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The Seal of Solomon: An Exploration of Storytelling

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The Seal of Solomon: An Exploration of Storytelling



Honors Thesis

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Department: English/Philosophy

Advisor: Joe Pici, M.A.

May 2015

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Abstract

The Seal of Solomon is a work of fantasy with steampunk, flintlock-fantasy elements exploring Joseph Campbell's monomyth, also known as the hero's journey. The hero's journey is both a physical and personal journey in which the hero ventures from their common world and into a realm of supernatural wonder where they encounter challenges, until they enter the "belly of the whale," undergo an apotheosis and achieve the ultimate boon. They return to their common world changed, enlightened from their experiences and with a freedom over their life that they did not have before. I explore the tropes and elements of this narrative structure while also incorporating multiple point-of-views, role reversals, and aspects of modern fantasy.

Disclaimer

This thesis takes the form of a work of fiction. Names, characters, and places are either used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.



Table of Contents

Abstract	Title Page
Introduction & Acknowledgments	1
Darren I	3
Nikola I	13
Darren II	15
Darren III	25
Nikola II	32
Darren IV	36
Nikola III	51
Darren V	55
Darren VI	60
Darren VII	66

Introduction & Acknowledgments

I began *The Seal of Solomon* in May of 2013, though it seems like only yesterday. I finished the first draft, a stack of hundreds of pages, by August of that year. Since then, the book has undergone multiple revisions and editions, two of which have seen multiple market channels. I learned a lot since I began that first draft, and most important of all those lessons I gained is patience.

The Seal of Solomon, though not widely received, was generally well-liked by those who read it, but looking back and reflecting on it, the perfectionist in me took over. This year I decided to gradually pull it from all of its markets. At first, I thought I was going to entirely re-vamp it. Now, I am not sure. My biggest problem with *The Seal of Solomon* was that I rushed it. I wanted to move on to new projects and write something different. I have been working on multiple other books, and have learned from *The Seal of Solomon* to take my time with these. Therefore, I have offered here an excerpt of the most recent edition of *The Seal of Solomon*. I would also like to extend an offer to anyone who reads this: if you wish to read the entire story, feel free to ask me and it's yours to read and enjoy.

The Seal of Solomon will always be the first book I wrote, and though filled with imperfections (some of which I may only see), it will always hold a special place in my heart. It has sparked a passion in me for storytelling that I cannot explain.

§§

In this excerpt, you are receiving the beginning of two stories. The first is Darren Cadwell, a young man whose story is a coming-of-age story, spurred by revenge and filled with magic and mayhem. He is the hero of the story and must leave his home in order to save his own soul when he is possessed by a demon that threatens his life. Then you have Dr. Nikola Finbar, a much more mature voice who owes a debt to a powerful magician. He is a take on the trope of the hero's guide, or mentor. Unlike the old sage in

many stories, Nikola is perhaps more flawed than Darren and in need of his own redemption and transformation. These two ultimately need each other if either is going to live. This excerpt includes ten chapters and is the first part of a large story, setting the stage for the journey that is to come.

§§

First, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to Dr. Darrow and Dr. Krane, for the opportunity to participate in the Berry Thesis Summer Institute. I would also like to thank the Berry family and the Honors Program Office, particularly Ramona Speranza and Jill Talley. The final person from Alumni Hall that I would like to show my gratitude is Laura Cotten. Thank you all for starting me on the path of continued success.

There are so many professors here in Dayton I deserve to thank for some positive influence on me, but there are two I should mention here. Professor Joe Pici, my thesis advisor, stuck with me through it all and never hesitated to support me in all my creative decisions. Dr. Tom Morgan – for recommending that I apply for the Berry Thesis Summer Institute. Since speaking with you, I've run with it and haven't looked back.

Last but not least are my beloved beta readers who encouraged me through all of the stages of working on this project and provided great feedback: Steven, Marie, and Tony.

Darren I

Darren loved the thrill of a good fight, even when he was the one being thrashed into the cold, cobblestone street.

He climbed to his feet and raised his fists, ignoring the sting in his side when he inhaled. A cacophony of cheers and jeers shook the air as the ring of boys and men encouraged him, reaching into the haphazardly formed circle to slap him on his bare back with their caps.

“The Prince lives,” someone shouted. Darren shot a glare into the mass of grungy faces. He hated the nickname.

Roger “Piggy” Darson stood in front of him, a stout man with a wide jaw. His hairy body glistened in the light of the low sun that crept its way into the wide alley. “Come at me, young man,” he spat. He raised his large, red hands, grubby from the oil of factory machines.

“I say let’s finish this so I can collect my coin,” said Darren, giving his opponent a smile and wink.

“I’ll wipe that bloody smile clean off your pretty face, Little Prince,” said Piggy, his broken lip curling in a snarl.

“Quit yappin’ and start the next round,” a boy complained, “before the crushers show up.” He was about Darren’s age, though the early signs of a dirty mustache peeked out from underneath his nose. He sat above the crowd on the doorframe of a pub’s back entrance, keeping an eye out for the police.

The crowd boomed in support.

Darren sprang forward, staying low. Sweat dripped down his face, stung his eyes, and rolled off his chin in large droplets. His muscles screamed and his lungs clawed for air, but he knew better than to let his opponent know that. He kept his focus forward and his hands still.

Piggy swung a branch-like arm at Darren’s head. Darren ducked, then swayed backward to avoid a left-handed hook. Piggy aimed another punch right to his ribs, slower than the others. This was his chance.

Darren unleashed a fusillade of jabs, striking Roger’s stomach and head. He felt the satisfying crunch of breaking cartilage as he connected with Piggy’s big, ugly nose. Another punch landed wrong, right below Piggy’s eye. As the giant staggered to the side, Darren bounced backward, shaking his pulsing left hand. *Damn, that hurt.*

“Darren!” A shrill voice, a woman’s, exploded through the unruly calls of the crowd.

Darren stopped, startled. He turned to the voice.

A fist, with knuckles hard as brass, slammed into the side of Darren’s face. He fell to the ground, his head cracking on the stone. His vision cutting black.

§§

A hard slap came to his face, and when he refused to wake, another. Darren opened his eyes to the same orange sunlight, leaking through from the horizon beyond the buildings. He blinked once, twice, attempting to orientate himself. Groaning, he tried to sit up. A heavy throb tore itself through the side of his skull. Feeling the hard smash of the punch again, his hand shot to his cheek. Perhaps it was best to stay lying down.

“Really did you good.” It was his friend Wallace standing over him, hands deep in his gray trousers. He looked down at Darren, his green eyes peering behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

“Fucking smarts,” Darren said, keeping one hand on his face. He could hear the slur in his own words. He felt dizzy, and the sunlight spilling past Wallace made his eyes burn.

“If that man didn’t already knock you into the ground, I’d do it myself right now,” said a girl standing off to his side. He knew that voice. After all, it cost him the fight.

“And if you hadn’t distracted me,” he began, but lost train of his thoughts. “Thanks a lot, Bea.”

Beatrice walked by him to join Wallace at his side. In her hands she held a small bag. “I got the ice,” she said.

“How long have I been out?” Darren tried to ask past his throbbing head.

“What are you doing still going to these fights, Darren?” asked Wallace, ignoring his question. He took the bag of ice from Beatrice and tossed it to him.

Darren almost caught it with his free hand, but the bag fell onto his chest. “You guys cost me four silver pieces,” he said, ignoring Wallace’s question in return.

“Darren, Master Geoffrey said he didn’t want you doing this anymore. It’s just stupid,” said Wallace.

“Excuse me, the Back Alley Pugilist Club is a fine organization,” said Darren. He struggled to sit up before carefully applying the bag of ice to the bad side of his face. The cold ice seared for a moment before his right cheek went numb.

“Back Alley Pugilist Club,” Beatrice repeated the phrase as if she was chewing on something bitter and desperately needed to spit it out.

“Some of the finest men in St. Charlesburg,” Darren smirked. He tried to push himself onto his feet, only to fail. Wallace stepped forward and slowly helped him up. His back ached and his legs cried for him to sit back down. The entire alleyway seemed to spin.

“They’re just street rats and dirty factory workers,” Wallace said, “and Master Geoffrey will tear his mustache out if he knows you were here. He’d take my inheritance if he knew I came to get you. And yours, if you had any.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what Geoffrey can have then,” Darren began, but Beatrice flicked the mighty bruise forming on his cheek. Darren yelped.

“Your prizefighting days are over. Now grab your clothes and let’s move on from here,” she said.

Darren held the ice firmly to his face and stared at her for a few seconds. She was tall at sixteen and stood eye-level with him, her blue eyes colder than the ice on his cheek. Darren smiled, “Four silvers you lost me, Bea.”

He ditched the bag of half-melted ice and with the help of Wallace found his shirt and waistcoat lying on the ground nearby. Quickly, he threw on the shirt and tucked it into his trousers, the same gray as Wallace’s. He didn’t bother buttoning the waistcoat.

“How do I look?” he asked with a lopsided smile, the right side of his face still a bit swollen.

“That man’s fist actually helped your complexion,” said Beatrice.

“Forgot your tie,” said Wallace. He picked up a navy necktie from the ground and pitched it to Darren.

“Thanks,” Darren said, tossing the tie around his neck and wrapping it in a quick loop.

Beatrice yanked at the collar of his shirt, drawing his body close to hers. She began to fuss with his tie, “Don’t even know how to tie a proper tie. What kind of man are you?”

“One who would rather not wear a tie,” he breathed, catching a whiff of Beatrice’s scent. It was something like lemongrass and ginger. He smiled, “You smell nice.”

“Oh shut up,” she said, pulling his knot up tightly, strangling him with his tie. She hit him on the chest as she stepped away from her knot-work. “Let’s go.”

“Yes, before Master Geoffrey has our heads,” added Wallace.

Darren began walking in the way of the street, but he stumbled, grasping onto Wallace for support. “Might need some help, big Piggy thumped me good,” he laughed. His vision was a little unfocused.

“Sure thing,” Wallace sighed.

Together they left Horseshoe Alley, thus named because it actually looped around and connected with another wide alleyway by means of a perpendicular back street. It housed many pubs and brothels, and was tucked conveniently in the industrial sector of the city. So its residents were factory workers mostly, along with some of the men wary from long trips at sea or sky.

Darren loved Horseshoe. Once you made it past the mumpers burnt out on spice and the rough façade, it wasn't too bad. Wallace clearly didn't think so; he couldn't get away quick enough. Beatrice was harder to read; she didn't say much. They booked it west, to the rail stop that headed up to the townhouses Beatrice and her crowd called home.

When the rail pulled up to a halt, they climbed on and found open seats, settling on ones by the window. Darren's head still throbbed. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, or at least close his eyes. Instead he looked out the window and watched the blurry landscape of St. Charlesburg change from the gray, smog-filled industrial sector to the residential neighborhoods nestled in the west. The buildings, dilapidated and ruled by the tall and domineering factories, transfigured into well-kept lines of new and colorful houses.

Beatrice lived on top of the hill on the far edge of the city, a small neighborhood called Finchley. Her house was wide and white, with a green lawn, something rare even in the company of the other Finchley homes. Its shutters were blue, and the windows on the front of the house were long. The rail let them out at the end of her street, marked by a skinny, black lamppost. Darren could see her house even from there. It looked as pristine as it did when he first met her.

The three walked up the hill and stopped in front of the short, black-iron gate at the edge of her lawn.

"Thank you for walking me," Beatrice said, tucking a loose strand of her strawberry blond hair behind her right ear.

"Of course," smiled Wallace.

"Take care," Darren said. He gave her a small nod and a wide smile, even though it hurt his bad cheek.

"You're a danger to yourself, you know," Beatrice said with a light smile. She turned to Wallace, "Keep an eye on him, please." With that she opened the gate, walked down the yellow brick path to her front door and into her house. She didn't walk like the other girls from Finchley, head up and every line of the body stiff and proper. No, Beatrice walked with a flare. Not quite like a boy, but something in her step, even in a dress, seemed powerful to Darren. *She's a total tom*, he thought.

"You know, I think she fancies you," Wallace said, giving his best rendition of a teasing smile.

"Shut it," Darren replied. He and Beatrice had known each other since they were kids, running around causing havoc throughout Finchley. Darren's voice was composed, but

something about Wallace's words twisted his guts and made a fuzzy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He let his gaze linger on Beatrice's house.

"I'm only kidding," Wallace said, obviously lying. His mouth was twisted in a look of disgust.

Darren clenched his fists, scraped by cobblestone. The pain distracted him from how much he wanted to knock Wallace in the head. What if he did like Beatrice? She had wealth and status, sure. But she was still Beatrice. The brainy girl who liked to get dirty like one of the guys. The only girl he was able to talk to for as long as he could remember without wanting to jump off a cliff.

"It will be getting dark before we know it, we should hurry back," he said, turning and beginning to walk past Wallace. His head began to spin and his balance teetered.

Wallace caught him by the arm. "It'll be hard to sneak you past Master Geoffrey in this condition."

"Why are you even here if you're so worried about getting caught?" Darren asked, throwing an arm over Wallace's shoulder.

"Her." Wallace bent his neck towards Beatrice's house.

Darren smiled, just a crack. "Let's go."

§§

Darren, alongside Wallace, was an apprentice at Astor Library, which sat just outside the industrial ring of St. Charlesburg. The two arrived at the front steps of the library just as the sun began to adorn the horizon and city workers were lighting the lampposts along the street.

The library was a prodigious building made of white marble. Large, pale pillars held up the pavilion of the building, which cast a shadow over the three tall wooden doors that acted as the entrances. With Wallace's help, Darren made his way up the long series of steps, passing one of the two lions that flanked the stairway. They were fierce creatures, lying with their paws crossed and their eyes looking forward in calm solitude. They were named Patience and Fortitude, according to Master Geoffrey. Supposedly, those were the two traits apprentices needed if they were going to succeed in their studies, the first of which Darren was always told he lacked. He didn't argue.

Wallace ran up to the door and tried the handle. To his surprise, the door opened. Darren issued a sigh of relief. "Think we're clear," he said. If anything, the other apprentices were closing up shop for the night, re-shelving books, sweeping the aisles, snuffing the reading lamps.

"You're lucky I went to fetch you," Wallace hissed, "we should be able to get you to your room without notice."

Darren chuckled, inching past Wallace and through the door. As soon as both he and Wallace were inside, he carefully closed the door behind him. The darkening room was thick with silence. Darren opened his mouth to say something but the words were strangled at the sight of what was waiting for them.

The other nine apprentices weren't closing shop for the night, they were standing on both sides of the double staircase. The staircase rose to a balcony with a row of doors, each leading to different sections of the library. Standing behind the smooth railing of the balcony were the three librarians. They were old men, all in the same, hard lined suits. They peered down at Darren like menacing sea-colored birds perched in their alabaster nest. The apprentices stood still, faces twisted in annoyance, eyes burning with distaste. *Probably ready to call it a night*, Darren thought.

"At last, the champion prizefighter has once again joined our midst," came a low, throaty voice from the darkness off to the side of the bottom steps.

The hairs on the back of Darren's neck shot up straight as soldiers. Master Geoffrey crept into the dying sunlight that streamed through the large glass windows, splashing the room in shades of copper and autumn. He was a short and thin man. His long bony fingers held onto a wooden cane to help with his limp. His head was as bald as the polished stone of the library. His frown was accentuated by his neatly curled mustache.

The click of Geoffrey's cane was slow as he approached Darren. Darren was frozen in his place, hoping that his bruised and swollen cheek wasn't as bad as it felt. Master Geoffrey didn't say a word, keeping his dark eyes trained on Darren. Darren returned the courtesy with brown, brooding eyes of his own.

"It was his fault," Wallace stammered nervously, "I had nothing to do with it. He's a dirty mutt."

Darren's eyes shot to Wallace, who stepped forward to his side. The bastard was a coward. Darren gritted his teeth, wishing he had knocked Wallace in the head like he wanted to back in Finchley. Geoffrey stopped a few feet from Darren. "Wallace," the head librarian said calmly, though his voice boomed.

"Yes, sir?" Wallace stuttered. He came forward, twiddling his fingers.

"Join the others."

"Yes, sir," Wallace said with a nod. He hurried to the stairs, where he joined the others. They stood there like decorative statues rather than actual people.

"Can I explain myself," Darren asked, "sir?"

"You may not," said Geoffrey.

Darren stepped towards Geoffrey, and words spewed from his mouth, "What did I do wrong? I got into a fight, so what?"

“You think you are better than us.” Master Geoffrey’s voice was a blade of ice that made the room cold and silent.

Darren blinked in astonishment.

“You believe that you are above the rules here. That is the problem,” Geoffrey said, pointing the tip of his cane at Darren’s chest. “You act with zero regard of how it may reflect on the reputation of Astor. You run around the city streets, making company of street rats and hoodlums.”

“They aren’t hoodlums.”

“You parade around, as if you were some champion boxer, worthy of some esteem.”

“I don’t.”

“If that is the case, then you wouldn’t have a problem gracing us with a demonstration of your ability? Come, fight me.”

Darren found his mouth half-opened, not believing what he just heard. “What did you say?” he asked.

A series of snickers broke out from the stairs, but it was obvious that Geoffrey wasn’t kidding. “Come, show me some of your moves, Mr. Champion,” he said.

Darren’s aching body suddenly seemed a thousand times heavier. His throbbing cheek burned with embarrassment as he could feel his face changing red. Was the old man serious? Darren could barely stand straight, let alone throw a punch, but he was sure he could take a stuffy librarian like Geoffrey.

“Fine,” he sniffed.

At that, the apprentices snickering turned into waves of laughter and whispering jokes. A couple mockingly clapped, quietly tooting and cheering. Darren shot them a glare before turning to Geoffrey. The man stood there patiently. “Come on, then,” he said.

Darren raised his fists, though a little uncomfortably. *Fine, if he wants it, then he’s gonna get it.*

Darren charged forward, his muscles tense and groaning in protest. He threw his fist forward, right at Geoffrey’s chest. When he picked up his back foot, the room tilted.

The next thing he knew he was flat on his back, with Geoffrey’s cane firmly dug into his chest and the room spinning. The other apprentices erupted in a flood of laughter.

“Now, I believe you’ve had enough of your silly adventures,” Master Geoffrey scoffed. “No more fighting.”

Darren heard Geoffrey, but his mind felt heavy and a wave of humiliation crashed onto him. The sting of tears scratched at his eyes, but he bit his lip and pushed them back. *Not in front of the apprentices. Not in front of that prissy coward Wallace,* he thought.

“We’ve had enough of this farce,” Geoffrey said, turning to the others. “You may go now.”

Still laughing, the apprentices turned up the stairs and retired to the dormitories. The librarians did the same, flying smugly away from their marble nests. Darren stared at the ceiling, refusing to budge. He blankly noted the details of the giant mural depicting the founding of Balnibarbi. Soon, the laughing and chatting of the apprentices vanished and the room became dark.

Master Geoffrey was the first to break the silence. “Stand, Darren.”

Darren rose, keeping his shoulders sagged and his eyes glued to his feet. “Look me in the eyes, boy,” Geoffrey said.

Darren reluctantly rose his chin, shooting daggers at the man. He didn’t care what Geoffrey had to tell him. All that mattered was what he had to put up with from the others the next day.

“I had to do that, you know,” Master Geoffrey frowned.

Bull shit.

“You should not be fighting in the streets. I had to teach you a lesson.”

More like *make* him a lesson.

“It’s simply unacceptable behavior for a pupil here at Astor.”

He didn’t feel like a prestigious pupil of Astor.

“Here in this building, you are given more than many in the city.”

“I know, I know,” Darren muttered.

“Clothes, an education, food,” Geoffrey sighed. “Here you have hope for more.”

“But sir-“

“Darren, ever since your mother brought you here, I’ve given you everything this establishment has to offer.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So I expect you to behave like the others.”

“Exactly,” Darren practically shouted.

Master Geoffrey stopped, silent. *Finally*, Darren thought. He finally had the man’s attention.

“I don’t fit in here. I’m not like the others. Like you said, I was *given* everything here. I didn’t earn it like them. I’m not from where they are. You knew my mom and that’s why I’m here.”

The old man blinked in the darkness of the balcony. “And what difference does that make?”

“I’m trash, I’m a fuck-up,” Darren said.

“You are just as good as all the others, even if you’re not the same,” Master Geoffrey growled.

Yeah right, Darren thought. He wasn’t meant for a life among the bookshelves. And even then, he was better than the humiliation Geoffrey had put him through. As if he wasn’t ostracized enough by the others.

“Anyways,” Geoffrey went on, “you’re barely fifteen, you’ve got plenty of your life to live, so quit whining.”

The last word flew through the air, a jab straight at Darren’s ego. He wasn’t whining. He wasn’t a kid to be talked down to by someone. He wasn’t a book that could just be picked up and understood. Darren stood in silence, fists clenched in anger.

Master Geoffrey hobbled closer to Darren, reached up and clapped a hand on his shoulder, and said, “You’re young, trust me, you’ll have all the opportunities to fight, travel, and screw up your life later. But for now, you are under my guidance and I expect you to obey me from now on. Okay?”

Darren nodded.

“Your mother trusted me with the responsibility of ensuring that you have a fighting chance in that world out there, and I’m not going to fail her,” he continued, patting Darren hard on the shoulder.

“Thank you, sir.” Darren didn’t know what else to say. Every time Master Geoffrey brought up his mother, he felt bad, guilty even.

Master Geoffrey sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. When he looked up at Darren, his eyes were somewhat softened. “I still have to punish you, I am afraid.”

Darren felt his shoulders sink, almost as if they were going to pull him into the ground. Wasn’t the humiliation punishment enough? He didn’t even want to think what facing the others was going to be like.

“You will come to my office tomorrow morning.”

“For what?”

Geoffrey furrowed his eyebrows, darkening the lines on his face. His way of telling Darren not to question him. Still, the next day was Sunday, and the library was closed. It was a day off for librarians and apprentices alike.

“You’ll be running some errands for me tomorrow.” Master Geoffrey smoothed out his mustache in contemplation as he said this.

Darren sighed. He was too tired to protest.

“I expect you in my office early,” Geoffrey wheezed. And with that, he turned and slowly walked up the stairs, off into the shadows of the balcony and up a stairwell, up to his study.

Darren remained planted in the floor for a moment longer. He looked up out the window, at the dim glow of the stars in the muggy night sky. He felt empty inside. With a final sigh, he turned around and dragged his feet to the stairs, up to the dormitory, down the hall, and warily into his bedroom.

Lying in bed, Darren typically thought about his fights. He thought about Beatrice. He thought about the factory workers. Usually, he thought about anything but Master Geoffrey. Anything but the other apprentices who called him a mutt and a mock street rat. Anything, but Astor Library.

But this night was different. This night Darren’s mind was filled with only one thing: bitter dreams of revenge.

Nikola I

Nikola Finbar was a bitter and cold man. Everyone in Lagado knew that, and Nikola didn't give a damn. For all he cared, all of the socialites could burn. He was content sitting near the back of the ballroom, but not so far away from the dance floor that he could not watch the guests, or hear the band. Nikola loved to observe the dancers, and judge the players. He found delight in each misplaced finger, flat note, and missed beat.

Everyone who was anyone had gathered at the White Palace for the Equinox Ball. If it wasn't for the celebration, Nikola would have never guessed autumn was upon them. His fitted suit stuck to his sweaty body and the exorbitant ballroom became nothing more than an over-sized hotbox. Nikola couldn't believe anyone *wanted* to be there. But it *was* the Equinox Ball, after all.

It was a ball alright. *A damn huge party, filled with fakes and whores*, Nikola brooded. He tugged at the collar of his shirt. *Too bloody hot*.

"Pleasure you with some champagne, Dr. Finbar?" a waiter with a silver saucer of glasses that sparkled white offered.

"Yes," Nikola said, snatching two and then turning away from the man without further acknowledgement.

In a single gulp, he downed the first glass. He then placed it down on the table in front of him only so that he could take another drag of his cigarette. The other glass followed likewise. He liked to drink when he smoked.

The assemblage of the city's rich and elite made Nikola uneasy. His eyes darted around, looking for another glass of champagne, or someone with a cigarette, his was almost dead. He took a final drag, letting the smoke settle in his lungs for a moment before exhaling and killing the cigarette on the pristine white table cloth. Someone would be very angry the next morning. *Good*.

If Nikola had his way, he'd be far away from the Palace, in his workshop, tinkering. He tapped his foot along with the music, trying to calm himself down. One and two and three and four, one and two and three and four, one and – There went that pudgy horn again, blasted!

He had been asked, or rather told, to attend the ball that night. They were orders. And if he learned anything in Lagado, it was that you followed orders. Else you find yourself missing and wind up being found in the gutters days later.

Nikola observed the room with cold precision. He took in the different pockets of people, all speaking to each other with the felicity of a Sunday brunch. But he noticed small

things. The woman, for example, who was subtly touching the Earl of Tannhauser's elbow as she laughed at whatever dry joke he gave: she would be in bed with him before the night was over, and if she was lucky, find herself with some kind of position in Tannhauser by season's end.

The nerves got worse, and the muscles in his stomach tightened. His eyes shot to the source of his nerves, up on one of the pale balconies that overlooked the ballroom. Curtains covered most of the balcony, and the rest was obscured in shadow, but Nikola knew who lurked there, watching the whole scene.

The magician, he thought.

"Does he scare you, Master?" asked Swanwick, who sat at his side. Nikola was pulled from his focus on the balcony, and the boisterous noises of the room flooded into his ears.

"Yes," he admitted, gazing up at the balcony as he got his hands on another glass of champagne from a passing-by servant.

Nikola looked at his creation. Swanwick was beautiful. His dark skin glistened in the light of the chandeliers suspended far above them. Nikola admired the strong lines of Swanwick's body: the large arms, the straight back, the perfectly chiseled jawline. He wanted to do nothing more but raise a hand and caress the cold, lifeless skin, or to lay his head near the prodigious figure's chest, and hear the steady ticking of his inner workings.

Swanwick sat perfectly still, staring forward in mocking attention, his lavender eyes seeming as though they were enjoying the scene before them. He was dressed similarly to most of the men in attendance: black suit, short waistcoat and white bowtie. Nikola had made sure Swanwick's hair, tight wiry locks, was tied back in a short tail. He almost regretted imbuing such ineffable glamor upon such a creature.

"Master, it is almost time," Swanwick said, tilting his head with the perfect curvature of his thick neck.

Nikola checked his watch, Swanwick was right. "Well, I suppose there is no use in prolonging the inevitable," he looked back at the shadows on the balcony, "our friend is waiting for us."

"Shall I lead the way, Master?"

"Please."

Swanwick rose from the table. He was at least a head taller than everyone nearby. Nikola let his gaze at the balcony linger for a second longer, before he stood and followed his creation through the crowd.

The magician waited.

Darren II

Darren woke up in the darkness of his small bedroom. He laid on his back staring into the blackness above him for a few seconds before rolling out of bed and dragging himself out of the room.

He only wore his underdrawers, because while it was the end of the summer season, the nights were still searing. Rubbing his eyelids, he stumbled his way to the door at the end of the hallway, hearing the snoring of the other pupils from behind the identical green-painted doors that lined the hallway.

The bathroom was already lit when he walked in. The lamps cast an eerie light that was reflected off of the white tile floor: witchfire. Darren had been told by one of his tutors that the library was built, like most of the city, during the height of magic in Balnibarbi. It and the aerodrome were the only buildings to keep their magical source of light. It remained in use because no one was brave enough to tamper with it, lest the entire library burn to the ground.

Darren made his way to one of the toilets on the far wall. It was too early to be up on a Sunday, when there was no work to be done and all of the pupils at the library had a break from their studies.

He stumbled toward the sink as the toilet flushed. He turned the faucet and, with a sputtering sound, water came pouring into the porcelain bowl. The library was one of the first buildings in the city to have running water installed. They were lucky. Those who lived in the industrial sector weren't, still having to run to the street and fetch water with buckets to carry to their houses. Darren could hear all the factory boys mocking him. *Prince Darren, hailing from Astor Library.*

He took a couple handfuls of water and splashed it onto his face, feeling the cool relief on his hot and sticky skin. He looked up and stared at his reflection in the oval mirror that hung above the sink, cataloging the damage from the night before. A brown eye looked back at him from above a still swollen cheek. The bruise had, however, changed from a dark blue to a reddish color. Beyond that, he had a few other small bruises and lumps on his body from where he had taken minor blows from Piggy.

He thought about how he would have turned and ducked if he could live the fight over again. Roger's fist would make contact with the front of his skull, breaking those hard knuckles as if they were peanut brittle. *That's how you win matches*, Darren thought. Tenderly touching the still sensitive cheek, Darren remembered that he needed to hurry to breakfast so he could meet Master Geoffrey in his study.

“Geoffrey,” Darren muttered through gritted teeth. Thanks to the head librarian he would have to put up with more than the typical teasing at the hand of the other apprentices. He didn’t even want to know what sorts of boring labor the old man would put him through. He touched the bruise again, feeling the twang of pain. It helped him not think about his anger.

§§

Darren quickly got dressed and headed to the dining hall. He wore an off-white shirt with a stiff collar, striped gray trousers, suspenders, and a brown wool tie. He also slipped on a pair of thin socks and a pair of scuffed-up brown shoes that were far more comfortable than the narrow black monks he was required to wear while working in the library.

Breakfast was eaten outside the main building of Astor in a humble adjacent building. There, he was able to fix himself a meal. Usually meals were prepared for them, but on Sunday the cooks didn’t arrive until later. He grabbed a couple of slices of cold meat from the ice room, and a piece of bread left over from yesterday’s supper. Sitting at a lopsided table lovingly referred to as “Ol’ Slanty” by the apprentices, Darren ate alone in silence. The meeting with Master Geoffrey weighed on his mind.

After finishing the meat and taking a few bites of bread, Darren decided that it was best not to make Geoffrey wait any longer. He left his plate at the table and walked back to the library. As he passed outside, the sun was breaking away from the horizon and into the sky. The warmth of the morning air caressed Darren’s face. In the distance, he could hear the train roaring through the heart of the city. The only people riding it would be the miners heading out of St. Charlesburg to dig in the hell pits of the earth for coal.

Master Geoffrey’s study was on the fourth floor, tucked away near the Cartography Room. Darren practically ran there, flying by rows of book shelves he tended to, and quite hated.

He paused outside the mahogany door, collecting himself and brushing down the front of his pants with the palms of his hands in an attempt to smooth out the wrinkles in them. He swept his fingers through his knotted and tangled curls of black hair, gave a cough to clear his throat, and then knocked on the door.

Nothing.

He readjusted the knot of his tie, a sloppy job compared to what Beatrice could do, Darren thought. Then he leaned forward and gave three more solid knocks.

Nothing.

He tapped his foot in agitation. Perhaps Geoffrey wasn’t in his office yet? Darren exhaled, trying to breathe out his impatience. For a third time, he leaned in to knock. Just at that moment, the door opened and standing there, wearing a shirt and tie similar to Darren’s, was Master Geoffrey, holding his withered cane.

“I said to come in,” he said, staring up at Darren’s chin.

“Must not have heard,” replied Darren. “Sir.”

With a sweeping gesture, the head librarian welcomed Darren into his study. The room was dim, lit by a single lamp of witchfire that stood near his wide wooden desk. Walking through the study was like navigating a maze, towers of books and parchments flanked a path that twisted and turned its way to the desk, which itself was covered in various stacks of papers. Tall bookshelves lined the walls of the circular office, save for a window behind the desk. Thick green curtains were closed tightly over the window, a layer of dust providing further protection from the light. Darren’s nose tingled at the strange smell of the room. It was like having his face in an old book.

Master Geoffrey hobbled his way to the desk, plopping down in the chair behind it. He sighed, carefully placing his cane beside him. Darren tiptoed through the path to a chair on the other side of the desk, an armchair with a red velvet seat. He slouched into the back of his chair, waiting to hear what the old man had to tell him.

“Now,” Master Geoffrey began, furrowing his bushy eyebrows, “as you know, your behavior is unacceptable.”

“Yes sir.”

“After some thought, I have decided what you will be doing today.”

“Which is?” Darren asked, sitting up straight as a rod.

“You will be helping me with my research.” Master Geoffrey’s lips curled into a wicked smile, and he crossed his fingers in front of him.

“What does that include doing?” Darren asked, slumping back down, even further into his seat than before. He knew that Geoffrey was a scholar in his own right, spending most of the day either overseeing the apprentices or locked up in his study doing research. Darren didn’t care enough about to actually ask what it dealt with. Darren always guessed it involved far too much reading and a bigger vocabulary than anyone ever needed to have.

“You will be running all over the city for me, organizing and alphabetizing my notes, and maybe helping me with dictation until sundown.” Darren almost rose in protest. His entire Sunday, gone! Master Geoffrey gave a wheezy laugh. He had triumphed over Darren and knew it.

Geoffrey continued, “No point in wasting time.” He gave a cursory glance over a piece of paper on his desk, then returned his attention to Darren. “First, I would like you to deliver a package for me.”

“What package and to where?” Darren asked. He tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair.

“You will deliver it to a client of mine,” Master Geoffrey went on, ignoring Darren’s questions. He paused for a moment, then said, “Now, it is very important that you listen to me.”

Darren looked forward, straight into the old man's puffy nose.

"I need the package delivered to a client of mine in Malvern." The final word caused a prickling in his thick mustache like a bolt of electricity ran through him.

Darren's ears perked up. Geoffrey had his attention. "Malvern?" Darren didn't believe what he heard.

"Yes, a small shop by the old cathedral."

"Who owns the shop?" Darren couldn't help but ask. Malvern was a neighborhood that was crammed in the northern sector of St. Charlesburg. It was abandoned for the most part, but was once thriving when it was home to the city's magicians. But that was a long, long time ago. That was before innovation, before the steam engine.

"My research is in ancient civilizations and artifacts. The proprietor of the shop is somewhat of a specialist in that field."

"In magic?" Darren was on the edge of his seat. He had only read of the substance in books.

"Yes, in this case."

"Amazing," Darren exclaimed, shooting out of his seat. The punishment had become more of an award, if anything. Geoffrey had lost the second he mentioned Malvern.

"Sit down, boy," Geoffrey growled. Darren crouched back into his seat. "Listen to me. When you deliver this package, you are *only* to drop it off and leave."

"Yes sir."

"Do you understand me?" Master Geoffrey's eyes were daggers. Darren knew the gravity of the situation. He knew the stories of the men who got caught up in magic. He knew their ends.

"Yes, I do," Darren said, giving a slight bow with his head, concealing a crack of a smile. "I will simply deliver the package."

Geoffrey sighed. "Thank you."

"Anything else?" Darren asked.

"Come straight here when you are done and I will have more for you. Don't you worry."

Geoffrey produced a square, brown paper package. Darren picked it up off the desk. It was only slightly longer than Darren's hand, and a couple of inches thick. He rapped his knuckles on it, getting solid thunks in return. It was a book. Darren groaned. It was *always* a book. Disappointment flooded over Darren, as he tucked the package under his arm and stood to exit the room. He gave a curt nod to Geoffrey before turning and leaving.

As soon as the study door shut behind him, Darren's mouth broke into a wide grin. His Sunday might have been taken, but Malvern gave him the promise of something far more interesting.

§§

Malvern was less of a neighborhood than it was a single street. It was steep and winding, ending at the old cathedral that topped the hill with an exclamation, its stained glass windows filtering the sunlight that spilled over the rest of the hill.

It was practically deserted. The only reason the rail still stopped at the bottom of the hill was because the cathedral, though falling apart in its old age, was still somewhat of an attraction. It still stood in Malvern as a testament to the time of faith and magic, its two black spires piercing the skies.

Darren stepped off the rail and stared up the winding brick street, filled with weeds and dust. He couldn't fathom that there was an open shop on that dilapidated hill. Malvern had become home to the city's stray dogs over the years. The dogs actually learned how to jump on the rail in the mornings and ride the train into the city, where they begged for scraps. Then, at night, they would ride back to Malvern for shelter. It was a strange behavior that was almost as much an attraction as the cathedral.

A couple of dogs cowered in the narrow alleyways as Darren made his way up the hill. Their fur was scraggly and their round eyes glowed in the darkness as they curiously sniffed at the air. Darren wondered which building was the shop he had to deliver the package to. From what he could tell, every building looked run-down and abandoned. Obviously, Master Geoffrey's client didn't run a good marketing campaign like the shops in the business district.

Halfway up the hill Darren had to stop. His legs ached and he was getting tired. He took a seat on the sidewalk, wiping away beads of sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. The peaking sun beat down on him. He looked up the hill. Still, no building was distinguishable from the next.

"Damn it," he muttered. He spat on the ground.

He then stood up and continued his way up the hill. Every building along the way looked worse than the next. Not a sign or indication of which one was a shop. Did Geoffrey expect him to look inside every single door until he found a store inside? If he did that he'd be at it for hours. Geoffrey had a sick sense of humor. By the time he reached the front of the cathedral, Darren was no better off on his mission than he was minutes ago.

Plopping down on the front steps of the cathedral, he tossed his head back and gazed at the dark towers of the building against the opaque, celeste sky. He dropped the package at his side and just sat there. Sat there and did nothing. And it was splendid. He needed it; his body was beginning to feel the after-day soreness from his fight. Who cared if he took a while longer to deliver the book?

Perhaps it isn't a book, Darren thought. He was dealing with mysterious business, and truly anything could be in the package. Maybe it was some kind of enchanted artifact, dug up in the red sands of a country far, far away? He swung his head forward and stared at the plain brown packaging. Maybe he should open it?

What could the harm be? He thought.

“Looks like we have a lost pup.” A voice, raspy and cracking at every other word, spoke from behind Darren, snapping his attention away from the package.

Darren leapt to his feet and wheeled around. It was a skinny old man, with a long mane of silver hair. He was dressed in a sharp black suit, his hands deep in the pockets of his short pants. Something about the man's eyes caught Darren. There was something wild about them, a burning life in the dead grey pools of his vision.

“Can I help you?” Darren asked, trying to keep the surprise in his voice under control.

“The question is, how may I help *you*, young man?” the man asked, looking at Darren with a ravenous expression. His thin lips, a pale blue, curled like a dried leaf.

“I-I'm look for a shop?” Darren stammered.

“I am the curator of this fine building,” the man smiled, “Constantine Cavendish.” His arm crept toward Darren, extended in a handshake. He moved so slow, Darren wondered how long he had been sitting there for this this man to sneak up on him.

“Delighted,” Darren said, taking Cavendish's lengthy hand.

“Now, you asked about a shop?” croaked Cavendish, retracting his arm back into his pocket.

“Yes, a shop,” Darren said. “It's supposed to be here in Malvern?”

“I believe the building you are looking for,” Cavendish began, his long legs stepped forward like a spider's as he picked up the package, “is a little ways down the way you came, on your left, brick.” He handed the package to Darren. Darren took it, trying not to look into the man's eyes.

“Thank you, sir,” Darren said. “Have a nice day,” he added. He then turned and began walking down the hill. He wanted to run, to be away from Cavendish and whatever it was about that man that made him feel uneasy.

The shop was wedged between two tall lonely inns, falling apart and abandoned. As Cavendish said, it was a brick building, covered in sad, green lichen. It had a moldy wooden porch that threatened to collapse at any moment. The porch was empty save for a rocking chair that sat in the shadowed corner, near one of the two windows. Darren gave the entire structure a look-over. The roof of the building sagged under the forces of nature that were striking their vengeance. It look more like a sleeping monster than it did a building.

Darren glanced back up the hill. Cavendish had vanished. Probably slipping back into the cathedral he cared for. Turning back to the house, Darren stared deeply into the mouth of the monster: a large pine door. What was he waiting for? He had a package to deliver. Taking one last breath, he walked up to the steps of the house. Each wooden step creaked, like tiny cries of pain, filling Darren's ears with agonizing screeches.

At the front of the decrepit porch, Darren wondered what was stopping him from just barging in. He looked at the package, then back at the door. Something tensed up inside him and a shadow lingered in the back of his mind. This was definitely the shop he was looking for. He could feel something strange in the air: "Magic." The word rolled off his tongue like something foreign. The original excitement of going to Malvern exploded in him, but Master Geoffrey was at his shoulder, whispering: magic is not to be trusted.

He grabbed the brass handle, the rust scraping the sweaty palm of his hand. Carefully turning it, he pushed the door open. A weak and hollow bell rang as he stepped into the darkness of the shop. Through the blackness he could see rows upon rows of shelves. It reminded him of the archive in the basement of Astor. A thin veneer of gray smoke lingered in the air, stinging Darren's eyes. It smelled like rosemary and a spice he couldn't place.

A film of dust covered every surface. The shelves at the front of the shop were filled with jars, individually labeled. As he walked down the central aisle, Darren read a few of the labels: Heart of Lion, Tongue of Snake, Antlion Eyes. The contents sent shivers through his body. *Who would want stuff like this?* The thought alone made him want to turn and flee the shop.

Near the center of the aisle, the shelves were practically empty. Everything had been cleared away except for a small box. He paused in front of it.

It was plain, made of glossy, off-white wood, with a golden lock sealing the front. Unlike everything else in the shop, it looked relatively clean. Coming from what he thought was inside the box, Darren heard a light hissing noise. He blinked. Was it just in his head? *Closer, closer.* The thought stabbed at his mind, though it felt foreign, strange even. He leaned forward to get a closer look. On the front of the box, right above the keyhole was the faint engraving of a star. Darren reached to touch the etching.

Suddenly, a voice rang through the haze of the room. "Trying to nick something, darling?"

Darren's hands stumbled and fell to his side. He stood there, silent, eyes wide, staring into the hazy smoke that filled the space between him and the voice. The woman's voice was thick and sultry.

"Come back here," she called.

"A witch," Darren breathed.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I won't bite, hun!"

Darren clutched the package tightly in front of him, almost as if it were a shield to protect him from whatever haggardly creature waited for him. He walked through the sea of smoke, his eyes watering as he approached the source of the voice.

At the back of the shop was a counter over which a woman leaned, her chin resting gently on her fist and the other hand holding a black, wooden pipe with a long stem. The bowl emitted wispy tendrils of gray smoke that filled the space.

She had long ebony hair, her bangs falling almost over her eyes and framing her face, while the rest flowed behind her, beyond the small of her back. Her amber eyes were cat-like, watching him as he walked forward like two copper arrows, poised to fly at any given moment. Darren couldn't help but feel as though the witch was more like a ghost or demon, for her pale skin almost seemed to glow in the darkness of the shop.

"A customer?" asked the witch, eyes widening in interest.

"No, ma'am," Darren responded, meeting her eyes.

The witch seemed to find the word "ma'am" funny. She mouthed the bit of her pipe and took a few puffs, sending rings of smoke into the air from her icy blue lips. "So then," she spoke, "what is it that you want, doll?"

"I'm just here to deliver this package," Darren replied. He extended the package to her.

She took it with little interest, throwing it onto the counter. "Ah yes, from Geoffrey?"

Darren nodded.

"A book from the old Arcadian Empire, some good bits I need."

Darren nodded again. He was right. He wished he wasn't. But his mind had drifted away from the brown paper package and back to the box. *Come, come. Closer.* The thoughts sat in his mind like a thick fog.

"Thank you ma'am, I believe that is all." He turned to go.

"Wait a second," the witch said, putting her lips back onto the pipe and eyeing him.

"Yes, ma'am?" He was beginning to feel uncomfortable in the shop. It was an unnatural place. But the fog of thoughts told him: *Stay, stay and wait.*

"There's something interesting about you, babe," she said, the smoke from her mouth dancing toward him before caressing his chest.

"Thank you." He didn't know what else to say.

"That box back there, the cypress one, were you interested in it?"

Yes, spoke the voice in his thoughts.

“I have no money with me.”

“Go, bring it here.”

Darren remained still for a moment. What else could he do? He could just leave. The woman was obviously strange, if not crazy. But yet, the box. It was appealing for some reason. It was almost like he could hear it, beckoning him. A hissing whisper in his ear, saying, “Come hither.” He wanted the box. He wanted to know its contents. He *needed* to know its contents.

He walked back down the aisle and grabbed the box off of the shelf. Picking it up, Darren thought it was very much like an unfinished music box. He promptly brought it to the counter. The witch’s eyes shined through the smoke that flowed from her mouth.

“This box is an interesting item,” she smiled.

“Seems so, but I can’t buy it.”

“Do you want to know about it?”

Darren considered the question, but only one word was able to pierce the fog in his brain. He nodded, “Yes.”

“It’s from the lost lands of Arcadia, far to the west.”

“What’s inside?”

“Ah!” The witch raised a finger and wagged it at Darren. “That’s for whoever opens it to find out.”

That was the catch. There was always a catch, Darren knew. He wouldn’t be surprised if the box was empty and simply a scam by the devilish woman. “Have you ever opened it?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know what’s inside?”

“I just know, hun.”

“Tell me what’s inside.”

“Your heart’s desire. Power, wealth, fortune, adventure.”

Darren’s heart skipped a beat, despite his disbelief. He thought about the times his nose was forced into a book and he read about the magical adventures of old. Lamps and djinn, enchanted furniture, and wishes granted by falling stars. “Is there a wish in that box?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” she said, biting down on her pipe, “I suppose it depends on your wish, babe.”

“My heart’s desire?” Darren asked, shifting his stare to the box. How could something so simple promise something so great? Through the fog in his mind he saw the librarians and apprentices of Astor, and also the factory workers. Neither thought he belonged with them.

“Braver people have inquired about this box. They left empty-handed.”

Darren considered the witch’s words, knowing that he stood on the cusps of his wildest dreams and fancies. Within that miniscule carved box sat the hope of something better, something more than being an apprentice at Astor: a life beyond the bookshelves. That’s what he wanted. More than anything, he wanted a place of his own. He wanted the taste of the life outside Astor, outside St. Charlesburg.

As if she were listening to his thoughts, the witch spoke, “Will *you* be leaving empty-handed?”

Darren didn’t know. He wanted to take the box, but found himself standing still. What if he got his wish? What if he regretted it? What if he never saw Beatrice again? He swallowed hard. His shoulders felt heavy with the burden of the decision. The witch promised him what he spent every night dreaming about. What was stopping him, if only himself?

“I want the box.”

“Take it, doll.”

“Is it that simple?”

“It’s that simple.” She smiled a beautiful smile that broke through the darkness of the shop and the fog of his mind, a shining beacon of promise.

Darren snatched the box off the counter and a surge of energy ran through his hands and up his arms. Immediately, the burden was thrown off his shoulders. His eyes wildly admired the plain box. A giant, toothy smile broke onto his face. He couldn’t help but grin for some reason. A fluttering feeling, beyond any excitement he felt in all his fist fights combined, filled his stomach.

The witch gave him a comforting smile, as if to say he wasn’t mad for wanting the box so badly. “Tell that old scholar I gave my regards,” she said. From behind the counter she pulled out a brass key and tossed it to him.

Darren caught the key with a single hand and slipped it into his pocket.

“And,” the witch smiled, “make sure you open that box somewhere private.” She winked and bit the mouth of her pipe.

He returned her smile and then turned and strode through the darkness and smoke, out of the shop.

Darren III

The rail ride back to Astor was the most agonizing ride of Darren's life. He wanted to do nothing more than open the box and discover its contents. He let his fingers wander, caressing the smooth finish, exploring the corners and the polished keyhole. The excitement built like a pressure in his head. It was like having a ticket in the lottery; moments before the drawing was going to happen. It was the excitement that came with hope.

He wanted to open the box right away, but thought it was best to torture himself and wait until he was back in his room. Somewhere quiet and private, because he had no idea what would happen when he opened the box. *Magic*, he mouthed as he felt the outline of the keyhole another time, memorizing its shape, like a little doorway leading to a magnificent and mysterious world inside the box.

Darren exited the rail and hurried back to Astor, up the stairs, past the lions and into the entrance hall. The hall was empty. Perhaps it was still too early for any of the others to be up. Or they had all gone elsewhere. No one wanted to be in the library on their day off. Darren ran up one side of the twin staircase and up to his room, where he slipped into the door unnoticed.

Making sure the door was shut behind him, he rushed to the center of his room and placed the box down onto the rugged floor. He fell down in front of it, eyes wide and feeling like he was about to vomit. His heart fought with the walls of his chest, pounding like a heavy drum. He could be smacked on his sore cheek and wouldn't notice. All his attention was sucked into the box.

Darren's hands stumbled into his pocket, clumsily withdrawing the old brass key. Steadying his hand, he inserted it into the small, golden lock.

Knock, knock, knock...

The pounding on his bedroom door cut through the tense silence like a hot knife through butter. Darren's hands snapped away from the box. He stifled a string of curses. "Yes?" he called.

"Is that you, Darren?" It was that coward Wallace.

Who else would be in my room, Darren thought.

"Yes. Why?" he replied, slathering on enough annoyance to pierce the heavy wood of the door.

“I should have known you’d be slacking off. Master Geoffrey asked if you had returned.”

Darren gritted his teeth. This was not the time for Wallace’s brown-nosing. He cleared his throat, “Okay, I will be in his office momentarily.”

“You should go now, rather than leave him waiting,” Wallace said, giving one last knock on the door for emphasis. Darren could hear his footsteps fading away from the closed door. His attention shot back to the box. He ground his teeth even harder, pounding the floor with a white fist. He would have to wait.

He took the box, key still in it, and slid it under his bed. It would be safe there until later that night, when he would have the time and privacy to open it.

Darren left his room and returned to Master Geoffrey’s study to receive his next errand, his mind still heavy with thoughts about what was inside that box.

§§

Geoffrey kept Darren busy until it was time for dinner. Darren had licked enough envelopes sealed to make his stomach sour. He had organized papers over and over again, until the old librarian was pleased with the work. He had accidentally swallowed enough dust to wash down the envelope glue. And yet, by the time the two entered the dining hall, his stomach rumbled for food.

The cooks had prepared a spicy chili with black bread and the last of the summer fruit on the side. Darren took his meal on a wooden tray, taking it and finding the only open spot at the end of one of the non-lopsided tables in the hall. Geoffrey took his meal and sat at the table at the front of the room, where all of the librarians sat and ate together.

“Oi, guys, aren’t we lucky to be sitting with the master pugilist?” one of the apprentice sitting at the table said. He was a short boy with a round face and ashy hair.

“Why don’t you show us some of those moves from last night?” another apprentice added.

The table snickered in almost perfect unison. Darren ignored them, taking a bite of sweet melon. What did they know about fighting? He doubted any of them had ever been in a fight, or ever would be.

“Only miners and factory rats fight, you know?” said the boy sitting across from him.

Darren didn’t acknowledge him. He focused on his chili, trying to eat as quickly as he could. He picked up another spoonful, but before he could bring it to his mouth, something hit him on the cheek, splattering across his face. The table broke into a roar of laughter. Darren put his fingers to his face to feel a goop, he pulled them away to find his fingers black. He shot his eyes furiously at the boy across from him. The boy had mixed his black bread with his chili to make the concoction that he had flung at Darren. The boy’s face was red with how hard he was laughing.

“There you go, now you look the part. A grimy, dirty factory rat. Just how you belong,” said the ashy-haired apprentice who spoke earlier.

“A dirty mutt from the streets,” said someone else.

Darren grabbed his napkin from his lap and wiped away the gunk from his face. He threw the napkin at the boy’s face, but the kid simply pushed it away and continued laughing. “What are you going to do, punch me?” the boy bellowed.

“He can’t even hit an old man,” someone added.

Together, it seemed like the entire hall began to laugh, and shout and call him names. The boy across from him took his spoon and flung another glob of black chili, but Darren moved his head to the side to avoid the projectile. He turned his head towards the librarians. *They have to stop this.* But his pleading eyes only met Master Geoffrey’s dark pupils as he stared down at the madness, and did nothing.

Darren bit the bottom of his lip, holding back the impulse to show the others that he *could* fight. He pushed his tray away and stormed out of the dining hall, across the yard and back into the walls of Astor.

When he got to the bottom of the twin staircase, he let everything go. Tears broke the corners of his eyes and he cursed, kicking the bottom step. “That bastard did nothing to stop them,” he exclaimed, giving the bottom step another hard kick.

He wanted nothing more than to just call it a day, run up to his room and...

His room. The box. He had forgotten about the box.

Without thinking, he charged up the stairs, down the empty hallway and into his room, letting the door slam shut behind him. Pulling the box out from under the bed and back into the center of his room, he sat down in front of it and with one last thought about Geoffrey, the apprentices, Astor, and how he hated them all, he turned the key.

The lock gave a satisfying click, making Darren’s heart skip a beat. Passing his hand over the smooth surface of the box, he grasped the sides of the top half of the box, which remained tightly hinged to its bottom half. He couldn’t wait any longer, so he threw open the box.

The inside was laid with violet cushion, but it wasn’t the craftsmanship that caught Darren’s eye. Floating a hair’s breadth away from the walls of the box was a small sphere of light, no larger than a dandelion flower. Darren winced at its nearly blinding brightness. Strands of light, like hot threads of fire, danced in and out of the sphere. Darren was amazed. *What is it?*

The orb of light ascended from the box, floating until it was eye-level with Darren, where it hovered. He had no idea what to do with it, or even what it was. Darren thought it looked like a star, plucked out of the night’s sky and stored in a box.

Darren tilted his head forward to get a closer look at the strange little star. It burned silently, but gave off no heat. Leaning just an inch closer to examine the tendrils of light, he breathed. Suddenly, he inhaled the small ball of light, pulling it into his mouth along with his breath.

In the blink of an eye, it was pulled from the air before him. He coughed in surprise. A prickling crawl ran down his throat, and panic simultaneously kicked in. Darren grabbed at his neck and forced himself to cough in a desperate attempt to expel the little star from his body.

The searing moved down his throat, towards his collar bone. Soon, it felt as though his chest was on fire. He coughed in desperation, pounding his chest with his fist. His eyes flicked around for help, only to remember that he was absolutely alone. The burning in his chest was a hot blade being thrust into his breast plate, attempting to tear him in half. Darren's head felt heavy and his breathing became stymied, the pathways of his throat locking up. Some invisible force threw him backwards, onto the floor. His limbs shook, the room began to spin, and soon, everything was lost in white light.

§§

It felt like a dream, a foggy and all-too-real dream.

He lied in a circular room. The walls were made of conjoined, rectangular mirrors, reminding Darren of the mirrored house that would come to the outskirts of St. Charlesburg with the traveling carnival. The floor was black, a hard stone that might as well have been solid shadow. A frail light hit the mirrors from some mysterious source in the dark abyss above him.

Darren sat up and scratched his head. He had had strange dreams before but this one seemed different. His head felt light and empty. He couldn't remember anything outside of the room. Only the black, suspended abyss came to his mind when he tried to think of anything before the mirrors. He supposed it had always been that way: just him and the mirrors, and the darkness, and the loneliness. He had always been alone. That sounded right.

A pitter-patter echoed through the enclosed room of mirrors. Darren whipped his head around only to find his own reflection staring back at him. The bruise on his cheek was gone. In fact, his flesh looked cleaner than it had ever been. The rush of footsteps echoed through the room again. His head snapped forward, once again only to find himself.

He got to his feet, which he just noticed were bare. He felt the cold of frosted glass on the bottoms of his feet. The scattered sound of movement once again echoed through the darkness. Darren spun around, trying to place the mysterious sound and who, or what, was making it. A flash of movement broke in the corner of his eye, he turned to see: something was moving in the reflection of the mirrors.

A shadow, the silhouette of a man, ran across the mirrors, bending around the room. It froze at Darren's line of vision, facing forward. The figure stood nearly seven feet tall, its feet extending out of the mirrors and disappearing into the darkness of the floor.

Cautiously, Darren stepped forward, reaching a hesitant hand out towards the shadow. Inches before the tip of his finger touched the face of glass, the shadow tensed and shrunk.

Swooping close to the ground, the silhouette took the form of a cat. The dark tail whipped back and forth, ticking like a metronome. “What is your name?” spoke a guttural voice.

Darren blinked. Did it just speak to him? He crouched down to look closer at the feline shadow. “Darren,” he said, “Darren Cadwell.”

The cat purred. It stood and began to prowl around the faces of the mirrors.

Darren’s eyes followed the strange creature. It was always just Darren and the mirrors. Darren and the darkness, and the silence. The cat brought with it something foreign, new. “I don’t understand. Who are you?” he asked.

“I go by many names,” the cat purred, stalking behind Darren. “Master, Lord, false god, Haddad, El,” the rolling voice seemed to take pride in each title, “Baal.”

“Where am I?”

The cat gave a throaty laugh.

Darren felt uneasy, scared even. He didn’t know why, he just did. Suddenly, the mirrored walls felt as if they were closing in on him. The cat’s laugh filled the space until it collected in the air. It had always been there. The shadow, the darkness in the mirror, was god. The space became cold; Darren shivered and looked at his reflection. Frost began to collect on the mirrored walls, and his breath hung in the air like a spiritual mist.

“I want to leave,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around himself in an attempt to stay warm.

“Stay,” the cat soothed. Darren saw a pair of almond-shaped eyes glowing in the darkness behind him.

“Why should I?”

“You want something, do you not?”

Darren didn’t answer. He felt a droplet of sweat collect near his temple before it rolled down the side of his face, freezing near his chin.

“What is it that you want?” the voice whispered.

In the mirror before him, Darren’s reflection twisted and turned until he was no longer looking at himself, but the spiny frame of Master Geoffrey. Behind the head librarian stood Wallace and the other apprentices. Darren saw them, standing there and laughing at him. A few pointed fingers, and others murmured things to those around them. But Master Geoffrey just stood there. Stood there, staring at Darren and doing nothing. “Nothing,” Darren muttered, thinking about the dining hall.

“Ah,” the cat breathed, “you want revenge, don’t you? You want power. You want to be worth something. *Prove* something.”

“I want magic,” Darren said. The image before him shuddered, and Geoffrey and the others disappeared. He was staring at himself, and could see the glowing eyes of the shadow behind him, and its tail, flicking back and forth.

“That can be arranged,” the shadow said.

“Can it?” Darren’s head was begin to fog over again, thinking only of the mirrors, and the darkness.

“Yes. You will work quite nicely,” hummed the shadow.

An arm fired forth from the black floor and grabbed Darren around the neck. Darren gasped in surprise, gagging at the strong grip of the hand. He snatched at the hand, but his fingers faded through it like air. Abruptly, another arm bounded from the ground and pulled at the back of Darren’s shirt, causing his back to arch towards the floor. Then another dark arm, holding his ankles, pulled him down into the floor. And another, and another, until appendages of shadow covered him entirely, save for his eyes. With every ounce of his body, he struggled to break free, but the shadows didn’t budge. He was forced to remain still, staring at the silhouette of the cat as it shifted back into a man once again. A pair of fiery eyes formed in the face of the shadow before the final hand covered the rest of Darren’s face.

Darren was lost in the silence and the never-ending darkness around him.

§§

Darren woke up, drenched in a cold sweat. He sat up with a fit of coughs and was surprised to find that the burning in his throat had disappeared, though he felt worse than before. His stomach was sour and there was a pounding in his head, a heavy hammer falling on iron.

The box still sat on the floor, opened and the key still in the lock. His eyes focused on it for a moment in a daze. The entire bedroom felt lopsided, and he felt like any movement would cause him to topple over. He firmly held his ground. Just for a second. His stomach rocked like ocean waves, and he lurched forward, feeling as if he were definitely going to vomit.

Then it hit him how foolish he had been. The witch was obviously some kind of gypsy illusionist, who had just given him a hoax box probably filled with spice. The snuff was probably enough to knock him out and he was paying the consequences for it now. He shook his head, feeling dumber than being an apprentice at Astor ever made him feel.

“Stupid,” he muttered. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

The room rocked again and he grasped the rug and the box, holding on for dear life. What if it wasn’t just spice in that box, but something worse? He had heard stories from some of the men in Horseshoe Alley of burnouts getting bad dope, and being found dead

the next morning. Darren's chest began to collapse with panic. He didn't want to die. Especially over something so stupid. His breath became heavy, and all he wanted to do was scream.

He did, and as his scream filled the room, the lamp at his bed side and on the wall ignited. The white flames of witchfire shot out of the glass cups. Darren jumped as the flames roared like waving arms, reaching up and brushing the ceiling of his room before collapsing back into their lamps. His eyes shot back and forth, between both lamps. The witchfire sat, calmly blazing as they usually did when turned on.

What had just happened? He had never seen witchfire act in such a way. Then the realization hit Darren: he had done that. He had ignited the lamps when he shouted. A laugh of genuine surprise escaped Darren's open lips.

The witch hadn't lied to him. The box did have something in it. Something Darren now had. His open mouth cracked into a large and wicked smile, like one he had never had before. More laughs bubbled up from his stomach, and he let them roll off his tongue. He couldn't believe it: "Magic..."

Nikola II

Swanwick led Nikola down a narrow hallway that only seemed to close in on them the further they walked. It reminded Nikola of how he felt: life was closing in on him, inch by inch, less room to breathe, but there was no choice but to keep moving, to keep walking forward. He hated it; it made his stomach feel uneasy. If only he could spite that damn magician. Perhaps vomiting all over the hallways would be a start?

His creation halted at a door. “After you, Master,” Swanwick said, bowing and opening the flawlessly white door.

Nikola brushed himself off and smoothed back his pale blond hair before entering the room. As he walked in, the ceiling chandelier ignited with blue flames, filling the space with a warm and ghostly glow. It was a close space, with a velvet floor and empty walls, both clean white. Curtains on the far wall separated the room from a short walkway that led to the balcony that overlooked the entire ballroom. Nikola couldn’t see behind the curtains, but he knew who lurked beyond them.

From behind the curtains emerged two hulking figures in white suits, expressionless. Swanwick spoke for Nikola, and he was grateful for it. “Dr. Nikola Finbar is here to speak with your master.”

One of the men grunted and the other disappeared back to the private balcony. Nikola could smell something strange on these men, like rotting meat and acrid blood. They smelled like death. Perhaps it was the alcohol in his stomach, but he felt as if he was going to lose the over-cooked chicken he had eaten in the ballroom.

He only had to wait a moment before the man emerged. “Mister Lynch will be out shortly.”

Nikola nodded, “For a second I didn’t think you were capable of speaking. Well done. Maybe you’ll surprise me with a compound sentence, then?” His mouth then snapped shut. He was afraid if he kept it open any longer, he would ruin the carpeting. Or more importantly, look weak in front of the magician and his henchmen. The henchmen remained cool and collected. Perhaps they didn’t understand the insult he had just given them.

After a moment, the two hulking men pulled back the curtains and there he was, the bastard. Many people thought Councilman Seabury Lynch was the image of perfection. He was tall with broad shoulders, and his muscular physique was only bested by Swanwick’s. Nikola couldn’t help but join the magician’s admirers in noticing how dazzling the man looked in his black suit, complimented nicely by the peaked lapel and deep red pocket square.

“Right on time, Dr. Finbar,” he spoke, running a quick hand through his jet black hair and then stroking his equally dark beard. He shot a glance back at his two lifeless lackeys. His black eyes glistened in the stark light of the room.

They promptly left without a word.

“Now,” Lynch smiled, revealing two rows of perfectly straight teeth, “why don’t we all have a seat.”

He snapped his fingers and three chairs materialized before them. They were plain white wooden objects. Nikola personally was getting sick of the white theme, it was tacky and ugly. But he wasn’t going to voice his opinion to the man standing before them.

Nikola sat down. Swanwick did likewise.

“Smoke?” asked Lynch.

“Yes, thank you.”

Lynch pulled a silver box from his pocket and flicked it open, grabbing a cigarette. He handed it to Nikola, and Nikola’s shaking hand accepted. Placing the cigarette between his lips, he waited for Lynch to provide a light.

The magician extended a powerful arm, his thumb pointing upwards towards the ceiling. Suddenly his thumb ignited in a small, blue flame. Nikola’s stomach lurched. The flame prickled his nose, but he dared not move his face away. He allowed Lynch to light his cigarette and was relieved when the thumb went cold and returned to its owner’s lap.

“So I believe we have some business to discuss,” said Lynch. Though he smiled, there was something in his eyes that unsettled Nikola.

He was glad he had the smoke to calm his nerves. He exhaled before speaking, “Yes, I believe we do.”

“Is this one of them?” Lynch turned his attention to Swanwick, who sat perfectly still. The magician’s eyes probed and molested his beautiful creation from head to toe. He hated the way Lynch spoke about Swanwick.

“Yes.”

“And the others?”

“What about them?”

“How many do you have?”

“The number you requested, of course.”

“And where are they?”

“In my lab, at my house.”

“Are they complete?”

“Yes.” Nikola was surprised the lie rolled so easily off his tongue. There were no others. None at all. Swanwick was the one, and only one, he had created.

“They are capable of doing what I will be requiring them to do?”

Nikola hesitated for a moment. Lynch wanted an army. Nikola didn't know why. He didn't care. The man paid well. He glanced down at his shoes as he took another drag of the cigarette. Very well. Breathing out the smoke, Nikola answered, “Just as well as the prototype, if not better.” He stumbled at the word prototype and felt ashamed saying it in front of Swanwick.

“Good, good.” Lynch pondered Nikola's words, stroking his beard.

“Quite.”

“Of course,” Lynch began casually enough, but there was venom in his voice, “I *will* be receiving them tomorrow then, as we agreed?”

“Tomorrow?” Nikola swallowed. The ashes from his cigarette crumbled to the floor.

“Dr. Finbar, I am a businessman. In fact, I believe I am a very good businessman. A businessman who always gets what he wants. You understand this?”

Nikola nodded. His jaw felt tight, he couldn't bite down hard enough.

“Now, months ago I paid you a very large sum of money. An investment.”

Nikola nodded again. Oh yes, a fine investment. He couldn't help but think of all the nights of hell-bent drinking and fucking the man had funded.

“Dr. Finbar, I *always* get a return on my investment,” Lynch leaned forward, “Always.” His eyes were viciously locked onto the inventor. He felt terrified, and didn't know how to react.

There came a knock, Lynch's eyes shot to the door. The dark and threatening look on his face disappeared and he sat back in his chair. “Come in,” he called, throwing a look back at Nikola. Nikola exhaled. Sweat ran down the back of his neck and his knees were shaking uncontrollably. He cleared his throat nervously.

The door opened and in walked the men wearing the hideously white suits. But they weren't alone. Between the two of them, they dragged a thin, ragged, pathetic man. The men ushered him to the space in front of the magician, between where he and Swanwick sat.

Pushing him, the weak man fell to his knees. He was shaking worse than Nikola was. As soon as he hit the floor, he jumped to Lynch's feet. Groveling and mumbling excuses and apologies. “Please, Councilman Lynch, I-I promise I'll have the money by tomorrow. My wife and I have never been short before, you know that.” He looked up at the magician with wide and sad eyes. *Desperate eyes*, Nikola thought.

“I gave you more time than we agreed upon, James,” said Lynch flatly. He examined his nails in boredom.

“Please, please, please,” James sobbed.

Lynch sighed. “James, I like you. I do.”

The man stopped pleading and stared longingly, hopefully at the magician.

“Don’t bother yourself with paying me.”

“Really?” James couldn’t believe what he had just heard, and neither could Nikola. “Thank you, sir. Thank you, thank you, th”—

Lynch snapped his fingers and at that moment James, still in the middle of slobbering his gratitude, erupted into flames. The flames whipped off his limbs, sapphire tongues of heat. James’ words of thanks turned into agonizing screaming that filled the room. He fell to the floor, shouting in horror and pain. Please, please, please! The smell of the man’s burning flesh unsettled the bile in Nikola’s stomach. The air tasted foul with the sizzling of James’ flesh. Eventually, the flames ruptured from his mouth and he became nothing more than a shaking and convulsing body of flames.

Nikola couldn’t help but stare. James’ skin had been burned away, as well as his clothes. What remained in the azure tongues of fire was the contorted black image of a man. Charred and black, the body was a silhouette upon a dancing canvas. Nikola found it hauntingly beautiful. Once James stopped moving, what was left of his neck fell towards Nikola’s feet. A skull, shattered and cracked by the heat, stared back at him with eyes of fire. Flakes of black char floated from the flames, fluttering in the air before gently landing on the white velvet carpet, a bitter period to the end of a man’s life.

Lynch looked up from his nails and smiled at Nikola. “I believe that is all, Dr. Finbar. Tomorrow around noon my men and I will be at your house to receive the automatons.”

Nikola held back the contents of his stomach. He swallowed hard and nodded. He stood and left the room, Swanwick calmly at his side. The burning blue flames shone behind him as he left the room.

The door closed behind them, but Nikola could still see the burning image of James. He would be sure not to meet the same fate.

Darren IV

Had the darkness always been there?

Darren supposed so because no matter how hard he tried to think about anything else, nothing came to his mind. Nothing but the endless darkness that surrounded the room of mirrors and silence. Darren thought that it had to have always been that way. Just him and the darkness and the mirrors.

He opened his eyes, heavy as if stumbling out of deep, deep sleep. The mirrors glowed with his reflection, and a cold fog hugged his ankles. He stood in the middle of the room, immersed in the silence and loneliness. Darren gave a cursory glance over the room, searching for something that he feared lurked in the mirrors. He didn't know what he was looking for, or at least he couldn't remember. But whatever it was, it frightened him.

The cold fog began to rise, kissing his knees and wrapping around his torso. Darren could feel his feet lifting off the platform of solid shadow and into the air, slowly ascending as the chilled fog lifted him towards the endless abyss above. Darren didn't know why, but the darkness didn't scare him, and he accepted it.

When the darkness receded and he could see again, Darren was standing in a marsh. His feet, which he just realized were bare, sat in a warm puddle of water. White lilies floated around his ankles in lazy circles. Darren looked up to see the night sky, a blanket of black and starlight. He thought the stars looked like glowing white lilies in a vast pool of dark water.

In the distance, the marsh broke into a muddy field, and there sat a crooked ash tree. Darren felt compelled to approach the tree, to touch it and know its secrets. As he began to step forward and wade through the waters of the marsh, the stars began to fall from the night sky, like fireworks plunging to the ground after they exploded into light.

"Almost there," Darren muttered, forcing his legs through the warm water. The falling stars illuminated the space behind the ash tree, making the tree a black silhouette on a canvas of white starlight.

Somewhere in the distance, a humming sound echoed. Darren couldn't place the song. His focus was on the ash tree, and moving through the water that was becoming hard as ice. What was that sound? The humming became closer, and closer as his legs became stuck in the frozen water. *A lullaby?*

§§

Darren had had three strange dreams the night before. He thought about them as he got ready for Monday's morning lesson. They had all ended the same: a humming lullaby

in the distance by some mysterious voice. All of them had been cut short when he awoke in the middle of the night, breathing hard and afraid for his own life. It had been the first restless night he had had in a long time.

He got dressed in the typical shirt and tie, with the brown trousers and polished shoes all apprentices were required to wear. Grabbing a worn-out text as well as a few leafs of parchment and a charcoal pencil, he hurried out of his room into the throng of other boys who were hurrying out of their rooms and to the lecture hall. Many of them didn't make it to breakfast on Mondays. Darren rarely saw the porridge that the chef whipped on Monday mornings himself. Though climbing the three flights of stairs to the lecture hall was always a good way of waking up, he thought.

Trailing behind the other groggy boys, Darren thought about his dreams. He had opened the witch's box and was granted his wish. He was given magic. But the magic was useless to him if he couldn't learn how to use it. *What kind of powers does the magic give me?* He wondered. A clock chimed, filling the stairwell with the ringing of copper and brass. It was only heard on the mornings of lessons. The rest of the library was silenced from the ringing of the bell so it would not disturb patrons and readers. Darren and the others hustled up the flights of stairs and into the lecture hall. They shuffled in and took their seats.

The hall was large and well lit by lamps of witchfire lining the walls in perfect three feet increments. Rows of benches rose through the room, with thin wooden desks running along in front of the cold seats. In front of the rows of benches was a stage, nearly empty but well-kept. On it was a single blackboard, a podium and a claw-footed table.

Behind the podium stood one of the librarians. His name was Mr. Limberry, and he was Darren's least favorite of the librarians only for the fact of how bland he was. Limberry's thinning silver hair was swept to the side and he donned his usual navy blazer and trousers. His tie was straight and fashioned with a polished silver clip. He cleared his throat, signaling that it was time for his lesson to begin.

"Now, as you may recall we left off with the crowning of Grand Prince Alistair I," Limberry began in his nasally voice.

Mondays' lectures were History, Darren's least favorite subject. Darren's marks were always lowest in the class. Of course, that wasn't much different from their other lessons. He tried to focus in on Limberry's voice, but it was like white noise. Words simply became sounds and soon, Darren had filled an entire leaf of paper in doodles and drawings. He was proud of his work; the paper was covered in various precisely drawn geometric shapes.

"Mr. Cadwell," Limberry sung.

Darren looked up from his notes, "Yes?"

"I asked you a question."

"Yes."

“Yes, what, Mr. Cadwell?”

“My answer. It’s yes.”

“I asked you in what year did Grand Prince Alistair I pass on the crown to our glorious Grand Prince Balbados III?”

“Ah, yes. I see.” Darren bit the end of his charcoal pencil.

“Well, do you have an answer, Mr. Cadwell?”

“Nope. Nothing.”

Limberry’s face flushed a bland shade of red. He cleared his throat again. “Well then, can anyone help our champion prizefighter here?”

Darren turned his face back to the notes on his desk at the jab.

Wallace’s hand shot up.

“Yes, Mr. Dean?”

“I believe the answer Darren is looking for is the Fiftieth Blaze, post Solomon, sir?”

“That is correct, Mr. Dean. I can tell you have been listening.” Limberry gave Wallace a bright smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Limberry,” Wallace replied.

“Now, I believe that is it for this morning gentlemen,” Limberry said, closing the book that sat on the podium.

The apprentices began to close their books and stand from their benches. Limberry banged his hand on the podium and loudly cleared his throat. “Before you leave gentlemen, I have an announcement to make.”

Darren looked up from his doodled shapes and listened closely.

“Master Geoffrey himself will be giving a special lecture on Thursday, so make sure you have read the material thoroughly. That is all.”

The apprentices instantly began speaking to each other, and in a clamor scurried out of the lecture hall, off to the dining hall to grab a bite to eat before beginning their duties. Darren snatched up his paper and textbook and hurried out of the lecture hall.

At the main circulation desk of Astor, the librarian on duty kept a list of the daily duties for each apprentice. They changed day-to-day. After snagging an apple and a banana from the dining hall pantry, he dropped his book off in his room and made his way to the circulation desk. There, the librarian on duty gave him good news: he was working re-shelving. *Perhaps the gods are giving me a break after the past couple of days*, he thought.

Re-shelving was a tedious task. It involved taking all un-shelved material and books and returning them to their proper place. At best, an apprentice could get *most* books back onto the shelves, but completing the entire task was impossible to do in a single day. This left a lot of freedom for slacking off. No one could measure your progress at any point. *Looks like I'm getting an early day off to make up for yesterday.*

Darren took the stack of books that was sitting at the circulation desk and was off. Once he was out of sight, he quickly ditched the books, placing them into open spaces on a random shelf. "Phew, well there goes a hard day's work," he sighed. Peering around the shelf, he saw that no librarians or other apprentices were around. The coast was clear.

The library was bound to have a book on magic, Darren thought. He moved through the shelves on the first floor, scanning the titles etched on the spines of the books. He had no idea where to begin. He wondered how people found anything in the library. He was an apprentice after all, and he was completely lost. Darren ran his hands across the backs of the books, seeing titles about cooking and stories of adventure. By the time he checked the entire first floor, he was no closer to knowing where he'd find a book about magic if the library had one. Librarians had the contents of the library in their head like a map. Apprentices were expected to learn and eventually master the system. It was a pointless exercise. *Though, Darren thought, I suppose it has its moments when it would be nifty.*

A couple of apprentices passed by and Darren grabbed a book off the shelf and acted as if he was returning it. He might not have mastered the layout of the library, but he was great at making it seem like he was doing his work. That was a hard earned skill over the years. He walked to the staircase and wondered what floor of Astor would most likely have the kind of book he was looking for. That's when remembered there was such a floor. *The Archives*, Darren thought. Of course, how could he have been so daft?

The Archives were located under the first floor of Astor, in the old catacombs. Usually, it required special permission from Master Geoffrey to receive entrance into the Archives. Darren remembered times he led staff and strange scholars into the Archives so that they could examine some old or delicate text, or something like that. He didn't remember their babble-talk too clearly. Sensitive material was kept in the Archives. So sensitive nothing was permitted to be taken out of the Archives. And while outsiders needed permission to enter the Archives, anyone affiliated with Astor could simply prance in unnoticed. Including Darren.

"If the Archive doesn't have it, then it's not in Astor," Darren said, taking a book off of the nearby shelf and idly examining it before slipping it back into its place and scurrying to the back of the library.

An old door, almost out of place compared to the rest of the polished and clean library, stood between the public section and the stairs to the old catacombs. Darren pushed the door open and slipped into the darkness of the stone stairwell. Feeling his way down the rough and cracked wall, he descended the stairs. At the base of the stairs was another door, and from under the door, Darren could see the pale light of witchfire glowing. He knocked on the door.

A rusted slot in the door slid open and speckled brown eyes gazed out and down at him. Darren looked back and gave the staring eyes a wink. The person on the other side of the door rolled their eyes and closed the slot. Darren heard the sliding of bolts and a few clicks before the door swung open. There, standing in the light of the witchfire lamps was a man with a long and sickly build. He wore a brown tweed suit, covered in the dust of the catacombs. The man's face was pallid and dark rings sat nestled up under his eyes.

"Good day, Lampheast," Darren greeted warmly, giving the man a wave as he entered through the doorway.

"Ah, yes, Darren," Lampheast coughed. "Hello hello."

Lampheast was a librarian, but didn't give lessons like the others and was rarely seen outside the catacombs. Darren liked Lampheast. The man, like him, was also ostracized by the others. Lampheast told Darren it was because he preferred the company of books over that of people. People didn't say nasty things about you and were quite dull. Darren didn't agree, but he said nothing. The others referred to Lampheast as Dusty Bunny. It was because of his buck teeth.

Lampheast smiled. "Trying to avoid your duties again?"

"Not particularly."

"Am I to believe you are paying me a visit then?"

"Sorry, Rabbit. I'm not here to just see you." Lampheast didn't mind it when Darren called him Rabbit. He told Darren that he liked him. More so, he liked Darren for who he was, and found him 'amusing and delightful.' Darren appreciated that.

Lampheast ran his tongue over his front teeth. "Hopefully you haven't been getting into too much trouble."

"I had to spend all of yesterday doing chores for Geoffrey."

"There's been worse punishment. You could always be sent down here to try dusting the Archives." Lampheast laughed.

"I wouldn't mind that half as much."

"How may I help you today, then?"

"I'm actually looking for a book."

"A book? You? Don't tell me the others finally got to you, or that yesterday's chores got to your head."

"No. It's something more important than anything Astor could muster."

"Fascinating. I'm interested. What is it, then?"

“I’m looking for a book about magic.” Darren swallowed hard, nervous of what even Dusty Bunny would say about the inquiry.

“Ah. The Archive has an extensive collection of works by the wizard Solomon.”

“Who’s that?”

“The First Wizard of Balnibarbi. An old, old magician.”

“Is he any good?”

“He is the most written about wizard since the death of the saints,” Lampheast retorted. He coughed up some dust.

“Well, that sounds just fine then. Can you show me where they are?”

Lampheast coughed again, but nodded in affirmation.

Taking Darren by the shoulder, Lampheast led Darren into the depths of the catacombs, grabbing a witchfire lamp off of one of the black hooks on the wall. He brought Darren down a passage or two, with turns and veering one way or another. Lampheast was valuable to Astor, despite being treated as badly as the dust on his jacket. He was the only one who knew the tunnels by heart. Darren felt stupid for thinking memorizing the surface shelves was an impossible task.

The carved out tunnels all looked identical, with roughly shaped walls partially hollowed out and filled with books. It was as if the walls were made of books. Lampheast abruptly stopped and handed Darren the lamp. “This entire row are works by Solomon. I hope you find what you are looking for,” he said. “When you are done, simply open the lamp and the witchfire will lead you back to the stairwell. He smiled at Darren before shuffling off into the darkness of the catacombs.

Darren brought the lamp closer to the shelves and squinted his eyes to get a better look at the spines of the books. He was dismayed to find that none of them seemed to be marked like the ones on the other floors of Astor. He groaned, placing the lamp on the ground and picking a random book off the shelf. He didn’t have time to look through them all.

He opened the book’s leather cover, then holding the book open with one arm, picked up the lamp with his free hand. He felt clumsy and awkward trying to read the book. The title page was written in thick, red ink. “Thaumaturgy and Wonder-weaving,” Darren read. *Well this seems promising*, he thought. He turned the page and found the next two pages to be filled in tiny, black scrawling. To make matters worse, Darren made out that most of the words were in a different language entirely. Darren swore and threw the book back onto the shelf.

He tried a dozen other books, and none of them gave him the answers that he wanted. Those that weren’t in a strange and foreign language were completely useless. One book, a small one with a flimsy binding was a hand-copied proof of Solomon’s own journals. Darren had opened it to a random page and read an entry about the old wizard’s breakfast and a meeting with some dignitary over tea. Not even a whiff of magic in the book.

Darren gave up, opening the lantern. The witchfire died down for a second before flying out of the lantern and zooming down the tunnel, out of sight, leaving behind it a long, silvery trail of sparkling light lingering in the air. Darren followed the trail, twisting and turning, until he was back in the warm glow of Lampheast's work station at the entrance to the Archives. The dusty librarian looked up and smiled at Darren. "Find what you needed?" he asked.

"No. Know a good translator, by any chance?"

"I'm fluent in several languages. You need to know a lot of words to soothsay the secrets from a tricky text or two."

Darren placed the empty lantern in his hand down on the table of Lampheast's workbench. "Thank you, anyways."

"Best of luck." Lampheast nodded, coughing.

Darren sighed. He returned to the surface, defeated.

After he returned to the main level of the library, Darren tried to actually do his work. This lasted for a solid hour before he got tired and gave up. It was too depressing to look at books when he couldn't find the one he actually wanted. He decided that he had done enough for the day. It was early in the afternoon when he chose to leave the library, and go out on an adventure instead. He slipped by the main desk, into the entrance hall, down the stairs and out the front doors. He knew exactly where he was going to go.

§§

Beatrice's house had a large backyard with a beautiful garden. The garden was surrounded by a tall brick wall, which Darren climbed easily enough. He jumped to grab hold of the ledge, and hoisting himself up, swung his leg over the wall, then the other. He sat on the wall with his legs hanging off, kicking back-and-forth. Beatrice's father took pride in his yard: the size of it, the splashes of oranges and purples from the flowers he kept during the summer and spring. Bushes, lush green in spite of how hot the summer had been, were cut into various shapes and sizes. In the center of the yard was a red stone fountain. Darren spotted Beatrice sitting on a cushioned chair near the fountain, sitting in the shade of a rowan tree.

Darren let himself fall from the wall, and staying crouched low to the ground, snuck through the garden towards where Beatrice was sitting. He took care not to brush too closely against any of the plants or bushes. He silently tucked himself behind another rowan tree, a few yards away from where she was sitting. She looked absolutely stunning. The sunlight danced off her strawberry blond hair, bringing out the strong accents of red. Her blue eyes were colder than ever. Darren thought she looked like a goddess, with hair made of fire and eyes of ice. She sat on the chair with a fountain pen brought up to her mouth in thought and a pad of parchment in front of her. Her other hand tugged restlessly at the fabric of her lavender tea gown.

Beatrice brought the pen away from her mouth and tapped it on the parchment. “If I were a dead leaf thou mightiest bear,” she thought aloud, “If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee...”

Darren poked out from behind the tree and said, “A wave to pant beneath thy power and share.”

Beatrice jumped in surprise. “Darren.” She quickly collected herself, tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “How long have you been there?”

“Only a minute or so, I wanted to sneak up and surprise you.”

Beatrice looked down at her parchment, then back up at him with a brilliant smile. Darren felt something get caught in his throat. “How did you know the rest of that verse? I’ve been trying to remember it for a while now for one of my lessons. No one else seemed to know it.”

“It’s the only poem I know,” Darren replied. He strolled over and took a seat on the ground next to Beatrice. “I had to write it over and over again for punishment. Eventually, it just sticks.”

Together, they laughed.

“So why are you using that poem anyways?” Darren asked.

“I’m writing about transformation and freedom. It’s a personal reflection.”

“I never got that while I was copying the poem, just the words.”

“Do you think that freedom is sometimes only possible with change?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it really.”

“Freedom or change?”

“Change. I think about freedom all the time. Freedom from Astor and even St. Charlesburg.”

“I suppose freedom is a form of change.”

“That just makes everything confusing.”

“Have you ever considered just leaving?” Beatrice set her pad and pen down beside her.

Darren shook his head. “It’d be impossible. How would I make it out there in the world by myself?”

“You always make Astor sound miserable though.”

“It is.”

“So then, why not leave and work in the factories with those men you fight with?”

Darren laughed. “It’s not that easy. The people at Astor think I’m trash, and the people over in Horseshoe think I’m a snob. I guess I’m just caught between.”

“Well, at least you could leave if you truly wanted to.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” Beatrice stuck her tongue out at him. She bent down and pulled one of the purple flowers that sat around the base of the rowan tree. “Isn’t it beautiful?” she asked.

Darren looked at the flower, then at Beatrice. A light breeze caught the leaves of the tree, and loosened the stubborn strand of hair from behind her ear. She glowed in the fractions of sunlight that broke through the moving branches of the rowan. “It is,” he said. He felt sick for a moment, so he stood to his feet.

“You’re leaving already?”

“Do you want to come with me?” He dug his hands into the pockets of his trousers and pulled out a few coins that he jingled around. “I still have some coin after that fight you cost me. Maybe we could take a stroll to the market district and get some sea salt taffy?”

Beatrice considered it.

“You know, Bea, you kind of owe me after that fight?”

She rolled her eyes and gave him a roguish smile. “Who needs lessons anyways?” She extended her hand and he took it, helping her to her feet.

Darren took Beatrice to the back wall of the yard. The two had mastered jumping the wall, and he knew that she needed help doing so in the bothersome dresses she always wore. Beatrice was fussing with her tea gown by the time Darren leapt the wall and landed on the other side. His foot landed wrong and he stumbled and tripped, but Beatrice caught him by the wrist, anchoring him back onto his feet.

They walked down the hill and out of Finchley. They hopped onto the rail and took it through the industrial sector, with its smoke stacks and giant clouds of smoke melting into the sky above. The streets were alive with people and Darren told Beatrice about some of the trouble he had gotten into on particular streets. The ride was quick, with few stops, and soon they stepped off the rail and onto the salt-stained and mud-covered streets of the market district.

“Do you remember how to get there?” Beatrice asked.

“It’s been a while, but I think so.”

JOE’S SEA SHACK was a small establishment that sold a variety of sweets and other assorted items that came in from other lands. It also sold the best sea salt taffy. Darren and Beatrice had stumbled upon it one day when they were just kids. They refused to eat any

other taffy. It just wasn't the same. Darren led them down a narrow and crowded street, crammed with merchants and customers, shouting prices and swearing in frustration.

"Are we almost there?" Beatrice asked, tapping Darren's back as they squeezed through the crowd.

"I think we're on the wrong street, hold on," Darren said over his shoulder. He led them off the street, onto the corner of an emptier avenue near the docks.

"I think I remember. It's a few block that way," Beatrice pointed.

Darren scratched his head. "I think you're right."

"Look who's skipped out on his duties today?" bellowed a voice from behind them.

They turned around to find Wallace and the ash-haired apprentice walking towards them, carrying paper bags in their hands. Like him, they wore the brown trousers with the ironed shirt and tie. Darren bit his tongue and waited for them to speak again. It wasn't the first time he had been caught skipping out of Astor. He just had to wait for them to leave.

"Hello, Beatrice," Wallace said, his mouth twisting into a crooked line Darren guessed was supposed to be Wallace's try at a charming smile.

"What are you two thick-skulls doing out of Astor, then?" Beatrice asked, sticking her nose up.

"We're running an errand for the dining hall," said Wallace, putting one of his bags down for a second to fix his horn-rimmed glasses. "We're supposed to be here."

"Though I guess Darren is supposed to be here too, on the streets, rather than dirtying up our library," said the ashy haired boy.

Darren let go of his bite, but before he could open his mouth, Beatrice spoke: "I'm surprised that a dim-witted louse such as yourself could think of such a rhetorically sharp remark."

"We are students of Astor," Wallace chimed in, "not some mindless child of a Lord."

"Students? Are you studying to be a halfwit? Because your knives are so dull they couldn't cut through hot water."

Wallace's face burned red and his lip curled. Darren laughed at how foolish the two looked. Beatrice never ceased to amaze him. Darren's laughing made Wallace's red face practically turn purple. He opened his mouth but the ash-haired boy cut him off. "Never mind her Wallace, it's obviously that time of the month."

Beatrice gave a small gasp at the comment. Darren wanted to do nothing more than punch the boy in the face. He stepped forward, but Beatrice's hand stopped him. "If I had to bleed to find you an annoying bigot, I would be anemic."

The boy snarled, and spat on the ground. "Forget it. We need to get back, Wallace."

Wallace nodded.

The two walked past them. Darren made sure that his shoulder bumped into Wallace, making Wallace stumble for a second before continuing on his way without a word. He and Beatrice watched the two walk down the street until they were lost in the crowd. Beatrice chuckled, most likely congratulating herself on her sharp wit. Darren stood there, steaming in the cool breeze coming off the green-water sea.

“Are you okay?” Beatrice asked, stepping closer to him.

Darren kicked at a hard clump of mud on the ground. He wanted nothing more than to say yes, but he couldn't. “No.” He stared at the ground and grabbed his hair. “Astor Library just makes me so angry, you know?” He kicked at the ground again, holding in a scream that he could feel burning and itching to be let go. “They just,” he paused, holding back the scream again. “They think they're so much better than everybody else.” The scream sat deep in his stomach and he could feel it boiling, rising and rising.

“Darren?” Beatrice's voice was saturated in worry and panic.

Darren kicked the ground again. “I'm sorry if this is bothering you,” he said. He turned to find Beatrice not standing where she had been. In fact, she wasn't standing at all.

She floated a few feet above the ground, stroking her hands through the air as if trying to propel herself back to the ground. “Darren, what's going on?”

The rising feeling continued to fill Darren. “Hold on Beatrice,” he said, “I'll get you.”

He pushed off the ground, letting the feeling in his stomach, like bread rising in an oven, fill him entirely. His feet hovered off the ground, then they scrambled through the air until he was floating next to Beatrice. He grabbed her hand.

“What's happening?” Beatrice asked, eyebrows furrowed as they inched higher and higher.

“Magic,” Darren said, unable to control the giddiness in his voice.

“Magic?”

“Yeah.”

Floating wasn't so bad. He had no clue how it happened, but he felt comfortable in it. The feeling in his body bubbled and overflowed, tickling his fingertips and toes. He gave the most reassuring smile he could. “Do you trust me?”

Beatrice swallowed nervously. She nodded.

Darren closed his eyes and focused on the bubbling inside him. He could feel them rise, higher and higher and higher. Beatrice gave a gasp of surprise and perhaps a little fear. Darren opened his eyes. They stood feet over all of the shack and building tops, looking down at all of the bustling and hub-bub of the market. Beatrice squeezed Darren's hand

with her own, as if to say ‘Don’t let me go, or I’ll kill you.’ He returned it with a squeeze of his own to let her know that he wouldn’t.

He moved his hands in small circles and kicked his feet gently, as if treading water. He glanced over at Beatrice and smiled. She returned his smile with a nervous one of her own. “Follow my lead,” he whispered into her ear. She nodded.

Carefully, he placed his right foot forward. Then the left. Beatrice mirrored him, doing the opposite. *She gets the idea*, Darren thought. Soon, they were walking together above the market, strolling through the air as if it was a secret street that only they knew about. Every step of his right foot caused them to bob upwards for a moment, only to come down when he stepped with his left.

“Now, which way did you say the shop was?” he asked.

Beatrice laughed, a tear forming in the corner of her eye. She pointed with her free hand, “That way.”

Darren led them as they bounced through the air. The briny wind tousled Beatrice’s hair and prickled Darren’s face with its cold touch. The air tasted cleaner than below; it was salty and made him think of the taffy that waited for them. He spotted the salmon-colored roof of JOE’S SEA SHACK. They were almost above it. Beatrice noticed it too, she pushed her hair out of her face with her free hand and motioned towards it with her eyes.

Now, how do I get down? He thought. If floating was mostly a matter of thought and feeling, falling had to be the same. He looked at the cobblestone streets below and swallowed, hoping they didn’t fall too fast. Darren imagined the balloon inside of him deflating. He sucked in his stomach. Instantly, the bubbling sensation inside of him started to calm. Just as he had hoped, they began to descend towards the rooftops. Darren began to move his feet almost as if he were walking down stairs. Beatrice did the same.

Slowly, slowly, slowly they neared the streets below. The pathways around JOE’S were emptier than most and only a couple of people happened to notice them as they gently landed on an open space near the beach. However, one of the people who noticed them Beatrice had noticed first. She ducked behind Darren, but it was too late. Darren’s head darted side-to-side, wondering what or who she might have been hiding from.

“Young lady,” a shrill, grating voice cut through the air and instantly Darren could see who Beatrice was trying to avoid. It was the housekeeper of her father’s estate: Miss Peregrine. Darren had run into trouble with the frightening woman before and it had not been pleasant. She was a plump woman with a round, motherly face, but her deep-set eyes were unrelenting and her soul was sour.

“Hello, ma’am,” Beatrice said with a sheepish smile. She stepped out from behind Darren.

“What are you doing in the market? Don’t you have lessons, dear?” Peregrine’s face was flustered and sweating.

“I was simply,” Beatrice began, trying to think of the words.

“No,” Miss Peregrine snapped. “It may work on the others, but not me missy.”

Beatrice frowned, defeated.

“I still need to get something for the house, but you will come with me, dear.” Peregrine’s words were kind, but her eyes shot bullets at Darren.

“Yes, ma’am,” Beatrice said. She dragged her feet to Peregrine’s side.

“Good day, Cadwell,” Peregrine said with a curt nod. The housekeeper snatched Beatrice by the sleeve of her dress and pulled her away. Beatrice looked back over her shoulder, her blue eyes burning with questions.

Darren smirked and mouthed, “Later.”

Beatrice gave a pout before Peregrine pulled her to the side and she turned away. *She’s going to go crazy before then*, Darren thought. He was equally itching to tell her everything; tell her about the witch, the box, the star. He shook his head and laughed at himself. Sticking his hand into his pocket, he jangled around the coins. They would have to wait to be spent another day, he supposed.

§§

Walking back from the market, Darren thought about floating. How unexpected it was. How exhilarating it was. He took in a deep breath through his nostrils. The air in the city was thick and dirty compared to how it had been far above the rooftops and smoke stacks. He had felt powerful. He had felt free. He held Beatrice’s hand. *I wonder what else this magic can do*, Darren thought, appreciating his right hand with childish giddiness.

He passed by the stop for the rail. There was nothing but bookshelves and bastards waiting back at Astor for him. He was in no rush. Anyways, his heart was still pounding too hard and fast. He needed the time to process and take it all in. Cutting through the industrial heart of the city would give him enough time.

Darren swiftly passed many of the main streets, strolled down a couple side streets and alleys. He was walking across Horseshoe Alley when a couple of men approached him. They looked like the factory breed, both built like stokers – tall, solid, and swarthy. As they got closer, one of them said something. “I think we ‘ave a lost book mouse from up the hill,” he laughed.

“I reckon you’re right,” agreed the other.

Darren gave a small smirk as they got close enough to see him. They were just as surprised as he thought they would be. “Not just any book mouse, it’s the bloody Prince ‘imself,” said the first one, slapping himself on the leg. “What’s the honor?”

“Just passing by, boys,” Darren said. He stepped forward, only to be cut off by a solid wall caked in coal dust. He looked up at one of the men, smiling back down at him.

“Not so fast, Prince,” the man said, scratching his beard.

Darren took a step back and smiled. “I’m sorry boys, I need to be somewhere today.”

“Boys?” said the other man, wiping away at his nose. He eyed Darren with gleaming eyes. “That shiner Piggy ‘anded you is almost gone.” He stepped forward and grabbed Darren by the chin with a hard, callused hand. He took a closer look; close enough for Darren to see his black nose hairs.

Darren shoved the man’s hand away. “A fight I should’ve won.”

“You’ve won your fair share a fights,” said the man, refusing to step away from Darren.

“Then you scurried back to your library, with its meals, clean sheets, and water,” added the other.

“After taking our money,” spat the first.

“I’m not looking for trouble,” Darren said, raising his hands and inching away from the two.

“You’ve won enough fights for trouble to find you,” said the man closest to him, “boy.”

That man was the first to pounce. He jumped onto Darren, but Darren was quick enough to evade his grasp, only to run into the charge of the second man. Darren grabbed the man by the back of his shirt and tossed him into the other man. His back faced a brick wall, and they blocked him from running. He couldn’t fight them both. Could he offer them the money in his pocket? No. They’d still beat on him because he was the Prince. It was their opportunity to not look like scum in front of the mass of others who held their pride above everything else.

One of the men threw his cap onto the ground and charged at Darren again. Darren pressed his back against the wall and raised his hand. The man flew backwards, hurdling into the trashcans on the opposite wall with a clamor of bangs and crashes.

Darren didn’t have time to ask questions. The other man was right behind the other. Darren shot his hand out again, but nothing happened. The man’s body crashed into Darren like a train running off its tracks. The back of his head smacked the brick wall and he was grabbed by the shoulders and tossed to the ground, the weight of the man on top of his chest. He struggled to get free, but his one hand was caught under the weight of the man. He snatched at the man’s arms with the other, but the man pushed it away and socked him right in the face. Darren’s head was knocked to the side and he coughed in pain. He continued to struggle.

He looked up at the grungy face of the man, his eyes were furious. The man raised his fist to deliver another punch. Darren stared at the fist, his head spinning from the first punch. As the man’s fist came down, aimed right at Darren’s jaw, it burst into flames. The

next thing Darren knew, the man slid off Darren, trying to put out the flames that were slowly eating their way up his arm.

Darren struggled to his feet. His head was throbbing. The man ran around in incandescent circles, yelling, swearing, and trying to take off his shirt. Darren didn't think twice: he ran away, turning onto the street and making a straight line towards Astor. He didn't stop running until he had reached the corner of the block Astor sat on. He slumped down by a lamppost, heaving and caked in a dirty sweat. His hands were shaking at what he had just done.

"That was me," he muttered between pants.

Thoughts seeped into his head, about the box, the star and the dream he had had that day. Shadows rose from the dark corners of his mind, and a thought that was more like a cooing voice said, *Remember what motivated you. Remember the embarrassment. Remember how he abandoned you when the others cut you down at the knee. Remember.*

Darren brought his hands to his face. The night of his fight, the thoughts of getting revenge on Geoffrey were just a fantasy to put him to sleep. He wasn't serious about it. There was no possible way he could try to embarrass Geoffrey in return without making more of a fool of himself. But he had magic now. Everything was different. The thoughts whispered again, *Remember.* Darren thought of dinner the night before, of how Geoffrey had done nothing. Nothing.

He stood and brushed off his pants, then hurried back to Astor, his mind flooding with thoughts of Master Geoffrey's lecture later that week, and the surprise he had for the head librarian.

Nikola III

Liquor was Nikola's best friend. He thought about it as he took another swig of the gin he had bummed off some drifter on his way to the warm comfort of THE PARTING RIVER. God damn, he loved his spirits. Why did people need love, or money, or dreams when there was a simple answer to all those cares and worries? The answer was simple: people were stupid. It was a universal truth he had known since he was a child.

THE PARTING RIVER, like most of the other fucking buildings in Lagado was white, but was the only one with a thatched roof. Which, by the grace of luck, made it easier to find and stumble into. The inside was not as appealing as the façade. *As is the way of this ugly world*, Nikola thought, taking another swig of the small bottle of gin before pocketing it and stepping fully into the firelight that filled the space. The walls were made of crude, white-gray stones. Tables, dirty hunks of splintered wood, were scattered throughout the room. There was a bar and a kitchen at the far end of the pub and a large, roaring open fireplace in the center of the room.

Nikola scanned the room for an open table. Most of the ones nearest to the fire had already been taken by smelling, wretched men who were already drunk enough to fall asleep, talking loudly about nothing important. He wished Swanwick was with him. His creation was always able to make the simple decisions for him. It was one of the things he appreciated most about the presence of the automaton. But there were more important errands for Swanwick to run at the moment.

He spotted a table in the corner of the room, where it was damp despite the recent heat and the floor was covered in muddy straw. It was perfect. There would be less snooping eyes and curious ears to worry about. It was better that way. *God I hate this blasted city*, he thought before making his way towards the table.

On the trip across the room he stopped a waitress who was trying to balance a tray of empty plates as she squeezed and dodged her way back to the kitchen. "Can you fetch me a bottle of your cheapest wine? Two glasses. At that table over there." The waitress said something he couldn't catch, but he took it as a yes and gave her a nice tap on the bum before letting her go.

He sat down at the table, keeping on his coat so not to feel out of place with the suit he wore to the Equinox Ball. It was best not to draw attention, he reminded himself. The wine came quicker than he thought. He didn't acknowledge the waitress and waited until she was gone to inspect the bottle. *Cheapest wine, indeed*. He popped open the cork. *Oh well, fuck it*. He planned on drinking it so quickly, there was no use in paying for something nicer. He took a drink from the bottle, swishing the wine around and feeling the tingling sweetness on the tip of his tongue. He then poured himself a generous glass.

Nikola was on his second glass by the time the person he had been waiting for stepped into the light of the pub. He was beginning to fear she would never show. Drusilla Thynn, the Marchioness of Elmdor and member of the Council of Lords, inspected the drab room before meeting eyes with him. She swept through the room like a phantom, passing through it quickly and quietly.

Drusilla was a fearsome woman; she was tall, with broad shoulders and a sharp v-like figure. Her body could have been mistaken for a man's, and Nikola wouldn't have been surprised to see a prick dangling between her legs one day. But her chin was gentle, though offset by sunken cheeks. She wore a sleek black dress that matched her long, dark hair. An eye patch covered her left eye, but her right eye was large and the color of sunflowers. Or piss, depending on who you spoke to. Her face was as expressionless as the stoned displays that protected coffins.

"So we're having wine?" she asked. Her voice was deep and plummy.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," Nikola greeted. He poured wine into the other glass, and refilled his while he was at it.

"You're drunk."

"I see you're as perceptive as the last time we met."

"And I see you're as foolish."

"What do you expect when I had to endure that awful social gathering of all the scum of this *elite society*?"

"I agree. The Grand Prince's balls are quite awful."

"Especially when you have a special meeting with a magician friend of ours."

Drusilla took a sip of her wine. Nikola refilled his glass again.

"Ah, yes," she muttered.

Drusilla shared something in common with Nikola: they both hated Lynch. It was enough for him to trust her, though not much. She was still from the same sphere as Lynch, and just as scheming and power-hungry. It disgusted him. He also wondered why Drusilla particularly despised the magician. He assumed it had something to do with her missing eye. He never dared asking for fear of angering her. After all, an intelligent and ambitious woman was more frightening and dangerous than any man could ever be. Even Lynch.

"Do you have what I asked for?" he asked.

"I do."

She placed an envelope onto the table. He moved to take it, but she didn't move her hand.

“First,” she said, “tell me why you need two tickets on the first airship out of Balnibarbi.”

“I’ve screwed our magician friend out of a good deal of money and I’m quite allergic to dying.”

“Good.” She let go of the envelope. Nikola took it and placed it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

“If all goes as planned, I’ll be far, far away, drinking my liver to death and fucking my way to an early grave.”

“It’s a shame to lose such a brilliant mind as yours.”

“Please, flatter me some more. I am quite brilliant.”

Drusilla rolled her eyes and took a sip of her wine. Nikola refilled his cup, taking the last couple drops from the bottle.

“Well, if I can find you, I would hope you could return to Balnibarbi one day. Hopefully soon.”

“What are you saying?”

“If all goes according to how *I* planned, our magician friend won’t be around for too long.”

“Music to my ears.”

“Of course, I can’t make my move until all of the pieces are in the right place. But for now I am happy saving your throat.”

“I am honored.”

“How do you plan on escaping the city without him noticing? He has little birds perched all over this city and every city west of here.”

“I haven’t figured that part out yet. I believe I will need another bottle of wine before the night is over.”

Drusilla took a sip of her wine.

“So what stops you from making your move?” Nikola asked.

“The east of Balnibarbi is in shambles.” Drusilla clicked her tongue and took another careful sip of wine.

“Really? I hadn’t heard.”

“You wouldn’t. It’s nothing much. Yet. But workers are getting increasingly agitated. Some groups of miners and shippers are even beginning to organize.”

“What a shame.” Nikola finished his glass of wine.

“Yes. My hands are full trying to keep everything tame. I have a meeting with a couple of the eastern lords on the matter tomorrow.”

“For my sake, I hope everything is resolved sooner than later.” Nikola stood to leave. He had to meet with Swanwick and finish preparations.

Drusilla stood and met him with a stern look. “Please, keep in touch.”

“Of course, Drusilla. You are too valuable of an asset to let go of simply because my life is in threat of ending.”

“You are an interesting piece on the board as well, Dr. Finbar.”

“Please, quit with the formalities.”

“Nikola.” Drusilla did not smile.

Nikola patted his chest and smiled. Drusilla was another player in the grand game they were all playing. He trusted her less than he thought. But at least she was keeping him alive for another day. Nikola wished he could say the same for Lynch.

“I have my meeting with the gallows tomorrow.” A meeting he would be sure to miss. How rude of him.

Darren V

Darren meticulously reviewed the plan as he slipped on his shoes the morning of Master Geoffrey's lecture. The past two days had been the most structured Darren had ever lived since he'd moved into Astor as a child. He would wake up – finish duties – eat – then set off to his room to practice. He started small, making the witchfire lights flicker, over and over again. Then he took it a step further and tried making things float. By the end of the first night, he had control over making objects floating and controlling how far they rose and when they fell. Of course, his control was limited to smaller objects. He tried it on himself again and only got himself to lift an inch off the floor before abruptly falling. Curses and frustration ensued.

Fire was the last thing he tried. The mix up in the alley with the two stokers frightened him. The fact that he had little control over it frightened him even more. After a series of singed papers and burning the edges of books (Lampheast would have killed him), Darren decided to stop. Going any further scared him and he was confident that producing a small amount of heat would be all he needed. He finished the night by practicing levitation until he was able to make himself float around the room twice over. By the time he slipped into bed, his body was a knot of excitement.

The plan was simple, and Darren knew that everything was going to go smoothly. By the end of the lecture Geoffrey would be made a fool of, and all the other apprentices would think twice before ever mocking him again. Darren knew he couldn't punch any of them, but he *could* scare them. What was more frightening than magic? *I can't wait to tell Bea about this*, Darren thought.

He grabbed his books and charcoal pencil and hurried out the door. He was on time to the lecture that morning. In fact, he was early. He took a seat in the center of the lecture hall, not too far away from the podium but far enough to have a safe distance and not be noticed by Geoffrey. Darren couldn't help but tap his pencil on his desk in impatience. The lecture couldn't begin soon enough.

The other boys doddered into the hall and fell into their seats. Then the guest of honors strolled in, cane in one hand, books and materials under his arm and supported by the other hand. He stepped behind the podium, dropping his materials and then clearing his throat, the universal signal that he was going to begin whether they liked it or not. The hall filled with the sound of shuffling paper, opening books and the muttered tail-end of conversations.

"Now, before I begin, I would like to make a comment about where I believe Mr. Limberry left off during his last lecture," Geoffrey began.

Geoffrey stepped over to the table to grab a rolled up piece of parchment. Darren concentrated on it, just as he had practiced in his room. And just as he practiced, the parchment floated away from Geoffrey's grasp, hovering a few feet off the table. Geoffrey snatched at it, confused, and every time Darren made the parchment move an inch out of the librarian's grasp. A few of the other boys began to chuckle, others whispered in confusion.

Darren let the parchment float higher until it was completely out of Geoffrey's reach. He took his eyes off of it, confident it would remain suspended in the air. He turned his attention to the other objects on the table. First, a book. It floated away from the table, sliding across Geoffrey's back as it rose into the air. Geoffrey spun around quite quickly for a man with a cane. "What the," he exclaimed. He began snatching at the book, only to be overwhelmed when Darren made everything else begin to float and revolve around the librarian like miniature planets to a small, pale and grumpy sun.

Geoffrey's face burned so hot, he looked like a red, mustached demon. "What is the matter with this," he cursed, swiping at objects as they continued to avoid his grasp. The others began to laugh and point, having just as little clue as their teacher what was going. Darren let himself join the laughter.

Next was the part Darren was waiting for. He concentrated as hard as he could on Geoffrey, and as soon as he began to feel the bubbling in the pit of his stomach, he let it come to a boil. Master Geoffrey's feet shot off the floor, sending the man flying up through the air where he stopped inches from the ceiling with an abrupt jerk. *That was close*, Darren thought. He didn't want scrambled librarian painted on the ceiling, after all.

The lecture hall fell silent. Geoffrey was breathing heavy, grasping his heart in surprise. Darren gently lowered the librarian until he was floating a few yards away from the ceiling. He began to rotate Geoffrey in circles. Standing to his feet, he addressed the librarian, who was still cursing and yelling down to the students about what was going on, "If you want to get down, sing a folk song for me."

Everyone began muttering to each other. Darren could hear the fear in their voices as they realized what was going on. *Good*, he smiled.

"What are you talking about boy?" Geoffrey called down to him. He let his cane fall from his grasp. It hit the floor with a clatter, then fell still.

"I said I'll let you down if you sing a folk song," Darren called back. "What about the one about the sailors and the invisible town?"

"Are you doing this, Darren?"

"Obviously."

"Let me down, at once."

"I don't hear singing, sir."

Some of the apprentices began laughing over the tense blanket of nerves that sat amongst the crowd.

“I will not sing your silly song,” Geoffrey shouted.

“If you don’t, I’ll take away that mustache of yours too.”

“What are you talking about? I am demanding that you let me down at once.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to make demands, sir.”

“You are still my pupil.”

Darren ignored Geoffrey. “I wonder what you’d look like without that rodent sitting on your lip.”

“Don’t you dare,” Geoffrey yelled, pointing a finger down at him as if it were a sword.

Darren smiled and snapped his fingers. The ends of Geoffrey’s mustache began to smoke. Geoffrey began desperately huffing away at his upper lips. The other boys were silent once again. “Sing now,” Darren commanded.

“Stop it already, Cadwell,” a couple of the others spoke up, their voices drowning in fear and desperation. Darren felt a twang of guilt and was about to snap his fingers, letting Geoffrey go, but something, a voice deep inside him, egged him on. It told him to keep it up. The voice scratched at his insides, gentle finger tips on an itchy, exciting feeling in his chest. He didn’t snap his fingers.

The flame began to move down Geoffrey’s curled mustache, moving around the bend of the curls. Geoffrey gave a short cry of panic. He began to sing in a cracking and horrible voice. The flame finished the curls and reached Geoffrey’s lip. He stopped singing. “There, I sung your song boy, I sung your song. Please, stop this,” he yelled.

Darren snapped his fingers again. The flames died away and everything, including the librarian, gently returned to the comfort and safety of the floor. Darren felt a release, as if he had just dropped a heavy weight he had been carrying on his shoulders. He could feel sweat lining his back like a veneer of paint. He laughed, but no one was joining him.

He kept laughing. And laughing. And laughing. He didn’t know where it was coming from. The laughs spewed from his mouth like water from a fountain. Something just seemed funny about the scene. Maybe he was giddy with power. Maybe he was just happy of how well everything went according to plan.

Geoffrey crept towards his cane and picked it up. He grasped desperately to the table, still shaking nervously. Darren was still laughing, but he wanted to stop. He couldn’t. He couldn’t stop laughing. Suddenly, Geoffrey’s materials, scattered over the table and floor, were set ablaze. Geoffrey gasped. He batted at the flames, desperately trying to put them out. Darren’s laughing fell to a rolling in his throat, even though a frown was painted on his face. He definitely didn’t want to do that. What was going on?

The other boys began to panic. Some ran to the front of the hall and fell upon the flames, trying to put them out with their jackets and hands. Darren tried to put them out himself. He focused on them with his eyes and thought about snuffing the flames. Nothing happened. Panic overtook the dying laughs in his mouth like fresh waves crashing over old ones near the shore. He stumbled over the rows of desks and closer to the fire. He was afraid, very afraid.

Burn it all, destroy it all, whispered a low, guttural voice over his shoulder, tickling the inside of his ear.

No, Darren thought. He tried to put the flames out again. People were yelling at him, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. *No.*

Burn, burn, burn.

What's going on?

This is what you wanted. Revenge.

No.

You told me. I saw this. This is what you desired.

No.

Revenge.

No.

Burning. Burning desire.

No.

Burn. Everything must burn. Everything must die.

Stop.

Darren's hands flew to his ears, trying to push out the verbal attacks that were jabbing at his mind. Someone grabbed him by the arm and shook him. The room – the fire, Geoffrey, the others, the panic – all sounded as if it were under water, drowned and muddled. The person shook him again.

No. Darren pushed the arm away from him, and at that moment the ocean the room had become was flushed away like someone pulled a drain plug. The noise and panic flooded back to his ears just in time for him to see Wallace fly across the room, crashing into the blackboard at the front of the hall and smashing against the wall behind it.

The voice came back to Darren's shoulder, this time not in a whisper, but screaming. Darren could feel a tension in his shoulders, hands grabbing him and pushing him. *Now. Now's the time. Burn it all. Burn them all. Kill them all.*

What? Darren thought. He felt fear grip him by the neck and tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

The voice split into three. Then five. Then seven. Soon, Darren was being barraged by the screaming and hissing of a crowd of bullies. Darren closed his eyes and screamed, trying to make them stop. Two new hands grabbed Darren by the arms, but this time the touch was familiar. He opened his eyes and found Geoffrey staring at him. The old man's voice leaked past the screaming voices like whispers through a keyhole.

"Darren, what's wrong with you... Darren... My god, your eyes..."

He hates you, one of the voices screamed.

You are worthless.

He hates you.

Everyone hates you.

You are nobody.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him. The voices began to chant in unison.

Darren's vision began to flash. He pushed Geoffrey away from him, shaking his head furiously. Stumbling out of the lecture hall, he ran as fast as he could, tripping down the stairs and barreling through the front doors of the library. He fell down the front stairs and onto the street in front of Astor. The voices were still chanting: *Kill, kill, kill. Burn.*

Darren's vision flashed more and more, until it was practically black. He screamed again, clawing at the ground as the voices drove nails into his head. *Stop, stop, stop*, he thought futilely. The last thing he remembered was Geoffrey falling to the ground beside him and wrapping his arms around him, bringing him in close. Then, the flashing stopped and everything went black. A blackness that seemed eternal. The voices did not stop.

Darren VI

He never intended to hurt anybody. He just wanted to mess around, scare them. What had he gotten himself into?

The darkness receded and Darren opened his eyes to the familiar glow of witchfire. He turned his head to see Wallace lying in the bed next to him, asleep with his chest moving in steady rhythm. Wallace wasn't the first person he wanted to see, but he found it comforting that he seemed to be okay.

Darren was afraid of what he had done. He turned his head away from Wallace and stared at the peeling, off-white walls of the infirmary. What had happened in the lecture hall? The last thing he could remember was Wallace crashing against the wall, and Geoffrey staring at him. What was Geoffrey saying? Darren closed his eyes and could see the librarian's lips moving, but no words came to his mind.

"How are you feeling?"

Darren opened his eyes. It was Master Geoffrey. The old man stood at the side of his bed, looking down at him with sad, dark eyes.

"My head still hurts a bit, and I'm sore, but otherwise better," Darren admitted, sitting up in his bed.

"Good."

"How is Wallace?"

"He's in-and-out, but should be fine save for a few broken bones and bruises."

"I am so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt anyone." He felt as though he were going to cry, but he pushed back the tears.

"It's alright. Do you think you'll be able to stand and walk?"

"I believe so. Why?"

"I'm attempting to think of a way to explain this to you." Master Geoffrey took a seat at the foot of Darren's bed.

"What is it?" Something in Geoffrey's voice was grave and made Darren feel uneasy, and even more frightened.

"You're going to have to get dressed," Master Geoffrey said sternly. "The first train to Malvern leaves within the hour."

“Are we going to see the witch?”

“Yes, you’re ill and I believe Morgana is the only one who can help you now.”

Master Geoffrey stood and Darren kicked his legs over the edge of the bed, sitting up and feeling the bones in his body crack. “How long was I asleep?”

“An entire day. How soon do you think you can be ready?”

He stared back into Geoffrey’s eyes with equal intensity, “I could be ready to leave in five minutes.”

“I’ll wait for you outside the entrance,” Master Geoffrey nodded. He cleared his throat as if he was going to say something else, but looking at Darren decided against it. With creaking knees, he stood to his feet and shuffled out of the room.

Darren let the following silence settle for a second. The scene from two days ago, the star in the box, the dreams, all weighed heavily on his mind. He felt out of control, and that was what made him truly scared.

He stumbled over to the small sink in the corner of the room and splashed cool water onto his face. Looking up into the mirror, he was startled to find that it wasn’t his eyes that were staring back at him, but two small, black voids. What had truly been in that box, and why was Master Geoffrey so worried?

§§

Darren was silent the entire ride to Malvern. Every street they passed on their way to the deserted neighborhood only fed his trepidation. The rail passed the wide street that led up to Finchley, and the tops of the beautiful townhouses shone in the morning sunlight. Darren thought about Beatrice, and what she would think of his predicament. She would’ve probably socked him on the head and told him how stupid he was. But he wasn’t stupid. His gut told him that, regardless of what waited for him at Malvern. He was confident he had made the right decision.

And yet he could still hear Bea’s voice telling him that he didn’t. She was like that. She was the kind of person who, once you’ve met her, was always in your head. Darren looked away from the horizon. He couldn’t bear to look at Finchley any longer.

It wasn’t long before the rail came to a stop and the two stepped off the train at the base of the hill, the ever-present black spires of the old cathedral staring down at them, watching.

Master Geoffrey led him up the cement steps of the hill, charging forward as if he had forgotten about his limp entirely. Darren followed closely behind, his stomach rocking like a ship at sea. As they climbed the hill, Darren looked to the cathedral and saw Cavendish standing on the front steps of the building. He stood tall, with his hands folded behind his back, gazing down at Darren with a foreboding look. Darren didn’t like the man. He was like a raven or a black cat, a bad omen. By the time Geoffrey halted at the shop, Cavendish had vanished once again.

Up the steps of the porch and to the door they marched. Darren couldn't hear the ring of the bell because Geoffrey had thrown the door open, causing it to slam against the wall. A few bowls and plates on a nearby shelf fell and broke with a crash.

"Morgana," Geoffrey barked, eyes burning through the darkness and haze of the shop.

"I thought I would be seeing you, and you brought my little friend. Come, join me!" The witch's voice ushered them forward. The tapping of Master Geoffrey's cane on the floor seemed louder than usual as they proceeded down the aisle to the counter in the back where the witch sat, casually smoking from the same pipe as before.

"We have something to discuss," said Geoffrey, seizing Darren by the collar of his shirt and dragging him forward. Darren glanced at Morgana, meeting her eyes only for a second.

"I see, it seems we do," she said, biting down on the stem of her pipe. "Nice to see you again, darling." She turned her attention to Darren, breathing out a stream of smoke that danced towards him, wrapping around his torso before breaking.

"I believe we both know what was in that box," Geoffrey continued. Darren wasn't surprised that he had discovered the box.

"Yes, I was quite aware Geoffrey," Morgana said, the playfulness in her voice was nowhere to be found.

"I don't believe I am though," Darren spoke up. "What was in that box?"

"A demon's heart," Morgana said flatly, taking another puff of her pipe.

"A what?" He was unsure if he had heard her correctly.

"The heart of a demon," she repeated. "Quite a powerful spirit too, I believe."

"The boy damn consumed it," Master Geoffrey said, his face not breaking away from the witch.

"Well, what else are you going to do with a demon's heart, babe?" Morgana laughed.

"I was hearing voices," Darren said, remembering the incident more vividly. His voice was trembling a bit. "My magic got out of control. How do I fix this?"

Morgana paused for a second, mouth on the bit of her pipe. She placed it onto the counter and walked around to Darren. "Let me see," she said, examining him. To her, he was only another item in the shop, waiting to be appraised.

"You said you were hearing voices?" Geoffrey asked.

"Yes, before I collapsed." He bit his tongue, fearing it would start happening again.

"That is quite common with the initial stages of possession," Morgana commented, still eyeing Darren from head to foot.

“Possession?” Darren swallowed a lead brick and could feel it landing in the pit of his stomach.

“Yes, at first the demon has little control. But your body will bind to it soon after.” Morgana brushed a bit of dust off Darren’s shoulder.

“Is there any way to exorcise the evil spirit?” Master Geoffrey asked.

“I’m afraid the demon has already taken hold of your heart, hun,” Morgana cooed, pressing a finger into Darren’s chest. She stepped back over to the counter and picked up her pipe.

“What does that mean?” Darren asked, following her to the desk.

“The demon will slowly devour your heart,” she said calmly, “and you will die.”

The final word was a gunshot right into Darren’s chest. *Die?* He didn’t know what to say.

The witch continued: “You chose your fate when you opened that box. However, though the die is cast, and your fate is set, you may choose to rise and meet it if you so wish.”

“That is why I came here, Morgana,” Geoffrey spoke up, the desperation evident in his voice, stabbing Darren with guilt. “I’ve been doing my research for years now, and I think it might be his only chance.”

“Think so, darling?”

“Of course, there is no guarantee, but the evidence shows there *is* a chance, however small it may be.”

Darren had been silently listening. His body felt numb and everything seemed unreal. Less than a week ago, he’d been fighting in Horseshoe Alley. Now, he was contemplating his own death. He forced himself to speak up, “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been researching the old civilization of Balnibarbi, and my studies have been focused on one element in particular: the Temple of Solomon,” Master Geoffrey replied, smoothing out his newly cropped mustache.

Darren was confused. Solomon seemed to creep back into his life quicker than he would have ever imagined.

“Solomon was the First Wizard of Balnibarbi,” the old man explained, echoing the words of Lampheast.

“A very powerful magician with an army of spirits under his control,” Morgana added in wonder, wisps of smoke escaping her mouth.

“The Temple lies far to the west, in the Wastes,” Master Geoffrey said.

“What are the Wastes?” Darren asked. Geography was never his strongest subject.

“A wasteland on the edge of the Balnibarbi territories,” Geoffrey said, “and it has been abandoned by humans for ages.”

“Far too dangerous, babe,” supplied Morgana.

“I still don’t understand,” Darren said. There was too much swimming around in his head to properly focus. He couldn’t control the shaking of his hands.

“I have been researching what artifacts lie within the Temple after the fall of the last empire.” Master Geoffrey stepped forward and clapped Darren on the shoulder. “I believe there may be something in there that can help you.”

“The Ring of Solomon,” Morgana laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Darren asked, his cheeks flushing in anger. He didn’t believe his predicament was any funny, and blamed it all on the witch.

“The ring is said to be capable of bending the will of any demon. It *could* save you,” Geoffrey explained.

“But that’s if I even make it to the Temple.” Darren didn’t like his chances.

“Or if the ring is even there,” smiled Morgana.

“You may choose to go on the journey, and retrieve the ring.” Master Geoffrey’s hand slipped away from Darren’s shoulder.

Darren wanted to scream. He wanted to break something, or just punch someone. Why was he the one in this place? Why did he have to make the decision? Why was *his* life the one in question? He hated it. He wanted to live. “How long before it kills me?”

“Depends,” Morgana said. “I would give you a couple of weeks before you’re dead. Half as long before you’re no longer yourself.”

Darren held back sobs. He was going to die. He was going to fucking die. He dug his face into the palms of his hands and held back the wave of tears as his shoulders heaved up and down. He felt Geoffrey’s hand on his back. “What are you going to do?” Geoffrey asked.

Darren wiped away at his eyes and sniffed. “Doesn’t seem like I’ve got a choice then, does it?” Darren turned his head to the witch, and then to Master Geoffrey, who stood silent, staring blankly at the handle of his cane.

“Hold on a second, babe,” Morgana piped in. She leaned over the desk.

“What is it, witch?” Darren snapped, eyes burning.

“Here,” Morgana said. She cupped her hands and began whispering strings of words Darren didn’t understand into her palms. She kept her cupped hands closed when she looked up at Darren, smiling. “Ready?” she asked.

Darren didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded.

Morgana brought her hands forward, then she open her cupped hands and blew into her hands. Small lights, like fireflies scattered from her hands and covered Darren. Darren jumped backwards as the little lights danced around him. They glowed yellow and green, and filled his nose with the smell of honey. The little fireflies settled on Darren, on his face, in his hair and on his clothing. They shone for another second before disappearing.

“What just happened?” Darren asked.

“It’s an enchantment,” Morgana replied, picking her pipe up again.

“What does it do?” he sniffed.

“It will slow the progress of the possession. But the effects of this enchantment will weaken over time. Your magic will seep through it, strengthening the demon inside your heart. Once the enchantment shatters, the progress of your possession will seem very sudden. Nevertheless babe, it will give you more time.”

Darren’s tears stopped and he glared at the witch. He thought of a string of curses. It was still all her fault. The whole bloody thing.

“Are you really sure you’re willing to do this?” Geoffrey asked again.

“Like I said, doesn’t seem like I have a choice.”

“You always have a choice,” Morgana asserted. “Hell, babe, we’re all damned to an existence of making choices. You’ll never be free from action.”

“I don’t know if I can do it,” Darren said. He felt tired, defeated, hopeless.

“I’ll help you prepare for the journey,” Master Geoffrey responded. “You leave tonight.”

Morgana glanced at Darren with a wide, devilish smile. Darren nodded at Geoffrey. Magic was not to be trusted, but magic might be his only way out alive.

Darren VII

Master Geoffrey told Darren that the train left at sunset. They had spent the entire half of the day packing and preparing for his departure from St. Charlesburg. Darren sat on his bed for what he feared might be the last time.

The plan was simple-sounding enough: the train would bring him to Lagado, the capital, and from there he would have to find passage further west to the Wastes. Geoffrey gave him a map that marked the supposed location of the Temple of Solomon, but the old man made it clear that his studies could be inaccurate. There was no guarantee of what waited for him at the Temple of Solomon, or if the ring was even there.

Darren's face dropped into the palms of his hands. *What am I trying to do?* He thought. Did he really think he could travel so far away, like some hero from the old fairy tales? He laughed, falling back onto his bed and staring up at the bare ceiling. It was funny how laughing seemed to be the only thing people could do during the darkest times in their lives. *Beatrice was always right*, he thought. He *was* as stupid as she always said, and now he was stupid enough to willingly walk a death march. It was a journey with no guarantee of a happy ending, and he had to accept that.

His mind wandered back to Beatrice. She didn't know he was leaving. He hadn't even talked with her like he had promised the last time they saw each other. He had to say goodbye to her before he went. Darren sat up, it wasn't even a question. Beatrice was his best friend. He shot up to his feet, feeling a tad lightheaded for a moment before walking across his room and grabbing the pack that he and Geoffrey prepared for the journey.

It was a new oilskin pack; the material was still taut and dependable. The giant pack was filled with everything he needed. A spare pair of clothes, Geoffrey said he needed only one. Then there was a brown hooded cloak, for the cold nights. Some food and basic medical supplies were also in the bag, along with the map, a coin purse, and a small book. Darren thought the item was quite useless, but told it was always nice to have a good piece of travel literature. Darren tied the pack closed.

Darren swung the pack over his shoulder and walked out of the room, pausing for a moment in the doorway to give the small dorm a final glance. Despite how many nights he dreamed of leaving the place, it was bittersweet to finally be doing it. He was surprised by the nostalgia that came with the room and how much he would actually miss it.

Darren let the door slowly creak shut.

The sun was low in the sky by the time Darren walked to Finchley. He ran down the row of houses lined with dogwood trees, whose leaves glowed in the sun a beautiful array of pinks and oranges. Darren always loved the look of the trees near the beginning of autumn.

He was almost out of breath by the time he reached Beatrice's house. Chances were she was home. It was a Saturday, which meant her private music and dance tutors would be strolling in and out throughout the day for her lessons. Only the best for the daughter of the owner of the largest tea company in Balnibarbi. Darren walked through the black-iron gate and down the path that cut through the lawn to the front door.

He knocked on the door. It was promptly opened to a squat, sniffing man in a house-servant's suit. "May I help you?" he asked.

"I'm here to inquire if I might speak to Miss Wakefield?" Darren responded in a polite, slightly higher voice. He had become used to dealing with people from Finchley, and didn't want the door slammed in his face.

"May I ask who is inquiring?"

"You may tell her it is Darren Cadwell, from Astor."

"I will inform her of your presence. Would you like to take a seat in the parlor?"

"I'd rather not. I'll wait here if that's fine, thank you." Darren gave a smile and a nod.

The man bowed his head politely and disappeared into the house. Darren spun on his heel, exhaling nervously. He was so caught up in getting to Finchley that he had not prepared what he was going to say to Beatrice. Something told him a simple "good bye" wasn't enough. Perhaps it didn't matter. He just wanted to see her before he left.

"Darren?" Beatrice stood at the door.

Darren spun back around and smiled, caught off guard when Beatrice swung her arms around him and embraced him in a short hug. His shoulders relaxed as she held the embrace a second longer before letting go of him. "I was surprised to hear that it was you at the door," Beatrice returned his smile, "I visited you in Astor, yesterday in the infirmary."

"You did?" Darren could feel his cheeks heating up. He bit his bottom lip. "I'm sorry. I meant to talk to you like I said."

"It doesn't matter, I'm just happy that you're okay. What happened? It has to do with that magic doesn't it?"

"How did you know?" Darren blinked.

"The other boys are talking. They're calling you a demon and a monster, among other things."

Darren hadn't known the other boys were saying things like that. He frowned and dropped his head. Beatrice tapped him on the shoulder, "It's okay. Geoffrey explained to

me what happened. Would you like to come in? My father has gone to Lagado for the Equinox Ball tonight.”

“Actually, would you like to take a walk?” He raised his head and warmly extended a hand. She eyed it warily, and then glanced at the backpack. The smile on her face disappeared.

“As long as you promise we won’t float away,” she said, stepping down from the porch, past Darren’s hand. Darren turned and followed her.

“Where would you like to go?” he asked.

“Why don’t we just see where our feet take us?”

“Sounds delightful.”

The two walked side-by-side, making their way down the row of beautiful houses and around the block, towards Finchley’s private park. Other than the few houses that had lawns, all of the green space in St. Charlesburg was in the park. Darren remembered speaking to a few of the factory boys about how they couldn’t imagine what grass even looked like. Along with a crystalline blue pond and walking paths, there were also shady oak trees and benches to sit and relax. It was a wonderful place to spend a free day.

“So, why the surprise visit this time?” Beatrice asked, playfully jabbing an elbow into his side.

“I wish I had more time to tell you this, Bea, but I’m leaving.” He stopped walking, and so did she.

Beatrice’s face contorted for a second, her cheeks blushed red, and then returned to her calm, controlled expression. “Why? Is it because of what you did to Wallace?” she asked, looking him directly in the eyes.

“I can’t say, Geoffrey is sending me off,” he lied. It felt as if needles were prickling his heart. He had a feeling it was obvious that it dealt with the magic, but he didn’t want to explain it all.

“Where are you going? How long will you be gone?” Beatrice asked, her brow furrowing, the fluster returning to her cheeks. “Will I see you again?”

“I’m heading west, as far west as I can go,” Darren said, “and I don’t know how long I will be gone.”

Beatrice’s eyes swelled with tears, her red face made her hair seem more blond than strawberry, and her blue eyes were fierce. Darren knew the look. He braced himself for whatever punch, slap, or other form of physical whiplash she was about to lay out.

Beatrice pounced forward, grabbing him around the chest, hugging him. Her head pressed tightly near his neck, he could smell the familiar scent of ginger and lemongrass.

He smiled, partially in surprise, and returned the hug, wrapping her in his arms and holding her closely, not wanting to let go.

“I don’t want you to leave, you stupid idiot,” she sniffed. She tucked her head into his chest and he could feel the first tear land gently on his collar bone.

“I’m sorry.” He didn’t know what else to say.

Beatrice looked up at him, wiping away her tears with a prideful flare. “Promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Promise me that wherever you are going, no matter how far or how long, that you’ll never forget about me.”

“I would never forget about you,” Darren said, pulling her back in for another hug. At that moment, he felt the weight of the world bearing down on him. The thought of forgetting Beatrice seemed impossible. “How can I? I owe a couple of my scars to you,” he laughed.

Beatrice laughed too, slipping out of his hug and pushing him with the palm of her hand. “And you will come back?”

“I don’t know.” It was the truth.

“Darren.”

“Yes?”

She looked away for a second, at the pond perhaps, as if she was looking for the exact words she wanted to say. She glanced back to him, only for a moment, “Never mind.” Darren’s heart ached, wishing she would say something, whatever it was.

“I’ll miss you,” he said.

“I want to go home. Walk me back.”

Darren nodded.

The two walked back together in silence. Darren didn’t mind. He didn’t know what to say, and it allowed him not to worry about words and just enjoy being with her. A couple of times it seemed as if Beatrice was going to turn to him and say something, but she didn’t.

They reached the front gate of her house when the sun was on the cusp of the horizon. It was time for him to leave. He stood there, waiting for her to say something, anything.

“I wish I could come with you,” she said.

“No you don’t, trust me.”

“But I do. You *finally* get to leave this place.”

“I didn’t know it would be so painful though.”

“There’s a window in our house, that faces the city,” Beatrice said, she pointed towards the coast, “and I can see the train coming in and leaving the city. Every day I sit there between my lessons, wishing, wondering what it would be like to be on that train.”

“If I can somehow leave the city, so can you. You’re amazing, Bea.”

“I’m a woman,” she scoffed.

“You’re bright, and can throw a hell of a punch,” Darren laughed.

“I’m stuck here, Darren,” she huffed, “from now, until I’m married, and until I’m no longer young, or beautiful.”

“You’ll be out of here one day, you’re better than the whole lot.”

“Thanks.” Beatrice smiled. The natural light of the dying sun made her features look immaculate.

“Good-bye, Beatrice.”

“Good-bye.”

Darren watched as she walked past her lawn and into her house. He wanted to call to her, to say that something, that anything, but the words were caught in his throat. Before he knew it, it was too late. He longingly watched the white door close behind her. Darren thought about the poem they had recited in the garden behind her house, about freedom and change. He turned and began walking back towards the city, scratching the back of his head.

He supposed it was never meant to be.

§§

The Beam Railway Station was bustling with people trying to get to their platforms and board their trains. Darren pushed his way through the sea of people. Geoffrey told him that he would meet Darren at the station to see him off. But Darren didn’t remember which platform his train was leaving from. He was afraid he was going to miss his departure time.

A slender hand broke through the crowd of people and snatched Darren’s collar, yanking him to the side. Darren nearly choked on his shirt with the force of the pull, but was relieved to see the old head librarian standing in front of him.

“I’m glad I found you, you looked quite lost,” Geoffrey said with a tight smile that just didn’t look with same without the neat curls of his mustache.

“Not at all, I was just admiring,” Darren looked around, “the walls. Interesting building, this is.”

“If you were as good as a liar as you were fighter, you’d be on the Council of Lords,” Geoffrey laughed, though it sounded more like a dry cough. There was a twinkle of sadness in Geoffrey’s eyes.

“When you last caught me, I lost actually,” Darren responded with a wide, toothy smile. He found it comforting to have the head librarian there. When he thought about it, Darren supposed Geoffrey was the closest thing to family that he had. He saw no one better to see him off.

Steam billowed from a nearby train as it rolled out of the station, filling the space with the high-pitched squeal of its whistle. Darren turned his head to see it leave, admiring the machine snake as its wheels chugged at ever-increasing speed. In only a few minutes, he would be on a train leaving the city too. Beatrice’s words came to his mind. It wasn’t how he imagined it would be, but he *was* finally leaving the city, like she had said.

“Here,” Geoffrey said, withdrawing a ticket from his pocket and handing it to Darren. “You will be boarding that train, right there.” He pointed to a cherry red train, with polished metal trim. It reminded Darren of the miniature toy trains the boys in Finchley used to play with when he was a child.

Darren gave a weak smile and mumbled a quick thank you. “I think this is the last I need,” he said.

“Not just yet, I have a couple more things for you.”

Darren raised a brow.

Master Geoffrey dug back into his pocket, drawing out a thin silver chain, eventually pulling at the end, looped around a golden key. The key was no larger than the palm of his hand. It was a lever lock-styled piece with a triple bit at the end. Its handle was a little thicker, with a hole just big enough for the chain to sneak through. Geoffrey handed it over and Darren took the key as if it were a sacred item, letting the chain fall into his cupped palms.

“That was your mother’s. It was the last item she left at Astor. I was going to give it to you after you had finished your apprenticeship.”

“What is the key to?”

“Your mother never said,” Geoffrey’s eyes glistened in reminiscence, “but if you travel with your mother’s spirit in tow, there will be few doors you won’t be able to open.”

Darren felt choked up. His mother seemed to have become nothing more than a memory, a distant thought. He held the chain and let the key dangle before his eyes. Instantly, he felt as if his mother was there with him, standing at his side like the day they arrived to Astor and were welcomed with open arms. He smiled and put the chain around his head, letting the key fall lightly onto his chest.

“Now Darren, after this train brings you to Lagado, you are on your own, but I have a piece of advice for you.” Geoffrey smoothed out the remaining hair on his upper lip.

“Tannhauser is the farthest town west. It should be your final stop before you reach the Wastes. There you must seek out a correspondent of mine.”

Not another correspondent, Darren thought. Images of Morgana came to mind. He didn't have much luck with Geoffrey's research associates.

“The man's name is Rosenheim. Rosenheim, don't forget.”

The train whistled the last call for passengers to board.

“Thank you, for everything,” Darren bellowed over the roar of the crowd and rumbling of the trains. After everything Geoffrey was doing to help him, he felt terrible for what he had done to the old man. And all out of spite and revenge.

“I'm so sorry,” Geoffrey sniffed, and Darren thought that it was *he* who should have been saying sorry. “I failed your mother, and I failed you.”

Geoffrey looked the most human he ever had to Darren. Darren wrapped an arm around the head librarian and embraced him for a moment. “It's okay, it was meant to happen,” he said into Geoffrey's ear.

He let go and the librarian nodded, wiping away a couple of tears from the corner of his eyes. The hand holding his cane was trembling. Darren kept smiling, gave a wave, and turned to leave. It seemed as if the crowd had separated, making a clear line to the door of the train and the conductor, who took the tickets of the lingering passengers.

Darren boarded the train, taking a seat by a window. As the train pulled out of the station, and rolled out of the city, Darren looked back. He had never seen St. Charlesburg from outside its borders, and was surprised to find out he couldn't see it at all. A thick, brown haze loomed over the top of the city, and only the black point of the cathedral in Malvern poked through the dirty fog. Darren watched the city as it grew smaller, smaller, and smaller, until it was gone. He was finally ready to meet his fate.