

“You can't be serious!” Alina's voice cut through the stagnant air of the chamber, rebounding off the walls. The faces of the council looked annoyed rather than startled. These outbursts had become more and more frequent of late. “This is a free city! You can't just force people to give up family heirlooms!”

“The items will be returned once we determine if they are of any strategic, or scientific, value” Replied a dim eyed councilwoman.

“And how long will that take? Months? Years? This is all but outright seizure of property!” Alina's voice tone was beginning to shift from incredulity to anger.

“May we remind the captain of the guard that what actions we take are not the concern of you, or your soldiers. Your concern is keeping an eye on doors and ensuring the safety of the people.”

“And what of their rights?” Alina's voice nearly spilled into a snarl.

“The people place their faith in us to do what we feel is best for them. If that means a small reduction in freedom they know we do so with their well being in mind. If you can't accept that we can just as easily assign this duty to the army.” The milky eyed man nodded in the direction of a middle aged man. His face was scarred diagonally across an eyebrow, and his hair was graying here and there. Alina regarded him coldly, turned without a salute, and stormed out of the room. A messenger stumbled slightly as she passed.

“She is becoming more unruly every day...” mused a dark haired councilman.

“Be that as it may,” Replied the dim eyed woman. “The people love her. Even if her position is reduced to something ceremonial we need her.”

“Madam?” Chimed in the messenger. “We have a report of airships heading this way.”

“Oh... excellent...” She replied silkily. “General?”

The middle aged man motioned to no one in particular. Two soldiers took up the positions Alina and Regalius vacated moments before, while four other followed him out of the chamber.

“You can't keep doing things like that...” Regalius muttered.

“Like what?” Replied Alina. “Voicing valid concerns? The council has been expanding its powers so slowly that no one is taking notice.”

“I know, but...” Regalius started, but was cut across by Alina.

“Mandatory relinquishment of technological artifacts?!” She huffed. “What do they expect to find? It's paranoid.”

“That's not what I mean, Alina.” Snapped Regalius. “You can't just blurt out your opinions all the time. The wheels of the council turn in darkness. If you want to change anything you have to walk in shadow as well.”

"I'm not suited to that sort of thing..." She replied. "Give me a fair fight where I can look my opponent in the eyes."

"While you're looking one enemy in the eye another is going to knife you in the back!" Declared Regalius. Before Alina could respond Regalius pulled her into a darkened corridor. Moments later the middle aged general strode by, entourage in tow. After they passed Regalius continued. "And that's the man who'll be holding the knife..."

The shopping district was even louder than usual. Word of the approaching airships had reached more than just the council. Shopkeepers were hurrying to place their best, most expensive, wares in prominent positions. Catching the eye of one of the sky riders almost always meant a huge financial windfall. They had the deepest pockets and spent gold as if it were water. There was also a slim chance of being paid in repaired gadgetry. Because of this the entire district bent over backwards for them. A huge space in the square was cleared of stalls. Enough space for 3 ships to land and be restocked.

The ships themselves did not appear to be a set. They had the look of expertly repaired scavenge. Of course no one knew how, or where, they had been recovered, but chances were high that they were exactly that. Almost all technology was scavenged and what wasn't was handed down for generations. Working tech was so rare it was almost incalculably valuable. All the wealth in the city would scarcely be enough to afford one of the flying ships. So they were kind of a big deal.

The lead ship was deep red and looked as though it had been built for speed. Apart from having propellers where masts might have been it looked like any ship you might see on the sea. Several smaller engines lined the hull and two huge propellers drove the craft forward. However, whatever kept them aloft was a mystery. The engines were always cut long before the ships set down, and they landed as softly as a leaf might find its way to the ground.

A crowd gathered as each of the ships came to rest. Children strained at their parent's arms for want of a closer look. As much as everyone was in awe of them they also had a healthy fear of these people. They had always set foot on land armed as if to make war and this time was no exception. A rope pulley lowered a small platform from the red ship. There were only 4 people upon it. One a short man with dark hair pulled into a long ponytail. Another very tall man with pale skin, sunken eyes, and shiny black hair. The third a beautiful, dark haired woman, in glasses, and the fourth a man whose features were all but covered by a wide brimmed hat and tall collared cloak. The assembled stood murmuring as they began walking towards a row of shops.

"Why are these people so creepy?" The short man asked the woman. "You'd think they'd be used to seeing us by now."

"I don't think people who live this far in the city get out much, brother." She replied. "Or maybe Crow scares them. He has that walking corpse look to him after all."

The tall man gave the woman a sideways glance. She grinned in reply.

"I guess..." Continued the short man. "But it's still creepy..." With that he waved at a group of children straining to get a look at his party, and motioned towards his ship. They squealed with delight, running to get a better look at the vessel. As per usual this broke the weird tension and everyone went back to their usual business. Although many of them made a point to pass between the ships when it

would have been faster to go around.

A group of merchants approached the band of travelers. Their leader, a fat man who appeared to be a butcher, addressed the little man.

"Captain, assuming our arrangement has no need of amendment, we have your order ready to load." The captain pressed a bag of coins into the fat man's palm.

"You'll get another pouch of those if you can have the ships loaded before we return." He said, ambling along his way.

The fat man nearly choked when he opened the little pouch, which was stuffed to the drawstring with very old looking gold coins.

"Of- of course, Captain Brahms!" He stammered. "Before your return!"

Alina was still obviously vexed when she strode violently into the barracks. Niona, heard her coming a long way off. Regalius sauntered dejectedly in after her and slumped into a chair near Niona.

"Did you have a fun time at the council meeting?" She grinned. Regalius cocked his head slowly towards her. "I see." she replied.

"Things are deteriorating quickly..." He drawled after a long moment. "The council has a short memory and she harbors no love for courtly machinations."

Alina thundered through the room and out again. Her aura seemed to shake the stone floor as she passed.

"Ill tidings..." Niona mused. "Things are coming to a head."

"Border towns are reporting sightings of skeletal hordes." Regalius tented his fingers over his lips. "An attack is coming and anticipation is driving our leaders mad..."

Across the building Alina had fumed her way to the kitchen. She threw open cupboards and cabinets, piling a plate with all manner of random foods. Herrin casually watched her stomping around, while chewing bucolically on a piece of jerky. When she reached the limit of her ability to balance her plate she marched over to his table and sat down forcefully. A few items rolled away randomly. Herrin halted a few things from falling over the edge. Alina said not a word, but rather tore into her trove viciously. She managed, somehow, to remain ladylike in spite of eating at a speed that bordered on suicidal. After several long moments her pace slowed, she took a deep breath, and looked up at her friend.

"Want to talk about it?" He asked. She nodded. "Go on then."

"I... Don't know what to do anymore." She started slowly. "After I lost... them..."

"What happened to Bress and the others wasn't your fault." Herrin replied. "No one could have known what was in that temple."

"I should've sent more people... I should've gone looking for them... for YOU sooner." Alina's voice was beginning to crack. "I don't trust myself anymore." Herrin noticed her worrying a bright blue stone in her hand.

"The others trust you." He said, soothingly. "And perhaps more importantly, I trust you. We were arrogant in those halls; kept pushing on in spite of what we were seeing. It cost them their lives and we three friends, but we chose that fate, not you."

Alina picked at her plate. "Maybe so... but still..."

Before Herrin could muster another response there was a rustling at the window. A young face framed by a willowy cascade of leaves peered into the room.

"Commander," Dewbeam said in a rich melodic voice. "something strange is happening. I can feel many feet marching."

Alina's eyes hardened. "Sound the call."

Captain Brahms stood, haggling casually with a shopkeeper, while his entourage milled about restlessly.

"Brother," His sister called out, disrupting his machinations. "I'm going across the street, this bores me."

William grimaced. "Fine, but take Crow with you. I don't want things getting out of hand this time."

"Don't put this on me." Complained the tall, sallow, man. "I can't control her any better than you can."

The captain shot him a glance.

"Sir." Crow added.

"Just minimize the damage then..." He replied, trailing off.

The dark haired, bespectacled, woman was already bounding out the door.

"She's getting away..." observed the man in the wide hat.

"Stick it up your bonnet." Replied Crow, as he sauntered after his charge.

The captain's sister was dressed for attention, and she was getting her fill as she bounced across the cobbled lanes. Crow sulked along behind her, mindful never to let her get out of his sight.

"Gods, Cricket, what is your hurry?" He complained. "Everything's a run with you today."

"We haven't been aground for more than a handful of hours in weeks." She twirled. "I want to enjoy the feeling of it!"

Crow took in his surroundings.

“I prefer the air.” He mused. “No one can sneak up on you there... All these buildings...”

Cricket turned to observe him. “And who do you expect will be sneaking up on us here?”

“That's the point isn't it? If I knew who was sneaking I would need to worry about it.” He replied.
“That's why it's called sneaking.”

“Always the grim dark with you.” Snorted Cricket.

“t's'kept me alive this long...” He muttered.

“But what sort of life has it been?” She said, dramatically, while lashing herself to his arm. “Do you enjoy nothing?”

Crow's pallid face filled in pink as Cricket's substantial breasts squeezed around his arm. She gazed up at him in a sarcastic pout. His jaw moved soundlessly for a few moments. Sensing her victory Cricket pulled Crow toward a row of colorful shops.

Back near the ships another small group had ventured out as well. Whatever goals they had appeared academic to onlookers, as they had visited a few book shops in a fairly short time. Their leader was a vast woman in sagely robes that only served to accentuate her full figure. Her autumn colored hair obscured much of her face while she perused a varied selection of tomes. Her nearest companion smiled blithely at passersby and seemed totally disinterested in anything to do with books. A constant stream of conversation poured from her mouth which the sage reacted to only occasionally. In spite of this she seemed filled with a pointless joy which seemed to radiate away from her.

Periodically a tall blond woman would present the plump sage with a few books for consideration then return to her search. She was accompanied by a short woman with harsh eyes who seemed to radiate dislike for everything said eyes fell upon. Her job appeared to be pushing the cart of books they were amassing, which she did much less than zealously.

“The only thing that's going to weigh down the ship more than you is these damned books.” The harsh eyed woman said caustically.

The sage barely noticed the insult.

“I'm well aware of the tolerances for each vessel, Trizia.” She explained nonchalantly. “These will have little effect on lift or drag.”

Trizia scowled, but said no more.

“I wonder how many books the ship could hold.” The smiling woman exclaimed. “Do you think they could hold all these shops?”

“That would be a bit much I expect.” The sage replied offhandedly.

“That's it!” Trizia blurted. “I can't stand any more of Melonia's nonsense. Exia, you're on your own... With these two I mean. I'm going to get a drink.”

“Technically,” said Exia, scarcely looking up from her book. “You will be the one on your own...”

Trizia began to storm away, pushing the tall woman toward her cart as she went. “Here, Jetta, mind the cart!”

Jetta steadied herself as she watched Trizia stride away. “What, just happened?”

Exia didn't look up, but after a moment Melonia replied. “I think Trizia was thirsty?”

“Do you have any small jobs?” Julius asked casually. “Finding a lost pet perhaps? Something where I'm not placed in mortal peril from start to finish?”

The guildmaster looked at him coldly. He waved his hands over a fan of papers. “These are the jobs I'm prepared to offer you.”

“It just... It just seems like you're trying to get me killed is all.” Julius replied. “You keep sending me on these missions of doom...”

“And you keep coming back alive.” The wizened man replied sternly. The words hung there a moment. “I've been master of this guild since before your father was a randy thought. I can take the measure of a man by how he wears his boots. These jobs are suited to you. In spite of your chicken heart- no... No, because of it. You will come back alive.”

“Chicken heart...”

“You're afraid. Nearly all the time.” The old man continued. “I don't know why, but you stink of fear every time we meet. You don't take chances, don't take risks... That makes you useful, especially as a thief. You don't get caught and no one remembers you when things are over.”

“I'm sure some people-”

“Do you know who the greatest thief in the world is?” The master asked, leaning in closer.

“Tenfingers?” Julius offered.

“No, you fool! Nobody does!” He replied, pointing a finger at Julius's chest. “Because they've never been caught.” With that he rolled up his papers and turned away. “These will be here when you've worked up enough courage, or hunger, to take them...” His window slid closed, and the sounds of the bar became apparent to Julius again.

He slouched his way back to his preferred corner to sulk. Things had been far too dangerous ever since his adventure in the tombs with Alina and her crew. More attacks on the borders, missing people, strange hauntings... None of which had turned out ideally. Something was coming. People could sense it. It was making them edgy and fool hardy. Having nearly lost Twig his stomach for adventure had soured significantly.

Julius was seriously contemplating trying out carpentry when a short woman stormed into the hall. Four and a half feet maybe, stoutly built, with a lot up front. Possibly a dwarf, or half dwarf. Cruel

eyes, and short, jet black hair. Attractive in that way that only heartless women are. Everyone else avoided eye contact with the stranger, but Julius let his eyes linger... She noticed him and the look of shock that crossed his face when he realized it made her smile. A smile that froze his insides. She had a huge mug and was striding confidently toward him. He sat there, paralyzed.

“You're not from here, are you?” She asked, sitting opposite him. “Where are you from?”

“A place that doesn't exist anymore.” He replied.

“I knew it.” She grinned. “Displaced. You've got that look about you. Sitting here, all alone. Village lost to the dead. How long now?”

“Many years.” He replied. She noticed the awkwardness that seemed to hang on him melt away. Something cold replaced it. Something Trizia recognized.

“Want revenge?” She asked. “Payback for what they did to your people?”

Julius was silent, but she could sense it.

“That's what my crew is going to do. Bring down the lord of the dead.”

“That is a bold claim.” He replied.

“Yeah, but we can do it.” She answered excitedly. “We're gathering technology. Stuff that hasn't been seen in an age. Stuff you can't imagine.”

“You'd be surprised what I can imagine.” Said Julius.

“Oh really? Seen some before have you? Or maybe you have some experience with it? We could use that.”

“I'm sure...” Smiled Julius. “Unfortunately I don't like heights.”

In a street not too far from where Julius was speaking with Trizia faces familiar to him were gathering. Niona, hair glittering magically in the breeze, was looking down the shaft of an arrow nocked in a resplendent looking bow. From her position on the roof of the tallest building she could see definite signs of activity.

“Army.” She shouted to Alina. “No question. Marching from the inner ring en mass.”

“He's making his move.” Said Regalius darkly. “We need to be ready.” Alina scowled.

“We are the shield of the people. If we abandon the city who will defend them?” She asked.

“They aren't going to hurt the people.” Regalius replied. “They want someone alive to subjugate, but we they will kill, and then the people will have to shield themselves.”

“I think he's right.” Offered Herrin. “This has a feeling of finality. I sense an ill wind...”

“Fine. Get the message out quickly.” Alina commanded. “Give the army space, watch for my signal. Be prepared for anything.”

The assembled nodded then broke away quickly. Alina stood alone for a moment, worrying her little crystal again. Then she remembered herself again and set out for the market square.

In the dark places of the city of walls news was traveling much faster. Like rats from a sinking ship the unsavory were scurrying around in a desperate attempt to flee with treasured artifacts. Their machinations had not gone unnoticed. From the shadows Twigg had heard them. Possessions and people were being seized. Resistance was being dealt with harshly. The city was becoming a place she and her master needed not to be. If only she could run faster... Between patches of shadow she pelted across the old stones of the alleys, not daring to go more than a short distance through the phase plain. The hurt was still too fresh in her mind and too real to her body. While pausing to catch her breath she grasped her little blue crystal and thought of Julius.

“Master...” She gasped. “Danger! Must escape!”

Several blocks away her voice sounded clearly even in the bustling tavern. Trizia was taken aback when a disembodied voice suddenly erupted from her companion's pant's.

“Does... Does it always talk to you like that?” She asked. Julius turned red.

“It's not- Why would you even-?” He stammered.

“I've seen a lot of things.” She replied. “A talking lovestick would hardly be the strangest.” Julius gave her a look of quizzical horror, and began fishing around in his pocket.

“Oh, this is exciting!” She beamed. After a moment Julius produced a tiny, blue, crystal. It glowed brighter as each word escaped.

“Where are you!?” It asked pleadingly. “I can't- It hurts too much. Help!”

“Twigg?! Where are you!?” Shouted Julius. Instinctively he rose from the table and started making for the door. A mixture of curiosity and fear caused Trizia to do the same. In fact, everyone nearby had taken notice.

“The army is coming, master!” The voice rang out in the now silent tavern. “They're taking artifacts, and- and whatever they want! I'm outside Madigan's!”

“I'm coming, don't worry! I'm coming!” Julius replied. He was now running down the street, Trizia huffing along behind.

“What's going on?!?” She demanded. “What's that stone?”

“I don't have time to explain!” Juslius replied. “You should warn your people. I suspect they are in the most danger of all!”

Trizia stopped in the middle of the street. She wasn't the quickest wit, but she knew danger when she

heard it. “We're docked in the market square!” She shouted as Julius's back. “I meant what I said! Come get some payback with us!”

She wasn't sure if he heard her or not. He'd suddenly turned toward a solid wall and disappeared into it.

Alina was nearly to the market when panic reached that part of the city. Doors and windows began slamming shut. The street was suddenly awash in people. Her progress was all but halted. She slid inside the nearest door just before it slammed shut. A very surprised shopkeeper gaped at her when he recognized her face.

“You're Alina Redgrave...” He said slowly. “Do you... need a potion, or a tonic?”

“I need a way to the roof.” She replied.

“Of course... Of course!” He said, recovering his wits. “Sue can show you!”

He motioned to a young girl who had been placing objects gently into an empty space below the floorboards. She was now staring, wide eyed, at Alina.

“Time is a factor!” Alina urged. The young girl scurried to her feet and ushered Alina up some stairs, across the house, and up another set of stairs.

“This opens up to the roof.” She said, pointing to a rope she couldn't reach hanging from the ceiling. Alina pulled it and a set of fold away stairs let in blinding sunlight. Before Alina made it out the girl called up to her.

“Are you going to stop the bad people again?” She asked. Alina tried to look confident.

“I'll try my best, okay?”

“Yay!” Sue jumped up and down letting go of the rope, which caused the hatch to close.

“On the whole I'd rather be facing the undead...” Alina muttered as she set out across the rooftops.

Twigg stood in a narrow alley, watching people pour down the street. Doors were slamming, windows sliding shut, and the sound of marching was coming closer. She placed her hands on the cold bricks, shrouded as they were in shadow, and concentrated. A cold sting ran through her as her hands began to fade into the darkness. She did her best to stifle a scream and crumpled into a ball on the dusty stones of the road. When her eyes opened again she was being stood up roughly by a pair of soldiers. They were patting her down and throwing her possessions as they searched.

“Don't struggle.” Said one of the soldiers. “By the order of the council you are required to surrender all magical artifacts. We know you have some on your person.”

“Here it is” Said the other, pulling Twigg's speaking stone from its chain. He inspected it for a moment. “This looks new...”

The first soldier released his grip and Twigg slumped to the ground again. She quickly gathered up her various trinkets and stuffed them into her pockets. Before she could slink away the second soldier kicked her slightly.

“Where did you get this?” He said, holding the stone in front of her face by the remains of its chain.

“I stole it!” Twigg blurted.

“From where?” asked the soldier, picking her up by her collar.

“I don't remember...” She gasped. “I had it a while now...”

“She's lying, sergeant.” Said the first soldier. “She's hiding something.”

“Don't make this harder than it has to be, dear.” Said the sergeant, loosening his hold somewhat. “Just tell us where you got this, and you're free to go.”

Twigg hesitated for a long moment. The grunt suddenly grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled back sharply.

“I made it!” She choked.

“Nonsense! You're too young!” Barked the sergeant. “Tell us where you got this before my patience is spent, girl!”

Before she could answer the crystal screamed from the sergeant's closed fist.

“TWIGG, DUCK!”

Instantly she fell limp, slid out of her cape, and on to the ground. Julius sprang from the shadows and toppled the sergeant with a dropkick. Before the grunt could react Julius spun his legs around, kicking over the soldier as he spun onto his feet. Twigg barely had time to grab her cloak before Julius had swept her up and was running down the alleyway.

“Are you okay!?” He gasped as he pelted across the cobbles. The sound of yelling and running was getting nearer and nearer.

“I'm fine now!” Twigg cried, squeezing his neck tight. He could feel warm tears on her face. “Give me your speaking stone!”

Too winded to argue Julius pulled it out and handed it to his charge.

“Put me down.” She commanded. He complied and made to keep running, but Twigg held him up. The soldiers, now ten strong, paused when they saw their quarry standing rather than fleeing. Julius drew his bow in hopes it would give them pause for longer still. Twigg however, spoke clearly into the stone, although they could hear her without it. The effect was that the sound of her voice was suddenly twice as loud and seemed to come from the entire alley.

“Give back my property.” She commanded. “Put it on the ground and walk away. I won't ask twice.”

“What are you doing?” Julius asked in a whispered gasp, but she didn't react.

“You shouldn't have run, street trash-” The sergeant started, but was cut across by Twigg's magnified voice.

“YOU SHOULD HAVE!” She screamed, then she whispered something into Julius's stone. Before he could react Twigg tackled Julius and threw her cloak over the top of them. A flash of heat and light washed over them as a blast of wind sent a cloud of dust hurtling down alley. As the dust began to settle Julius threw off the cape and peered into the dissipating cloud. A pair of legs were all that remained of the sergeant. Standing in a somehow surprised way, charred solid. Similarly ghastly remains stood as far as 3 men back and the rest of them had been otherwise incapacitated by the stone's detonation.

Julius was torn between relief, shock, and horror for a few moments before speaking.

“THEY FUCKING EXPLODE!?! WE'VE BEEN CARRYING TINY EXPLOSIVES IN OUR POCKETS FOR YEARS!?”

“They don't explode unless I make them.” Twigg replied, still laying on the street looking up at the sky. “I have to speak the right words to them.”

“Yeah?!, were you ever going to tell me the words?!?” Gaped Julius. “What if I did it on accident!?”

“You'd never have.” Said Twigg. “You have to know the stone's name and its trigger words. And you have to mean it.”

“How does it know if you mean it?!?”

“It's magic, stupid! It just does! I made them that way in case someone bad stole one. You can use them to listen in on us, you know?!?”

Still panting, Julius considered this a moment. “Alright... Fair enough...”

“Someone's going to miss those guys soon. We need to go.” Said Twigg grimly.

“You're right.” Replied Julius. “Something terrible is happening in the upper rings. Some kind of power grab. We need to get out of the city.”

“How? It's too far to sneak out by now...”

“If we can make it to the market square,” Julius replied. “We're going to fly out.”