

“Last night I dreamt I was a sausage.”

The statement, inane as it might be, seemed almost profound with the sense of purpose the old man lent it. Ava looked to the charge nurse for guidance. For a moment she had forgotten where she was and almost wrote it down in her notes.

“That’s nice, Mr Smith. What kind of sausage were you?” The bullish charge nurse asked, her tone professionally measured for the press. One part condescension, two parts *what-a-character-eh?* Pencils scribbled on notepads in frantic shorthand, the journalistic equivalent of the single clap. “Bloody stupid kind of question is that? Why would it matter what kind of sausage I was? If you’re going to insist on treating me like I’m insane then the least you can do is act sensible.” Ava watched as he stormed away down the hall, noting his room number just in case. The group had moved on, the charge nurse’s haughty tones preceding them just enough for the sisters to get the less presentable patients out of sight.

Mr Smith sat roughly on his bed, grumbled, pushed a spring back into the mattress and lay down. They had a girl with a peacock on her head walking among them and they had the audacity to think him insane. The spring sprung. He grumbled, closed his eyes, concentrated, and dreamt.

“This is our rec room.” The charge nurse gestured widely over the narrow room. Stained couches crouched around a television even older than her. A connoisseur’s selection of moth-eaten *characters* populated the moth-eaten room.

“Obviously with recent budget cuts we’ve had to cut down on certain luxuries...” The scritch and scratch by Ava’s ears drowned the rest of the excuses out. A laugh, another clap, and again they were herded onwards.

Dreams of nostalgia, dreams of warmth, dreams of foodstuffs, old friends and lovers. If he was to be confined then he might as well be confined in comfort.

Threadbare was the word that came to Ava’s mind and pen when she saw the garden. Patients wandered between the fenced off flower gardens or sat wild-eyed and twitching in the mismatched patio chairs. “Don’t take our

word for the quality of care, we encourage any interviews you would be willing to do with our guests. I'm sure it will do them the world of good but please, be careful, some do bite." As a herd the reporters agreed not to bother the patients with their questions, thanked the nurses, and took their leave. No-one noticed the bright haired girl striding across the lawn towards a reclining schizophrenic.

"Hi, excuse me. My name's Ava, I'm with the *Lochlin Gazette*. I was wondering if I could ask you a few things about your care here?" She mentally patted herself on the back, the introduction was always the hardest part. The woman opened her eyes, dull lifeless things.

"Care? Care? Don't make me laugh."

"What makes you say that?"

"They think ah'm crazy! Ah know what ah saw and ah won't let them bastards tell me otherwise!" Her accent was as thick as the steel bars on the windows. A throaty Scottish growl fired out in staccato bursts.

"Why do they think you're crazy?" Ava chided herself, of course they would put the real insane people at the end of the tour.

"Because ah know what Mr Smith is!"

"A sausage?"

"Dinnae you get smart wae me hen." Ava apologised. "It's alright. Aye, it sounds daft but it's true. He's no like us. He's a dreamsmith, least that's what he calls it. Makes yer dreams real or makes yer feelings real, it's hard to explain but ye know what ah mean."

"Like a wizard?"

"Oh aye, daft auld Maggie believes in wizards. Look, this'll prove it tae ye." On her neck hung a porcelain statue of a man, too big to be a pendant.

"Touch him."

Ava reluctantly did so.

A blanket of comforting thoughts spread over him, around him, enveloping him in its embrace. Warmth spread through the room as memories lined up for inspection. He smiled, content in dreaming. A spring coiled.

Ava lay her head on her desk. A tower of paper on either side of her guttering and whirring laptop giving her a useful shelter from the rising sun. The cursor blinked accusingly, blinked mockingly on the near pristine white page. One word sat alone in its snowy exile; *geswefnian*. How did a schizophrenic Glaswegian know an Old English word like that? *Geswefnian*,

to appear in a dream to. She was too tired, the more she thought about it the less it seemed that Maggie had even said it. Groaning she pulled the lid shut and closed her own. Sleep gripped like a vice.

Deadlines loomed, great mountains of white and black endlessly circled by carrion birds. Ava wrote, the words flowing like a river, carrying her to a fall. Scritch, scratch, rats ran hither and thither along the banks, carrying bundles of notes, hiding them in the bushes and under rugs. The fall grew nearer and nearer, Ava wrote faster as the deadlines threatened to come crashing down. A man watched her. The carrion birds cawed and swooped at her, scratching at her pen. Sheaves of paper poured over the edge, their words hanging in the air before falling as droplets of ink. A man watched her. The back legs of the desk teetered over the edge. Ava paused, the river stopped. A porcelain man watched her from the riverside with embarrassing disinterest.

“Hello?” It was a weak question she knew but she wasn’t sure how else to approach the subject.

“Olleh.” The porcelain skinned figure waved jovially, its arm moving far too fluidly for its apparent construction.

“Why are you just watching me? Why aren’t you helping?!”

“Enif demees.”

“Seemed fine? What part of going over a waterfall makes you think I’m alright?!”

“Won deppots ev’uoy.”

“Well yes, I had to...” Ava stepped away from the desk. “Who are you?”

“Nainfewseg.”

“I thought so. Why are you here?”

“Dellac uoy.”

“I did? How?”

“Eutats eht.”

“Oh.”

“We need your help.”

Ava stomped her foot. “Why talk backwards if you can talk normally?!”

“Normal is a concept, and not a very useful one. What is normal for you-”

“Yeah, the order for the spider, chaos for the fly.”

“Which is why we need you.”

“For what?”

“Unfortunately, you will not remember, but we will try to guide you.”

Ava became a sausage.

Dull fan blades cut the musky air. Some of the younger nuns floated around the room dusting and sweeping and listening. Mr Smith put his coffee down and smiled as warmly as he could manage. Which, even in his current mood, was warmer than the coffee.

“So what can I do for you exactly, Miss...”

“Ava’s fine.”

“Then what can I do for you, Ava.”

“I spoke to Maggie yesterday. One of the other patients.”

“I know her, not well though.”

“Geswefnian.” There. Just for a second, a flash of recognition. “You know what that word means don’t you mister Smith?”

“Haven’t the foggiest.” Slight twitch of the lip, glance at the nun as if to say *can’t talk or they’ll drug me*. Ava nodded slightly and started writing while talking. Surreptitious notes that only they would notice.

“I’ve noticed the staff here are very diligent about keeping everything clean.”
Nod if the word does mean something to you.

“Oh yes, our dear sisters are very particular. Cleanliness is next to godliness as they say.” Slight tip of the head.

“Our readers would love to know what kind of entertainment you have access to. Books, television, that sort of thing.” *I think I met one.*

“Really?” His eyes widened, the subterfuge forgotten. “Where, what did—” The sisters were watching. “Sorry, got a little carried away there. I used to be a little famous, the talk of readers gets me in a nostalgic way. Our entertainment options are limited but that’s to be expected with parliamentary budget cuts.”

“Is there anything you would like to say about these budget cuts?” *You aren’t just any John Smith, who were you? What’s going to happen?*

He lowered his voice, dropping the pretense of subterfuge.

“I think a great amount of change is coming. Incredible and fantastic things that may not resemble your world at all. Of course that is just the opinion of an old dreamer. But dreams may come true yet, just try not to forget them. At least, so Albus Huxley says.”

The sisters were starting to swarm.

“Mr Smith needs his rest dear”, “thanks for dropping by”, “do hope you can come again some time.”

“But do call ahead.”

Ava said her thanks and left. A pit had formed in her stomach but at least she had one lead. Albus Huxley.

The internet had no answers except a brief mistake in a teenager's fan fiction about English wizards. The library was just as useless but the smell of old books and dim lighting gave the search a sense of purpose. Reading in bed was the worst idea of all though as sleep quickly took her, an old encyclopedia of magicians serving as her pillow.

The comfort of the familiar dreamscape, a book filled caravan resting on the beach of a vast shimmering lake. A porcelain woman sat on a wicker chair resting her feet in the cold waves.

"It is a lovely dream you have. Detailed. Even the birds sing different songs." Ava sat beside her, a wicker chair with cushion leaves sprouted from the ground to meet her.

"Thank you." For a long while they watched the waves lapping against the sand.

"You have done well to follow our guidance."

"You turned me into a sausage..."

"And you were able to remember that vivid image and connect it correctly to dear Albus." The sun shimmered and shone, dolphins leapt from the loch in spinning flips. The porcelain woman laughed, light glinting off her skin.

"You react so openly to praise."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Neither bad nor good, just a thing. You are just who we need, Ava. For many reasons, we are sorry." The sun had begun to set, steam rose from the sea on the horizon where it sank.

"Why?"

"Unfortunately, you will see." The woman rose and looked out over the waves.

"What's your name?"

"It'll come to you. Eventually. No matter how many times I say it, you have to hear it first."

Ava awoke with a start, the dream falling into the dark recesses of her memory. She swung her legs out of bed, grass tickled her feet. Grass. The walls were gone. The floor was gone. The city was gone. Squirrels scampered across her dresser, rings and bracelets scattered on the ground. Great twisting trees knotted their branches together overhead to make a

solid canopy. Thin rays of light dyed green by the leaves dappled on the scene. Ava did not appreciate the beauty of it. She screamed.

Eventually the birds resettled, ruffling their feathers. *Quite pitchy. No sense of rhythm or tone. Talentless screeching*, they chirped to each other. Some sparrows had already left to avoid the rush. Ava collapsed on the bed, pinching her arms, slapping herself, clenching her eyes tight and opening them again hoping for stucco. An owl landed on the foot of her bed.

“Who?” It asked. Ava stared, a losing game against a creature that dedicates most of its life to looking.

“Who?” It asked again, deciding that the girl was clearly mentally deficient or socially inept.

“Shoo.” Ava swept her arms at the snowy intruder, it didn’t move.

“Well Miss Shoo, I have to say your manners are quite lacking.”

“What?”

“Your manners, Miss Shoo. I had to ask twice.” It sighed. “Although I suppose it is to be expected of a wrong footer.” The word slid out hushed and quiet, a label to be kept secret and safe.

“A wrong footer?”

“Someone from another world. What was the example they used again, bah, I forget.”

Ava simply stared. *Another world.*

“My name is Sylent. You’re in luck I found you first.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I’m a card carrying member of the Community For Wrong Footer Care. The CFWFC.”

Ava pinched herself again. It hurt but she didn’t wake.

“There are a few steps on the path of acceptance. Get yourself comfortable, Miss Shoo. I will need my notes to explain this.” With a shake of his wings he took to the air. In seconds he had vanished between the trees, there were no sounds in her room. There were no sounds in the forest.

The silence was overwhelming, cloying and crushing. Ava whistled in the hopes of breaking it. The silence swallowed it. She stopped. Tense violins played in her head. Rising in pitch, screeching against the bow. A twig snapped. A man stood half hidden in the scrub. His skin looked black and broken as if burned but it was hard to tell as the light seemed to avoid touching him directly. Tendrils of smoke rolled from his back. His eyes glinted

like an animal's. Ava's fingers tensed around the loose bar of the headboard. The figure convulsed in a silent body wracking cough, night flowed from its lungs like an oil spill. Ava pulled the bar loose and stood in the centre of the grassy floor.

"Are you alright?" Her voice quavered, a betrayal of the mounting panic. The night rolled across the ground, evaporating and rising like ink steam.

Ava ran. Branches clawed at her face and arms, severing pastel ducks from her pyjamas. Cold, wet breath rolled across the back of her neck. She screamed, spinning with the headboard bar and struck. Charcoal chunks of solid night dashed across the ground. The snaking tendrils recoiled. For a moment the light returned.

"Hah! Not so tough now, are you?" She swung the pipe threateningly. The dark shrunk away. "That's right! Go on! Get!" *Where are the eyes?* The dark was too dark, no eyes. Ava turned, the dark had coiled round between the trees. The last rays of light faded under the rising shadows. Eyes shone between the faintly defined trees. Her knuckles whitened around the bar.

"I'm not afraid of the dark." She whispered to herself. The light was gone, only inky shadows and the reddish eyes remained. Soundlessly it crept forward shrinking as it came. A wolf like growl whispered through the darkness. Ava swung frantically, her breath coming in laboured gasps. Unseen teeth bit the bar and pulled it from her hands. It paused for a second, savouring the fear. Ava leapt at the dark wolfish shape, screaming, punching and kicking in a panicked flurry. The thing tried to pull away but Ava just grabbed harder. Rays of light burst through the treetops. Ashy chunks broke off in her hands, crumbling out of her grasp. The darkness slunk away like smoke. For a second the outline of a broken man appeared, looking back over its shoulder with a familiar look of terror. Ava picked herself up, dusted off the charcoal dust and yelled at the top of her lungs. "I'm not afraid of the dark!"

Hours passed as Ava searched for her displaced bedroom but in her frantic flight she had become hopelessly lost. The sun was nearly set when the sound of music and laughter echoed faintly through the woods. Sylent had not returned and the shadowy thing was likely waiting for night. Grumbling, she headed towards the distant laughter.

It was a long and hellish journey through nettle patches and deep mud. By the time Ava stumbled from the woods muttering curses under her breath the sun had set. She stopped. Freshly mown grass pressed gently against her

aching feet. Great pleated paper walls a few dozen metres high spread out haphazardly in all directions. Red and white and black sheets folded together like origami architecture into a shape not unlike an opera house. The faint sound of lilting violins and rolling drums came from within. A tunnel like a paper accordion umbilical cord stretched across the grass, Ava lifted a fold and slipped in.

The tunnel led to a vast open space like an architect's model of a concert hall for an indecisive client. Seating areas sprawled on the grass floor and up stairways onto open platforms like room sized books. A tall gold bar counter of the same paper construction as the walls dominated the centre of the hall. Faceless bar staff dressed in gold and silver filled crystal glasses with vibrant sparkling liquid. Men and women dressed in crumpled page dresses and music sheet suits danced in elegant harmony; switching places and partners constantly. Ava wandered through with wide eyed wonder. From high above came a piercing shriek.

"What in the world is that thing?" Ava looked around for the thing from the woods. They were looking at her.

A shadow fell across her as a titanic woman descended from the impossible balcony. Each step sounded like a phone book rustling as her saga length dress tail dragged across the steps. Ava gulped. *I wonder what books she used.* She chided her curiosity and tried to remember her lessons on gate crashing galas.

"You there! The girl with the peacock on her head, just what do you think you're doing!" *Peacock?* Ava touched her hair, a green-blue lock fell across her face. *Ah.*

"I asked you a question girl!" She was close enough to read. *Grimy blue and jumping beans, she saw a filly in the fold.*

"What book is that?" Ava asked, leaning in to read the woman's hip. Sniggers rose from the not-audience. The woman paused.

"Lumping lures in fox boxes? What does that even mean?"

"Its... It doesn't matter, I aske-"

"Excuse you!" A man with a poem top-hat interjected, parting the crowd before him. "It does matter Madam Foultry. This is a literary gathering and you have the audacity to say the work of the great late Erica Von Fillistine doesn't matter? The girl has cleverly called your bluff."

"Bluff? What bluff?" Her bosom ballooned in indignation.

“Your dress, Madam. I have seen your library and would wager you’ve neither read nor are even aware of what prose it is composed.” The not-audience had given up the charade and were watching with intense interest.

“You go too far, doctor.”

“Then prove me wrong. What book became your dress tail?” *Slip away to the cloakroom and find a phone.* Ava quietly moved through the enraptured crowd. Madam Foultry’s blustering attempts to redirect the conversation fell under the calming violins.

The band had finished their piece and Ava still couldn’t find a phone. Swearing, she approached the golden ring bar in the middle of the room. Gentle applause followed the musicians off-stage. Ava scowled at the bar. She could barely see over it.

“Excuse me.” She waved her hand above her head, hoping to catch someone’s attention. A bubbling orange drink in a chintzy crystal glass was placed on the counter before her. The barman - at least male shaped, it was impossible to tell through the featureless masks and concealing suits - hadn’t even looked her way. *Free drink.* Ava took it as recompense for the rudeness. It tasted like fruit but with a curious buzzing sensation at the back of her throat. The walls moved. She looked at the drink in disbelief. *Drugged!* She looked back at the walls and noticed the team of faceless workers pulling the walls into a new shape. *Or not.* The lights dimmed and a saxophone’s soulful song filled the darkness. Ava found an empty seat.

A man dressed in a book spine suit pushed through a slit in the paper wall and onto the stage. He grinned widely at the crowd, some cheers erupted from the back.

“Saaaaaaalutations and warmest greetings my prepossessing intimates. My locution, we have a prodigious gathering of wordsmiths, writers, poets, and poseurs tonight. Have we all been working hard this month?” A few confident agreements overshadowed the guilty murmurs of the majority. “Well, even if you haven’t been persistently penning these past few weeks you’re here now and I’m not legally allowed to oust you.” The crowd laughed and Ava found herself warming to the weird club, strange though it was. “In a moment I’m going to read a section of my new novelette; Last Train to Lunderville. But before we get there, I’d like a volunteer to come up here for a little reading.” Ava’s hand raised. Her eyes bulged in disbelief.

“Yes, you there Miss. Come on up, don’t be diffident, give her some acclamation.” Awkwardly, yet largely comforted by the applause, she made her way on stage. At some point during the performance the rear wall had been pulled into a wider cone, funneling the audience’s attention towards the stage. The book spine suited man smiled widely at her. Up close he seemed much older; salt and pepper hair and deep crow’s feet.

“Exclamation!” He yelled theatrically, leaping back. Ava spun, fists raised. “Apologies dear, I just wasn’t expecting.” He paused, looking her up and down. “Ducks.” Horrid laughter hit her like a wave. *Don’t cry.* The man frowned, a sudden and worrying departure from his overtly optimistic persona.

“Now now dear I didn’t mean to discomfit you.” He turned the last word towards the audience with an icy tone. “After all, a picture is worth a thousand words. Though I daresay it may take a few here more than a thousand to describe a duck!” He put his hand out, Ava took it and walked to the centre of the stage.

“Just nestle there. Not there, there. There we go. What’s your name?”

“Ava.”

“Well Ava you’re in for a treat. Just follow the plot and enjoy.” He let go of her hand, leaving her standing alone in the dim spotlight.

“Um.” Some quiet laughs came from the back. *Deep breath.*

“Demoiselles and coves - ladies and gentlemen to the modern bodachs in the back - my name is Elias Mortimer Grim and this! Is the story of Howl!”

The spotlight shut off with a metallic clunk leaving Ava with a dancing afterimage. She sighed with relief but gasped as light spread across the ground beneath her feet. The wooden stage shifted under foot into something like... brass?

“The twelfth of Gummering only sixty years past, three brothers had a vision.” Elias’ spoke with a rehearsed confidence and as he did two shuttering hologram men appeared on either side of her. One, the taller and older looking brother, wore a muddy green waistcoat and purple trousers covered entirely with pockets. He had slicked back black hair and a handlebar moustache and a preoccupied look about him. The other, still taller than Ava, reached over and nudged him with a playful smile. He wore oil coated dungarees and carried a canvas bag filled with rattling tools. She could practically smell the oil. “I had hoped for a male volunteer but beggars

cannot be choosers, so..." Elias snapped his fingers and a thick black walrus moustache appeared above her lip.

"Ho ho ho eh, what?" Her voice had taken a ponderous baritone quality. An oldboy if ever she'd heard one. "What did you do to my voice?" Laughter erupted from the crowd again.

"Don't worry Henry, it's all part of the story." The taller brother said, patting Ava on the shoulder. His hand felt warm but impalpable.

"The three Tock brothers, Richard, Nicholas, and Henry stood on the first scale model of their magnum opus." The brass floor dropped off sharply around her leaving only a small disc under her and the two brother's feet. Sea wind and gull cries filled the room. Ava peered over the edge at the ocean far, far below.

"A home, dear brothers, that will answer to no outmoded governmental systems. No kings, no queens, just science and its pursuit moulding a utopia for right minded people." It was Richard who spoke but Elias' narration was just audible through it.

"A home that does not mar the land nor plunder its resources. Wave power and perpetual motion will provide everything people need to live fulfilling and happy lives." Nicholas added.

"Perpetual motion? Really?" Ava laughed.

The disc expanded under them until the edges disappeared at the limits of the stage. Houses sprouted around her, first as frameworks, then clad, then as homes with steam rising from their chimneys. A clockwork man stood in front of her. Shining steel and copper pipes filled his exposed chest, Nicholas held the panel.

"And so the brothers built." Elias narrated. "Richard and Nicholas Tock made their utopia. Howl. The Clockwork City. And for many years it was good."

"Wait, are we just ignoring the robot?" Ava asked.

"Robot?" Nicholas asked with ham acted disgust. "Henry I never thought to hear such malignant words from you. This is a tick-tock-man, a helper to make our lives better. He is not a slave."

"Really? Explain how its not a slave then."

"He. He..."

The audience jeered, in lieu of rotten fruit they threw manuscripts. In some cases they were worse.

"Preachy!" Someone cried. The ring bound first of a quintet struck Ava in the temple. Everything went dark.

When she awoke the sensation of movement sent surges of adrenaline coursing through her. She sat up. Elias sat across from her in what looked like a Victorian carriage. Purple leather and silver trim seats and clinking crystal glasses. *Toff*.

“What happened?”

“You were struck in the temple and rendered unconscious. I do apologise.” He handed her a glass of water. “I hadn’t expected a debate on the rights of tick-tock-men.”

“What’s a tick-tock-man?”

Elias nodded knowingly. “You aren’t from around here, are you?”

“Well, this is a dream so I suppose not.”

“I had a feeling you were a wrong-footer.”

“That’s what the owl said.” Elias nodded with understanding and sighed.

Colours played gently across his face; reflections of the lights outside.

Colourful paper lanterns wrapped the trunks of the thin oak trees lining the road. A wooden sign read Quill, nearby. Lunderville, quite-a-ways. Howl, very far.

“Hit me,” he said.

“Why?”

“It’s a well known fact that most well adjusted individuals cannot reliably strike a living being in their dreams. Pillow punches as they call it. The lack of tactile response registers in the mind, even if we cannot interpret it properly.” She kicked him, his shin was tough.

“Shit.”

Elias rubbed the spreading bruise and smiled wanly. The carriage rumbled over a small pot-hole, the horse let out a musical whinny and came to a stop.

“Sorry about this.”

“What’s wrong?”

“The horse needs wound.” He stepped out, Ava poked her head out to see.

The horse was wrong, where a regular horse might be chestnut it was copper. Its legs didn’t quite connect to its body, its neck was banded with gaps. Cogs and gears comprised its flank and from where a carousel horse would have its pole rose a large wind-up key. Elias grunted as he wound it. Ava patted its mane, it was hard and painted white with flecks of black. A giddy feeling rose in her chest.

“How does it work?” She asked, running her hand under its chin. Gears clicked into place and it nuzzled her hand rhythmically. A faint music box sound came from between its ears.

“Clockwork, mostly. I’ve never really asked to be honest.” He gave it one last turn. “That should do us back to Quill.” Ava patted it once more on the head, it blinked with a shuttering sound. *I need one of these.*

Quill was closer than she expected. Within an hour black wood and white stone houses replaced the festive oak trees. Ink black tiles topped every roof. Ava pressed her nose to the glass, taking in every idiosyncrasy of the strange town. A tenement sized building loomed at the end of a side street. Its roof rose and fell atop oversized printing press wheels. It passed out of sight. Dozens of bookstores stood side by side on what Ava could only assume was the main street.

“I can give you a place to stay the night, the hotels are all fully booked thanks to the festival.”

“Thanks.”

“And, if it doesn’t offend you, my son may have some old clothes that are about your size.”

She tugged at her pyjamas and blushed.

“I forgot I was wearing these. God I look like an idiot.”

“These things can’t be helped but may I ask why they are in such disrepair?”
Surely can’t be any crazier than anything else around here.

“A...thing attacked me-” Elias’s eyebrows raised. “-It was like it was burnt and it puked ink like a squid.”

“Nyctohylophobia.”

“I’m not afraid of the dark.”

“That’s nyctophobia. Nyctohylophobia is a fear of dark forests. Though I didn’t expect to see one so close to town.”

“What.” Her voice was flat and serious. “That was real?”

“Oh yes. It’s quite a common nightmare but I doubt they’re much threat in the civilised world.”

“Go back a second. Nightmares are real.” Elias nodded patiently. “And I attacked one?”

“You attacked it!?”

“Yeah... It’s the whole ‘fight or flight’ response. I just find it less scary to attack first rather than trying to run away.”

“But your size.” The air in the carriage grew icy.

“What about it?”

“Nothing.” The horse came to a stop at a thick wooden gate. A blue and green manor house with pitch black roofing stood at the top of a small hill. Elias unlocked the gate and the horse continued.

“How does it know when to stop?”

“How do you?” He asked.

“I can see but it’s clockwork.”

“It can see as well, that’s how it knows the way home. The tinkerer said it has something to do with multiple thought tracks but I might be remembering that wrong.”

He opened the door and guided her out. The horse tucked itself and the carriage away at the side of the house where rain wouldn’t get it.

The house was smaller than she’d expected for someone with their own carriage but she had the sense not to say. Elias took out a small leather book and flicked through. Each page had a picture of a key.

“What’s that for?” She asked, peering at the descriptions. *Cellar door, spice cupboard (old), carriage trunk.*

“Opening things.”

“You put the paper in the lock?”

“No, no don’t be vacuous. I show the picture to the lock and if it recognises it, it opens.”

“Like a passport?”

“Very much like a passport, yes.” He showed a drawing of the front door key to the lock. The tumblers turned with an acknowledging click. Elias went in, Ava stared at the lock. It looked like a lock.

“How?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer much of the how beyond that it was done by a dreamsmith.”

“Wait. I’ve heard that word before.” Elias’ eyes lit up. Without a word he lead the way to the living room. All four walls were lined with book filled shelves. The table was littered with pamphlets and postcards. Towering stacks of textbooks stood by the bay window where a cushion filled daybed held the tracks of a hungry mind. Plates of half eaten food, empty bottles with twisting alchemical shapes, and a dozen open books lay strewn on the purple sheet.

“I apologise for the mess, my son gets very preoccupied with his reading and oftentimes forgets to clean up before he collapses.” He gathered up the

mess, the sound of plates clattering in the sink made her jump. He poked his head back into the room.

“Would you like something to eat?” Ava nodded, he disappeared before she could say thanks.

Something brushed her leg causing her to leap onto her chair. A sleepy looking pug wandered out from under her seat with a leather bound tome in its teeth. Unaware of her it took the book to an empty space on the shelf, crudely dog eared a page and pushed it into place. It turned, saw her, blinked twice, then looked confused. It panicked, running back and forth between the shelves. Ava laughed to herself. It found the book it was looking for, a chewed red book with the title *Guard Dog Training Manual*. It pawed through the pages, stopped at a dog eared chapter and read, huffing with fright. It flicked the page, checked the diagram then turned its attention to Ava.

“Bark!” She didn’t move. It pawed to another page, read, huffed, looked at Ava.

“Growl.” She was unfazed. Panic took hold. Desperately it pawed to another page. It huffed deeply and ran to alert the homeowner to the intrusion.

“It’s alright Bartemis. She’s a guest.” Elias laughed. He placed the silver tray he carried on the table and patted the off-white pug on the head.

“He was reading a book about being a guard dog.”

“He reads a lot but he gets muddled up if he’s panicked.”

“He reads. He’s a dog who reads and you’re telling me I’m not in a dream.”

She took a bite of pastry, Elias did the same.

“I can see why you’d be flabbergasted. I would be too if I saw a dog reading.”

“But-”

“But Bartemis isn’t a dog. He’s a pet peeve. Just so happens to look like a dog.” Ava pinched the bridge of her nose, she was starting to get a headache. She took another pastry. *Eat Me*. She stopped.

“A pet peeve is going to be like a nightmare, isn’t it?”

Elias nodded.

“And these cakes and pastries make you want to eat them because of the writing on them. Right?”

“Bossy Bakes.” He smiled as he took another. “And yes, a pet peeve is like a nightmare. Bartemis is a dog-eared dog.”

Bartemis had found a book on etiquette and was gnawing on it in a scholarly fashion.

“Why would anyone want that?”

“Partly to annoy other people and partly to show that one is bigger than petty concerns. They’re in vogue just now.”

Bartemis waddled over to Ava’s side and, with great magnanimity, licked her hand. She patted him on the head. To continue the ritual, he stood on his hind legs to gesture his intent to sit on her lap.

“He’s adorable.” Confirmation of desire; he leapt onto her lap and exposed his belly. Scandalously she went above the recommended number of tummy scratches. He found it hard to mind and instead shook his leg. Outside it started to rain. Ava took a sip of tea and closed her eyes. *Wake up*. It didn’t work. *Wake up!* No matter how much she screamed it in her head it didn’t work.

“Does the name Albus Huxley mean anything to you?” She asked. Elias scrunched his face in thought. He tapped his chair then checked the shelves. Bartemis leapt down to help, puffing and panting as he did. *Eat me*. The last pink iced pastry read. She tried to resist. *Eat me*. It read, this time somehow with more force. She turned it upside down.

“Good boy Bartemis.” Elias said, taking a hexagonal star covered book from him. He flicked through, enraptured.

“I remember why I hid this book. Each of the bastards have put the concept of interest on their own biographies. One second, I just need to read this real quick.” He took a seat. Ava read the title, *Dream Peerage: A History of Famous Dreamsmiths*.

“My word! Did you know that Arthur Armitage D.S.P once ate two dozen apples in order to ensure he dreamt of apples?” He paused and shook his head. “I’m sorry, that’s not terribly interesting unless you’re reading it.”

“I’m so glad you said that, I was worried I’d have to fake an interest in apples.” No response, he was too engrossed in the book. Ava helped herself to the last pastry. *Dammit! Too late now, may as well have it*.

“Exclamation!” Elias yelled. She choked. “It says here that Albus Huxley was investigating the long ridiculed idea of the Geswefnians when he disappeared. Almost thirty years ago.”

“So there is a way for me to get home?” *Yes, wake up!* It didn’t work.

“You’ll have to find the CFWFC, they’re the experts in these matters.”

“And where can I find them?”

“Lunderville I believe. I can give you train fare but sadly I can’t go with you. I’ve got a new book coming out this week and my publisher is breathing down my neck.”

“You’ve been really kind, thank you.” Elias smiled warmly but there was a sadness to his eyes that frightened her.

“Let’s get you some clothes and money. We’ll get you to the train station in the morning.”

Ava said her thanks and was showed the guest room. Elias laid out some clothes for her and said goodnight. She didn’t sleep. *What is he afraid of?*

Sylent landed on the rusted bed frame and gulped.

“Oh my.” He said, twisting his head and hopping from foot to foot to get a better look.

“Where is she Sylent?” The voice belonged to a woman but it sounded like it was on loan from a siren. She held the black covers up and sniffed lightly.

“Nyctohylophobia.”

Sylent leapt up into the branches.

“Where?!” He hooted.

“Don’t you mean where?” The woman asked, shouldering her crossbow.

“That’s what I said!”

“Sorry.” She scanned the treeline. “I’ve been waiting to use that one for a while.” She lowered the weapon.

“No sign of it.”

“Or the girl.” Sylent said, landing back on the bed frame. The woman flipped the bed and fired into the dirt. Thin wisps of black smoke evaporated around the bolt.

“Good shot!”

“Thank you Sylent but I’m afraid I was too slow. It got away.”

“Is that bad for us?”

“That all depends on where it got away to.”

In the morning Elias made her breakfast and walked her to the train station. Open stalls over laden with hundreds of different books lined the black stained streets.

“Romance! Get yer romance here! All kinds a steamy hot romance! Two for the price of one!” The vendors cried out their genres like farmers at market.

“Lovely long fantasy sagas! Longest fantasy sagas in the market!” They crested a hill and Ava gasped. A lake larger than she’d ever seen stretched as far as she could see and it was all ink black.

“Its impressive isn’t it?” Elias laughed. “You spend so long living next to it you forget it’s strange.”

“Is that an oil spill?”

“No, no. It’s the Inkk. One of the greatest natural phenomena in the world and the reason there are so many writers here.”

Ava nodded dumbly. They walked in silence for some time.

“That’s my publisher.” He said pointing to an old windmill that had been forcibly converted into a printing press. Pipes and wheels poked garishly through the stone walls. The blades spun frenetically; starting suddenly, spinning fast enough to spray the ink rain still clinging to them in a great arc up and down the street, then stopping. Bundles of books were dragged out and carted off, presumably to the town’s many, many bookstores.

“But if there are so many writers surely most books go unnoticed.”

“Oh yes, that’s why you have to find your niche. Write something that no-one else is writing.” He looked at a gleaming glass building further down the hill. “Or write manuals.” He spat the words.

“What’s your niche?” She asked, trying to stay on the positive side.

“I write elegant romantic murder mysteries for the modern man. Stories of dashing detectives finding their beau in unlikely, and dangerous, circumstances. It’s a sizeable niche and I have my following.”

“How many books have you written?”

“Thirty-nine. Plus a few pamphlets, poems, and novellas.”

“Wow. That’s. That’s a lot of books.”

“Thank you.”

The train station stood at the edge of the sea with only a short plaza and a beach separating them. Towering arches stood over the deep set stairs and the statues of lions reading. In great brass letters on the wall above the arches the words Quill Centrel Station. A man in overalls picked the rags from the barbed wire surrounding it.

“They’ve misspelled central.”

“The rail baron had a disagreement with the mayor.”

“So they changed the spelling on their sign?”

“A rather simple and dastardly plan that shines with corrupt elegance, isn’t it? Most regular folk wouldn’t even notice it but writers care so much they hold protests over it. Then they lobby the mayor, thousands at a time, demanding it be fixed.” Further down the street she saw a group of tweed jacketed protesters with placards and canvas tents.

“How long have they been protesting?”

“Nearly a year now. Though most couldn’t handle the friggen.”

“Friggen?”

“Its remarkable the subtle differences in language, isn’t it? Friggen is the cold season. A frosty friggen morn.”

“We call it winter but I think I like yours better. It’s more descriptive.”

The station was grandiose but diminutive. High ceilings - stained black by the coal - were held aloft on the granite shoulders of bored looking statues. Colourful mural tiles led the way to the gold leafed ticket booth and the single, lonely platform.

“Wait here, I’ll get your ticket.”

Ava waited. The smell of something sweet floated through the air on cinnamon wings and led her feet astray. *I need it.* A lasso of chocolate fragrance wrapped itself around her and pulled her towards a florid kiosk. Its sign read *Bossy Bakes*. *No!* She shut her eyes and tried to step away but her feet would not be dissuaded. Rows of pink and yellow pastries glistened under the low lamp light. Carefully arranged displays of macaroons and cupcakes spread their scent through the station with varying degrees of success. The co-conspirator - the barista - poured a cup of hot chocolate with a hint of strawberries. Ava struggled against herself and managed to pull a foot away. A gust of wind blew through the station, breaking the bakery’s hold. She walked quickly away. Elias came back with the ticket.

“The train isn’t due for a few hours, delays in Pott. Will you be alright on your own?”

“I’ll be fine. Thank you Elias, you’ve been a great help.” He put out his hand, Ava hugged him. For a second he went rigid then hugged her back. The clock chimed. Elias looked at his watch in disbelief.

“I’m late! Take care Ava. Be sure to drop by one day if you’re ever back.” He ran as quick as he could, scattering pigeons and pedestrians alike.

Ava waited. The scents made their insidious return. Three minutes passed like a lifetime of celibacy. *Just one.* She shook her head and checked the purse Elias had given her. Nuts and bolts and a few silvery eggs...

“Fuck.”

A passing woman in ruffled petticoats tutted at her language. Ava scowled after her. *Okay. What do train stations sometimes have?* She looked around for the bathrooms. *No! A currency exchange kiosk.* She looked for that instead. By the ticket desk stood a wood paneled and copper piped vending machine. A banner above declared it the Exchanger.

The vending machine stood much taller than Ava. A series of weird shaped holes - some circular, some square, one shaped like a fish - were arranged in a row above a gold letterbox style flap. Down the side was a list of conversions. Small copper bars called 'loose', were twelve to an 'egg'. Bishops, like the chess pieces, were worth three eggs. She rubbed her eyes and read again. The list still obstinately priced nuts and bolts, eggs, chess pieces, literal I.O.U.s, screws, gears, crystal eggs, white gold puzzle pieces, and a golden fish as if it were perfectly reasonable. *Hey, he's given us about a hundred loose.* She went to the bakery.

A bossy bake was a loose or two, plus another for a cup of coffee. Ava smiled contentedly to herself as she savoured the rich 'savour me' fudge cake. A book had been left on the bench and so she read, and ate, and waited. The hours passed and the telltale sound of an approaching train filled the station. Through unseen speakers a voice announced the approach of the 10:15 to Lunderville. The clock read 2:10. The station rattled.

The train stood three decks high and richly decorated from cowtipper front to cargo-car end. The front of the titanic train was embellished with gold leaf and silver plating over its rich shamrock green chassis. Steel legs rose and fell beneath it in rolling steps like a frantic millipede. As it got closer the legs slowed to a jog, rising and falling in step with each other. The train pulled up beside the platform, barely missing the top of the high arches. Clockwork men stepped out on extending arms, opening their nearest door and helping passengers with their luggage. One copper handed machine took an ancient looking woman down with gentle care and tipped its patchwork steel bonnet. Ava shuddered and slipped onto the train while it was distracted.

She went to the top and found a compartment to herself. Two red leather couches with beds above took most of the space. A covered copper pipe poked from the table in the middle with a menu tied to it. She had barely had time to sit down when the door to her compartment opened. Without speaking a woman put a little book on the table and left. Ava took it and sighed. Dark fantasy romance. She put it down. Another person opened her door and put a book on the table. A history of trains. She couldn't put it down fast enough. Another; speculative religion. By the time the train was leaving Ava had a pile of books to wade through. She looked out the window. Distantly, but perhaps not unrelatedly, a dozen writers cried.

The journey was smooth, for a while Ava forgot the train was running rather than rolling.

“Running late.” She laughed to herself. Outside the great black lake rolled onto the horizon. If it wasn’t for the half glimpsed mountain range peeking over from beyond the horizon she would have sworn in was an ocean. After a short while she got bored. *Had to pick the sea view...*

“Hmmpf nph ill mph.” The speaking tube rattled its cover, Ava lifted her impromptu sleep mask *History: An Opinion* and opened the flap. The books cascaded off her legs.

“Wha?” She yawned. The black lake still stretched on outside, seemingly unending. A distant and tinny voice replied.

“Wassat mam?”

“What did you say? My tube’s lid was down.”

“No worries mam, was just sayin’ we’re nearly at Pratchett where we’ll be stopping for the night due to engine troubles.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks”

“No problem mam.”

The train slowed to a halt. The sun set on the far edge of the lake and for a moment cast brilliant golden reflections into her cabin. She smiled, squinting at the sun set.

Pratchett was, in more ways than one, nearly identical to Quill. Book sellers lined the streets in gaudy stalls overladen with potboiler penny dreadfuls and pulp. Ava browsed, enthralled by the sheer quantity. Two stalls run by a wide smiling woman with a distant stare were dedicated solely to *The Exploits of Vannaheim Granger, Master Detective*. The most recent declared itself the most daring adventure yet and a celebratory thousandth issue. One loose, or five for three.

“Wrote them myself.” The woman said with a proud smile.

“Really? That’s incredible.” A monochrome photograph of the smiling woman stared up at her from the blurb. *A harrowing murder in smoggy Lunderville leads Master Detective, Vannaheim Granger, on a deadly trail.*

“Do you need to read them in order?” She asked the wide smiling woman. The smile faltered.

“Well... No. But you’re really missing out if you don’t.”

“How much is a first issue?” Memories of articles on vintage comic auctions flittered through her head. *Tens of thousands of pounds, millions even.*

“Same as the rest pet. Should be a few at the bottom.” The train of thought came to an engine troubled halt.

“You’re still selling first issues?”

“Of course I am. Not going to throw them away after a year am I? They’re not eggs.”

Ava flicked through the book, counting as quickly as she could. *Hundred and twenty-ish pages. Probably about seven hundred words a page. Times a thousand.*

“That’s nearly ninety million words!” The woman nodded. Her smile gone.

“That’s impossible! You’d have to write every second of every day for...” Her lips moved as she did the math. “Nearly three years!”

The woman leaned over the counter, smiling until she got close.

“You’re quite the little mathematician, aren’t’cha?” Ava tried to back away but the woman grabbed her wrist. Her bony fingers were like handcuffs.

“You’ll keep your mouth shut if ya know what’s good for ya.” She released and the smile returned. Ava backed away, replaced by a swarm of young men jostling for the latest issue. Some were still holding their copy of nine hundred and ninety nine.

The rest of the stalls were a little more diverse but just as dreadful. Ava picked out a couple of cheap novellas about a group of explorer children searching across the world for clues to yet-another-mystery. Something about the noticeable printing lines and half hearted attempt at colouring on the cover endeared itself to her in a way she couldn’t fully express. As she walked, the town seemed to pack itself away behind her. Stall owners shuttered and locked their wares away, homes darkened and distantly a bell tower tolled midnight. She was alone.

There are two types of people that skulk around in alleyways watching young women; neither are likely to provide a positive experience. Armed with this knowledge, Ava made her way back to the train, scrutinising every alleyway with extreme prejudice.

“So glad I got my knife sharpened today.” She said loudly to the darkness. *That’ll scare them off.* She smiled at her ingenious plan.

“Yeah. So glad I’ve got my massive cleaver.” Something in the alleyway moved. A bottle clattered to the ground. Ava froze. She wished she did have

that cleaver. Another scuffle and a quiet muttering. Ava backed away. A cat stepped out of the shadows.

“Meow?” It asked. It looked as if it had been electrocuted. Off-white to gray fur stood on end around its manic looking eyes. It’s mouth curled into a hiss as it tried to guard its... *watermelon?* Ava’s heart melted as the little street cat mewed desperate defiance.

“Aww, who’s a cute kitty?” She crooned.

“Fuck off.” It replied. Ava stood stunned for a moment. *Cat just spoke. Cat just swore. Of course it did, cats are assholes. Cat’s gone.* Ava ran back to the train.

Intermittent clangs rang out from under the crab like legs of the so-called train. Groups of stripy overall clad workers disappeared under the machine with a workshop’s worth of tools. Unnoticed by the workers a figure watched from the platform. Clad in midnight black and pressed as close to the wall as to be unseen but not enough to be suspicious; he watched with interest. Each part change and screw turn was catalogued away but none seemed to be what he was looking for. As the sun started to rise and the workers packed their bags, he strolled away unheeded.

A forlorn creaking sounded through the compartments of the train. The solemn voice of the conductor cleared the dust.

“Treasured guests, I am sorry to say that we are still experiencing engine troubles and our onboard tinkerer has given us the grave estimate of at least nine hours. You will be treated to free meals and a reasonable drink allowance at the speakeasy as recompense for this unfortunate affair. Thank you for your patience.”

Ava put her novel down and looked out at the ink waves receding from the shore. She considered what lay on the other side and on the other side of that. She didn’t know. She considered what lay with the Wrong Footer Committee; home, deadlines, work, a world so explored and explained she found solace in books. The adventurous youths on the penny dreadful cover smirked at her. *You wouldn’t know an adventure if it bit you.*

It was a strange day in the kitschy little Footnote Cafe. The regulars glowered into their cups, grumbling curses. Mostly due to the noise. Mostly.

“Who wrote this? Honestly, please, if you’re here stand up Mr Khulad.”

Brash, humiliating laughter filled the cafe, rattled hands rattled cups but no-one rose. “Oh, this line is amazing.” The black clad figure coughed theatrically, one foot on the table, one hand over his heart.

“Halcyon days kept eternal by-”

“The timeless light of your darling smile.” A deep bass voice rumbled through the cafe like a passing train, rattling teacups and plates. “In the abyss of my tortured soul a candle burns brightly.” The orator rose like a lonely mountain at the far end of the quiet room. Candles dimmed and the sound of the street had faded into obscurity. “And though I tread on thinning ice, I’ll make the journey nightly.” He strode forward with the confidence and presence of a flagship. “If you wish to make a matter of it, then let us step outside *disaster artist*. ” He spat the words. The clientele erupted in applause and whistles. The black clad figure scowled at the titan.

Throw a loose through the crack in the window, underhand, fifty-eight degree angle, wait three seconds, duck. His wrist twitched but he kept his grip on the copper loose. He leant in to the titan and whispered.

“I’m not sure you want to do that Mr Khulad.”

“Whispered threats shall not stay my fury rat-mother.” His accent grew thicker as his anger grew, the crowd hissed and heckled.

Dodgy kettle boiling in the back, frayed thread on the chandelier, carriage passing, waiter with a steak knife. Push!

His elbows flexed but he kept them still.

“Just so you know Mr Khulad, I’m not a disaster artist anymore.” He whispered. “I’m a consultant.” The hulking author glared at him but said nothing. The cafe grew quiet. He palmed a small brown envelope into Khulad’s pocket.

“We know, Mr Khulad and my client would prefer if you didn’t skip town this time.” The colour drained from the goliath’s cheeks. The man sauntered to the cafe’s glass door and stopped.

“Quite the storm brewing isn’t there?”

The black clad figure took a draw of a black papered cigarette and sighed a cloud of pitch black smoke. A cold wind rolled across the black waves of the Inkk and straight to his bones. Down on the rocky beach a splash of colour

picked its way among the strata. Grinning to himself, the black clad figure palmed a rounded pebble and took aim.

I'm finally doing it! The thrill of adventure shook Ava to her core and she loved it. She scrambled over another large slick rock, not minding or noticing the state her clothes had gotten into. Her borrowed boots crunched in the sand. She stopped. There on the rock was a book. A large leather bound tome with gold filigree writing naming it *The Big Book of Cats (and other cute mammals)*. No-one was around that could have just left the book. The book was *abandoned*. Curiosity took hold, a sharp whack loosened it. "Ouch!" She scowled at the rounded pebble as it tried to settle innocently into the sand. She scowled up at the pier where a black clad figure waved innocently at her. Unseen to her *The Big Book of Cats (and other cute mammals)* was reeled rapidly out to sea and into the mouth of a large, greying shark. She clambered up the sand bank and over the rocks, past the flood wall and after the rock throwing man.

"Hey you!" She shouted. The man stopped, turning and smiling at her with disarming charm. *What now? I don't know, I thought you had a plan!*

"Yes?" His lip curled in a condescending smirk. A crowd seemed to form from the ether at the promise of street theatre. Most had notepads ready in case any good dialogue came up.

"Uhhh." Ava said. "Don't throw rocks at people." The more desperate novelists reluctantly took notes. Someone at the back offered two for one analysis of the diatribe.

"No, no, no!" A voice called from the crowd. "Call 'im a dodgy blaggard!"

"A dodgy blaggard?" Another voice scoffed. "Period piece bollocks. She should call him a prick."

"Quiet both of you, you don't understand the underlying subtext of the scene. She's disarmed by his roguish charm."

"No I'm not!" Her cheeks were flush. *Yes you are.*

"There's no shame in it deary." An old woman near the front piped in. "It's how these things go."

"Yeah, in hetero-linear romantic trite."

Ava couldn't see the speaker but knew she hated him.

"Well as a romance serial author, I think it's a beautiful scene and I think she should give love a chance." The old woman bit back.

"Well as a surrealist author, I think she should hit him with a fish."

“Don’t you all have books to be writing?” The black figure shouted over the growing crowd. The crowd collectively kicked the dirt and mumbled something about needing some fresh air.

“As for you.” He said, turning back to Ava. “Let me make it up to you.”

“Ya dancer! Romance wins again!” The old woman cheered, scattering nervous writers and pigeons alike. Ava hurried off after the black clad figure, barely biting back tears of embarrassment. *See? This is why we stay away from confrontation.*

He walked with a long, confident stride. Ava almost had to jog to keep up, dodging and weaving between window shoppers.

“Why did you throw a rock at me?” She asked as she drew up beside him. He stopped and smiled.

“You aren’t from around here are you?” *Poor thing.* He sighed. “The book you so foolishly tried to take was a lure.”

“What do you mean a lure?”

“Have you ever been fishing?”

Ava nodded.

“Same idea, different direction.”

“What? So a shark was fishing for me?”

“Don’t be so narcissistic, it likely wasn’t humaning for you at all. You’re tiny.” *Talking owls and cats, monsters in the woods, and sharks that fish for people...* Ava pinched herself. It hurt, again. The man had gotten far ahead, she ran to catch up.

“You never told me your name.”

“Ruin.”

As it turned out Ruin, or so he insisted his name was, had a very peculiar idea of what it meant to make it up to someone. He led her through the seaside town, weaving through crowds and stalls and eventually turning down an alleyway slick with ink. *Well, he’s going to murder you. We can still catch the train.* Ava shook her head, dislodging the voice. She stepped into the alleyway, the shouts and yells of the high street drowned out to faint murmurs. Ruin stood at the far end of the alley holding the handle of a low and dirty door. The faint orange glow of candle light came from within. “In here.” He said with a disarming smile. *Adventure*, she justified and squeezed through the small doorway. The ground slipped below her like an avalanche. Ava let out a yelp of fright as she skidded down, cascading into a

box of damp books like a boat on a tidal wave. She coughed and spluttered from the dust and mould. Some more ink-logged books collapsed around her.

“Ruin?” She called up to the little door. It clicked shut. *Told you.*

Langley snapped his pen and grit his teeth. Milky white tea darkened as it seeped through the Page. The Page he had spent the last several months staring at. The Page that had promised to pay his rent but taunted him with its still immaculate state. The Page that was now just a page. Langley laughed and laughed. He swore as the old cabin trunk landed on his toe. He laughed as he hurriedly packed reams of paper and pots of ink, warm clothes, light clothes, bathing suits and toiletries, sandals, boots, towels, and maps; lots of maps. Banging and laughing he pushed the heavy trunk out into the street, threw the keys on the roof and left.

Ava sat in silence listening to the banging and laughing. Occasionally something would smash and she would flinch. She sat huddled amongst the mouldy old books for quite some time after the door thudded shut and the banging stopped.

“Hello?” She whispered. *Murder house, just like that film. Shut up!* She eased herself off of the book pile causing a mini avalanche. *Murder hou...shhh!* She took a deep breath, dust caught at the back of her throat. A single treacherous cough escaped. The seconds passed like glaciers. No murderers revealed themselves. She sighed in relief and picked her way through the mess.

It's not like I'm a bad guy. Ruin thought to himself as he savoured his ice cream. *She would have gone on and on and on about her world, expecting me to be flabbergasted and amazed.* A child's piercing cries faded out as he turned down a sidestreet, his feet on autopilot. *Oh, my world has these wonderful things called cars. We're not backwater savages wrong footer, we've got them too!* He dropped the ice cream cone and stepped back into the shadows. A few seconds passed.

“Blimey!”

Ruin emerged from the shadows like a seedy guardian angel. A fat constable, shiny blue uniform stained with vanilla, lay disorientated on the ground.

“Are you alright there officer?” Ruin asked, helping him to his feet and snatching a few choice items from his belt.

“Yes sir, thank you kindly.” He dusted himself off, the cold vanilla sticking to his clammy palms. “Bloody spoiled brats leaving their rubbish wherever the fancy takes them!”

“Its awful”

“Back in my day if we dropped food, our father would make us eat it off the ground.”

“Good old fashioned parenting.” Ruin commented, passing the constable his handkerchief.

“That it was, thank you.” The stain wouldn’t budge. “Blast. I can’t go out on patrol like this.” He wiped furiously.

“You know, I’ve always admired the work you brave lot do for our community.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“In fact, just the other day I was thinking to myself if only there was some way I could give back to the force. Of course I was thinking more along the lines of apprehending a dangerous felon.” Ruin laughed, a practiced and measured charisma falling from him. “But for the benefit of the force’s reputation, I would happily switch clothes with you, nip down to the dry cleaners and get them cleaned up for you.”

A wide and thankful smile broke across the constable’s face. Ancestral memories of the legendary good old days when village constables were considered upstanding fellows and when the milk was always on time came flooding back to him.

“You’re a lifesaver mister...”

“Loamish Farley.” Ruin lied, smiling.

“You’re a gem mister Farley.” He said, slipping his jacket off. Ruin’s smile faltered.

“Ruin!” Ava screamed advancing like a predatory peacock, her finger shaking with the weight of her accusations. The constable’s trousers dropped.

“Won’t be but a moment officer.” Ruin grabbed the discarded uniform and ran, Ava hot on his heels.

“Get them to use the apple scent if you can!”

Ruin was fast and knew the streets well but Ava had the persistence of a pitbull. He vaulted a green grocer’s cart, Ava followed. He sprinted through labyrinthine alleyways, splashing through stagnant puddles, Ava followed. He ran into a writer’s cafe, screaming about a publishing deal outside. Ava fought the tide of writers like a salmon seeking revenge. Ruin ran and ran

and ran until his legs felt hollow beneath him. Ava caught up. Ruin slumped to the floor, gasping.

“How?” He managed between gulps of air. Ava panted, pointing at his ink soaked boots and the trail of greeny-black footprints trailing them into the alley. Ruin nodded, laughing slightly. Ava scowled, then, against her will, she laughed as well.

“Alright, alright. I’m sorry for throwing a rock at you.”

Ava gestured for more.

“And for locking you in a basement. Let me buy you and your peacock dinner.”

Ava helped him up.

“Peacock?”

Ruin patted her hair. “Oh. Well that’s disap...” The words caught in his throat. Ava had a thread but strangely, it went straight up. It cut its way through the clouds and...

“What?” She moved his hand and he lost sight of it. “Do I have something on me?” He shook his head and faked a smile.

“Just softer than I imagined. Come on, I know a place that does the best criticisms.”

Perplexed but pleased, Ava followed.

The restaurant did in fact do wonderful criticisms. Old women dressed in aprons patrolled amongst the tables, stopping to ask why they hadn't gone for something more adventurous, why they were eating out instead of learning to cook for themselves, or why they insisted on eating like such a pig. Ruin beamed at Ava over his menu, she smiled back but her eyes were locked on the approaching grandmother. Jackboots clacked, clacked, stopped.

"You really are taking all day to order, do you plan to order something or are you just here to wear down the leather on the seat?"

Ruin politely waited for Ava to order first. Smile unbroken.

"Umm. I was--"

"I don't care what you was going to order, I care what you are going to order. Really, I'm an old woman, every second you spend wasting my time takes me closer to the grave."

"I'll-have-toad-in-the-hole--" The grandmother waited, "-please."

"And I expect you want something to drink? You don't really think ahead do you?"

"Curiosity cola please."

The matron d' turned to Ruin, scanning for a weakness.

"You won't be wanting anything too wholesome I expect. Skinny thing like you's probably run from a good meal." Ruin laughed with her, stopping the crone in her tracks.

"Very close Mildred. It's so hard to find good food these days. All those health nuts in Howl spouting their nonsense like they have any real experience, am I right?" The old woman nodded. "That's why I dragged my dining partner here today. To show her that a body full of creativity isn't worth a gnarled tooth of experience."

A wry smile spread across her lips.

"So I bow to your judgement and I'll take whatever you think is good, please."

"Fisherman's pie and a writer's coffee then. And sit up straight, no wonder you're nearly hunchbacked." She stomped away to the kitchen. Ruin snapped his fingers in frustration.

"Damn, thought I had it that time." He laughed.

"What the hell was that about?" His laughter seemed to protect them, a single safe bubble in a sea of torment.

“The horrible criticisms and terrible service? They’re some of the best cooks in the country and it wouldn’t be a home-cooked meal without some familial drama, would it?”

“I guess not, but do they have to be so mean?”

“Think of it as part dining experience, part emotional endurance training.”

“Thanks. Just what I needed.” She smirked but there was no humour in it.

You’re losing her. Lay out the bait.

“I’m sorry Ava. I’m terrible with people, I like this place and-”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“Bullshit. I saw the way you dealt with that old woman. How you dealt with me. You’re a goddamn con artist.”

“Disaster artist actually.”

“Whatever you want to call it but don’t try that shit on me. I might be young but I’m not naive.” The chair tipped back as she stood. Ruin grabbed her wrist.

“Please, hear me out.” His eyes glistened, he exuded grief. *Don’t fall for it!*

Ava sighed and sat. A passing crone whispered something cruel under her breath to a vicious round of cackling. Embarrassment welled up inside her but was held in place by the delicious smells from the kitchen.

“Fine.” She said.

“Thank you.” He adjusted his place setting. “Ava, it’s pretty obvious what you are.” Ava raised an eyebrow. Ruin leaned closer. “A wrong footer.”

“So?”

“So? You’re a stranger in a strange land with a limited understanding of how the world works.”

“I’ve got the dozen loose equals an egg stuff down. I’ve learned about humaning and bossy bakes. I’ve met a bunch of authors and a talking raven and I’ve even had a run-in with a nightmare.”

“What kind?” Ruin asked through a shocked grin. Ava flipped her notepad open.

“Nyctohylophobia.”

“The fear of dark forests.” They said in unison.

“Well, maybe I was wrong.” The matron d’ returned with two pie crusted bowls, one with an ornate crust carving of crustaceans and cephalopods, the other a short limerick.

There once was a girl from elsewhere

*Who had strange ideas about her hair
She ummed and she ahh'd
She bleated and baa'd
So in life she'll get nowhere.*

"Thanks." Ava grumbled. With almost ceremonial lack of care a glass and a bottle of caramel coloured soda were placed in front of her.

"It smells divine, thank you very much Mildred." The crone laughed, spitting gristle as she did.

"Quite the charmer aren't you? Eat up afore it gets cold." She hobbled off.

"Divine he said Margaret, did ye hear that?" Another round of vicious cackling rang through the restaurant. A weaker diner dropped his spoon in his soup and nearly had an anxiety attack.

They ate in silence, engrossed in the annoyingly delicious food. One by one the other diners paid their bill with a hefty tip. Ava watched intently as a gentleman laid out a pile of copper bars and silver eggs on top of the bill. The old woman serving him insisted on counting them before letting him leave. Biting each bar, turning them to the light and squinting, and finally complaining about the dirt on them. Ruin waved his hand in front of her. He had calloused hands but he spoke like a poet or a writer, maybe he did some DIY around the house? Or maybe he had to run away from the law a lot. Climbing walls would give you calloused hands, wouldn't it?

"How are you feeling?" He asked with a laugh but why would he laugh? Did she have something on her face. *Wait, did he drug me?*

"I feel a bit weird. What did you do? How did you do it?"

"I didn't do anything. *You* drank some curiosity."

A plate, or maybe a mug, what sort of porcelain objects do people keep in their kitchens here? Ava felt a tug at her shirt, she had gotten up. Ruin smiled at her.

"Are you familiar with the saying about the cat?"

"Curiosity killed the cat?"

"I was thinking the other one, but that works better. Come on."

Not enough room to swing a cat? Or is it skin a cat?

It was dark outside by the time they left the restaurant. Ava wondered if the swearing cat would be there then wondered if the city, or was it a town?

What was the difference, where was the line drawn? Was it size or population?

"Population, I think." Ruin answered, leading her by the hand.

"Are you psychic?"

"Either that or you're thinking with your mouth open." Ava blushed.

"It happens to everyone their first time. You get used to it the more you drink it." They stopped under an arch made of three huge books.

"How do you feel now?"

"A little better. Are these books just for show or do they have words in them?"

"They're a trilogy but they're terrible. You can get abridged versions in most bookstores." He shook his head as if dislodging a thought. "Ava, I'm setting off soon and I want you to come with me."

"Where are you going?"

"It's hard to say. Mostly wherever I'm needed."

"Why do you want me to come?"

Ruin sighed and turned away.

"You see through me Ava. Not many people call me out on my bullshit and well... I could use that from time to time." *Strangely honest. Shut up.*

A clockwork carriage cantered through, its rhythmic trot on the cobblestones echoing down the tight street long after it passed.

"Will there be adventure?" She asked.

"More than you know."

Ava beamed and spat on her hand, putting it forward to seal the deal. Ruin grimaced and did the same. His eyes followed the thread all the way up to the leatherbound ceiling.

"You planned this." Ava laughed, following his gaze to the ceiling's title; *The Call to Adventure (and several short epics on the subject of personal growth)*.

Ava woke in the morning bright eyed and bushy tailed though thankfully not literally as she had half feared. The hostel Ruin had suggested was quaint and cheap, the kind frequented by budding travel writers hoping to explain the beauty of the Inkk in their own unique voice. Lists of useful adjectives were pinned to the dorm walls next to every bed. Murky, somber, crepuscular, sunless, darkish were scored out. Ava looked around, they were scored out on every sheet.

“Why are some words scored out?” She asked the person below.

“They’ve been bought out.” The woman responded.

“Bought out by who?”

“Publishing houses, famous authors, who knows. Just can’t write them anymore.” The woman got up, she was pitch black from head to toe. Even her teeth were black. She seemed to eat the light.

“That’s terrible! They can’t do that, can they?”

“It’s only for a short while, usually. One printing season at most and there’s a bunch of rules about it now.”

Ava dropped down and got her shoes.

“Like what?”

“Well they can’t buy them in bulk now so at least there’s always a few adjectives going around. They can’t buy nouns anymore and scientific writing and certain genres are excluded. Thankfully.”

“Are you a researcher?”

“Did the full body dye give it away?” The woman laughed, passing Ava a cup of coffee. The smell roused the weary dead slumped over their typewriters.

“Black with four sugars, please.” A large woman pleaded from under one of the desks. The researcher filled a cracked mug and handed it under.

“I know that feeling.” Ava said. “How soon’s the deadline?”

“What day is it?”

“The sixteenth of Gumming.” The dyed woman said. The world became a flurry of motion. Cries rang out from many of the bunks as manuscriptless men and women grabbed their pens and paper. A few tried to dress, throwing shirts on backwards and applying a liberal coating of coffee.

“I’m late! I’m very, very late!” The large woman cried as she scooped her pages from the wreckage. Ava stepped round her, trying her best to avoid standing on anything important.

“Good luck!” She sang back as she slipped out the door.

Ava grabbed a couple of pastries to go then came running back for another because it insisted. Ruin slouched by the doorway with a fresh newspaper. "Morning."

"Sleep well?" Ruin asked, tossing the newspaper over his shoulder.

"Eventually. I never knew writing could be so annoying to listen to."

Ruin laughed, leading the way down the narrow street.

"One of the main reasons I don't like writers. That scritch sound their pens make or Truf forbid the clacking of their typewriters."

"What does truf mean?"

Ruin stopped and turned.

"Ah. Right, yeah. We need to sort out a few things if you're going to fit in."

"I didn't mean to offend."

"You didn't, don't worry. I'm agnostic but it's a turn of phrase that's deep in the language and if you don't know them, then you'll stick out like a-

"Sore thumb!"

"Yellow elephant." Ruin sighed. "Truf is the god of the Piggits, a harvest religion that was very important until a hundred years ago." He continued on, leading them down the book market.

"It's normal to say things like Truf forbid, for Truf's sake, but never say it in front of a devout Piggit. Got it?"

"Got it." Ava said.

"Course the chances we run into any devout Piggits are pretty slim these days. Mostly they just stick to their farms and cock fights. Oh, and if anyone around here asks which cock you support, you're a Grampsham Grey, got it?"

"Ava?" The street was decidedly monochrome.

A curiosity hangover is a curious thing in and of itself. The subject feels a sporadic and scattershot attention span that dips and peaks, leading their train of thought on a wild adventure. The effects are thankfully short lived and only of any serious effect to the naturally curious. Researchers, readers, and good reporters should take care. Ava had read the warning label on the cola but figured it was just thematic. Now she wasn't so sure and her head was starting to hurt.

"Ava!" Ruin shouted over the bustling morning shoppers with their sea of papers.

“Ava Missing! Read all about it!” A fast typing newsboy shouted, cranking issues through his bicycle press. They sold well, people love a bit of drama.

Her curiosity waned, sated with the answer. She could in fact climb the criss-cross brick wall. She pressed close to the shingles and whimpered. *You climbed up, just climb down. That’s easy to say when you’re not in charge of the hands!*

“Ava!”

She tried to shout but could only squeak. Fear aside, the rooftop was a quiet place, perfect for contemplation. Unfortunately all Ava could contemplate was the shape her splatter would make and what that annoying drilling sound was.

“Hello?” Ava managed through her tight, dry throat. The drilling stopped.

“Fuck,” someone whispered from behind the chimney stack. “‘Ullo dear. Out fer a climb?” They asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know why though.” A shingle came loose under her foot. She screamed, letting it fall to the street below.

“Quiet now girl, it’s alright” The voice said, a shingle slid past her. “The roofs round ‘ere aren’t ‘olding up well. Jus’ turn roun’ and take my ‘and.” Ava took a deep breath and inched her feet. She put her hand flat on the sloped roof and turned, pressing her stomach flat against the shingles.

“Good goin’. Now jus’ reach up.” Shaking, she raised her hands and felt calloused palms grab hers and pull.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” Ava said as she felt herself rise.

“Don’t thank me girl. It’s hard enough as is.”

“What?” She asked as she lurched backwards. The voice belonged to a man with a night black beard and a mouth like a knife slit. His arms were out, as if he had pushed. A tattoo of a brush with a head of fire burned black on his wrist. *He’s trying to kill me.* The thought was like an unexpected ice cube down the back. The chimney stack gave way to sky and for the first time Ava noticed the strange shapes above the clouds. A dull and faded moon, a handful of glinting triangles, and a square at least as big as her hometown. Somewhere, someone shouted her name and suddenly gravity seemed to notice her.

Throw the rope, catch the trolley wheel, kick the awning bar, and grab. He threw the rope over the bent lamp-post. A passing tram caught the rope and yanked hard, launching Ruin into the air. He kicked out at the awning of the

little grocery causing it to unfold and grabbed, knocking the air from Ava's lungs. For a second they hung gracefully in the air, then plummeted, hitting the awning and bouncing into the street. The cobblestones deflated like overfluffed pillows.

"Ow," Ava said, more out of habit than pain.

A crowd had formed, mostly the same writers as before, each trying to put their unique spin on the news.

"They soared through the air like alcoholic albatrosses."

"Falling, falling, like the prophesied end of Wwynd."

"Fuck off and out of my way." A throaty croak rang out from the crowd.

"Move you!" Someone cried out in pain, then another, and another till the crowd parted. A bow backed old woman hobbled out onto the soft, pillowy road. Ava pushed a cobblestone in, laughing.

"Ha! I died! I actually died!"

"You didn't die stupid girl," the hunchbacked hag said, tapping her foot on the cobbles. Suddenly, they were hard again, though their indents remained.

"Thank you ma'am. I didn't take the grocer as someone who tended his springs."

The old woman just stared unblinking at him.

"So, do we owe you money?" Ruin asked, patting his pockets theatrically.

"No, no, no." The woman shooed his hands. "Not money."

Ava shuddered. The woman gestured for them to follow.

The old woman stopped by a tie-dye door with a stained glass window in a single pedestrian street. She jostled the lock, a tubular bell cacophony filled the street.

"Odd choice for a dreamsmith." Ruin said, following in behind.

"An' a bare face grin is an odd choice for a disaster artist," the dreamsmith replied, dropping her bag on a ragged armchair. Ava gasped then scolded herself for being so cliché. Thankfully no-one seemed to notice so she indulged her curiosity. Miniature hot-air balloons floated in the air with tin gentlemen taking potshots at each other from the gondolas. Tiny porcelain sheep leapt quietly over a tiny fence with a counter in its base. Thirteen sheep leapt over the fence, fourteen, fifteen. Ava yawned.

"Careful wi' that un," the woman laughed from behind the counter.

"What does it do?"

"Puts ye t' sleep." She ducked behind the counter to get something. A faint muttering of obviously drifted over but Ava was too enthralled to notice. A

large bronze cage dominated the corner. Its multiple stories were filled with little metal carriages and colourful wooden townhouses with little plaques bearing names like Mr Fuzzypouches and Madam Bellatrix Lestrade. The top floor of the cage had been entirely given over to a tiny parliament with benches on both sides surrounding an intricate human sized typewriter that had been built into the cage wall.

“What do you keep in the cage?” There was a thump and an ow from the desk.

“Bureaucrats. They’ll be up soon, little bastards.” As if on cue, the first bleary eyed rats opened the doors of their townhouses and scurried up to the top floor.

“Aww. They’re adorable.”

Rats filled the pews with a large black rat taking the stand. Three smaller brown rats rested on the keys, waiting. The black rat squeaked, the pew rats squeaked back, the brown rats jumped on the keys. A sheet of paper emerged from the top of the cage.

Notice of Offensive language

Bylaws 16: Amendment A: SubpAragraraph C

Referring to any Rattus rattus as cute, or derivative term, or synonym of the forbidden term is illegal. The accused has been givin one (1) warning as she is clearley deranged.

Signed and agreed upon by the General Commity.

“They can type?”

“Barely.”

“Hey! I’m not crazy!”

“Well, you are shouting at rats,” Ruin laughed, taking the sheet from her.

“New breed of pet peeve?” He asked. The old woman nodded, placing a pair of black boots and red slippers on the counter.

“Bred ‘em last year. Glossophobia, papyrophobia, and praeceptaphobia.” She paused.

“Fear a public speaking, paper, and rules. Dulled down qui’ a bit course.”

The question hung unsaid in the air for a bit longer than was comfortable, filling the silence with its presence, urging someone to ask it. Ruin broke first.

“Why?”

The old woman took the red slippers and gestured for Ava to sit. She did.

“It’s a tren’ ‘mongst rich folk. Get themselves a pet peeve to preten’ like they got problems I suppose. Mos’ like ‘em for the novelty a having something quirky roun’ the house. Slip yer feet in there.”

Ava slipped the slippers on.

“Why am I doing this?” She asked.

“Yer givin’ me a mem’ry in repayment for savin’ yer life back there.”

“Oh. Okay.” *Say something!* “Any particular one?” *You’re useless.*

The old woman took a step back and let Ava see the patchy red slippers.

“Stan’ up, take a walk. Let ‘em get a taste for ya.”

“That’s a horrifying image,” Ruin laughed as he ran a feather across the bureaucrat cage.

Official Request By The Genneral Commity

We, The Genneral Commity, request the tresured feather from the soverign subject. We are willing to offer a faire trade of twelve (13) Bojangle brand Minty Obsessionss.

Ruin crumpled the note. Ava walked around the room, trying her best not to imagine the shoes eating her feet.

“Relax!” Ava tried to relax but old instincts lodged their complaints. She walked a little more. *This feels like shoe shopping with mum. Shouting and all.* She stepped and the world changed. The bare stone walls sprouted blue wallpaper. The stained and warped wooden floor smoothed into a familiar stucco as racks upon racks of shoes dropped into formation around her.

“How does that feel?” A smiling man with frosted tips in his hair appeared beside her.

“Answer the nice man.” A familiar harsh tone cut through her. A titanic figure materialised, a wooden bench forming beneath it as it crossed its legs.

“Too tight,” a soft, childish voice said through Ava’s lips. *Oh, no.* The figure stood up clutching her handbag tight. Her lips were set so flat she looked almost reptilian.

“Right.” A cold wind blew through the store, Ava shivered and even now felt her stomach drop. The figure grabbed her by the wrist, twisting and pulling to the door. The sound of screaming filled her ears and her lungs felt empty. Horrified, she pressed her fingers to her lips and felt the air rushing past. The bells jangled, the man shouted.

“You have to pay for those!”

“Why are you still wearin’ those fucking shoes?”

The world tilted as her foot was lifted. A dull throb spread across the back of her head. *Don't touch it, don't feel it.* Tears rolled down her cheeks. The tips of her fingers felt warm and wet. The figure recoiled and everything went dark.

Ava felt the warped wooden floor beneath her and curled up with the vain hope of hiding herself. Her eyes stung with hot tears and she couldn't breathe fully. She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright, it was just a memory," Ruin said.

"Fug'ff," she mumbled into the wood.

"That bad?" He laughed, patting her.

"That one'll sell well. Rich folk like a bit a drama," the dreamsmith laughed and held the boots up. "Your turn disaster artist. Make sure t' git me somethin' good."

"Fine," he said, stepping over the soggy Ava. "Though I feel it's important to mention that I'm reformed."

The old woman laughed, buckling under the force of the fake laugh, injecting it with as much spite as she could.

Ruin frowned and pulled the boots on. *Something boring, something useless...*

The store shimmered like a mirage and, annoyingly, didn't change much. A portion of the wall collapsed revealing a window and the dull view of Lunderville it afforded. Tall townhouses herded together against the dark alleys, bright blue copper domes adorned the abandoned rooftops where the urchins roamed. A pile of paperwork dominated the desk. Smiling, he took one from the top.

"Ahh, tax season." His memory said. He licked the nib of his pen and could actually taste the ink. *Knew this would come in handy one day.*

He let the memory play. It was silent except for the scratching of the pen, the faint murmur of the street below, and the dull, rhythmic thud of the pipes upstairs. *Funny how you can block out annoying sounds like that.* The thuds got louder. For a second the office gave way to a steam tunnel a thousand miles away.

"You look like a lad with a score to sett-" The office returned. *Fuck.*

When the memory ended, he came to on the armchair with handfuls of fabric. Ava sat on a wooden chair beside him.

“Are you okay? You were breathing weird and you’re sweating.”

The dreamsmith scowled at him from behind the counter. *She knows.*

“I’m fine,” he lied. “Just a bit sick from the shoes.” He pulled them off and slipped his own back on.

“Is that everything then?”

“Almost. I need t’ develop the mem’ries so take a seat.” She sidled through a beaded curtain and out of sight.

“The rats wrote you a letter.”

Official Request By The Genneral Commtity

It is notted that the soverin subject rejected our initial offer. We are willingg to give you a loyal retainerr to serve as your secratary as well as our orijanal offer of twelve (11) Bojangle brand Mint Obsessions as payment for the tresured feather.

Signed by The Genneral Commtity

Ruin stood before the general committee. They waited with bated breath. He held the black feather in the air.

“This feather?” The bureaucrats nodded. Ruin stroked his chin. “Nah.” He crumpled the note and dropped it with the other. The pew rats exploded with anger, squeaking and scratching in outrage. The black rat tapped its thimble on the stand. The brown rats jumped, the typewriter clacked.

By Order Of The Genneral Commtity

Refusal of trade is allowble, but your behavior goes beyondd insulting. An apology must be mad by the soferign subject or we will hav no choicee but to go to war!

Signed by The Genneral Commtity.

Ruin put his face close to the cage and smiled.

“Bring it.”

There was no outrage. No squeaks of indignation. The cage parliament simply calmly rearranged itself. Sheafs of paper were brought in and plastered over the cage wall, hiding official business. A single sheet of paper emerged from the top of the cage.

By Order Of The Genneral Commtity

Make piece your gods for you will receeve none from us.

“That’s...” Ruin showed Ava the note.

“That’s actually quite terrifying.” She finished. The old dreamsmith’s grumbling returned, followed shortly by her herself.

“Well t’ memories are borin’ as Fundas evenin’ but tha’ ne’r really mattered to ‘em.”

Ruin watched her eyes as she spoke and if she was hiding something, she hid it well.

“Sorry to have disappointed,” he said, bowing mockingly low. “If that’s all that is required, we’ll be taking our leave.”

“Yes, yes. Go on.” The old woman waved them out and locked the door behind them.

“Bastard,” she said to the empty room. The cage clacked, a note printed.

*By Order Of The Anshent Decree Of The Honorable FuzzyPouches II
No foul language, swearing, cussing or cursing in the storre or offical
dockumentation.*

Signed Last Month By FuzzyPouches II

She scowled at the cage with its paper covered sides and stormed off to get some tea.

Ava peered over at Ruin’s journal, strange colourful shapes and neat little writing covered every page, some even had scraps of paper taped in to give more space. *Nosy. Inquisitive!*

Ruin shut the journal and frowned.

“We’re going to have to take a carriage.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Ava said forcing a smile and trying to make eye contact. His mood had gotten even worse after leaving, almost as if he was worried about something.

“It is when you’re like me...”

The carriage was more familiar than the centipedal train she had rode in on. It had wheels, doors, and a couple of horses up front. Real horses. Despite herself Ava couldn’t help but smile as she settled into her seat. Ruin on the

other hand looked like he would need an army of masseuses to get him to relax.

"Relax, it doesn't go that fast, does it?"

Ruin shook his head.

"Then what are you worried about?"

Imagined slideshows of precarious cliffs, tangled horse legs, broken wheels, thirty carriage pileups, and worse played behind his eyes.

"I just prefer walking."

"Same. As long as it's not too far. Like, five miles at the most. Unless I'm hiking then I'll go all day," she beamed. *Please smile.*

Ruin smiled back. *Truf, that is a big bit of pastry in her teeth.*

The carriage jerked as the rider cracked the reins. Ruin scrutinised the other passengers; a young author with an ink blot on his temple, dungaree wearing woman with loose blonde hair, and a handsome gentleman in a black suit with a silver pocket-watch in his breast pocket. *I see you. But how to know...* He turned to Ava for ideas but she was buried in a penny dreadful.

"But how could you possibly have known?" Lady Abigail cried from the moon drenched balcony. Vannaheim Granger spat on the vampire vampire's ashes.

"After I saw the second set of bitemarks on the Count's neck, I knew. I knew there had to be a vampire vampire preying on the court." Vannaheim spat the words as he adjusted his cigar in his mouth.

"How can I ever repay you?" Lady Abigail asked. Vannaheim grabbed her by the shoulders, his huge hands holding her tight.

"By being straight with me Gail." He said, his voice dripping with stern love. Cold tears ran down Lady Abigail's snow white cheeks.

"I'm sorry Vannaheim." She cried. She braced herself for the imminent deathstrike. For Vannaheim's justice that he doled out so expertly on the others of her kind. The kind of justice she deserved for toying with his heart. The kind of

justice that was made all the worse by her love for him.

"Say something Vannehim." She cried but was silenced by his huge, strong lips against hers. "Now go. Go now and don't come back. You hurt me Gail and I can't promise I'll be as strong next time I see you." He spat. Lady Abigail nodded, tears falling from her cheeks and turned into a bat and flew off into the night.

Ava put the book down and sighed.

"I can see why they call them penny dreadfuls." She said more to herself than an attempt to make conversation. The ink blotted author smiled.

"They get better." He said, putting his own book down.

"I'd hope so with the amount they're selling."

"Sales are not indicative of quality. The best book in the entire world only sold one copy."

The woman sighed and lifted her own book higher, hiding herself from the conversation.

"What was it about?"

"The future."

"Oh, fuck off." Ruin groaned.

"It's true!" The author retorted. "Kenneth Brahan was a brilliant man with the Truf-given gift of clairvoyance! So many of his predictions have come true!"

"Like what?"

"He predicted the fall of Howl." The author cleared his throat, ready for powerful oration. "And there shall be a great clock, greater than any clock seen in all of Mandlass and those that made it shall pass and the clock shall fall into disrepair."

"That could be any big clock."

"Well what about Overunderville? In the midst of civility a great calamity will cause an exodus and the undeveloped will be as to lords as fleas are to dogs."

"Shock, horror, stop the presses. Rich people will look down on people? Never!" Ruin laughed.

"Can ve stop talking about silly seers?"

“It isn’t silly. Brahan has predicted so many things over the past three hundred years.”

Finally, the black suited gentlemen chimed in.

“Given enough time, everything will happen. A seer that doesn’t date their predictions is just a dishonest author.”

“Exactly!” Ruin said, slapping his palm down on the little table. Outside, the rolling fields gave way to forests strung with paper lamps and bookshelves. Ava shivered.

The day was fading, the blonde woman had gotten off Writer’s Retreat, a safe haven for authors that banned literacy in all its devious forms. Everything from the retreat’s sign to their restaurant menus were pictographic. Ruin had fought with the other man to hold the door for her while Ava rolled her eyes.

The forest beyond was calm and quiet with nothing but the occasional owl’s hoot or badger’s complaint as it found the fox hadn’t taken out the bedding like it said it would.

“Night Ava.” The young author said as he curled up on his seat.

“Night Welcot.” She stretched her arms and lay her head against the window. Ruin made a gagging face.

“What?” She mouthed.

“You two. Love birds.” He mimed.

“You’re one to talk.” She whispered. “What about Alexandria earlier?” Ruin’s eyes shot to the man in the black suit. Still sleeping.

“Fair point.” He whispered back and looked out the window. Conceding was the only way to end the conversation. An hour passed and eventually Ava began to snore.

Her feet pounded against shining white tiles; her breath caught in her chest. The tiles rolled on ahead and turned sharply right as the walls came into focus. The familiar smell of catering grade boil-in-the-bag curry hung in the air and threatened to gag her. Shadowy figures materialised in the hallway, their faces forming and unforming as they spoke. She risked a glance over her shoulder, the lights that were just now appearing in the ceiling were turning off and spouting inky black smoke. She knew it was chasing her and she had to keep running. Bracing herself she shouldered the stiff door of the cafeteria, the sign loudly screamed “Lunch Room” and she could feel her dad sighing at the americanism. The whole room sucked in and out with the

sound causing her to lose her footing and sprawl across the bleach stained floor.

“Hope ye brought me a postcard.” A shadowy figure cackled from somewhere in the coalescing crowd. The grating voice repeated, sticking like a broken record as the dark swallowed the room whole. Closing in on her circle of shame. The light above flickered and a face with broken, ashy skin appeared above the crowd. Wait, not skin. Fur. A cat pushed its way through the crowd with the moon on its back. It hissed.

Ava woke with a start. The carriage had continued on during the night, the faint sound of pistons came from outside. *Just clockwork horses, they must have switched over. Look at you knowing stuff.* Without noticing or understanding the significance Ava let the memory of the dream dissipate and lay her head back down. Outside a fine mist of rain started to fall but the paper lanterns never wetted.

The dark between the trees darkened and growled. A coal black hand tore a string of lanterns from the roadside, plunging the path into darkness. Angrily it stalked alongside the road, following the carriage like a wolf with a wounded doe. The sky was overcast and grey, just the way it liked. Anger pulsed through it. The dark at the edge of the road became the dark of the spaces under trees, of the places where trees pressed tight against each other to starve the grass. It placed a hand gently on a green frog-shaped lantern. The candle inside melted and flowed like an open wound. The paper rotted, leaving only the cheap wire frame and a handful of emerald dust. It smelled the air and smiled. The girl was awake but there was a deeper sleeper. Like a drop of ink Nyctohylophobia flowed alongside the carriage, its head pressed gently against the window and whispered.

The moon was completely gone and even the paper lanterns had disappeared. She shivered. *Oh, grow up. There's nothing to be...* She waved her hand in front of her eyes. Nothing. It was pitch black in the carriage but that couldn't be right.

“Ruin?” She whispered.

“SHHH.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on edge. *We've only known him a day. Still.* It wasn't Ruin's voice.

“Welcott?” She asked, frightened of the answer.

“No.”

Ava threw her bag at the voice and screamed. Not a Hollywood damsel in distress scream, a deep, guttural scream of terror. The kind that rises in the stomach and meets the vocal cords on their retreat down the octaves. She kicked out, striking something in the dark. Something hissed and for a second she saw shapes through the darkness. *Just keep kicking!* She felt the table snap under her onslaught, felt her feet connect with something fleshy, heard Ruin shout, “ouch! What? Why?”
“There’s something in here!”

Ruin froze. *Get up!* He chastised himself, his body protested. A cloud of darkness filled Ava’s corner of the carriage, occasionally a leg would burst through but that was the least of his concerns. He stared at the back of a shadow. The shadow of a man, taller than him and shaking intensely. *Get up you damnable coward!* He watched it lean in, finger length teeth extending from its void like maw. There were no threads in the carriage, nothing to his advantage.

Ava threw her shoe and heard a dull crack. The darkness burst, leaving just ashy motes hanging in the air. The shadow of a man stood in the middle of the carriage. Welcott still lay sleeping. The shadow followed her gaze to the young author and reached out. *Oh no you don’t!* Ava tackled the shadow. Where her skin touched it she felt like her pores were filling with ice. Where her shoulder hit it, she felt it crumple like paper. Where her face collided with the bench, she felt pain.

Ruin leapt to his feet and helped Ava up.

“It’s alright, its gone. You got it.” He said, catching her fist.

“Why didn’t you help?”

“I..” He cast his eyes down and smiled. “Was getting ready for a sneak attack. But you apparently had it all under control.”

Faint flute music coloured the silence. As one they looked over at the sleeping young author. A red scaled cobra rose swaying to and fro from his open mouth. Ava picked up the broken table and held it like a shield.

“Ruin?”

“I don’t know.”

He’s sleeping. What always wakes you up? The snake rose up to the ceiling and tasted the air.

“Ruin, throw water on his face.”

“Oh sure, send me in in front of the big snake.” He hissed. The snake hissed in reply. The faint flute music stopped and for a second everything was still. Like a sail snapping in the wind, the cobra’s hood shot open. It’s jaw opened and it struck. Ava jammed the table in its mouth.

“Now!” The very tip of its teeth brushed against her knuckles. She let go of her shield. Ruin doused the young author with his flask. Nothing. The snake reared up, throwing the table out of the window. “I said now Ruin!”

“It didn’t work!”

The snake hissed, its forked tongue stabbing out at Ava. Tasting her fear. *You might wake up if you die...* Everything seemed to slow as she watched the snake’s muscles tense. She pictured her room, her life, her parents. The snake shot forward like a lightning strike. Ava leapt to the side. It’s teeth brushed past her leg as she collided with the luggage rack. Ruin wet his finger and shoved it in Welcott’s ear. The snake evaporated.

“Eww, what in Truf’s name are you doing?”

Ruin ruffled his hair. “Time to wake up. Ava are you alright?”

Ava grumbled from the luggage rack. Outside the path grew brighter.

“So this girl, who is completely new to our world, came into contact with a nightmare and her first reaction is to hit it with a stick?”

Sylent tutted, “poor thing, she must be terrified.”

“Or she’d make a natural knight.” The woman said, crumbling a piece of night between her fingers. The owl hooted furiously.

“You! You! Mercia, you can’t be serious?”

She shook her head, “No, I know. She needs to go.” They stepped out of the forest to an empty clearing of flattened grass and punctuation confetti.

By noon the carriage had pulled into a coach house. Ava stood up and cracked her back. Ruin winced.

“Can you please not do that?”

“Why?” She gripped the edge of the surviving bench and twisted her bubblewrap back. A disagreement turned into an argument turned into a shouting match.

“...And where is the fucking driver?”

“I was thinking that myself.” Ruin said to the carriage at large.

“Where is the other man that was travelling with us?” Welcott asked.

“Same place as the driver,” *if we’re lucky*. The passenger door opened like a stage curtain to reveal a beetroot red and beetroot shaped man. He stuck out a finger and huffed.

“What, in the name of all that is good and right, have you vagabonds done to this carriage?” And as an afterthought. “And where is the driver?”

Ruin stepped forward, taking the man’s hand in a firm handshake.

“Thank Truf, you’re the proprietor of this carriage business?”

“Yes?” He was literally on the backfoot. Ruin seized the advantage and stepped him down. *Get the height advantage, get witnesses.*

“I just want to say thank you,” he said loudly, gesturing animatedly. Heads started to turn. “If it weren’t for your driver, we’d all be dead!” A crowd started to form. Ruin eyed a thread at the top of the carriage that seemed to fray out into the crowd. He gave it a hearty pat, dislodging a charcoal chunk of night and a shard of glass. The crowd gasped.

“With the help of a passenger whose name we sadly never learned, the driver fought off nothing less than a nightmare!” He held the piece of night up for the crowd to see. Inky smoke fell from it. *Just keep your mouth shut peacock and we’ll get out of this.*

Ava watched in disbelief.

“That treacherous fuck.”

“What is he doing?” Welcott answered, mimicking her disbelief.

“I would like to personally commend the dedication this company shows to keeping its customers safe and to say that I salute that brave man.” Forcing a tear, he placed the nightmare scrap in the beetroot hand. “Thank Truf we didn’t travel Juniper.” Cheers from the crowd. *Patriotic morons*. Ava tugged on his jacket.

“Ruin, what the hell?” *Shit*.

“Play along,” he whispered. “Thank you all, no we won’t pursue reimbursement, don’t worry-” he ducked low. “-keep walking quickly before they realise.”

The coach house was long, big enough for two dozen carriages to fit inside with room to turn. They hurried past the line of hole-in-the-wall shops, through the bruise coloured smoke of a tobacconist, and almost to the exit when someone called out.

“Wait a minute, he’s a disaster artist!”

Ruin sighed. The crowd would never see the speaker but he already knew. Could already picture him rubbing that silver pocket-watch. Ava thankfully

didn't hear the accusation, too busy coughing from the smoke. He summoned some chivalry and held the door. Welcott followed.

The coach house was the capital attraction for the town of Nothing-Hill. That, and the lack of a hill but that was Nothing. The town was mostly there to serve as a hub for coaches heading to other, more interesting towns. Places with something to look at. Ava nonetheless enjoyed the town as they made their way down the thoroughfare. Picturesque cottages coated in ivy strands and flowerbed thatch lined the streets. Statues of knights and women with pencils behind their ears stood on the corners, greening from the rain.

"It's beautiful," she said.

Not as beautiful as you, Welcott thought and would later write.

"It's alright," Ruin replied.

"Sour puss," she said and stopped. "Why does it keep saying 'Nothing four miles'?"

"Because there's Nothing out there."

"Then why put a sign up about it?"

"The tourism committee put it up," Welcott offered with a smile.

"Why?"

"Because every town needs a bunch of optimistic xenophiles that think every rock you can squint and tilt your head at deserves a name and a plaque," Ruin offered with a smirk. Ava rolled her eyes.

"Where are we going?" Welcott asked, *and how do I get rid of him?* He thought.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"Ruin!"

"Well, I actually asked and they said the replacement carriage wouldn't be running until morning so no, I don't have anywhere else to be."

Ruin eyed the threads around him. *Elderly baker, hot pie, cat, classic.*

"The morning?" He stamped, the cat yowled and scratched, the baker screamed in alarm, and apple crumble coated Welcott. Ava held back a laugh and paused. *He didn't look surprised by that.*

"You alright?"

Welcott nodded.

"Come on we'll see if we can find a bathroom or something to get you cleaned up," Ava said.

"I know just the place!" Ruin said.

The place, as it turns out, was a pub called the “Nothing To See Here” which Ruin assured them was a hilarious pun. Ava couldn’t see it through the smoke. As Welcott sojourned to the bathroom, Ava escaped to the garden and stopped dead in her tracks. *Not right*. She looked around at the mismatched patio furniture and the deep crust ash trays. *No, worse than that*. She looked at the old man pissing in the flower filled hedge. He had a croquet mallet and swore as he dropped it on his feet. *Ew, but worse than that*. She looked at the horizon and saw Nothing.

All of it.

Where logically there should have been a hill, the ground instead opened into a great pit. Where wind should blow there was instead stillness. Where a bird flew in, there was instead, suddenly, no bird. Even the horizon behind the not-hill was warped, the horizon line broken in half like an eraser line through a child’s drawing. Ava squeezed the bridge of her nose, feeling a migraine come on just from looking at it. *We apologise for any inconvenience caused*. She laughed at the memory, of the way Alex used to put on that ridiculous conductor voice whenever headaches were mentioned. She frowned and shoved the memory aside.

“Quite ‘eh sight isn’ tit?” The old man asked, leaning on his mallet.

“What?” She asked, snapping back to reality. Or, at least what currently passed for it.

“T’ Nothing gel.” He nodded towards the shimmering space where the not-hill was. “Gave me qui’ t’ headache firs’ time I saw it.”

Don’t look. Ava looked and wished she hadn’t. The not-hill was preferable to the not-nice sight hanging from his trousers.

“What is it?” *You are such a reporter. Grow up, we’ve seen them before. Yeah, but that’s disgusting. Don’t look.*

“Not really sure,” he scratched it. “Feller from t’ university came an tol’ us all once but I was knee-deep in echoes by t’ time he arrived.”

“Ah, okay. Thanks,” she said, retreating into the bar.

She found Ruin sat in a corner booth listening intently to a man sat in a cage hanging above the bar. Without looking he pushed a tall dark blue drink over to her.

“What’s this?” She asked but was drowned out by the caged narrator.

“And lo! Jeremus the fleet footed rascal from Lunderville passes the ball with a deft kick to, oh you would not believe this folks, Graham Grunty Grisham snatches the ball from midair with the grace of a highway..”

Ava stopped inspecting the drink.

“Wait, is this football?” She asked. Ruin shook his head.

“They can use more than just their feet. Just can’t hold it for more than a second.”

“How does he know what’s happening?”

“He’s reading it? The match happened last night.”

“Ahh,” she said and went back to inspecting the drink. *If he wanted to drug you, he’s had a lot of opportunities.* She drank and nothing happened.

Disappointed? Welcott returned damp.

“Did you find it alright?” Ruin asked.

“Yes but the tap burst and I got soaked.”

Ruin laughed and once again, *he isn’t surprised.*

A group, unmistakably police by the batons at their hips and the bloodlust in their eyes, barged into the pub. The crowd gave the most cursory glance and went back to listening to the match. Ruin had disappeared.

Good job Welcott, he praised himself then asked, *for what?* One of the constables strode over to their booth and clicked her heels.

“Good afternoon sir, we believe you may have been involved in a murder. Anything you do or say will likely make it worse so please resist so that I can smack you with this here baton. ”

Welcott looked round, Ava had vanished.

Ava stepped out into the garden and scurried down behind the hedges. Ruin was already there.

“Brewture. It lets you see a little bit into the future.”

“How did I know the police were coming?” *Wait. What?* Her head pulsed, the departure board shuffled madly.

“Yes.”

“You mean I can see the future?”

“Sorry.”

“Stop doing that, you’re confusing me!”

Ruin took her hand. *He has really pretty eyes. Shut up!*

“He’ll be fine.”

Ava didn’t bother to ask the question but her teeth started to ache and it forced its way out like a hatching snake.

“What about Welcott?” The distant sound of shouting told her she didn’t have a choice. Ruin was already scurrying away, past the croquet field and into the woods.

She followed.

About thirty three and a third miles away, a rock tumbled down a well. This alone wouldn't have been enough to send do-gooder border collies running for help but what the rock was attached to just might have.

There was a splash at the bottom and then all went quiet.

"Deriq," the taller of the robed men started. "Are we sure he was a heretic?"

Deriq sighed and placed his hands on the edge of the well. Wax dripped from the trio of candles that adorned his iron crown.

"Franq. I know thee are new to the Reclamants, but thou has to understand, if he weren't a heretic, he would have said as such."

Franq considered this for a moment.

"I think he did say 'stop, please, I haven't stolen any wax!'"

The two looked into the well.

"Yes, well a heretic would say that wouldn't he?"

Franq nodded, spilling a little wax from his own candle crown.

"Excuse me!" A voice rang out. Mercia strode out from between the trees, lowering her crossbow. "Do either of you know the way to Nothinghill from here?"

The two priests looked to each other and shook their heads.

"Sorry miss, we aren't from around here."

"Just came down from Last Light on some business."

She peered past them at the well.

"Uh-huh. Do you at least know the way to the path?"

Franq beamed at the chance to help someone.

"Of course! I can light the way there myself if you'd like miss..."

"Thank you," she said with a wolf like smile.

"If you don't mind me asking..."

"Franq," he offered smiling.

"If you don't mind me asking Franq. Why are the priests cracking down on stolen wax all of a sudden?" Her eyes scanned the woods at the edge of the candle light. Franq scratched his arm nervously.

"Th...We shan't suffer the heresy of the thief any longer miss."

"But why not send the ignitiates to deal with it? Why send actual priests?"

"The heretic's tongue can wrap the unprepared in lies and cloud their candle miss." He stuttered as he spoke as if trying to remember it right.

"You're running out of wax aren't you Franq?" She watched his face as she spoke, for the slightest betrayal.

Twitch.

There you are.

Franq tried to laugh it off.

“Don’t lie to me Franq. My family stood the line during the Long Night.”

“Please miss. I’m not allowed to say,” he begged, clutching his hands together in prayer.

“Is Last Light running out of wax?”

He nodded and wailed into his robe. A branch snapped. Mercia spun with her crossbow raised but it was only Sylent.

“I found the path. Oh! What’s wrong with him?” He asked, pointing his wing.

“Stubbed his toe. Lead on.”

Sylent glanced back at the crying priest, thought about seeing if he was alright, thought better of it and led the way.

“Ruin!” Ava shouted as she stumbled over another fallen tree. *Bastard, slow down!* She stumbled through nettles and shrubs and finally, with warm throbbing cuts covering her legs, found a patch to lie down on.

“You’re being a dick you know!”

Ruin made no response, just squatted by the tree and watched, mumbling to himself.

“We should go back for Welcott.”

Ruin said nothing.

“Hey! Don’t ignore me.” She punched him in the thigh.

“What?” His nostrils flared.

You followed a complete stranger into the woods. You know you’re half to blame if he kills you right? She hesitated.

“There’s no point going back for him,” Ruin said.

“Why not?”

“Because he won’t get into any trouble. They’ll take one look at him and know exactly what happened.” *Well my boy, you’ve just stepped in it there.*

Any seco-

“Then why did we run?”

There it is. Ruin let out a deep sigh and shook his legs out.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“And I don’t want to be in the middle of the woods.”

Ruin sighed again and took a pure black bottle from the inside of his coat.

Midnight Liqueur.

“I’m not a great guy Ava.”

“True.”

“First, ouch. Secondly, you barely know me, you don’t get to make calls like that.”

“You threw a rock at me and dumped me in someone’s basement as your way of apologising.”

“I had to make sure you were tough enough.” *Take the bait. Take it.*

“I’m tougher than you, you froze up when that nightmare attacked us!”

“And I’m grateful for how you handled that.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Ava, it’s difficult for me to say this, not least for the legal implications, but...”

“But what?”

You are a terrible person.

“I’m not exactly in good standing with the law. As you rightly saw, I used to be a con-man.” *Liar...*

“And all this is a con?” She balled her fists, palming a nice jagged rock just in case. *Hear him out, don't fly off the handles.* The events of the past few nights flooded her mind, her train of thought jumping from one to another. No stops on this journey, the engine whistled frantically.

“No. I've been trying to get away from that old life. Rebuild.”

“So why run?”

Ruin looked up into the trees, it was late afternoon and the light flitted between the leaves.

“Parking tickets,” he sighed, inflating it with as much regret and sorrow as he could muster. Ava laughed.

“Parking tickets? You should have just said.”

She'll find out sooner rather than later. Why do you even care? He looked at the thread coming from her. Golden white and stretching straight up to the clouds.

Elsewhere a man fought with a map, trapping its ends with ink pots and sandals as he traced a dotted line across it. Occasionally, he laughed. As his finger finally found its mark, he stabbed the map and gestured to the woman before him. She shook her head and pointed to a row of carriages each with six canvas wings. As he watched, the first made its jerky ascent, the wings flapping in sequence, slowly at first, then quicker until it rose into the clouds. He laughed, dropped a few loose into the woman's apron and ran down the street, his luggage clattering against his heels. The second and third carriages rose with slightly more grace than the first. The flapping wings cracking like sails in a storm. A man with skin like ebony stone shut the carriage door, smiling at the family within. His smile faltered as a man collapsed beside him.

“You are too late sir. I am all full up,” the ebony man said, a measure of true regret in his tone.

The man opened his luggage and shook his head.

“I cannot take any more passengers. The weight is too much even for me.”

The man pressed a letter into his hands. With an eyebrow raised, he read the address and the name on the back.

“You must be mad mister Langley but I will deliver the letter for you,” he laughed.

Langley watched as the carriage ascended into the parting clouds. At the edge of the sleepy town the anchors were raised, great chains pulling them

up into the sky and the great city of Wwynd drifted on. He laughed to himself and set off.

Ava stopped, planting herself on a warm patch of grass and sighed contentedly. Beneath her, a mole whose shelves had just collapsed cried dejectedly.

"It's such a nice day, can't we stop for a little bit?"

Ruin eclipsed her.

"And what will we do when it gets dark?"

Ava shrugged.

"We could camp?"

"Do I look like I have a tent?"

Ava sat up.

"Wait, you lot have mechanical horses and emotions you can drink, don't you have some sort of key that opens a door to a magic bothy?"

Ruin shook his head.

"Potion that makes you really small and a cottage in your pocket?"

Ruin laughed.

"Not that I know of but that's not a bad idea."

"Shit," Ava said. "Where are we going to sleep tonight?"

"There's a regular bothy a few miles down the road. If we get there early enough we might even be able to claim it for ourselves."

Now there's an ide- No! He's not my type.

He put a hand out to help her up.

Alright, maybe a little bit.

The road to the bothy was quiet, an old greenway wreathed in budding flowers. Crystal clear puddles filled the mossy furrows that split the path. Songbirds sang love songs in the thick canopy. Ruin sauntered with a definite confidence. His fitted black coat and nearly skin tight trousers still immaculate even after being slept in.

He's got that stylish vampire thing you like. And a nice butt. She stumbled over a small rock and blushed as Ruin turned to check on her.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded, biting her tongue.

Long eyelashes, dark eyes, good cheekbones. What's the issue?

"Aha," Ruin said so suddenly Ava jumped. *Can he read minds?*

"There's the bothy," he said, pointing to a picturesque stone cottage.

Trees grew so close that their branches seemed to intertwine with the thatch. A small vegetable patch with signs offering cheap turnips and carrots sat at the side of the house. Ruin held the door open and smiled.

But he's male.

Ava looked at the kitchen table. Dirty plates stood as a monument to the previous guests, the fossil remains of their parting meal left undisturbed. The ashes from the hearth had spilled onto the threadbare rug that carpeted the lounge and bedroom of the open plan cottage. Cave paintings chronicled the dynasty of the last guests in thick black above the headboard of the left-most bed.

"Lovely."

Ruin clicked his tongue and sighed. "It's normally nice than this." He ran a finger across the kitchen counter, lifting a thick amber trail. "Some people just have no respect for the establishment."

"Says the guy running from the law."

"I'm not saying that a healthy dose of anti-establishmentism is wrong but there's a limit."

Ava blew the ash from a half burnt poster.

"Professor Suraci will unveil his magnum opus, the first voyage into the stars aboard a purely tinker made vessel, to lay claim to Opula, our greatest satellite, in the name of progress and science." She held it up for Ruin to see the picture of a moon and a bronze rocket circling it.

It's not Wwynd. She has something to do with the moon.

"When," he cleared his throat, "when is it?"

Ava shrugged, "dunno, the date's been burnt off."

Ruin took the poster and frowned. Ava slapped his hand.

"Don't snatch!"

"Sorry," he said with a grin. "I'm obsessed with space."

"We could stargaze in the garden."

Shit. I don't know anything about space. Well, neither does she.

"A stellar idea, Ava."

She blushed but Ruin's eyes were elsewhere.

The back garden was more a tamed part of the forest than a garden. Thick clumps of grass and roots made the ground uneven, setting the chairs to wobble. Not far from the house the tamed woods bared its nettles, a reminder of its wild nature should it tire of its domestication. At least, that's

what it might have been like if it wasn't a metaphor. In stark reality, the garden was overgrown but in the dark it was no different from any other. Above, the sky glittered.

"What are the weird shapes next to the moon?" Ava asked.

"Some people say they're Opula's daughters. Though I remember reading once that they're apparently buildings that somehow ended up there."

"Buildings?"

"Built by the nomads in the desert before they were nomads. Even they don't know how they got up there."

He has a lovely voice.

"People say they wander the desert, trying to recreate them but they can't remember what shape they are."

"You're kidding? That sounds too ridiculous even for here."

He shrugged and smiled.

"Just saying what I've heard."

"Alright, what about that constellation there?" She pointed, barely looking. Her eyes lingering on his lips.

"Ahh, The Mime. A very important constellation. It pulls the unseen forces of the universe and controls the wind."

"Uh-huh. And that one?" She pointed, barely listening.

"The Snake. See where the stars make a sort of line with one off to the side? That's it testing it's cosmic bonds."

A chill wind blew through the woods. Ava shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"No." Her teeth chattered as she spoke.

"Here," he said, placing his jacket over her.

Just kiss him. Go for it! No!

He sat back down and placed his hand on her thigh. Ava's heart fluttered. Her train of thought derailed.

Ruin stared at the thread, following it up slowly, almost wishing it not to. Up through the sparse clouds and like an arrow to Opula's breast it hit the moon.

Huh.

Ava wrapped her fingers around his.

"Woah!" He recoiled his hand away.

"What?!"

There was a pause. An awkward silence in the garden. *You blew it!*

"I thought you were a spider."

The train of thought rerailed, first stop Confusion.

"Shall we get some sleep? It's getting late," he said.

Anger.

Ruin went into the cottage without even looking round.

Last stop, Hurt, where this train terminates. Alight here for self-doubt, guilt, and the world's largest lump in the throat!

You laid it too thick you damnable cur. Now she's in love with you and you're going to have to break her heart.

Ruin sighed into the limp pillow and tried to sleep.

Ava sat alone on a creaking pier overlooking a dry lake. Cold and biting winds blew past but they went out of their way to avoid her. She wiped at her eyes.

"You can sit if you can stand to be near me," she said. A tall man with porcelain skin wrinkled with cracks of gold sat beside her.

He said nothing.

"Why am I so repulsive?"

He put his arm around her and kissed her on the head.

"Thanks but you aren't real." She smiled weakly.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps you aren't real and are merely a dream of mine."

"You know that's not true," she shivered.

"Or perhaps the thin line between reality and make-believe is one that shifts with the wind." The man reached out and plucked the moon from the sky.

"Perhaps we give our feelings too much control over where we place our line." He dropped the moon into Ava's hand. It was heavy and cold and the sight of it filled her with dread.

"You know, it's really clichéd to give a girl the moon."

The man laughed and patted her back with one hand. With the other he crushed the moon to dust.

"Wh—"

The world was plunged into darkness and a voice called out from the alleyways of her memories.

"Fu—"

"Rise and shine Peacock!" Ruin banged a pot by Ava's ear. She screamed, kicked and tangled herself in the blanket.

"Why?"

"Cause it was funny," he said but Ava wasn't listening. She grabbed her notepad and wrote, her dream solidifying as she held onto it. The colours deepening, the memories of sensations tingling on her skin, the feelings, the words... the words were gone.

"Dammit!"

"What?"

"I was trying to remember something but your stupid banging made me forget!"

She pulled herself from the cotton cocoon, grabbed her clothes and stopped. Ruin was holding her notepad.

What did I just write?

“Give me that!” She grabbed the notepad, wincing as the paper sliced her finger.

“You drew the moon.”

“So?” She scowled as she sucked on her finger.

Tell her what it means, tell her what you think.

“It’s a pretty good drawing. Good shading.”

Coward.

Ava half smiled and put the notepad in her bag.

“What’s for breakfast?”

A knock at the door, followed by another and another. A polite yet forceful knock that demanded attention. Ruin held a finger to his lips and gestured to the back door. Ava nodded and quickly and quietly gathered her things. By the time the knocker had the wherewithal to check the back door, they were gone.

“I really dislike people whom leave the bothy door locked.”

“Don’t you mean who?” The knocker asked.

“You know how I feel about that word.”

The knocker nodded with a wry smile.

Mercia paused and sniffed the air.

“Do you smell that Sylent?”

The owl sniffed and shook his head.

“We’re close.”

She turned to leave but paused, on the ground was a drawing of the moon.

Ava and Ruin walked for hours in what felt like silence. The wind barely blew, the birds barely called. There was a reason for this outside of their own introspective self-pity. The flying city of Wwynd was docked in the clouds about three miles up. For the humans in the area, this was wonderful news as it meant that the merchants would come down in their great winged wagons and sell exotic trinkets from across the world for strangely low prices. For the birds in the area, it meant it was time to shut up and stay in-tree as the cloud nets would be down.

In some circles this natural phenomena was cause for concern. In the philosophical circles it begged the question: are birds too intelligent to eat? In the more practical minded agricultural circles it begged the question: what are we going to eat now? Thankfully one bright tinker had been to the gleaming arcades of Howl and saw what wonderful fun their aptly named Descending Claw Prize Catching Game was. And if the birds wouldn't come the easy way, well, the hard way was much funner anyhow.

Neither Ava nor Ruin noticed the large cage like claw as it swung by behind them. Nor did they notice as it wrapped around a tree and yanked it roots and all into the clouds.

Eventually Ruin broke the silence.

"Hey, isn't this a stroke of good luck!"

The path twisted and turned as it dipped into a deep stone valley.

"You're excited over a valley?"

"Not just any valley kid. The Silent Valley. See, it's got a big bronze plaque and everything." Sure enough there was a bronze plaque embedded on a conspicuous rock just a little off of the path.

THE SILENT VALLEY

"Protected Natural Wonder: Takes the words right out of your mouth."

NO LITTERING

BEWARE THE CENSOR

Gift Shop Open 9 til 10

Ava massaged her temples frustratedly; another migraine was brewing behind her eyes. Evacuation orders had been posted by the medulla. Delays and cancellations were to be expected.

“This is going to be something weird. Isn’t it?”

Ruin smirked, huffed on his cane, polished the silver skull, then bothered to reply.

“Weird is subjective, peacock.”

“My hair isn’t weird!” Burning pain, *we apologise for the cancellation.*

“Nevermind. Let’s go,” she said.

The valley itself wasn’t weird. A typical example of water erosion through limestone over the course of millions of years that eventually dried up. Steep grey walls capped with grassy locks and the occasional non-conformist tree growing out of the stone.

“This isn’t-” Rounded metal letters fell from her mouth, clattering on the stone below. *This isn’t.* Ava *gasped*, it clattered. “What?!” Louder and bigger, the question hung in the air for a second before landing on her toe with a hearty thump. Ruin clamped his hand over her mouth.

“Shhhh.” Tiny copper letters rolled off his tongue into his hand. In the same hushed and tiny voice he added. “Carry them. No littering.” He unclamped and pocketed his words. Ava scowled but picked up her sentiments. Solid metal letters, some joined together, some loose. She pocketed the loose letters and awkwardly carried the heavy question.

An hour or so passed in relative silence. The sound of their feet didn’t make letters appear, or at least if they did they were small and assumedly didn’t count as littering. Experimentally Ava tossed her *What* on the ground. It thumped. She opened her mouth to ask, caught herself, bit her tongue, and *grumbled*. Tiny letters pressed against her lips, she spat them into her hand.

stupid-valley.

Twists and turns and twists took their toll and the two tired travellers stopped. Ava dropped the question and slumped over a comfortable stone. How much longer could this valley be? Ruin would know, but she’d have to carry it the whole way. Curiosity got the better of her.

“How much farther?” She asked. Quietly. Seven fingers, seven miles. She picked up the words, each weighed about as much as a pencil. Seven fingers, seven hours. Which did he mean?

“Miles?” He nodded. High above the sound of a hawk’s screech split the silence of the valley. Ruin’s eyes bulged. The sound ran through her head igniting painful fires as it went. *We apologise for the delay.* He kicked off the large stone, tackling, rolling. The sky seemed to crash behind them as sword-sharp *E’s* embedded in the stone. The two locked wide, fear filled eyes in the shadow of the screech. The word itself spread from wall to wall,

blocking the valley with twenty metre high copper type. Their edges glinted like swords. Ruin *groaned* and turned back.

“Where are you going?” Ava whispered.

“The long way.”

The long way started four hours back, a thin crack of a valley covered in signs to the effect of “Turn back, there’s nothing up this way, don’t be crazy, go that way.” Ruin turned the arrows with a self-contented smirk and headed on. Neither noticed the missing signs nor did they notice the oily substance coating the walls.

Night approached like a runaway coal train. Shadows elongated into twisted and terrible shapes before filling the valley entirely. Beautiful stars in strange constellations littered the sky but stars are no solace to the cold and hungry. “We need to make camp.” Ava whispered but Ruin continued on. “Ruin. We need to stop.” The words were a little larger, Ruin still continued on. “Ruin.” The word thudded to the ground. He stopped.

“We can’t stop.” Ava raised an eyebrow. “Look over there. On the rock.”

Spiky brass type lay strewn around the rock. A mess of *g*’s and *r*’s.

“Mountain lion?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Ava sighed, relieved.

“It’s a valley tiger.”

Ruin pushed on until long after sunset, Ava stumbling along behind. She wanted to ask how he kept avoiding the trips and falls but her pockets had started to strain. Only important questions from now on she promised herself. She paused. Ruin was gone. Dark valley walls stood high and imposing against the glittering sky. Visible only through their absence of stars. Memories of cracks in the stone, big enough to trap a leg filled her head. Imaginary tigers stalked her through the night.

“Ruin?” She hissed desperately.

Ruin touched her back, reflexively clamping his hand over her mouth.

“We’ll camp here.” He whispered, quieter than usual as he led her by the hand to a deeper shadow in the dark valley wall. A cave. Thick canvas moved aside revealing a squat purple tent with gold filigree huddled by a wheelless cart. Boxes of supplies, food and explorer miscellany lay scattered on the ground. A deep black oil had extinguished the fire. Ava opened her mouth to

ask then decided against it. Ruin pointed to the tent and mimed sleeping. Ava shrugged. Ruin shook his head, pointed at Ava, pointed to the tent, and mimed sleeping. Ava understood and nodded. Ruin pointed to himself, his watch, the cave entrance, his eye.

“What?” Ava asked, catching the word in the air. It was heavier than the others.

“I’m going to keep watch tonight,” he whispered. Ava nodded and clambered into the tent. Ruin waited, his attention fixed on the black oil and the hand sticking out of it. *The Censor*. Ruin checked his pockets, double checking he had all his words. *Phew*.

Ava snored. Ruin rubbed his face and grumbled. She’ll have too many to carry by morning. He tried to draw his eyes away from the hand in the oil. His own hand produced his sleep-box. Still some left. But you won’t be able to sleep. His sigh floated up to the cave ceiling and burst on the stalactites. He pulled back the tent flap and blew the sleep inside. Ava went silent, facedown in a pile of thick g’s and r’s and even a few k’s and, strangely, a p. There were, however, no z’s in sight. Ruin smiled faintly as he watched her sleep. You’ll have to tell her soon. Otherwise who knows what’s going to happen.

The night passed slowly. Ruin sat on the floor until his rear got numb, then paced slowly around the cave, ears pricked. He sat on the cart but that was worse than the floor so he bunched up his coat and sat on that. He checked his watch, dawn was just a couple of hours away. Outside something *growled* but was cut short by a deafening silence. The sound of the wind, of the barely heard insects, of Ruin’s own heartbeat disappeared for a few horrible seconds.

Sound returned as suddenly as it had left. Nothing in the cave could be used to make a disaster. Least, not the type he wanted. Heavy footsteps approached the canvas covered cave mouth. The canvas lifted slowly, a sharp, oily beak pushed in. Sharp talons clicked against the stone. The censor. A black vulture like creature as tall as Ruin with burning white eyes. Glittering dust speckled its leathery hide. Thick oil that swallowed what little light there was dripped from its beak.

Ruin backed away. *Plan, plan, what do I do?* He threw a handful of choice words at it. It snapped most out of the air but one struck home. It blinked furiously and shook its wings.

“t” A heavy iron *t* materialised in the air. Ruin gripped it like a club. *Could have been louder!* The censor clicked its beak, globules of oil flicked across the cave. Its throat convulsed.

“Ooooooo” Bands of iron sprung from his lips, shrinking into each other to form a nearly perfect shield. Oil struck the metal disc, catching it in the air before slamming it against the far wall with a wet thud. Ruin cowered behind the disabled cart. The censor turned towards the cart and bit. The entire left siding burst under the pressure.

“P” Twelve foot tall and iron, the *P* fell like steam hammer. Shards of beak scattered across the ground. It screamed agonised silence.

“-” Ruin shouted but no sound came and no letter formed. He looked at the *t* in his hand. It wasn’t quite a sword, too blunt and rectangular. The serif at the end made it a bit like a crowbar. He looked at the censor’s knees. A daring jab to the wing. It sliced a talon in response, ripping open the tent. Both stopped to look. The censor snapped forward, Ruin swatted it on the beak spraying oil across the ruined tent. It stepped back, clacking its beak. Ruin grabbed Ava and hurled her to safety. The censor struck out with a talon, catching Ruin across the back.

“Shit!” He cried out cracking the ceiling as the sharp iron letters broke through the stone. The censor screamed its violent anti-sound but was cut short as Ruin drove his *t* into its knee and pulled. Sound returned with a meaty pop. Ruin leapt back as the censor vomited its oily bile on the floor. The cave filling letters melted into the oil bringing stalactites with them. The *S* shook and the red threads of disaster spread from it to Ava. Ruin leapt, vaulting the middle of the *H* and kicked Ava to safety. The censor snapped at her as she passed, just missing.

“T!” He yelled, the great iron letter appearing like a mine strut. The censor turned, its white eyes narrowing at the mess. It let out another silent shriek. Ruin leapt bringing his *t* down at its shattered beak but it was fast. It dodged its head and bit at his hand, coating it in oil. It yanked up, his hand detached and Ruin fell into the oil.

“K!” The word formed, its arm punching through the censor’s chest and pinning it to the ceiling.

Ruin heaved against the oil, it didn't seem to be melting him, he uttered small praises for that but he was stuck. Stuck and sinking. The letters seem to sink faster and within a minute the dozen foot K had already sank below, leaving him shoulder to wing with the dead censor. *Any bright ideas?* He scanned the cave, the only threads the web of red over by the T strut.

"Shit," He said, letting the words fall into the oil beside him.

"Help?"

There was no response. He twisted his head, the oil pulling at his hair painfully. Ava was crumpled in the corner, a good foot away from the oil. He let out a hearty *phew*. It floated quickly up to the cave roof. *Now, there's an idea.* He pulled against the oil as hard as he could with his able arm. His shirt ripped and his arm popped out of the oil fast enough to punch himself in the cheek. He *grumbled* and massaged his cheek. A few deep breaths and he *sighed* as contentedly as he could manage. As the sound floated from his mouth he grabbed at the d and held on. He sighed again, looping his hand through the next d.

Ruin lowered gently to a safe part of the cave, letting the last sighs float back up to the ceiling.

"Ava, wake up. It's time to go," he said, nudging her with his foot. Ava yawned, stretched, and froze.

"Ow!" She pressed her ribs gently. "Ow! What the—" she paused as the two ows clattered to the ground. The cave was ruined. Black oil covered nearly everything and words were scattered everywhere else. But most importantly Ruin was naked—most importantly she was covered in bruises. She stared, just to make sure she was seeing things correctly. His arm was covered in criss-crossing black and red tattooed lines that led to a paper white skull. He had a few bruises of his own and was missing a patch of hair at the back of his head.

"What happened?" She whispered.

"It's alright, you can leave your words now." He formed another *t*, making sure to speak sharply. The edge was keen. He smiled as he started cutting a robe from the canvas covering the cave.

"You didn't answer me. What happened?" Her back seized as she stood up, eliciting a *groan*.

"One of us had a hole in their pocket. The censor followed us to the cave." Ava stuck her hand in her pocket, her finger pushing through the torn fabric. "Sorry."

“Don’t be.”

The two of them shared a smile. Ruin slipped his new musty poncho on. Ava *laughed*. It sank into the oil.

Carefully she edged around and out the cave. The sun was just coming up over the distant hills, leaving the valley still mostly in the dark.

“Best to still keep quiet,” Ruin said pointing at the notes a valley tiger had left. Ava nodded and the two set off.

The long way was proving to be substantially longer and Ruin grumbled as his feet started to ache. *He’s being nice but he’s clearly furious at you*. His robe flapped in the wind forcing him to hold it shut. Ava gestured for him to stop.

“I. O,” She said, catching the two letters in her hand. Ruin raised an eyebrow. She folded the fabric and pushed the *I* through, clasping it with the *O* like a brooch. She gestured for him to turn and clasped the other side. Ruin smiled and shook his hips. Thumbs up, she asked. Thumbs up.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they saw the valley’s end. An anti-climactic slope leading up and out to freedom. Ava beamed and started to run.

“Whoooooo!” A passing owl called. Ava ran faster, putting some good distance between her and the crashing wooden *O*s that now filled the valley like a dam.

“Ruin!” She cried out, the words half as high as the valley walls.

“I’m alright!” Came the response.

Ava ran back to the pile of wooden *O*s. Some had cracked and splintered and sharp wood poked up out of the mess. She put her weight on one causing it to slide down and hit her in the shin.

“Ava,” someone said from behind her. A woman with russet brown skin, a stern looking blue uniform with armour plating, and a curved crossbow stood further down the valley. Her name lay on the ground in front of the stranger. It was made of gold.

“Who are you?” Ava asked, the question hung in the air for a second before thudding to the ground.

“My name is Mercia Linlatter. I’m with the Community for Wrong Footer Care.”

“Like the owl?”

Sylent landed on a rock nearby.

“Yes miss. I’m terribly sorry it took me so long to-”

“I nearly got killed because you took off!”

Sylent fluttered back as Ava *spat* the words at him.

“And a regrettable mistake it was Ava but the CFWFC is a terribly underfunded organisation. We wish we could have gotten to you quicker so-”

“So you could send me home?”

“So we could have protected you.”

“I’m doing fine on my own, thank you very much.”

“Is that what you call travelling with a dangerous criminal?”

Ava *scoffed*.

“You people really care that much about some parking tickets?”

Ruin eased his weight onto another *O*, it slid slightly. *No, no, be good. Be good.* It held, Ruin breathed a *sigh* of relief, catching it just in time to stop it floating over the top.

“He is a known disaster artist. He has orchestrated death and destruction on a scale you can’t even begin to imagine.”

Well. That’s that ruined.

“Bullshit!”

“Ask him.”

The pile shifted slightly. Ruin stood.

“Don’t climb it, it’s unsteady,” he called down.

Ava stopped. Mercia peered down the sights of the crossbow. A cold wind blew sending shivers through Ruin’s sensitive parts.

“Is it true?” Ava asked, biting back tears.

You can be truthful here and try win her back later. Or you can lie and risk losing her forever.

“It was.”

Ava stepped back as if shot. The tears broke their dams and started to flow.

“You said it was just parking tickets!” She yelled, her words tinged with pain.

The wooden heap rattled and shook as her words collided with it, causing Ruin to stumble and slip. He grabbed hold of the *s* in tickets and reflexively let go. The copper fingers of his remaining hand twisting in agony.

“I’m sorry!” He yelled and the apology cracked the ground beneath it. Ava didn’t notice.

“Take me home.”

Mercia nodded and gestured for her to follow. Ava didn’t look back.

ACT 2

Authors Note to Self: Ava gets taken to Lunderville, Mercia explains that they are going to send her back but need to wait for the right time of month. Ava changes her mind at the last minute and escapes into OverUnderville.

We don't see anything from Ruin's perspective while this is happening but we do learn a little more about Langley's quest and the rocket.

The journey to Lunderville had been quick but boring. Mercia and Sylent had led her to a train station that serviced the Silent Valley. The gift shop had been closed. They sat shoulder to shoulder with Sylent perching on the luggage rack. Ava barely looked up for the entire journey. Only taking notice as the driver announced over the tinny voice pipe that they would shortly be arriving at Lunderville St Apatrine Station and would passengers please remember their bags, unless they've got good stuff that the driver can pinch.

Lunderville station was as opulent and decorative as Quill Centre but easily thirty times as large. Marble platforms spread out twelve abreast with wrought-iron walkways above servicing a duo of cable cars emblazoned with golden wings. The difference in class was immediately apparent as two men in silvery suits boarded the cable cars and a pack of vagrants pushed past her with a grunt and a spit.

"Dick," Ava grumbled. The man at the front stopped, his pack halted. He turned, licking what teeth he had left and smiling sardonically.

"What was that sweetheart?"

Mercia placed her sword under the man's unshaven jaw.

"Keep moving derelict," She said, pressing it just enough to draw blood. The man backed away. Wiping his chin and grinning at Ava.

"Better watch your mouth Blue."

Mercia placed a hand on her shoulder and offered her a faint half smile.

The streets were just as impressive as the station. Five story buildings bedecked in stone statues, thick columns wreathed in iron ivy, and, peculiarly, a wire mesh running between all of the buildings. As if the population might up and fly off. *There's a kid up there.* Ava watched as a young boy, or girl, it was hard to tell, ran across the mesh. It dipped but the young adrenaline junkie kept on, their toes gripping the mesh with ease. Almost as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone.

"There was a child up there," Ava said, tapping Mercia and pointing to where the child had disappeared to.

"An urchin. Don't worry about it."

Ava went to ask what she meant by it but thought better of it. *No use getting into an argument now.*

The streets were packed with gold suited toffs and rag clad vagrants. With worrying frequency someone would cry out that they had been robbed. Ava clasped her money pouch tighter. Mercia didn't seem so concerned and with the way the crowd parted for her, it seemed her confidence was earned. Ava hurried to keep up. Eventually Mercia seemed to find the crowd thin enough to start speaking.

"We will have to get you an outsider's visitation pass."

"Visitation pass?"

"You will need one in order to be here legally."

Yay! Paperwork.

Mercia turned down a side street with rooftops that seemed to knit together. Here and there the mesh had been torn, one of which had a rope ladder hanging down from it. What few storefronts there were were boarded up or abandoned. Ava paused. A bookstore, dusty and unlit and mostly empty except for a few water damaged books in the window.

"Come on Ava, it's closed."

The children on the cover laughed at her from their cheap raft with its bed sheet sail. Mercia gripped her by the elbow.

"It's not safe here Ava, come on."

Ava nodded mutely and fell in step.

This isn't why your here.

The CFWFC building was a thin wedge that had been jammed in between an iron works and a College of Music for the Tonally Challenged. Mercia held the door open, ushering Ava into the thinnest hallway she had ever seen. Even with her small size, her shoulders touched both sides.

"Umm."

"Up the stairs," Mercia said sliding in sideways. With not inconsiderable effort the two eased their way upstairs, past portraits and decorative banisters. At the top of the stairs Ava had to squeeze under a chandelier that had had portions of the wall cut out to accommodate it.

"Why is there so much stuff?"

"The landlord believes ostentation is important to an organisation's reputation."

Ava snaked her way past a suit of armour. Someone had had the sense of mind to wrap the sword in padding but it still gave a nasty whack as it dropped on Ava's shoulder. *Why are you going through with this? Run off, become a pirate or something!*

“Just through that door to your left.”

The office was a bit less cramped than the hallway though they seemed to have made an effort to mimic it. Piles of paperwork sat on every surface, swords and crossbows hung from hooks behind one of the three desks. The only light in the dinghy room seemed to come from the portion of chandelier that poked through the wall. Ava pinched the bridge of her nose, the headache was getting worse. Mercia closed the door and waded through the newspaper tide.

“Sylent, can you find me the visitation pass form?”

“Probably not but I’ll try,” he said, fluttering up to a perch hanging from the ceiling.

“Take a seat,” Mercia said, gesturing to the desk opposite. Ava trudged through the quarterlies.

“So, firstly, why are you here?”

Ava stared for a moment.

“I don’t know? I just woke up here.”

“That is fine. A lot of outsiders arrive unexpectedly. It’s part of what makes our world so dangerous for you.”

“Like going on holiday without learning the language or customs?”

“Precisely.”

Mercia rifled through the paperwork on her desk.

“Do any of these words mean anything to you: Oneirology, dream song, troum, geswefnian-”

“I know that one.”

“From where?”

“I read about them once.” *Maybe I should tell her.*

“Uh-huh.” *Nope. For that tone, I’m gonna be as awkward as I can.*

“I think it was a pdf I got online.”

“That is fine. Next question, have you had any contact with dream smiths, tinkers, or spinners since you’ve been here?”

“I wouldn’t know what any of those are.”

“Understandable. A dream smith is someone who is able to take portions of a dream and make them a reality. A tinker is someone who has the ability to invent new technologies. And a spinner is someone who can conjure images, sounds, and smells with their story-telling. Have you met anyone that fits these categories?”

Lie or they’re probably gonna do weird tests on you.

“Nope.”

"I don't think we have a copy of the form Mercia," Sylent said, twisting his head round to face her. Mercia groaned.

"I'll have to go and get another printed off. Can you watch her?"

"Of course!"

Mercia waded out, grabbing a set of keys from the side of her desk as she went. The chandelier rattled slightly followed by a muffled swear.

"Sounds like apart from the whole falling in with a disaster artist, you've managed quite well."

"Don't forget the nightmare in the woods," Ava said coldly.

"Oh, yes, and that," he said, ducking his head.

He's a little owl, don't be shitty.

"So how come you can talk?"

"You know, I often get asked that and I always forget that it is strange that I can talk. It's quite simple... though I fear you may need some background or this may come across as quite frightening."

Ava stayed silent.

"Well. We used to have quite a problem with nightmares. Like the thing you saw in the forest except... well, everywhere. One day this group of knights bands together and drives them all off beyond the Candles. Then, for a while, everything was good and great. Until they realised that they hadn't quite got rid of all of them and that there were still nightmares hiding out in the cracks and dark places. So, some clever clod of a dreamsmith gets the bright idea to break the nightmares down into smaller, weaker things. Using her dreamsmithing powers she's able to break the nightmares apart, purify each bit, and imbue it with a new form and purpose."

"You're a nightmare?" Ava asked, discreetly palming a letter opener from the desk.

"No! Well, a little bit. I prefer to think of myself as a daydream. Or a pet peeve if you must."

"I've met some pet peeves. None of them could talk."

They could read and type though...

"But they could understand you. Couldn't they?"

Ava nodded.

"Same business here, only I was lucky enough to inherit that part of the nightmare. Although. I can appreciate that that might be a little jarring to hear."

The building shook, Ava leapt to her feet brandishing the letter opener.

"What's going on?"

Sylent fluttered his wings.

"It's just the printing press in the basement! No cause for alarm!"

Ava placed the knife on the table.

"Sorry."

Mercia's arrival was preceded by another muffled swear and jangling of the chandelier. Her uniform was stained with black ink spots and her arms were black to the elbow, the ink drying into a sort of second skin.

"Sorry for my delay. The printer jammed."

"Is anyone hurt?" Sylent asked.

"Hedgar lost another finger."

"We need to get that thing replaced."

"And whooo is going to provide the money?" Mercia asked with a smirk.

Oh great, it's just me that she does the whole stern act with.

"So, Ava. Shall we go through this form now?"

Stall.

"I've had a pretty rough day. Would it be okay if we left it until tomorrow?"

Mercia drummed her fingers on the table.

"Very well. It is late. We can make you up a cot here." Images of being swaddled by the stern woman flooded Ava's mind. Her cheeks flushed slightly. *Really? It's been a while...*

"That would be nice. Thank you."

The cot was little more than a board with some cushioning laid over the paperwork floor. Sylent and Mercia took some of the paperwork and headed home for the night after explaining where the bathroom was and what to do in case of a fire. Sidle quickly until safely outside, then run to the fire station on the corner. Ava said her thanks and made a show of getting ready for bed. Yawning and wrapping herself in the thin cover. She listened as they left. Muffled swear, creaking metal arm, stairs, stairs, painting scrape, stairs, door. She waited half an hour before getting up. Her bruises already throbbed. She sat down again. She looked at the door and sighed. She tried to count the money in her purse and gave up, letting a silver egg drop back on the copper loose with a sigh. *Make up your mind!* She strode over to the door and stopped. She took her notepad and wrote:

"I'm not ready to go home yet. Please don't follow me."

The streets of Lunderville were still busy even at this late hour. While not thronging with people, there were still groups window shopping and laughing with each other about everything and anything. Some shops were still open. A haberdashery down the road from the CFWFC encouraged with its chalkboard sign any passersby to “come and try our latest *hats*.” The sound of excited hat enthusiasts echoed faintly from the changing rooms in the back. Ava peered in, a thick set bouncer with eyes tattooed on his cheeks growled at her.

“Piss off birdy. No art in ‘ere.”

Ava tutted and moved on. *I should probably dye my hair.*

Ava wandered past late night butchers and tailors, grocers, and candlemakers. All of which seemed to have a bustling clientele and heavy set bouncers. As one group made their way out of a late night post office, Ava tapped one on the arm.

“Hi, sorry to bother you, but do you know where the nearest pub is?”

The woman screech-laughed and patted Ava on the shoulder.

“Shhh! Don’ you know Lunderville’s a dry city?”

“Oh. No, I’m sort of new here.”

The woman moved some hair out of her face and smiled. Her cheeks and nose were red and her breath reeked of cheap whisky.

“Aww pet. Well don’ you worry. You jus’ go into that pos’ office there and say you wan’ lick some stamps. They’ll see you right.” She screech-laughed again, setting Ava’s heckles on end.

“Thanks,” she said, excusing herself.

“No bother wha’soever. Always loved you lesbians.”

“Thespians!” Her friend corrected, laughing as she slapped her arm.

“Tha’s the ones.”

Their screeching continued on around the corner.