

The ARLIGENT Experiment

A Tale from Charinthosse



Nick Bane

A TALE OF CHARINTHOSSE

First Edition

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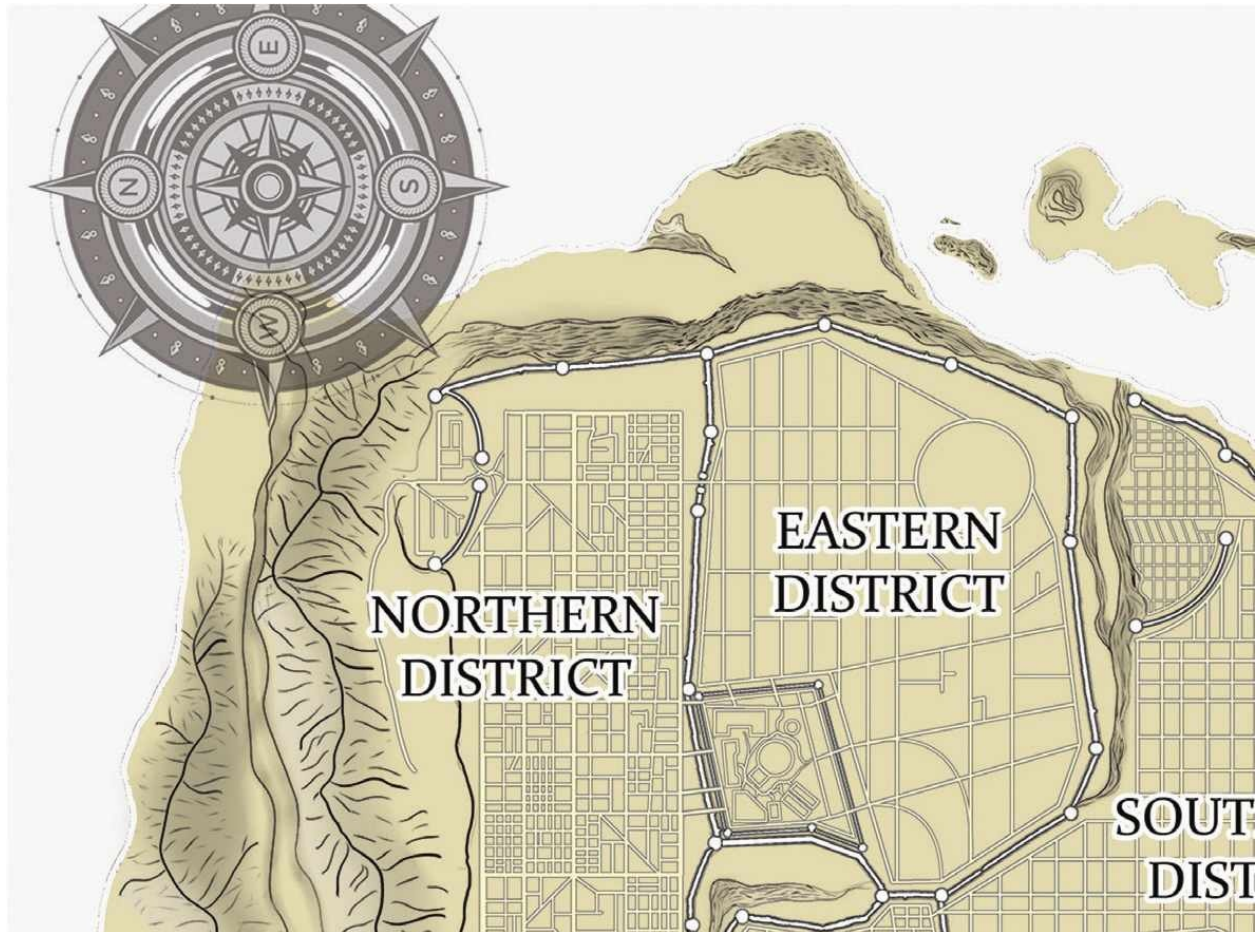
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The ARLIGENT Experiment

Written by Nick Bane An Introduction to Charinthosse



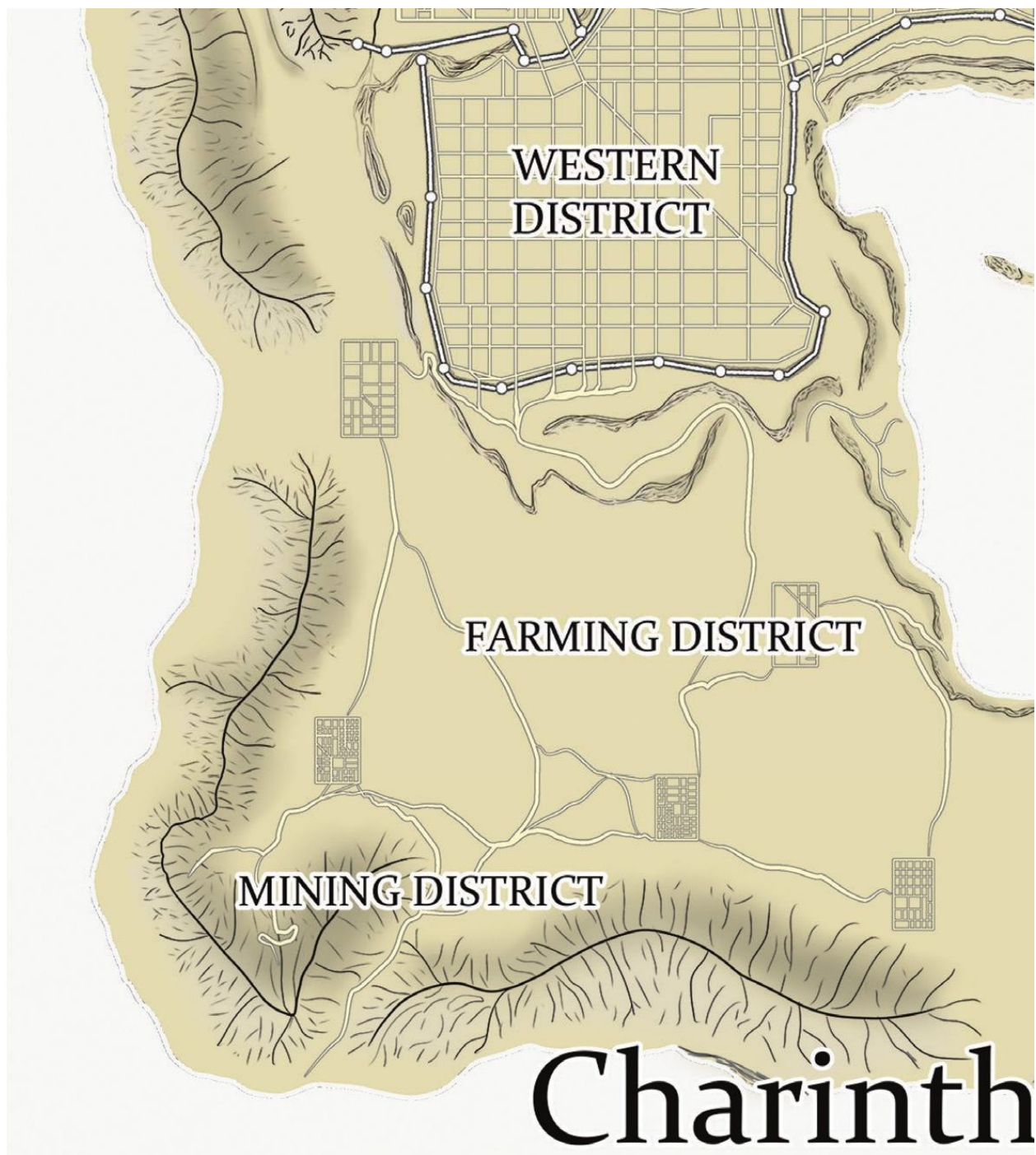




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Excerpt from The Charinthosse Chronicle: Winter Solstice Special Report

DEATH IN THE DELTA OF ADDAN'VOS: 12 RESCUED, 35 PRESUMED DEAD

The most ambitious joint effort to date between Wolfhardt Industries and Hoddrick Steel, the Artificial Lightning Generator, or "Arligent" Experiment, ended in horror earlier this week.

While reports are still in their early stages, experts closely connected to the site suspect a manufacturer defect in the materials used for one of the turbines, causing a turbine to become dislodged.

Further, according to experts who examined the scene as soon as it was safe to do so, the turbine's power forced it through one of the submerged walls in the hydroelectric dam; mechanical failure appears to be the chief cause of the accident. Remains of several employees were unable to be recovered.

The Board of Directors for Wolfhardt Industries are expected to release published statements with regard to the incident later in the month, after a formal and thorough investigation into the cause of the failure. The Board of Directors refused to address further rumors of former Wolfhardt Industries Head of Affairs and founder, Giovanni Wolfhardt's disappearance and whereabouts, as well as the possibility of his son, Machiavelli Wolfhardt, taking over as Head of Affairs.

Project directors include Wolfhardt Industries Interim Head of Affairs, Oliver Kipperrn, Direct Supervisor Victor DuGall and Hoddrick Steel Head of Affairs, Ariana Hawkins. No comment was available from any party involved.

///// Chapter One: The Silver Ladle

The city-state of Charinthosse could have very easily been the

a lonely sliver of land on the horizon, staring back at the mainland from over the top of proud ivory-colored walls in silent triumph at the fractured kingdom that had once tried to conquer it. An estimated seventy-thousand families called the unnaturally resource dense island their home; opting for a simpler life, away from royalties and creeds that had turned other kingdoms so stagnant.

It was a societal experiment all its own, governed by a phrase lifted directly from a military creed centuries old; “Thy Word, Thy Bond. Thy Bond, Thy Brother. Thy Brother, Thy Life”.

for their point on a compass, or their primary function—each governing themselves as best they were able, adhering to the universal standard. The “Compass Districts”, as they were known (Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western) were walled individually from one another with reinforced gates to allow passage between them, each District an annexation of the last.

Charinthosse, sprawled the Northern District. As the wheels of time turned, Northern District expanded enough through immigration and native births to require walls. The city continued to expand District, with each district carefully crafted to be allowed to close

either disaster or criminal enterprise. There had only been four such instances in the whole of the city’s history where the gates had ever fallen shut. Bright as the days ahead promised to be, such a happening was a distant, unreasonable fear.

automation and seafaring. The proudest achievement in centuries,

Charinthosse’s exports of metals, textiles and what food they were able to grow. The Carrier, a direct instigator of the revolution, was the only ship of its kind on the seas, built almost entirely of smaller ships intended to retrieve scuttled remains of other vessels, or mine—as well as process—ore between destinations. The innovation shortened the time it took for ingots to arrive abroad, doubling, or in some instances tripling the output of the mining industry.

testing ground for a product all their own. A train network was designed and implemented within four years, with credit laid at the feet of Ariana Hawkins, the unlikely heiress to the corporation's

corporation of such public magnitude. Hawkins saw to it that the steam engines ran through the heart of each District to better move the incredible amounts of cargo, but even at four trains per day it was not enough to keep pace against the volume of goods. In addition to the train, she led Hoddrick Steel through a vicious legal battle to construct additions to the walls themselves. Her company became the purveyor of cranes which straddled the walls, reaching to the ground on either side round the clock to retrieve canisters of

or needed to be moved more quickly over the wall, rather than wait to move through its gates. As the business mogul families competed, Charinthesse only grew more prosperous. Operating at peak

could be delivered from the Farming District, all the way into the heart of the Southern District's markets and up to the Eastern Surplus Vaults by the next morning, with the trains ready to run again by noon.

The city's unique geographic position had enabled it to transform itself over a single century into the trade capital of the world—reinforcing its position by installing even more cranes that reached over the district walls within the city and increasing the frequency of daily trains on the track from four, to seven. On the south side of the city, covered docks welcomed all boats for imports, as well as exporting textiles crafted from the Western District.

mansions and libraries. It was the oldest of the districts and celebrated the rich history of the city-state by making only the most seamless of updates to designs, rather than building new constructions entirely. The unfortunate byproduct of the decision was a thick atmosphere of aristocracy, whose inhabitants saw themselves far above the dockside workers. The wealthiest merchants traded in the riches of nations; clandestine agreements

would over using what they considered to be only the richest of historic tapestries as their backgrounds.

Workers in the Western District manufactured textiles with materials brought in via coal train and wall crane from farms and grain, ore, coal and food into the rat race of often unheard of companies

competing below for the scraps left by Hoddrick Steel

Only a stone's throw to the east, domed roofs and unnecessarily tall towers faced the dawn. Inside of the Eastern District, the courts

Politicians, clergybeasts and businessbeasts alike nattered away

anything under threat of being dethroned by their constituents—a sentence that often ended in death, by Charinthossian standards. It was the only place in the whole of the city where members of every walk of class and life were not allowed to mingle for the sake of pure

to the rest of Charinthosse were directly through the heart of the richest points of Northern District. Most were grateful that the didn't bother building many courthouses to try and expand their unfortunately narrowed worldviews.

So far as Theodore Locke, a Gray Wolf who found his employ

the manufactured problems and the noise of the city were all an ocean away.

While many on the Southern Docks stared to the Eastern District with deepest resentment over some decision, or that politician, Theodore found he could only shake his head at the state of the world. The industrial revolution, as prosperous as it was, had turned the globe inside out. While he understood the core of the whinging on the docks—namely that power seemed to lay solely with beasts whose only skills were 'can wear a suit all day', or 'can argue in circles'—he found more often than not that there was more

The entire economy danced before those beasts who wouldn't dare do the work themselves. He contented himself with being among the *actual* workers of society, rather than the workings. On its best day, he found politics was a poison that was only too readily dosed. Not to mention that most of the hypocritical curs often abandoned whatever 'convictions' they held publicly for the sake of a private coin.

Not that Theodore held many other professions in particularly high regard either. Textiles required too many machines and Theodore had been raised to prefer labor done by paw and sweat. Farming had once been an option—it was noble, but utterly thankless. One day though, the Wolf had resolved he wished to return to the sea as a sailor to honor his upbringing, but for now Theodore was glad to be well away from it all.

His shift at the Silver Ladle was to start soon, or at least, soon enough. The Wolf strode through a pair of saloon styled, batwing

preparations and the beginning of the evening patrons. Theodore grinned and nodded politely to the barmaids as they bustled about. He'd arrived late, or at least, late for him. There wasn't more than an hour of twilight left to be had and that made preparations for the night ahead more rushed.

While some called it dishonorable, his life as a dockside escort

money; sometimes even indulging a fantasy or fetish. Drunken curs weren't uncommon and Theodore had learned to manage quite well against tirades, violent customers or other clients that refused to leave. Except for a few sore spots every day, he quite liked how simple his life was.

The bar never changed much, a dozen booths lined the walls; tables were lined in neat rows and draped with threadbare sheets to maintain a semblance of class. Lanterns hung from exposed rafters overhead, a single worker checking them to ensure they contained enough oil to last through the night. Theodore wove his way through the crowd of workers making ready to serve the evening's rush, ducking through a pair of gentlebeasts as they lowered chairs from

the best of Theodore's knowledge, tonight had nothing particularly special planned, at least in terms of music or entertainment.

docks. The scents of pork roasts, as well as other sides of beef and prepared meat, wafted from both the cellars below and the kitchen the far corner of the establishment from the door. Theodore knew those things had been marinating from the evening before, he'd away for indulging in a sample. His stomach rumbled in anticipation to ensure that no food went to waste.

Every other weekend, every crest brought in from patrons waitresses and the more 'individualized' attentions that were

from the sensual escorting that he and a few of the ladybeasts did, to soothsaying, courtesy of a Hyena named Isolde that managed to only ever appear when she felt needed (which, much to Theodore's surprise, her timing was more often right than not).

Theodore slipped between a pair of the workers to set a small,

most valuable of belongings: a few spare bullets for a revolver he'd secreted upstairs, a set of clothes and a few spare coins if something urgent came up. Patricia had once commented he should have carried a memento of some kind, but her suggestion was met with

rooms under the provision of Madame Sybil, but Theodore hadn't wanted that. Instead, he insisted on travelling between the brothel

a naut away; the bag travelled with him to and fro to keep his more valuable possessions with him. The Wolf was careful to ensure that would have probably been given a heart attack if he understood what Theodore did to pay his rent.

bag, moving it toward her. He heard the telltale clicking of the bullets, which he made a mental note to reunite with his revolver soon, from inside the bag. The Leopardess gave him a wry smirk, knowing full well what was in the bag, as well as the fact he should have them in the Ladle to begin with. She shook her head and tutted her tongue at him before moving the glass she had been cleaning to the side.

she picked up Theodore's burlap sack, moving it behind the bar. "I slept in," the Wolf shrugged, grinning toothily at Patricia.

"Can't talk though—Madame Sybil'll have my hide if I'm not ready." "Best of luck to you, Theodore!" she called after him. Ducking up the stairs and to his room, Theodore did his best

to ignore the logistics of preparing the bar area below. So far as he cared, Theodore had a roof over his head and got a pair of square meals a day so long as his room was in order. He wasn't part of the clean-up crew, or in charge of anything in particular with keeping the bar stocked, or preventing patrons from getting too rowdy.

things clean was a part of Theodore's nature since childhood. Staying shrug and a good bit of rest. Theodore didn't feel he could ask for more.

Ultimately, Theodore was grateful. He wasn't required to pay attention to current events; were he a farmer he would have been troubled with not enough, or too much rainfall, or if he were an

workplace deaths. All that was asked of him was sex. Some days, he felt that there should be more to his life. Oftentimes, he would laze about as he waited for the next client to secret through his door for whatever they wanted. It gave

him time to daydream and sometimes even make a mountain out of a molehill.

This week's molehill was gaslights.

The Silver Ladle, under the ownership of Madame Sybil, was always the trendsetter for whorehouses in the region. However, when it came to the installation of the new lights, many feared the Silver Ladle would be left behind by its competitors. The Madame of remained silent and wary of their installation, rather than others who leapt at the new technology immediately. She had resisted

pumped through wooden walls was inevitably asking for a serious problem, in addition to astronomical labor costs.

Per usual, the Panther's watchful eye saved the establishment months of revenue at a time. In their infancy, gaslights were the

homes as well as two rival brothels burnt to the ground before they started getting any safer, but still the Madame wouldn't have them installed in the Silver Ladle.

Madame Sybil's wariness on the matter drew the attention of engineers to the problems. Once Theodore had even seen one of the chiefs invited to Madame Sybil's private quarters under the guise of discussion. He didn't care to know the contents of the discussion or evening, but less than two weeks afterwards new studies on the

that sort of clout and the possibility of it felt staggering.

Prototypes and ideas were brought before her in steady streams over the course of weeks only to be time after time denied. It wasn't until a needlessly complex, so-called 'safe' switch for the gaslights

installation of the gaslights.

It must have been an adorable thought on paper, Theodore against a bit of steel. If the gas feed were on, the gaslights would

Theodore glanced about his room again, his eyes travelling to the gaslights in each corner of the room. He'd nearly broke his thumb installing the little devils there, which made him resent the cur

of the house now stated that Theodore was personally responsible for maintaining the lights on his walls in addition to the general

needing to be replaced every few-hundred twists.

Theodore didn't see why Sybil couldn't have held out for the newer electric lights that he'd been hearing so much about. Some of the engineers bragged that they were helping to usher in the new age with them. They were slowly becoming more available throughout the world and they seemed to make much more sense than turning

Theodore had read in the papers once that several experiments to make electricity more widespread had failed; even the threat had spurred along gaslight technology to try and become more manageable.

Madame Sybil had even seemed interested for a time in the new technology, going so far as to warn Theodore that he may have to rip out the walls again. Shortly thereafter she changed her

after citing a tragedy in another country. She doubled down into the 'gaslights' corner to such an extent she'd bought a book for her private shelves in order to study the concept further.

In protest of the Madame's decision, the Wolf opted to keep nights it become uncomfortable, but he didn't mind, so long as he unbearable, such as it was tonight, Theodore would throw open the window as well.

This close to the docks, many of Theodore's clients were surprised by the open window. So many came from Northern District—often thinking they weren't recognized—and unwaveringly

in his youth and knew that the concern wasn't completely Northern District were so squeamish. He didn't miss the stench window allowed the breeze to carry in a heady, almost overpowering scent of ivy, mint and nettles instead.

The window itself was large enough for any beast to be able to climb through—a necessity in the whoring business in case of any emergency evacuation of the room, particularly for the patrons. Just on the other side of the window, there had been a masterfully crafted

of debris, save for a slight overgrowth of vines and pungent herbs to allow a

quick and trackless escape. Lattice further blocked the view to the street below and allowed plants to grow freely, creating make it nearly impossible for even the most experienced of trackers. For now the path stood blocked, the furniture was shoved

The bed and vanity were all that were really in the room, leaving He stripped himself out of his long-sleeved shirt, vest and trousers and folded them neatly, placing them atop the vanity. No one in the a modesty wrap, so long as he didn't lounge about. Payday weekend made it common enough for whores to come down from the upper often rebuked beasts for such practices. She felt that it degraded the atmosphere, or something like that. Theodore was rather grateful have reprimanded him more publicly.

The kitchen was back down the stairs, a straight shot from the last stair to the cramped, busy room. Mops, soap stones and buckets were placed at the mouth of the kitchen for easy retrieval. Theodore didn't have occasion to visit the kitchen unless he was ducking his head inside to see how the food was coming along, not that he was particularly welcomed with his sampling habits. He'd gotten better about them, he was proud to admit. Theodore had learned a harsh lesson about stealing a turkey leg from a regular patron. The Badger's food had killed his sense of taste for a week by using some

a bucket with cold water, dropping a single cake of soap into the a moment, only enough to start the suds, before snatching a few equipment.

He stole a glance out the open window, squinting through the lattice and plants. There wasn't much of a view out that way, save for the shadows cast by buildings against the interior of the Wall of Charinthosse. He guessed he had an hour before darkness overtook

back. He had to hurry.

Tried as he might to stop it, Theodore began to feel the ticking sense of urgency in the back of his mind. He tossed the rags over an edge of the bedframe, which he had up-turned against the wall near the window for the sake of a more thorough cleaning.

grabbed of the four that sat near his hearth and he doused it with a touch of

lighter fuel and a match from a kit he'd secreted behind the past.

perked. He glanced back to the smoking cinder. Theodore narrowed

three strides, moving some of the wood from the side of the stone hearth to the ravenous blazes before pulling the neglected grate closed. He paused and inhaled with a smile; the scent of cedar on

complimented the otherwise heady, herbal tones from the window.

Shaking himself from his daydream, Theodore snatched the towel from his bed frame, only to toss it on the ground and step on it. He swept his leg to and fro to dry up as much of the water as he was able to. His heart began to race a bit faster as he heard the

the corner into his room from the open door. The soaked rag was replaced with a second dry one, then even a third, as he furiously

He stooped to pick up the rags, closing his eyes for only a moment to allow his senses to return to that lovely scent of burning cedar. A movement behind him in the doorway caused his features

The cedar scent was now mixed with heavy lavender and the Wolf didn't need to turn. He knew precisely who it was.

A simple, dry click from behind Theodore turned on the gaslights in each corner, illuminating the small room and everything in it. Theodore leaned the mop against the wall near the bed, only to watch it the handle teeter to the side and clatter to the ground.

He straightened his back, then turned to face Madame Sybil. The mistress of the house was a Panther: not a spot in her fur wasn't

gown of velvet in various pale shades of gray and luxurious splotches of red beneath a black covering lace. She stood in all her splendor in the doorway, lowering her paw from the crank that controlled the gaslights and folding them neatly before her.

remove their clothes, bordello or not. This establishment doesn't

He cleared his throat and rolled his shoulders, glancing down to attire. It was a modesty wrap that left little to the imagination, and Theodore couldn't stop a mild blush as far out as his ear tips beneath the Panther's watchful gaze. "Your trip to the kitchen did not go

"Thank you, Madame," the Wolf replied, clearing his throat the hearth. He crossed the room with as much dignity as he could,

trousers from the vanity behind it. He slid into them, tying the cords about his waist and letting the cloth hang naturally over his legs, neglecting the closures near his ankles. "Few of the military gents appreciate it as well."

"It is 1929, Mr Locke," the madam remarked, artfully changing gaslight sconces on the wall. "Firelight seems archaic, don't you

still choose to live in the dark like a beast?"

"Gaslights disagree with me, Madame."

The Feline's face was set in stone, breaking her composure only

to speak. " *Your* disagreement with them is noted. Be that as it may, you have a customer. I expect your room to be ready, bed made and all, within ten minutes," Madame Sybil stated. "He is a professor and former military man. Be respectful." The Panther nodded curtly as Theodore straightened his back.

Professors and military beasts were each interesting beasts. Most of them were so proud, insisting on being called by their professional titles or squad nickname, as if that somehow masked who they were. But to have a professor that was also a former military man, or a military beast a former professor? Part of the Wolf shivered nervously at the thought. Theodore had once wanted

dreams after the horror of seeing the medical corps pull wounded

Since then, he had a deep regard for the beasts who volunteered their lives and limbs for the sake of Charinthosse's ideals—and with that in mind, for this customer a good impression was required. Theodore decided to put his best foot forward.

While Theodore never tried to think of it much, curiosity slipped through the cracks; his mind drifting to musings of what his life would have been like, had he taken the seas. He'd never went out to sea on a Captain's own vessel, with its

military missions and all—but more often than not he helped the docked ship owned by the gentlebeast that raised him to stay clear of vermin. Captain Nathaniel McGinnes had always enforced standards aboard the vessels with a switch. While Theodore hadn't ever learned *all* of the rules, he'd learned only enough to know that the cleaner the decks

adulthood.

Not that he minded much; part of him was even grateful that his former Captain had been so strict. The memories always managed to dredge themselves up when a soldier or a sailor came to his bedside.

room, favoring the vanity over the hearth. Over-washed sheets came to make sure his shirt was tucked in and his sleeves buttoned at the wrist.

Theodore scowled pensively, drawing a deep breath as he heard the slight footfalls approach. He positioned himself as he always did, choosing to stand directly between the vanity and the bed. The way that the door swung into the room, it ensure that Theodore was

distract from the door nearly scraping the foot of the bed as it was opened.

Tonight's client was an Otter—an older beast by the look of the graying fur on his muzzle, who strode into the room carefully and surveyed the area from behind a pair of thick, wide-rimmed glasses. Despite his apparent age, Theodore could tell he kept himself in

drawer clothing to boot. A well-tailored pair of trousers, a made-to-measure shirt and a similarly tailored vest adorned the professor. He as well as a satchel over his shoulder that looked as if it was ready to

It took Theodore a moment to see it, but—in stark contrast to his well-to-do appearance—a scar ran across the bridge of his muzzle. The scar itself was perfectly horizontal across what looked like both of his eyes with utterly lethal precision, it had clearly been a close miss. Theodore found himself staring; the wound looked far too deliberate to be the result of an industrial accident.

If Theodore had to guess, it looked something like a sword slash and he couldn't help wonder if it had been the result of a duel—better yet, some fascinating war wound. Something that close

fought down the urge to study the wound further and consciously

to deliberately cover the scar and Theodore took it as a cue to set his mind back on task. He straightened his back and allowing his many rehearsals of his ‘new patron’ speech take over.

“Welcome to the Silver Ladle,” Theodore bowed politely. The Otter nodded in return, then eyed the wide open window, which allowed the night breeze in. Theodore followed his gaze. “Our aim

I will see to it immediately,” He spoke, glancing from the window frame back to his patron. “Discretion is, of course, our highest priority.”

“Close the window. *Please*,” The Otter said quietly. Theodore’s ears perked and he glanced back to the Otter, then again toward the large opening in the wall. The poor beast’s voice quaked and it was

that this gent had ever been whoring.

“Nobody can see in. That is but an escape route, sir,” Theodore explained. “Wood and lattices guard patrons from view, should the need arise. That is but one of several entrances to a network that runs the rooftops of the district; you can even get to other districts from there. It allows for quick escape into the night, in the event of

The Mustelid’s eyes narrowed from behind the rims of his glasses. As if the Otter noticed Theodore’s glance, he positioned the insist. Close the window.”

Theodore nodded, turning to do as he was told, but paused when he heard the Otter close the door behind him—his eyebrows raising in surprise as he then heard the scraping of the door wedge being kicked under the bottom of the door.

“Madame Sybil said you were a former military beast?” Theodore asked carefully, turning back to face the Otter. The patron nodded curtly.

“Gunnery Captain of the Fourth Island Regiment. I was a Combat Physician for seven years before retiring to work in the Professor Kendall Whitaker.” As the Otter spoke, he stepped around the Wolf and pulled the window closed on his own.

Theodore didn't mind titles in the slightest—most of his customers were members of the powerful elite. Madame Sybil had a reputation, since long before Theodore had begun working for her, of cutting out the tongues of those who violated the privacy of the brothel's patrons; a concept she held in regard even above her own life.

“Theodore Locke, former dock worker, former steelworker, currently at your service and leisure.” The Wolf bowed politely. As he straightened, he allowed himself a better look at his patron. On normal evenings, professors or military beasts were rarities;

frequented the Silver Ladle owing to the expensive fees that Madame

As a result, it was odd to see someone who could pass as ‘active duty’ in the military. Generally speaking, of course, the active duty servicebeasts had their picks of the various rooms such as Theodore's, whenever it was that they actually showed up. Perhaps rumors that Madame Sybil let soldiers use the brothel for free were true; but they were rarely acted upon. Even then, this Professor Whitaker was still uncommon; so many soldiers in retirement had allowed their bodies to go soft with decadence, or even laziness.

This Otter was anything but, scurrying about the locked room and peering around Theodore even, as if to ensure that they were alone. He didn't seem interested in the Wolf in the slightest, constantly glancing down at his satchel, as if he didn't believe it would stay there.

“While this is hardly customary, we do serve a variety of interests here in the Ladle. What's your passion, Professor Whitaker?” Theodore asked, carefully leaning back against the vanity, trying to appear more relaxed. In reality, Theodore wasn't entirely certain that he wanted to know.

“You've claimed that I can trust your discretion. I shall hold you to that,” Professor Whitaker spoke softly and started moving around the edge of the room, tapping the walls with his knuckles. The statement made Theodore's stomach sink as he thought of everything that statement could have meant. The room's walls were desperately barren of any sign denoting hard limits and the Wolf

Theodore made another mental note to go pick up more logs from

“Indeed you can. While I am certain that a studied beast such as yourself would have noticed, we’ve soundproofed the walls to an extent as well to better ensure such privacy,” Theodore nodded. The Mustelid completed his round, standing once more at the foot of Theodore’s bed. “Is there anything else that you’d like to ask after?”

if you’ve got something else on your mind entirely? What’s your pleasure?”

The professor stood silent, unamused even, before the Wolf. “My pleasure?” Theodore chuckled softly, wetting his lips. He did his best to not sound condescending as he spoke. “That *is* what brothels are for, Professor,” he considered his words carefully, lest his tone be read as mocking. “Powerful gents such as yourself come to indulge fantasies with energetic lasses,” the Wolf shrugged nonchalantly, before grinning almost savagely. “Or—as it seems you prefer, energetic *gents*.”

The Otter scowled darkly, then twisted open the small, silver clasp that held his satchel closed and pulled some papers from it—a drawing or two splitting the sea of words that spilled onto the bed.

“It seems you brought a script?” The Wolf tried not to chuckle.

“I am trusting your discretion.”

“As you’ve said,” Theodore remarked, unable to keep a hint of disgust from his voice. He hated role-playing, it added such needless drivel to the otherwise simplistic nature of brothels. He made a mental note to charge the professor extra—double even, if he was expected to memorize any lines for a scene.

“Sit down, Mr. Locke,” the Otter said quietly. “And do keep your paws to yourself.”

“Should I address you as ‘sir’ then, Professor?” The Wolf asked, sitting down on the bed with a small, but eager sigh. Theodore sat near the edge, turning his back to the patron somewhat. Many times, Theodore had found if he allowed himself to seem relaxed—vulnerable even—his patron would follow suit and relax a bit themselves.

The professor looked him over carefully. “That’s entirely unnecessary.

‘Professor’, ‘Whitaker’, or the full ‘Professor Whitaker’

Theodore’s ears perked and he looked over his shoulder at the Otter. “You didn’t pay a pittance of crowns to enter the club, only to come for my company as a scholar?” Theodore glanced over his shoulder to the Otter. It was a stab to his pride that, in his view, the cut he was allowed to take was a pittance. “I’ve already told you, I’m no student. I can read a newspaper, but I somehow doubt

that'd really help you at all."

"Madame Sybil is a rare sort. I've been allowed the room for free," The Otter said, continuing to look through and sort his paperwork. Theodore blinked.

"Because you're a former serviceman?" He asked, cocking his head to the professor.

The *wouldn't-be* client stopped himself, carefully considering what to say, before replying with a diplomatic, "I won't assume to know her motivations, but for now I would like a moment of quiet," Professor Whitaker said, still staring into his notes, appearing to sort them as he refused to take a seat. "I need to make sure I have everything."

Theodore's eyebrows arched, the Wolf craning his neck in an

are—"

"Did Madame Sybil explain it correctly, that you are in fact, able to help yourself to a muzzle?" Professor Whitaker snapped, then collected himself "Please, there are things that I cannot explain to you unless you would like to be involved. No more questions, Mr. Locke."

Theodore fell quiet as well, glancing nervously at the Otter.

He'd never done lots of things. But being unnerved in the seat of his own authority was entirely foreign to him. "No more questions?"

The Wolf's ears twitched, his eyebrow arching incredulously, "Why *exactly* would you even consider coming to a brothel if all you wanted was peace and quiet?"

The Otter stepped forward, baring his teeth at the Wolf.

Theodore stood head and shoulders taller, but the Lupine was strangely certain that the other male could overpower him. "I'm treading rather close to honorless," the Otter growled softly. "I would prefer you didn't force the issue further."

"Thy word, thy bond—don't worry, I'll try to not get you publicly hanged," the Wolf grunted back, leaning back to prop himself up on his elbows. He glanced in the Otter's direction, his eyes travelling

arranged the stack of papers.

Theodore watched in silence while Whitaker tapped some of the pages together to even them, only to slip the most of the papers back into his satchel. His eyes

widened as one of the closing lines of the

Whitaker yanked the paper violently and shoved it further into sort of embarrassing confession.

He'd have *preferred* an embarrassing confession, or some sort of diary, at least. "Necessary to preserve the integrity of the eye for installation?" Theodore quoted aloud, blinking up at the Otter. Whitaker's eyes narrowed dangerously. "*The eye... for installation?*" Theodore repeated, his voice rising slightly. The professor stepped to face Theodore, then leaned forward to put himself almost nose to nose with the Lupine. "You are *certain* that you want to know?"

///// Chapter Two: The Matriarch of Nights

Madame Sybil had always been careful to watch for the paydays, going so far as marking them on a calendar she kept in her personal chambers. Every two weeks, the Southern Dock nightlife exploded for the

Other brothels allowed themselves to be overrun; a pawful of only-tooeager courtesans cheapening the atmosphere with as many "clients" as they could handle. Madame Sybil resolved long ago that would *not* be a fate that befell the Silver Ladle.

Madames who allowed their girls to wear the more tawdry fashions of the day, what with skirts ever shortening and cleavage becoming more exposed—cheapened the lofty standards originally set by an ageless, unspoken tradition where ladies of the night were more "Lady" than "cheap thrill". Madame Sybil had dismissed more than her share of girls already, refusing to employ anyone who shed their clothing too willingly. The Panther routinely looked down the bridge of her regal muzzle at such displays. Courtesans had long since inhabited a gray area in the

Charinthosse and others fought tooth and nail to separate themselves from what they would call 'honorable' society, even as their leaders revelled in it so. As such, Madame Sybil took great pains to ensure the Silver Ladle was no place for the garden-variety, dockside slut. If she had set her shop up anywhere further from the arriving ships, or lowered her standards in matters of her workers it would have been an immediate end of her exclusivity in the market corner of visiting delegates.

In this gray nebula between societal circles, Madame Sybil had thrived. Her establishment was renowned throughout Charinthosse, word of the Silver Ladle stretching even into other countries for being of the highest of quality within the houses of ill repute.

While Madame Sybil never thought too directly on the matter, she often traded discounted evenings or even free trysts with professors and lawbeasts willing to formally tutor the courtesans. Some of the girls had even gotten out of whoring because of it. Others believed it was due to, in part, the dress code she enforced for her own workers that promoted a business-like atmosphere over a den of degenerates. Madame Sybil accepted these explanations—falsehoods, speculations and truths alike—so that she could keep a watchful eye on those who spread them.

This was especially truthful tonight. Their mysterious, urgent patron, Professor Kendall Whitaker, had traded an evening with one of the premiere escorts for several pages of what appeared to be a coded set of

tucked them skillfully into the folds of her dress and creased the garment over them. They would remain invisible to even the most trained of eyes, as Madame Sybil had a pouch sewn into her dress directly in front of her lap. There wasn't a gentlebeast, or a shebeast alive that would allow their eyes to linger in such an unsightly way, even inside of a bordello.

Information, Madame Sybil had discovered, was integral to the ways of

than any weapon she could have learned to brandish. The greater their stature in society, the greater the secrets they kept were. She had long since sworn never to use the information traded with her to damn anyone's career or twist any arms. Their secrets were always kept with the highest of discretion. It's what kept them coming back.

Of course, while she would never have used the information against they truly spread their wings. The Great War wouldn't have been ended so decisively as it had been, were it not for her, or the information she

felt the swell of pride in her chest as she thought back to that day—where toxic monarchy. She reminded herself, on days where her mind would drift, that her victory was made possible by the gents and lasses that arrived to her chambers with world-weary hearts.

Tonight, however, while the bar was brimming with activity, there was no such patronage from the upper echelons of society, or memories of

beast in varied stages of undress and inebriation. Some slapped the asses of the lower end whores, others were content to grumble into their alcohol. Cards and dice were haphazardly thrown to and fro as sailors, steelworkers, dockers alike engaged in a spree of gambling that Madame Sybil didn't even attempt to understand.

While the dice game that was popular on the docks ("Sixers", she believed it was called) was crude at best, she didn't mind the dice as much as she did the cards. Sleights of paw were not as easy as it seemed and the throwing of dice from a cup to a table almost eliminated the risk there. But it was the cheaters that she observed at the card tables that made her blood boil. Even if the rules of their games escaped her, she couldn't help but feel a pang of contempt for the curs; one needn't know the bylaws of a game to spot the sleight of paw that twisted a card into place. They were subtle enough movements here and there—a card into a sleeve, or a pocket, or the reverse. Her contemptuous glare stopped one or two of their antics and set her mind to whirl with solutions for the rest. She ran a respectable brothel;

or liars.

Anyone willing to steal from anyone, particularly their friends with a grin on their face was simply... Madame Sybil mulled the feeling over for *inferior*. While she never prided herself on having close enough relationships to call 'friends', the

house—as a result, many people whom she had grown close with over the years only ever disappointed her with some form or another of hypocrisy, or worse yet, lying.

Madame Sybil picked a spot near the base of the stairs, posing regally as she overlooked the fascinating display of the fundamental components of dockers. Widely ignoring the cat calls, the Madame strode around the row of stools in front of the bar. They stood vacant for now, the dock workers most likely attempting to respect the lone barmaid behind the

Madame Sybil looked down to the row of empty chairs as she strode by, turning her gaze to a pair of the strategically placed bouncers inside of the bar. With a

simple nod and gesture of her paw, the bouncers moved to collect the chairs and store them in the cellars through the kitchen. Madame Sybil made note to thank them later as she approached the barmaid, who was scrubbing one of the glasses as if she intended on breaking it.

“Yes Mistress,” she said. Madame Sybil nodded carefully, sensing the barmaid was trying to sound as controlled as possible. She set about, placing the glass she had cleaned atop of a drying rack. Patricia straightened her light colored dress, turning around at the same time. She gave Madame Sybil a polite, but clearly distressed curtsy out of respect before returning to her duties.

The waitress snatched a second glass from beneath the counter,

atop the counter, still crouched. Madame Sybil waited patiently, watching the waitress shake the barrel to ensure the last of the beer was out of it. The Leopardess stood, her eyes closed as she inhaled slowly.

The madame strode forward, glancing down to the beer keg below the bar. “I shall have the gents move that downstairs as well when they are back from moving the chairs,” she remarked simply. “I know for certain you are not supposed to be here alone tonight. Have the other new girls sent word, or shall I not expect to hear from them again?”

“They’ve sent word, ma’am. Susan is with child and Adrella is at the

“At the constables’?” Madame Sybil stepped forward immediately. Patricia blinked, then looked away, taken aback by the madame’s sudden response. Her silence was met with a withering gaze. “Patricia, If something is amiss, I need to know it. Please, speak of this to me.”

The other Feline paused and then looked up at her mistress pensively

whisper. Madame Sybil’s eyes narrowed, but said nothing as she watched the Leopardess stack some glasses atop a small waitress’ plank and rush them out into the crowd at the request of a rowdy group of customers.

returned, a load of empty glasses on the plank now. The Leopardess’ face was a mask of concentration, an invaluable trait that Madame Sybil

shoulders.

“Is the cur here?” “Yes.”

Madame Sybil nodded, then leaned forward. “Point him out to me, if

you will,” she asked, her voice sickly-sweet. Patricia didn’t make eye contact, or even raise a paw to the beast.

“Please, Madame. We needn’t involve the constabulary, Adrella is doing her best with them for now! A second report would only muddle—” Patricia begged, but a glower from Sybil silenced her completely. “Second table from the stairs—” she muttered. “The three Wolves, the Cattle Dog and the Badger. The Cattle Dog is Adrella’s mate,” Patricia continued as she began to arrange steins atop of a simple, wooden platter. Madame Sybil bowed softly to her waitress, then slid wordlessly to the table Patricia had indicated.

“Good evening, gentlebeasts,” She said as she arrived at the table.

approached. She walked a tight circle around them, taking note of each of their stances. The three Wolves were packmates—status betrayed by the similar beading at the napes of each of their necks. No doubt they

most of the meaning. Clockwise from the three Wolves sat the Cattle Dog shouldered Badger whom Sybil recognized as one of the blacksmiths. between the Cattle Dog and Badger.

“But of course madam,” one of the Wolves nodded, as another took a continued.

Madame Sybil smiled pleasantly—inclining her head politely. “I’m

more prompt with our services,” she said, her voice lowering as she glanced down to the winnings scattered across the table, as well as the modest gambler’s pool in the center. “We’ve a waitress with child and another caught with *ghastly* circumstances.”

The Badger, whom Madame Sybil recognized by scent alone was the local blacksmith, was doing poorly, but drink was keeping his spirits high. The Wolves across from the Cattle Dog were already on edge—Sybil had no doubts that the three intended to pool their winnings after the game, as so many Wolf packs often did. By her count and the obvious distress of the two Wolves that had refused to touch their drinks, this game had cost them quite a bit.

“It seems that you have been quite fortunate, sir,” Madame Sybil commented

softly, placing a single paw over the shoulder of the Cattle Dog. He was a proud testament to his species; a solid block of muscle, with a splotchy, merle pattern in his fur everywhere save for his perky, black ears and white furred chin.

“I’ve had a decent night,” he agreed. The Panther leaned forward— covering his winnings for a moment with her paw before smiling to the group. She made space for herself between the Badger and the Cattle Dog, smiling around the table pleasantly.

“I must admit, I’ve never understood this... is it *poker*?” Sybil asked, trying her damndest to sound interested.

“Scuttle, m’lady,” One of the Wolves spoke up. Sybil was now certain the Wolf in the center was the alpha of the three; he’d been the only one to speak throughout their limited conversation.

“I was never much good with cards,” The madame mused softly. “I always found them too easily manipulated, if one knew what they were doing,” She added pointedly, glancing to the small pile of coins in the center of the table.

The group at the table exchanged uncertain glances with one another, before all eyes settled on Madame Sybil, who leaned forward. She carefully set her paw over the top of the Cattle Dog’s winnings—knowing full well that none of them noticed the trio of coins she’d cupped in her paw to place atop the pile.

She took a moment to feel the pile beneath her palm, mulling over how to best approach the group at the table. One of the things she particularly adored about the currency was the splash of color that it managed to add to the otherwise droll table. Each of the coins—Crests, Dukes, Barons and Queens—were the same size, but unique in their colors. While each was little more than a band of metal around the perimeter of a colored bit of glass, they were entertaining, in their own right, to look over. The Crests and Dukes were bands of brass, surrounding gray and green tinted glass, whereas the Barons and Queens were bands of silver, surrounding a gorgeous shades of sapphire and red, respectively. Unlike foreign

it remarkably simple to modify a pot for poker. Most of the beasts in her establishment weren’t keen enough observers to notice if a color changed until the tempers threatened to insight a sort of violence.

“Shall we play a little game of our own?” The madame challenged. Their

nodding toward the Cattle Dog. By feel alone, she could tell there were seven

Crests, four Dukes and two Barons, to not include the three Barons she had added. It was a tidy sum of money; nearly two full paychecks, in fact.

“Why would—”

“The closest guess is the winner; and winner drinks free,” Madame Sybil upstairs *personally*.”

A low whistle of surprise came from the table as the Panther looked around. Her grin widened as the Wolves and Badger began to look at their own winnings—making their bets. She smiled pleasantly, even though none of them would be able to come close to the sum.

This tactic had worked a hundred times over in Madame Sybil’s career, even before she was a Madame. The additional Barons were a hefty sum— but not utterly unrealistic for the wagers set on the table. Particularly with Wolves and their incredible sense of honor, at best it would be seen as a

stay at their table longer. They would, without a doubt, accuse the Cattle Dog of the worst of crimes and when the Cattle Dog couldn’t provide a valid answer, he would be labeled a cheat.

The Southern Docks were no place for any sort of beast that would be labeled such.

“Time is short, gents,” Madame Sybil remarked carefully. “And if you do

“I had four crests, a baron and three dukes,” The Cattle Dog muttered softly to Madame Sybil, praying the others wouldn’t hear. The Panther ignored the comments made by the other patrons of the table, turning her head slightly to the Canine beside her.

“I’ve added a few bits extra to help with Adrella’s recovery,” she

immediately to her voice as she stood and shook her head to the small gathering.

“Sorry gents, not quite,” Madame Sybil said as she slid from the table and back to the bar, her poise returning to her movements.

Patricia returned a moment later, stepping around Madame Sybil as a controlled, graceful smile parted the Panther’s statuesque features.

Sybil,” the Leopardess remarked, scowling down at the dishes as she stacked

them near the edge of the bar to be cleaned in a moment. “But how can you expect to properly run a brothel if you are directly giving away coin to abusers? Doesn’t that *invite* their ilk?”

“Not at all,” Madame Sybil replied gracefully. “I’ve forced karma into action.” Patricia gave her a small, unamused glance. “How?”

“I’ve tilted the pot unfavorably towards a Cattle Dog who deserves every bit of the beating he will receive,” Madame Sybil explained. “I told him it was for Adrella’s recovery. Now, he may explain to his group that it was a gift for such recovery and out himself as an abuser, or he can say nothing and allow himself to be labeled as a cheat, or worse, a thief.”

Patricia blinked at Madame Sybil, but the Panther’s face remained as controlled and stoic as ever. “They may *kill* him!” Patricia’s voice trembled.

“The moment the constables hear that Adrella works in a brothel, she shall be branded a pariah,” Madame Sybil replied sternly. “They will not do anything to help her even if she arrived at a precinct with her arm twisted

A small bit of pride welled in Sybil’s chest; despite her initial confusion, Patricia would take this lesson to heart. The Leopardess didn’t make a further remark as she stepped around the Panther to return to her chores.

She savored the moment, only to relax, casting her gaze over the empty

Tiger who stepped behind her would have been something of a surprise, had she had a less suspicious upbringing; but in her many years of being a proprietor of a house of evening professionals, Madame Sybil had learned

acute awareness of her surroundings. She calculated her step, plotting a movement that would put her directly in front of the Tiger, rather than running into him.

“Mikhail Vladislav.” Madame Sybil’s back straightened regally, turning. The arctic-colored Tiger was, in simplest of terms, a mountain of meat. His fur was a milky, midnight shade of moonlit white, with slate gray and

what was typical of the docks of Charinthosse, obviously in an attempt to blend in: baggy, hide pants, coupled with a long-sleeve shirt, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a vest he undoubtedly ‘borrowed’ from

his shirt collar. Even though he tried to blend into the crowd, Madame Sybil

knew precisely who he was. His reputation preceded him.

He was an assassin of highest caliber and a soldier of fortune. The type of beast who would sell the world on a whim, only to betray the beast to whom he sold it for the reward thereafter. His reputation preceded him and it made her stomach churn with distaste. Some of Sybil's personal clients were from the upper echelons of society and had shown her pictures of the Tiger with dire warnings, deepest regrets and conspiracy theories in equal measure.

Mikhail looked down at the Panther with a knowing smile, cocking his head gently to the side as he purred. "Madame Sybil, I presume," the Panther looked the Tiger in the eye; they exchanged controlled, professional nods to one another.

"But of course." Madame Sybil brushed creases from her dress before locking her gaze with the Tiger's.

"You've heard of me, obviously," Mikhail's tail twitched—the Panther

dossiers she'd seen implied, he prided himself on being something of a

enlisted her services personally while working on cases involving the Tiger. Straddling the line between the criminal and legal worlds had proven invaluable on more than one occasion. "I should like to know how," he added, his features otherwise set in stone.

"Information is powerful and I'll not divulge my sources," Madame Sybil responded bluntly. Mikhail nodded contemplatively, maintaining an otherwise pleasant demeanor.

"Then no doubt you know I've been paid to be here," The Tiger responded smoothly.

claim the same," Madame Sybil kept her tone equally pleasant. "Though I doubt you are here to entertain any particular interests."

"I'll not be insulted, Madame." Mikhail couldn't keep a boiling growl from invading his cordial tone.

like to know for whom you've been paid; we've only a pair of whores, a

"Does it matter?"

"Coy doesn't suit you," the Panther shot as the Tiger gave his most convincing of grins. "Speak your piece or away with you."

"Kendall Whitaker," Mikhail uttered quietly, his grin transforming into a toothy,

carnivorous snarl.

//// Chapter Three: The Caper's Close

Theodore tasted the air around the question, regarding the professor suspiciously before nodding. "Go ahead."

"Would it satisfy you to know these are for military research?" The Otter indicated the notes, waving them softly through the air. Theodore shook his head and Whitaker groaned softly. "In that case, are you daft or desperate?"

"If you must know, desperate," Theodore shrugged. "Not too many exciting things happen in my life and this is one of them. Explain in twenty words or less, please."

"You give more of an impression that you're daft, then," the professor articulated carefully. "You've no stake, or leverage in this discussion and time is of the essence—if you please, *shut. Your. Mouth.*"

"I need only raise my voice for security to run through that door, the

harder. "I believe we can decide on whether or not you need my help from there," Theodore's eyes narrowed as he leaned forward, bracing his open paws against his thighs. The professor clicked his tongue dryly at Theodore's feeble attempt at wit, only to scowl. "I do swear to you this much— discretion is my *highest* priority. I may be the last person you can trust."

"Thy word thy bond, thy bond thy brother, thy brother thy life," the professor almost automatically quoted what was arguably the spine of society. "And what good is the word of a whore?"

statement. The Wolf watched in silence as Whitaker replaced the papers in his satchel, slapping the clasp shut irritably. He glowered in Theodore's direction and the Wolf was only too happy to take that as a sort of backwards

anything doesn't leave bases. Research especially," Theodore tried to grin, rather than to take obvious long rant short I'm going to call you a snitch."

Kendall's eyebrow arched, the Otter grunting darkly in Theodore's direction as he pushed his glasses back onto his face. "Hardly anything so mundane."

"For what, may I ask?"

“Unless the documents I have are *masterful* forgeries, there is a group of scholars that faked their deaths in order to play God. If that is all, I should have my leave.”

Theodore’s eyebrow arched. “Pardon?”

“I do not believe I could have been more concise.” Whitaker couldn’t

leaving them be. Suddenly, his stance became more alert and he turned his head to stare at the door.

“But—”

“Shush,” the professor ordered, moving back to the door. He leaned against it, then carefully moved his head down the wall, pressing his ear against it. The Otter straightened his back and Theodore heard it too.

hardly had to strain to hear it; it sounded more serious than a drunken brawl.

“Goddamnit...” Whitaker murmured, stepping urgently away from the door. He glanced toward the closed window, baring his teeth in frustration. Theodore could see the wheels turning in his head as the professor fought for a solution.

who didn’t initially hear the question. His eyes were turned toward the door—his ears perked as he leaned toward it. A deliberate, almost menacing silence rested on the other side of the door. Whitaker stepped toward Theodore and Theodore blinked.

then nodded, standing up and stepping around Whitaker, trying to be light on his feet as he passed uncomfortably close to the door.

“I do, but—”

“Get it,” Whitaker ordered softly, looking toward the door with a small scowl. He leaned forward, pressing his ear against the wood, clearly straining

the bed. He tried to step lightly, only to wince at the groan of one of the

“Quickly!” The Otter insisted.

The Lupine strode across the room to the mantle, carefully reaching uncomfortably warmed, but not enough to burn on touch. He tugged and worked a brick free, setting it down quickly near the hearth.

Whitaker followed Theodore closely, snatching the brick without caring to let it cool completely, tossing it onto the bed. Theodore opened his mouth to speak, but the professor raised a single paw to silence him.

The Otter mulled the brick over in his paws, his face a mask of accessible in the world, the gun was also not obtained through the most legal of means. It was something that his usual clientele would ask questions distastefully at the Lupine, returning the compartment to Theodore grudgingly. “For all that college level intellect—” The Wolf grinned savagely. moment for a carefully hidden lever arm. Theodore pressed his nail beneath it, lifting to reveal the open compartment. Whitaker’s scowl deepened; said nothing, reaching uncertainly into the now-opened secret compartment to retrieve a few folds of cloth that contained Theodore’s six-shooter.

“Why the hell do you even need a gun?” Theodore hissed, keeping his tone hushed. “And what gives you the right to be such a *cur*?” The Otter matched the Wolf’s icy glare, then bent forward slowly, speaking quickly. “Are you familiar with the Arligent Experiment?” The professor asked bluntly.

Theodore nodded. “I read it in the papers, once upon a time... ‘Bout three

electricity. It failed, then ended up killing a bunch of people. Why does this matter, I thought you were in a rush!?”

“It failed on purpose.”

The Wolf’s eyebrow arched. “Excuse me? I don’t think I understand, but you say these are *connected*? Would you care to straighten *any* of this out?”

“The Arligent Experiment was designed from the ground up to fail,” The Otter repeated himself. “I have the documents that all but prove it, as well as ledgers, letters and technical notes to describe in detail *why* the experiment failed. ”

Theodore blinked again, standing slowly. He didn’t even realize he was clutching his pistol until he heard the dry click of the hammer.

The Otter grabbed his wrist immediately, raising a paw to the Wolf’s

bone and pushed the Wolf brutally against the wall, holding his arm away from his side.

Theodore had once been taught about leverage—how he could have the simply by merit of the Otter’s strength.

“It isn’t loaded for fuck’s sake!” Theodore hissed.

“Why in the blazes,” the professor blinked, then shook his head. “We do not have time for this.” The Mustelid threw his paws down, twisting the gun away and disarming the Wolf in a single motion as he stepped away, only to toss the gun onto the hearth.

Theodore blinked down at his paws. He'd thought he'd had a good grip

Otter.

the papers neatly. The Wolf arched an eyebrow at the suddenly controlled demeanor of the Otter, particularly since he'd been so panicked only moments before.

Theodore froze as he heard the telltale sounds of someone begin checking the doors and making quite the ass of themselves, if screams of protest and accusations of perversion were anything to go by. By the sounds of it, whoever was checking was on the opposite side of the hallway, checking each door in line before reaching the far side of the hall and coming back in their direction.

The professor moved the room and checking the door wedge, as well as latching the long-neglected bolt on the door.

Whitaker began to throw the drawers open, not seeming to give a damn for their contents before sliding them shut. He made his way down one of the three columns of drawers in the vanity before the professor beckoned the Wolf over quickly.

Theodore leapt over the bed, not matching the Otter's grace in the slightest as he slid next to the professor. "Is there any drawer that *isn't* to the brim with your tolerances!?" Whitaker asked, the rattling of the doors coming down the hallway toward them.

"For the love of God, you came to a brothel—"

"Chains, Locke. Do you have them?" The Otter spat. The Wolf splayed his ears then nodded. Theodore ducked to the base drawer, opening the deep compartment quickly.

The door was tested and the pair froze. The door groaned slowly beneath the pressure of someone pushing on it. Someone strong.

where it was from.

"Who is it?" The Otter demanded, sounding quite annoyed. Theodore arched an eyebrow at the Otter's rather phenomenal acting skills and he reached forward, snatching the satchel before the Otter could grab at it. "Open up, Professor." The voice from the other side of the door came.

Theodore's stomach sank at the sound of the voice. He couldn't help but to

was had clearly heard enough to positively identify Whitaker.

“I am indisposed at the moment,” Professor Whitaker spat back, watching Theodore work.

The Wolf opened his shirt and his vest with the satchel in front of him,

satchel and placed it behind him. He shook his arms only for a moment before Whitaker understood what he was after and helped to conceal the satchel beneath his shirt and vest, while giving the impression that Theodore’s wrists were bound behind him. He shrunk down immediately, nestling into

all but hidden from view between the vanity and the bed.

“Jammed *and* locked, Whitaker?” The voice mused on the other side of the door.

“If you are so concerned with privacy, why even acknowledge your presence at all?”

“Because, you *boor*,” the Otter snapped angrily as he strode to the door,

pay extra for the damages you would inevitably cause to the door!”

The solid oak door was thrown open—and a White Tiger with inky black stripes pushed his way into the room. Whitaker deposited the chains on the foot of the bed with a dark grunt while the Tiger glanced around.

the view of the “bound” Wolf.

between your uncle and now you I should begin to wonder what proclivities your father may have,” The Tiger goaded as Professor Whitaker moved toward the hearth. The massive Feline leaned down in front of Theodore for only a moment, reaching forward to grip his chin and turn his head from side to side as if inspecting him. He turned for only a moment and reached

strap of leather.

Without invitation, or request, the Tiger’s paws shot forward and

his head away. The Feline patted his cheek as Theodore growled softly at him, Whitaker now having disappeared from Theodore’s obstructed view kneeling to retrieve something only to be revealed by standing a moment later. Even as Theodore sat up, the Wolf sandwiched between the large bed and vanity, pressing his back against the wall; there was only so much he could get away with to still see what was going on.

The Wolf shrank down, trying to make himself rather inconspicuous as he glanced beneath the bed—ducking his head as low as he could comfortably do so the instant the Tiger’s back was turned to him. He tried looking beneath

leather now wrapped about his muzzle. When the Otter had reached to pick up the door wedge, he had also snagged the gun from the hearth. The Wolf squirmed back up to a more comfortable position, his own mind whirling with the possibilities of what Whitaker could be planning.

The Mustelid held the door wedge in his paws, but from where Theodore “Usually they have a more sultry companion,” the Otter explained quietly.

The Tiger tutted his tongue softly, glancing toward Whitaker before turning his shoulders to face the professor. “Usually? I thought you were not one to regularly go whoring.”

“Well,” the professor nodded, then swallowed visibly. Theodore winced on Whitaker’s behalf—if he had seen it, Theodore couldn’t even imagine a scenario in which the Tiger hadn’t. “I will admit that there is more to the separation of myself and my wife than I have cared to admit to the others.”

“Ah,” the Tiger replied coolly, only to turn his gaze back toward Theodore before sneering. “If he were so morbidly obese as Mr. Shepard, I could certainly see the resemblance,” Theodore grunted into the leather. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but something hard in the bag was prodding his kidneys uncomfortably.

“Yes, yes,” Whitaker waved his paw dismissively of Theodore’s movements.

“I’ll pay you extra for having more than one of us here.”

“I am not staying, Professor Whitaker,” the Tiger replied smoothly. “I’m only here to ensure that certain properties are safe.”

Professor Whitaker seemed so calm, but Theodore’s heart was racing.

anyways? What the hell were these two playing at?

“Why the devil would properties be missing?” The Otter glanced down to Theodore and asked. “Or are you using it as a sort of excuse to come visit a brothel with me?”

The Tiger bared his teeth, a growl boiling in his thick throat. “I do not visit

whore houses.”

“Ah, how could I forget?” Whitaker responded immediately. “But alas I do, Mr. Vladislav. And I would appreciate to be left in peace.”

The Tiger breathed in slowly, then began circling. “You seem eager to be rid of me,” the Tiger said, taking steady, deliberate steps about the room. Theodore shifted, trying to ensure the bag behind him was as hidden as it was able.

“Certainly you understand that these rooms are rented by the hour and more than one patron is extra,” The professor replied stubbornly. The Tiger continued breathing in slowly through his nose—the Wolf felt his heart skip a beat. He knew the expression.

Theodore glanced warily between the Otter and the Tiger, his view still widely obstructed by the bed. Vladislav, Whitaker had called him, knelt

were

and he looked away from the pair. He felt the leather satchel behind him, gripping it gently and shifting in his seat.

“What do you *think* you heard?” Whitaker challenged slowly. fail—” Mikhail said smoothly. “Another couple of things about a pistol and having proof of such an elaborate scheme.”

as if he was itching to pull the gun on the Tiger. The professor restrained

at Mikhail’s intrusion. Theodore could tell the professor’s emotions weren’t truly genuine—he could only imagine how easily it was for this Mikhail Vladislav to see through the deception.

“Perhaps I got a bit overzealous in my role playing, that doesn’t quite muzzle.

Mikhail turned to look down at Theodore once more, who shrank back into the shadows near the vanity. He’d never considered himself a coward by any stretch of the imagination, but there was murder in the Tiger’s gaze. The intruder’s eyes narrowed in on Theodore, stepping forward to stand directly in front of the Wolf.

Mikhail lifted Theodore’s chin, turning his head to and fro, as if inspecting the leather band keeping Theodore’s mouth shut. Theodore pretended to struggle softly, more focused on crushing the satchel behind him to keep it out of sight.

“I’m only here to make sure you aren’t over-sharing anything, Whitaker,”

Vladislav said, standing up to turn once more. He slid around the bed with liquid grace, standing in front of Whitaker once more with an almost

same time that you did.”

The Otter straightened his back as Vladislav’s gaze left him. The professor documents here,” he said quietly.

The Tiger’s expression changed to a small bemused smirk, but he didn’t had rooted out where the documents were hidden.

guests’ gaze. Theodore did his damndest to not betray Whitaker’s tactics— he thought he could see the Otter reaching for the pistol in his waistband. “Who said anything about looking for documents?” Mikhail asked softly.

behind Mikhail. Silence engulfed the pair, but only for a moment before Mikhail turned violent, raising his arm to strike Whitaker.

Theodore didn’t see the professor’s response, focusing instead on getting to his own feet and untangled from everything. He tugged once at the makeshift muzzle, only for Whitaker to be thrown atop the bed. Theodore heard one of the supports beneath the mattress shatter with the force of the professor’s landing and another groan in strain as Mikhail vaulted over the bed to stand in front of Theodore.

“The documents, Wolf,” he said simply, holding out a paw for them.

uncomfortably close to the open window sill.

mattress and yanked the gun from the back of his trousers, staggering for a

The Otter was slammed against the wall, held there only for a moment by the Tiger. Whitaker didn’t have time to bare his teeth before Mikhail twisted and threw him again, this time toward the hearth.

The professor dropped the gun upon the impact, landing with a heavy thud against the ground. The Tiger was upon him in the same instant,

muzzle, his teeth bared in a sick, triumphant grin as he readied the hammer on the revolver. “Do say hel—” The Tiger started, only for Whitaker to heft the hollow brick from the hearth and reduce it to pebbles and dust against the side of Mikhail’s head.

The pistol fell from Mikhail’s paw, clearly caught by surprise with the Theodore found the will to move restored, scrambling awkwardly over

“Downstairs, *now!*” Whitaker yelled, himself scrabbling away from the prone Tiger and getting to his feet.

Theodore was halfway out the open door before Whitaker even spoke, even then the Otter right on his heels. Whitaker snagged the chains from the foot of the bed, looping them several times around the door handle as he slammed it shut. Theodore grabbed as much of the chains as he could to help pull them taut, wrapping them on the door knob across the hallway, to keep both doors closed. Theodore was grateful for the inward-opening doors that allowed a tactic such as this possible. “Use the rafter passage milord and lady, I do apologize for the inconvenience!” Whitaker shouted through the door to a pair of surprised gasps.

his muzzle as well. He quickly spun the satchel around, moving to wear it properly even as Whitaker attempted to shove him down the hallway toward the stairs.

“Then what *precisely* is the point of keeping the gun hidden, or even at all!?” Whitaker hissed.

“Because no one else knows it’s not loaded, you sea rat!” Theodore shot back, keeping his tone hushed. “That and you’ve never answered my question and *continue* to press the issue! What gives you the right to be *such* a *cur!*?”

Theodore demanded as he tucked in his shirt hastily.

“*Is now the time for that?*” Whitaker demanded, shoving Theodore toward the staircase. The pair all but fell down the stairs to the bar below.

The professor hissed something after Theodore, but the Wolf paid it no mind as he strode quickly past the bar nestled beneath the staircase.

This time of night, it wasn’t uncommon for the drinks to have stopped and the scene to be winding down. Theodore couldn’t help but feel disgusted by the normality of the scene—no one seemed to even be questioning the thumping and shouting that had come from upstairs.

Patricia continued to wait the steadily emptying tables, beasts were still

and even a baron, won by a particularly lucky patron.

“Bullets!” Whitaker hissed at Theodore. The Wolf turned, only to step back as one of the patrons of the bar drew closer with a drunken stagger.

Theodore’s eyes left Whitaker for only a moment; barely enough time to step out of the drunkard’s way—but when he turned his head back around to

look for the professor, he was gone.

His stomach sank. If Whitaker was willing to hide, then being anywhere near the open area of the bar was the last place Theodore wanted to be.

He ducked quickly behind the bar, grinning nervously up at Patricia. She nodded uncomfortably at the sight of seeing the Wolf with his gun. “Do I want to know?” The Leopardess asked softly. She was perceptive enough to understand Theodore wanted the small burlap sack that held what little belongings he brought with him for the day. However, she didn’t seem to understand the urgency of the situation.

“Very important! Move!” For Patricia’s sake and feelings, Theodore attempted to be polite, but couldn’t quite manage it. His ears perked as he heard the doors above him yank open. Patricia gave a loud yelp of surprise as Theodore lunged forward, snatching the sack from her.

He upended it on the counter, opening the cylinder of the revolver. With shaking paws he retrieved a few bullets from the pile of extra clothes. He The footsteps were coming down the stairs.

Theodore ducked behind the bar, throwing his clothes into the far corner of the bar near the dirty rags. He didn’t give a damn where Whitaker had ended up and his paws were shaking too badly to put the bullets in any sort of real order. “Theodore, what is going on?” Patricia asked, her voice rising in concern.

“Just try to ignore me,” Theodore spat, sinking down behind the bar.

There was a small alcove beneath the tabletop. From the stink of the hole, it had housed a formerly full keg of beer, but it would do. Theodore sank into the space, keeping his feet underneath him as best he could.

There was now nothing between him and the Tiger—the bar little more than a table draped in weighted burlap. Theodore cursed himself, his shaking paws leaving a gap between the shots. He emptied the cylinder to get it right a second time.

He cursed himself again for his poor choice of hiding places. The footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs.

Theodore felt his body quaking. He could feel Patricia’s gaze on him. It was giving him away, but he didn’t dare move to try and convince her to avert her gaze.

The footfalls moved around the bar, moving deliberately passed Theodore. The quiet click of the cylinder snapping shut sounded as if the entire bar would hear it.

“How can I help you, sir?” Patricia asked. Her back was turned to where Theodore guessed Mikhail to be, the Leopardess busying herself with

cleaning a stein or two.

“Tell me Kitten, is it customary to leave clothes and coin so upended on the counters of these establishments? Forgive me, I’m not at all familiar with bordellos.” The buttery smooth voice sent chills down Theodore’s spine. Patricia turned slowly, then dropped the glass she was holding. It shattered

yelp as some of it skittered in his direction.

“Your head, sir...!” She gasped softly, Patricia immediately ducking to glance around beneath the bar. “I’ve a rag here somewhere, let me get it for you—”

“Thank you,” Mikhail said simply, contenting himself to stand in silence

She was careful to move about the broken glass on the ground before giving over the cloth.

“Are you alright?” Patricia’s voice came. From his hiding place, Theodore could see the hem of her skirt, but not much else. He leaned forward

Theodore glanced down at his paw, silently baring his teeth at himself for his own stupidity—a shard of glass had sliced open the pawpad of his ring was bleeding. He slid his paw between his bicep and his ribs, squeezing it tightly beneath his right arm to try and apply pressure at the expense of a steadily growing stain in his armpit. It wasn’t as

the gun.

“Is something wrong, sir?” Patricia asked.

“Nothing that isn’t evidently obvious,” Vladislav cooed softly. “Unless I’m

quite mistaken, there’s quite a bit more blood on the air than my gash. How is your foot, miss?” He asked carefully.

Patricia paused in surprise. “My foot isn’t hurt, si—” She began.

The makeshift bar was torn from its admittedly-unsecure perch, revealing the half-empty kegs of alcohol and Theodore. The Wolf scrambled to his feet, his ears splayed as he raised the pistol in the Tiger’s direction.

Vladislav tossed the oak table to the side. Despite the thing’s sturdy make and steel braces, he didn’t seem as if he was putting himself out much. Theodore’s eyes went wide as he saw the nearly-ruined side of Vladislav’s face. The Tiger’s green eyes bored holes into Theodore’s, the assassin’s features contorted to an ugly snarl. Blood covered the side of his head where Whitaker had destroyed the brick—matted fur beginning to brown slightly as the blood started to dry. “The

satchel, Wolf.” Mikhail’s voice boiled.

part of this little shitshow—”

“You are for as long as you hold onto that damned bag. Pass it over, get to growl as he took another step forward.

“I don’t think I believe you,” Theodore said, a wry, half-cocked grin of bravado by allowing a chuckle to invade his statement. It was clear that Mikhail was having none of it.

The Wolf yelped as Mikhail closed the distance—dropping low and immediately shoving his shoulder into the Wolf’s stomach. Theodore’s eyes went wide as the wind was knocked from his lungs; a simple, well-rehearsed turn tossed him high overhead and sent him sailing into the tables as Patricia screamed.

Theodore landed hard, skidding through the wreckage of a pair of the card tables and chairs, but he still had a hold of the bag. Mikhail turned to face him, Theodore blinking spots from his vision.

“This is your last chance, you *cur*,” Mikhail bared his teeth further, his voice seething with fury. “If you don’t—”

Theodore took advantage of the threat, raising the gun and pulling the trigger. an empty cylinder. The next three pulls were accompanied with deafening the recoil from each of the shots pushed his shoulders back uncomfortably against the table wreckage.

Blurred as his vision was, he couldn’t see if he’d hit Mikhail or not. He continued pulling the trigger nonetheless until all he heard was the dry clicking of the hammer striking at either open air, or inert primer.

He shook his head clear, pulling himself to his feet with a small groan. “A little help?” Theodore asked of Patricia, only for his request to be answered by the feeling of a heavy foot landing against his chest.

Theodore nearly slid back, but Mikhail pressed down further, pinning the Wolf’s back against the debris. “I didn’t expect you to have the balls to pull the trigger,” The Tiger chided.

Theodore ground his teeth, his attacker pressing his full weight against the foot that pinned Theodore to the ground. He tried grabbing the Tiger’s himself.

It was then that Whitaker chose to materialize from wherever he had been hiding. Judging by the bottle he held, Theodore could have only assumed it the Mikhail did slump forward, nearly on top of Theodore, had Whitaker not been there to roll the Tiger away as he fell.

Theodore scrambled from beneath the motionless Feline, panting hard. He hardly even noticed the gash on his paw and the slight trail of blood he left through the wreckage of the tables.

“Call the constables,” Whitaker barked at Patricia. “But if anyone asks, please —”

“I didn’t see you! I understand,” Patricia nearly yelped as she trembled, speaking through her paws at her mouth. “Discretion is our highest priority,” She muttered, her voice trapped somewhere between reassuring Whitaker and reminding herself of the most basic of rules.

Whitaker’s gaze softened for only a moment, but he said nothing else.

he was dragged to his feet and shoved, satchel and all toward the staircase. The Wolf was guided by Whitaker, as if the Otter didn’t believe Theodore could walk on his own.

“We need to leave, now,” Whitaker grunted, pushing Theodore a bit harder as shouting came from the street outside.

“T... The blood,” Theodore stammered, visibly shaken as Whitaker dragged him upstairs, taking the gun easily. “I’ve never shot anyone before...”

if Whitaker was trying to console him, or berate him. “But for now, we’re both marked. We need to leave and leave quickly,” The professor said quietly. right; while the chains would have been strong enough to hold the Tiger in

“My God...” Theodore muttered, watching Whitaker step around the chains, into Theodore’s room.

“You said this window takes you through a labyrinth, correct?” The professor called from inside. Theodore followed him after a moment, still stunned from the spectacle.

“Y-yes sir.”

“I will need you to be my guide,” Whitaker stated, straddling the window ledge and beckoning the Wolf forward. “Gather whatever you can grab and run with. We need to leave before Vladislav wakes up, or God forbid, we are arrested.”

Theodore nodded, climbing out of the window with ease. The Wolf blinked, his gaze narrowing in the moonless night. Whitaker allowed him to step past—grabbing his wrist as he did so. “Your paw!” Whitaker exclaimed. Theodore yanked it away from the professor, pressing the thumb of

worried about him following the scent, don’t. That’s what the skunkweed is for ___”

“But it needs tending to. That gash appears deep,” Whitaker protested.

Theodore looked to the Otter with cold regard, arching an eyebrow. “Growing suddenly attached, are we?”

“Oh, for the love of...” Whitaker scowled, his eyes narrowing behind the

rim of his glasses. “I’ve told you! I am a physician! It is quite *literally my job* to tend to medical concerns!”

“And here we are again,” Theodore grunted, taking a step down the corridor.

“You *insisting* that we hurry, only to slow our entire escape down with

with the wife, yes? Perhaps it isn’t *just* the ‘whoring’?” He grumbled, still clutching his paw.

and between the ivy and walls. *Northern District*... He thought to himself. He knew the path well enough—it would skirt them along the wall near the

Western Wall until they would take a hard right and head directly from the guard house to the Northern District. Theodore wasn’t looking forward to the ladder he knew that would take them back to street level.

establishment managed it. So many of them were so grossly overweight—anyone to arrive anywhere in the Southern District and, if one were creative enough, even into the Western District within minutes.

spouses or worse. He’d only ever been witness to one such evening, but it

do with their trips to the whore houses being damaging to their livelihoods. Assigning taboos to something as natural as sex—be it the ‘public image’ of some sod in a long black robe, or something sacred that must only be

“Would you like to split up at the Fishmonger’s, or closer to the heart listened to the distinct click of the cylinder of the revolver snapping back into place. Whitaker had loaded the pistol?

“I need you to get me as close to Northern District as possible. That and I don’t believe it’s safe for you to return to the Silver Ladle any time soon.” Theodore glanced over his shoulder as Whitaker turned over the revolver in his paws. A cold knot twisted in Theodore’s stomach as he began to suspect

Whitaker did notice Theodore’s increasingly nervous stride, he didn’t show it. “These had once been used by drug smugglers, you know.” The Wolf tried

the nagging anxiety in the back of his mind. The worst of the bleeding had stopped from the gash on his paw, but they continued to shake. Whitaker’s silence was almost unbearable.

Theodore closed his eyes, trying to get a bearing of his surroundings as his mind desperately focused on something—*anything* else. He recognized the almost overpowering smell of blade oil and coal. The wind carried a

crossing over the blacksmith’s forge when Whitaker spoke next. “Mr. Locke, stop here.”

Theodore’s ears perked and he heard the cylinder turn over, the hammer of the gun priming. He didn’t need to turn around to know the gun was pointed at him now.

Theodore raised his clasped paws slowly over his head, as if to show that

Theodore snapped, unable to keep a nearly-sarcastic growl from his voice. He stood still as Whitaker stepped closer to remove the satchel. Theodore unclasped his paws as the leather bag was lifted from his shoulders, feeling

His back straightened as Whitaker continued.

“I want you to answer me truthfully, Mr. Locke,” the Otter said. “Because you must understand now the situation that you are in.”

Theodore nodded, his toes curling against the rooftop as the Wolf braced

as his weight shifted from the pads of his feet, allowing his nails to grip the ground below.

He wasn’t scared of the gun. It may have been a .38 special, favored by gangs and the like—but unless Whitaker brought his own ammo, the worst thing in that

chamber was a 'low powder' bullet. At least, that was if the fence that sold it to Theodore was to be believed. It was a small comfort, even if that wouldn't remarkably change the damage they could do at this range.

Even then, in order to get his paws on bullets, Whitaker would have had to search Theodore's bag. The Wolf blinked at the thought, mulling it over as Whitaker spoke.

"Mikhail Vladislav knows your face now. He knows your scent. He knows you," Whitaker explained. "You may live the rest of your life, on the run and simple label, or I can give you a quick death here."

Theodore hadn't seen Whitaker go through his bag... and Theodore had the satchel. He couldn't imagine the odds were too great that Whitaker wouldn't have asked for bullets if he had them, either.

He almost smiled at the small revelation. He silently reminded himself to kiss Madame Sybil for all of her instructions of observation and reading the customer's behaviors.

"What the hell would they even want with me? It's you that stole from

room with me, I'm in danger? Your concern is *almost* touching, Whitaker."

"They will do things to try to track where I may have gone," the Otter moved the gun up, now pressing the barrel against the back of Theodore's skull. The Wolf closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. "I do not want to kill you, but I cannot leave a loose end."

He carefully considered his options as Whitaker spoke again. "What will it be, Mr. Locke?"

you any of my extra rounds?" Theodore asked, arching an eyebrow, allowing his eyes to crack back open. He let his paws fall to his side and turned. Even is empty. Unless of course, you happen to also be carrying a few spare .38 cartridges in particularly creative places. But I doubt that *very* much." The Otter gave a surprised, but strangely approving grunt. Theodore Whitaker stepped around Theodore, glancing over his shoulder as he passed by and motioning forward. "Excellently played, Mr. Locke."

Theodore debated lunging at Whitaker, if only to attempt to bounce the

options.

"But why point the gun at me at all?" Theodore's eyes narrowed. The professor

shrugged, glancing to the sky for a moment, then back to

Theodore. “Perhaps it was a bit dramatic, but I also needed to see how you responded under pressure.”

to be.”

Theodore fought the urge to roll his eyes. “And why would I go with you?”
“Because if it’s not you that gets pulled into this, it’s someone else.”

Whitaker lowered his tone. “Would you really want that? To die in a whore’s

“Seeing that it’s *clearly* not going to be you that does the killing, what precisely do you think will happen up here?” The Wolf quizzed, his teeth baring some.

us. I doubt that he will be as willing to resort to theatricality and subterfuge—he’s far more the throat-cutting type.” Whitaker explained coolly. “So, it’s go with you and risk dying later, or stay here and risk dying now?”
shrugged carefully. “There really isn’t much of a choice to make here,” the Otter said,

if it were day. You may come with me, or you can do yourself a favor and give hints of light showing through the rooftops from the Silver Ladle. The bullets he’d managed to fumble into the pistol were all that he’d been able to grab forward once again and nodding to Whitaker. “Fine,” he grumbled. “I’ll take you to Northern District and we’ll head to your ‘safer place’ from there.”
who would be more than the match for Mr. Vladislav, don’t you fret,” the professor started. “Have you ever heard of—”

Theodore didn’t bother to spare the professor even the slightest glance, staring further down the moonlit path. “You have gaslights at your house, Whitaker?”
He interrupted, turning his muzzle over his shoulder.

The Otter blinked before starting out after Theodore, stammering for a moment before clearing his throat meaningfully. “I do, in fact.”

“Wonderful,” Theodore sneered in the professor’s direction. “Perhaps we can get lucky and the entire house can explode like a tinderbox, rather than face a rabid Tiger’s wrath?”

“I... I hardly understand,” the Otter muttered softly before clearing his throat. “For whatever it’s worth to you, Mr. Locke,” Whitaker said as Theodore stepped past him. “I think you are making the right decision.”

Theodore stopped mid-stride, only to half-turn to Whitaker and scowl. “What

could possibly give you the inclination that I give a *damn* about your opinion?”

//// Chapter Four: The Letter

T

though the gesture was nearly fruitless, it seemed to help calm Whitaker's discomfort, as well as to prevent himself from getting nervous, Theodore let his gaze travel in circles around the interior of the carriage.

"Feral-drawn" was a thing of the past now. Under any other circumstances, Theodore would marvel at the thought: an automobile!

Internal combustion engines had been the talk of sailors for a few years now. Theodore had initially heard of them while he was working at the steel mills on the Southern Docks. Now, he trundled away past gaslit houses, decadent parties, and a life that didn't seem real.

Aside from the cherry-red cushions, the interior of the taxi was remarkably bland: built of lightly stained oak benches and sidewall panels covering a barely-hidden metal frame behind an almost-haphazard layer of glue and cloth. The 'next generation' of transportation had numerous 'features' that needed to be worked out before it would feel like any form of luxury.

within his power to not make eye contact, or even glance toward the professor across the carriage from him. Each moment in the car made him increasingly disgusted with what he could only call his kidnapper. Somehow, gazing out

irate.

It was not the immeasurable wealth locked in the marble buildings and crystal chandeliers which made Theodore's stomach churn. For all of the pawblown artisanal glasses, expensive wine—part of him felt as if the gents

in one fashion or another, while the other part couldn't help but to notice his surroundings. Any admission that he could have made to credit the beasts was choked immediately by the waves of pretension, put on full display by the high pitched, howling laughter of those who were far too out of their mind with alcohol.

Theodore gave a small snort in disgust at them. Their wealth hadn't ruined them so much as the absence of their character. Theodore couldn't really see the point of expensive booze anyway; particularly not if one intended on drinking enough

of it to forget whether or not it was any good to begin with.

Theodore recalled the time one of his patrons brought a bottle to his bedside. The drink had been far too bitter for Theodore's liking, even though he'd been assured of its high quality; the brand was apparently something that was well known in other countries. So far as Theodore was concerned, 'other countries' could keep their overpriced import.

"Can I still take you at your word that you will try to not see me hanged?"

Otter's voice seemed intentionally pointed, as if he were *trying* to surprise Theodore. He shook his head and closed his eyes, taking a moment to pinch his muzzle bridge.

Theodore gave a curt, but sincere nod. "We'll see how this plays out," the Wolf admitted softly. "Whatever you have is certainly worth the attention,

good reason."

"He's compensated very well, if that helps." Whitaker replied automatically.

"Well so am I, but there are limits," Theodore sneered, leaning back against the cushion. He rubbed at his thighs only to look directly at the Otter and clear his throat. "Speaking of limits... Eyeball transplanting?" Whitaker fell silent, staring back at the Wolf before glancing down toward the satchel for only a moment. "Originally I was part of a research

War. It's part of how I got my surgeon's license," he spoke softly, clearly uncomfortable with the memory. "Not sure what sort of sadist resorted to shrug, trying to not let a chuckle invade his voice. "Seems like the best way to go about it."

procedure," Whitaker mumbled, tapping the bridge of his muzzle. "A cure for blindness is a marvelous thing."

"I'll try not to stare," the Wolf shrugged, crossing his legs. "But... moving forward, I suppose, I intend on being back at the Ladle for my shift tomorrow."

"That would be thoroughly unwise," Whitaker replied, placing a paw on

was discharged inside of the Ladle."

"It's a weapon used in an attempted murder—" the professor began. "Out of self

defense!”

“—I don’t think it is wise for you to hold onto it for the time being. If it

said, ignoring the Wolf as Theodore tried to speak over him. “But in the meantime it would be wisest for you to stay at my home.”

Theodore shook his head immediately, his brow furrowing at the thought. “No overnight rentals away from the Ladle, my good sir,” he growled softly. “I’ve got the Madame’s reputation to maintain.”

“I will not force you to stay, Mr. Locke,” Whitaker replied coolly. “But if you decide to leave then I cannot and I will *not* protect you from what happens next.”

“That sounds like a veiled threat, Professor,” Theodore scowled. “What do you think could—”

“Mr. Locke, you should not expect that I will mince words with you,”

give you all of the information up front. There are delicate matters on the horizon, you’ll forgive me for not being entirely forthcoming.”

“*Will* I, Professor?” the Wolf challenged, arching an eyebrow. He tried to add a dash of sarcasm to his voice, but he wasn’t entirely sure he could sell his insincerity.

“I cannot force you to, but I can only ask that you take what I have to say into consideration,” the Otter said calmly. “The shortest version of events is incredible amounts of coin to unspeakable interests.”

Theodore let Whitaker stew in his self-styled drama for a moment, only to clear his throat softly and lean forward. “This is an awkward conversation for someone such as myself to be privy to,” he said, his voice barely above a

interests.’”

“My military research was bastardized to stitch together a corpse and to attempt to evade ethics for the sake of studying God,” Whitaker replied bluntly. Theodore froze and stared forward, dumbstruck by the Otter’s words.

“When we arrive at my home I shall give you some of the documents to read, should you so choose,” Whitaker announced. “If you decide to stay, that is.”

“I don’t think I have too much choice in this matter, do I?” Theodore asked. Whitaker fell silent at the question. “If I agree to help you, what precisely are we going to do? Because from where I sit there really isn’t much to be done.”

“I’ve given a good haul of documents to Madame Sybil—it is part of what got me into your room,” Whitaker admitted, to which Theodore nodded solemnly. The Otter continued after making the briefest of eye contact with the Wolf. “Mostly ledgers and transcripts, a few letters here and there, as well as a few documents that would be nearly impossible to forge.”

to grow for only a moment before pressing the issue. “And what do we do in the meantime?”

“We can scatter these documents around my library,” Whitaker said, gently patting the satchel next to him. “It would take time, but if done correctly it is an excellent safeguard.”

professor.”

“Paper *burns*, but books are remarkably more resilient,” the Otter replied smoothly. “Fire requires fuel, air and heat to burn. Heat and fuel may be in

“Your point?”

Whitaker looked at Theodore, then gave a slight chuckle. “What sort of amateur arsonist would stand about to ensure that the books were all entirely gent looks for such things, but looking for a piece of paper in a library...”

right one.”

“Fair enough, I suppose,” Theodore said, looking out the window as he allowed the silence to resume.

“Are there any other concerns you have, Mr. Locke?” Whitaker asked carefully, turning his head slightly to follow Theodore’s gaze. “How long do you expect me to stay at your home?” Theodore asked blandly. “I’ll need to send word to Madame Sybil as quickly as possible.” “You seem, if you pardon the expression, doggedly loyal to her,” Whitaker remarked carefully. Theodore scowled at the Otter, who shrugged. “It is not a bad quality.”

“I’d recommend you not be so sensitive, Mr. Locke,” Professor Whitaker waved his paw dismissively. “There are more pressing things to draw your outrage.”

“Such as?” Theodore asked, relenting as he crossed his arms. “And I to begin regaling me with puns.”

The Otter gave something of a sneer to the Wolf, who allowed himself a dry chuckle in return. “That being said,” Whitaker sighed. “When we arrive at my home, I shall have your room prepared for you. We shall send word for an extension of your services tomorrow morning—I am certain that Madame Sybil will understand.”

“If she doesn’t demand you to deliver my pelt for shooting a gun indoors...”

Theodore grouched.

“It is ridiculously uncommon for anyone to travel unarmed in Charinthesse, she knows this,” the Otter said sourly. “The only reason I don’t

“They sound paranoid,” Theodore remarked.

“They’ve been at war for thirty years,” Whitaker replied heavily. “I am beginning to be concerned that the nation wouldn’t know what to do with “As much as I would *adore* getting into the philosophy of their quarrels, I think I’m a bit underprepared for such a discussion,” the Wolf smirked. “But That sounds like it could be a hell of a passion.”

Whitaker fell silent once more, visibly swallowing as he stared into the Wolf’s eyes. “As I said... You cannot expect me to grant you all of the information all at once.”

“And why not?”

“Because you wouldn’t believe it,” Whitaker stated. “I was there for a grand host of it. *I* scarcely believe it.”

“That’s a lot of ‘it’ for not a lick of explaining,” the Lupine grunted. “Care to stop circling the drain and get to something of a point?”

The Otter turned away, crossing his legs as he shifted uncomfortably

his thigh, and he tutted his tongue gently, even rubbed at the back of his head. Theodore had seen the expression more than enough times to know possible, but get him to shut up in the same breath.

Theodore waited, his ears perking expectantly while the professor to stop entirely with a loud, shuddering whine. “We’ve arrived!” The driver called.

Before Theodore could warn Whitaker that the conversation wasn't over, the Otter had sprung to the door and out into the street.

The Wolf bared his teeth, but only for a moment as he slid out of the taxi to the street outside. It was immediately obvious that he was in the Historic Quarter of Charinthesse. He'd only ever been here but once a year and only

clients as well as regulars. Considering that the Summer Solstice Gala was the largest gathering in Charinthesse, it was also of Theodore's busiest times of the year.

The cobblestone roads here were far, far nicer than those in the Southern District. Rather than being rocks that were smoothed out over time and wear of cart and foot, these were red brick and carefully set. The streets weren't as wide as other Districts and houses were nearly stacked atop each other, each building only a slight variant of the last. Each one was its very own, separate

The walls that separated Whitaker's property on either side were tall, proud creations that were brick all the way up to Theodore's eartips, only to have wrought iron grates extend beyond those. The Wolf followed Whitaker through a narrow gate made to match the iron above the brick to the property inside. The redstone and mortar construction surrounded a simple-enough yard, a splash of well manicured green in the middle of a ring of brownstone.

While the yard itself was no larger than the bar at the Silver Ladle, it was immediately apparent that Whitaker cared more for architecture than for any form of gardening.

A pair of pillars stood at either side of the door. Marble columns rose

Theodore squinted at the nearly-seamless design, believing that he caught a glimpse of hinge that would have allowed the panes to open. Why a more usual window in their place wouldn't have worked was beyond him. Arches ran between the columns to better shore things up and looked nothing short of artisanal. Stained glass was visible from the front of the manor and as Whitaker lead Theodore closer to the house, he saw that the windows themselves were hinged with glass panes in a wooden surround. It wasn't too uncommon at all these days, but Theodore couldn't imagine having *every* window as an openable one.

The minute details in nearly every carving were astonishing—so much so that

Theodore couldn't help but feel cheated. Professors were common minor nobles from foreign lands. Certainly if the mates and maids who "Cheapskate curs..." Theodore muttered. He was unsure of Whitaker damn.

was shocked that their sudden appearance. He turned his head around the courtyard to see where all the beasts had come from. It took him a moment to notice the separate, smaller structure built directly into the wall; he ventured

where they could quickly gather to help whomever came through the gates. It also struck him as odd that the servant's quarters were sandwiched between manager? Did the servants live separately inside of the same building? Perhaps even there was a dividing wall somewhere inside of the structure. He shook his head clear of the thought, deciding it better not to pry as he stepped toward the door, watching as one of the servants attempted to blame him.

Just inside the double doors, granite, polished to a mirror-like shine, building. Everything smelled like pine. Theodore found himself stunned as he stepped to the center of the room and looked around.

The interior of Whitaker's house was something out of a housewife's polished to a mirror like shine, accented carefully by brass pipes, artfully to run from the back of the staircase all the way to the gaslights set into the walls and pillars. Theodore looked down at one of the pipes near his windows. His curiosity got the better of him and he placed his bare foot on even warm against Theodore's foot.

"This way, Mr. Locke," Whitaker called, his voice echoing through the while all others that dotted the foyer were closed.

Inside was a collection of books larger than any Theodore had ever imagined. Scholars that had visited his room at the Ladle had always seemed like overeducated gits—even worse than Whitaker!—the thought of them having *more* of a resource pool for useless facts was staggering.

There was no way in Heaven or Hell that Whitaker could have read *all* of these volumes. Some were as thick Theodore's arm, while others were library, blinking in mild shock.

Shelves as high as the ceiling were stacked two volumes deep in some

strides long; lined with rows upon rows of shelves stacked two books deep, between the counters. Every other window stood across the way from a door. Theodore thought that, at one point this could have been something of a banquet hall, but had been repurposed into a library to better house some almost-fetish for books.

At the far side of the room, there was a reading nook, quite possibly the original extent of the library, the circular room domed gracefully to a single, six limbed, brass chandelier, hanging over the top of a carefully angled couch. Theodore cautiously stepped throughout the library, walking the perimeter of both the reading partition and the main area itself.

Any section of wall not directly in front of a door housed waist-high

length and sides of the grand room. Just above those cases rested even more shelves—books and older looking tomes were kept close to the interior walls, while newer publications and far less valuable bobbles sat on the shelves nearer windows. The windows themselves were masterfully crafted. Perfectly

complete whatever scholarly appearance Whitaker was trying so desperately room.

“When was it that you ran out of *useful* things to spend your money on?” He asked bluntly, casting his eyes toward the center of the room. Dark chocolate leather couches mimicked the pattern of the shelves,

table were plants in desperate need of water.

“The life of a university professor is a lucrative one. Doubly so when you are also a physician,” Whitaker remarked with a small smirk.

“Kendall?” A third voice called from the foyer.

“In here, Lady Marie!” Whitaker called back, moving to the door. He

into the room.

Her behaviors were, in many ways similar to Madame Sybil. Rigid, with an air of authority that Theodore didn’t dare question. The sandy shades of her pelt accented the dark shades of the long, highly-conservative garment.

between black panels of leather. Propped against her legs were a pair of straight-

edged swords—twins, save for one slightly shorter than the other and each bare of a scabbard save for a simple ring near the hilt of the sword. She looked rather young to be a Lady, but Theodore didn't remark upon it.

Theodore narrowed his eyes as he glanced over the Feline's light, sharp complexion. He had seen her somewhere before—but he couldn't quite place it.

"Theodore Locke, meet Lady Marie Eileen Ackerman." Whitaker stepped

couches, crossing her legs comfortably. "Marie, Theodore Locke." "Charmed," The Feline said softly, not glancing at Theodore. "Marie Ackerman?" Theodore's eyebrows raised. "The revolutionary, or

the bladesmaid?" Theodore had heard the name several times, particularly same."

Theodore gave a small grunt, trying not to seem too impressed, but even he had to tip his hat to Whitaker. Marie Ackerman was something of a legend—a hero from the civil war in Fielora, she was one of the few bladesmaids in the world, the *only* one at the professional level. Her matches were occasionally the talk of gamblers and self-proclaimed high-rollers when Theodore had cared to listen to them and she'd given more than one speech with regard to the state of her home, the Free States of Fielora.

Theodore's mind raced for only a moment, before he found cause to once again catglower at the professor. Certainly, if Whitaker had no idea what he *her* to his cause. The cur had lied to him for the sake of stroking Theodore's own ego—or at least that was as close to an explanation as he could come.

No sooner had he passed Lady Ackerman where she sat on the couch, than the Feline broke her composure to smile—a wide, warm, welcoming grin as she shook her head almost playfully. "I can't even pretend to brood. I don't know how gents can do it."

"You always were a terrible liar at any case, Marie. Deception is central to

A few deep breaths saw her composure return and her back straightened once more. "I do apologize, Kendall."

"You've a reputation to uphold." The Otter waved his paw dismissively as

blades, propping them against her legs so there was room for Theodore to sit.

He took a moment to steal a glance at the blades she carried. He'd seen his fair share of knives, pistols and all manner of weaponry at the docks, but those blades entrapped his interests; they had started a revolution.

They were thicker along the blade, tapered almost imperceptibly to a point than a standard rapier. A sort of half-ring protected the paw at the hilt and the handles were slightly longer than Theodore would have expected.

well, *bland* they appeared.

Nonetheless, he allowed himself a seat where Marie indicated the far corner of the couch. "So what was this, with regard to the Arlagent

the folds of her dress.

"Brace yourself, Marie," Theodore remarked, trying to sound casual.

Whitaker scowled softly at the Wolf, then spoke.

"I have the proof of Judge Zedoch's involvement in the orchestration of the kidnappings in Fielora Grand." Whitaker's statement was met with a bark of laughter from Marie.

"That is excellent news! Why so somber?" The Feline leaned forward, her

"Because someone else has hired Mikhail Vladislav to trail me. I

and her face slowly became somber once more.

Theodore sensed this pattern of highs and lows to be typical of her. "Mikhail Vladislav?" She asked, her eyebrows arching in concern. "The one and only."

together as he cast his gaze around. "—but I need quite a bit of context before a damn thing is going to make sense."

"You must forgive *me* for being rude; but when I last spoke with Whitaker, I didn't realize you were a part of this little soiree. You're one of Whitaker's shook his head. "Then why is he here?" She demanded, her voice lowering once more.

"Because he shot at Mr. Vladislav three times. He is here for his protection and I thought he would be useful for other aspects of our endeavors as well." Whitaker exhaled slowly.

Theodore cut in. "I work at the Silver Ladle, in Southern District." "The Silver

Ladle... The *brothel*

“Shall I thank you now, or do you have more you’d like to add?” Theodore spat. Whitaker raised his voice. “It’s late enough as it is; we don’t have time to start a squabble.”

“Then perhaps you can bring me up to date with the information we have,” Theodore demanded, casting his gaze between the Feline and the Otter. “I’m utterly lost here and there’s yet to be a coherent explanation of what is going on.”

room once more; the trio stewed in it before Whitaker looked to Theodore. The Otter wet his lips diplomatically, taking a seat opposite of Theodore and placing the satchel on the ground next to him.

the economy surrounding metallurgy. Simply referred to as a Salvage Carrier, this monstrosity was built to be a self-contained city. I’ll spare you the most of its details” the steel mills. But is it truly relevant?”

Whitaker nodded in understanding and exhaled slowly. The Otter took

outside of Khami Rhus, the copper mining crags. Most recently, the materials gathered from the Salvage Carrier have become what we now know as the, I quote, “failed” Arlilent Experiment.”

the masses.”

“Spare me the droning, please?” Theodore looked between the two, who nodded respectfully before Whitaker continued.

“We have obtained proof that the Arlilent Experiment was engineered

hydroelectric dam; and some of the schematics I’ve managed to liberate, as well as a signed letter from one of the engineers point directly to a potential failure inside of the machinery,” Whitaker said hurriedly. “Unfortunate as it would seem, there is a set of circumstances that could be staged and the turbine supports could twist themselves in half as result,” the Otter said with a small nod.

“The documents you stole? The ones that you have no idea what to do with, or at least didn’t until I started in on you?” Theodore demanded.

before Theodore started in again. “Besides, how does one stage a failure of that scale? I thought the entire point of electricity being ignored was that it was so

damn hard to control where it actually went.”

“You said to spare you the technical babbling,” Marie parroted Whitaker next.”

“You mean to tell me that three dozen of the brightest minds engineered a catastrophe to fake their own deaths?” Theodore asked incredulously. “Is this that Congregate of Scholars that you were talking about, Whitaker?” He asked, turning to the professor.

Whitaker nodded. “Yes, their deaths were a ruse, but it is the implications that are created by their staged deaths that are more worrisome.” “Herein lies the cloak and dagger of our world,” Marie swallowed, the Feline reaching down and gripping the swept metal hilts of her swords, as if to comfort herself.

“But why go to the trouble of convincing the world you are dead?”

the woods?”

“Because that would be disappearance, Theodore, not death. There are no ethics checks for dead beasts, but there are searches for the missing—,”

“Perhaps we could no longer beat around the bush then? What are they doing that would require them to be considered dead in the eyes of the to Whitaker expectantly. “I’m absolutely lost and you two go on like I should already know what you’re talking about.”

forward. The Mustelid seemed so much more wizened as he lifted his glasses from his face, then rubbed his forehead. “Faking their deaths was an expensive maneuver and—”

“For the love of *God*, stop talking in circles!”

“What do you think we are doing, Mr. Locke?” Marie shot again, her frigid composure returning immediately. The Wolf raised his paws in defense and nodded toward the Otter. “Continue, Kendall.”

million Queens were spent on this staged accident,” Whitaker silenced Theodore with a glare, the Wolf nearly opening his mouth to speak. “And I hope you do have a sort of *basic*

donation check to an occultist society,” Whitaker swallowed, choosing his words carefully. “The amount of money that was spent needs to be restored to the Congregate’s funds before further experiments and the like can be perpetuated.”

“Which means that money will need to be laundered from other things,” Queens’ worth of revenue. It would need to be done on a percentage, over time.”

“So what *exactly* are you saying?” Theodore asked, crossing his legs as he leaned backward into the couch. For added emphasis of his boredom, as well as his almost condescending tone, he propped his head upon a paw, bracing his elbow on the arm of the couch.

“Let’s deal with *simple* percentages, Mr. Locke,” Whitaker grouched. “An The Otter fell silent, then inhaled slowly as if to consider how to continue. Marie took it as a signal to speak.

billion Queens’ worth of violence across bullets, bandages, artillery...”

Theodore’s eyebrows arched.

Queens was worth. He didn’t even have anything to liken it to. Thankfully, Marie continued and gave him a clearer idea. “That is approximately eight it is the trade hub of the world.”

Theodore swallowed hard, thankful that the room had fallen silent. He tried to digest the numbers quickly, but only came back to one, overriding revelation. “*What* could you *possibly* be studying with *that much coin*?” Theodore demanded.

“There is a letter that I would like you to read that can detail more, Theodore,” Whitaker said somberly, dragging the satchel to sit on the couch next to his hip. “Are you a religious beast, Mr. Locke?” Whitaker asked,

Theodore thought carefully for a moment, then shrugged. “I was raised in the Faiths, yes. But it’s been years since I’ve been to a church.”

“We followed old religious adages to our own ends,” Professor Whitaker explained, crossing his legs as he began to paw through a selection of the papers. “The eyes being windows to the soul?” Theodore nodded carefully, vaguely aware of how sick the Otter looked as he spoke. “We approached it

and added more eyes?”

Theodore shifted uncomfortably, then cleared his throat. He glanced between Marie and the professor, both of whom sat motionless. “Added more eyes?” He asked, glancing between the two. Neither made even the slightest motion.

“Added. More. Eyes?” He asked more slowly.

“It began in pursuits of chemistry and other, more innocent endeavors.

But yes,” The Otter admitted.

“How?” Theodore nearly laughed. “You have to understand, this sounds absolutely absurd. You expect me to believe that there’s a shadow government funding some sort of penny dreadful? How would you even go about adding more eyes?”

“The answer to both of your questions are that it has been a long and arduous road to such,” Professor Whitaker said, his voice heavy with regret.

“The deaths were quick, at least.”

Theodore froze, staring at the Otter. “I don’t believe you,” The Wolf said quietly, his eyes locked onto the professor. “This is insane. Utterly and completely insane—even if it’s the truth, what in *God’s name* drives beasts to pursue these things?”

“Believe what you will, it is the truth,” Whitaker’s voice cracked. “I was not there at the inception of the Congregate, but I do know of why it started.” between life and death.”

The Wolf looked up at the Mustelid, shifting nervously as the Otter

the curtain of the myth of God and we found the truth.”

“And what truth is that?” Theodore asked softly.

“We are hardly alone in this or any world,” Professor Whitaker stated.

The Otter moved to pick up the satchel he had carried across the town and deposited it in Theodore’s lap. “Read this if you wish to truly catch up on what we have done. If you are so inclined, the wet bar is there,” Whitaker said, nodding to a shelf housing several, expensive looking bottles. One of them was already placed on the counter, glasses staged next to it. “Help

Theodore opened the satchel slowly as Marie and Whitaker stood, then moved out of the library. Marie stopped in the doorway, glancing back to the Wolf, her expression one of concern.

“Don’t stay up too late,” she said softly. “I’ll be sure breakfast is waiting for you, but I cannot guarantee that it would warm well.”

Theodore withdrew a stack of letters from the satchel as she spoke,

“Therasphetamine,” drug trials and things that Theodore didn’t even want to look at. More than once, he glanced away from a page that contained a

photograph of a guide to organ transplants: circles and lines showing trainees where to cut, undoubtedly. Each time he looked away, his eyes rested on a

to make it bulge open.

Marie watched him from the doorway as Whitaker left for the evening, for you. Cool water, fresh sheets and a bath will be drawn when you are ready for them.”

“That is more than generous. Thank you,” Theodore said, not looking

“Good evening to you, Mr. Locke.”

“And to you, Lady Marie,” Theodore murmured.

He sat alone in the midst of the books—tomes of knowledge he would

wouldn’t be able to take it back. If Whitaker was to be believed, that little papers Theodore had laid over the top of his thighs. Setting the documents aside and picking up the leatherbound book,

reading anything felt somehow *unnatural*. He tried to ignore the shadows in that watched him. Theodore shifted his feet, knowing his mind was carrying him away as it tried to tell him the cool breeze against his ankle wasn’t from directly underneath the cushions of the couch Theodore occupied.

“I didn’t get kidnapped for nothing,” Theodore grouched into the open, empty air as he withdrew one of the letters. It was meticulously kept in date.

stomach and he returned the paper to its original place.

According to the header, this was a letter from the desk of Giovanni

Theodore didn’t dare consider how the Otter had gotten his paws on it; the entire situation struck him as simply odd. What would a physician be enough to be a professor turn out to be a fool and steal documents from... well, wherever the hell he stole them from?

It felt dangerous to be in the open area of the main library; the windows created a certain vulnerability that Theodore didn’t like. He turned his head to and fro, looking at each of the massive things before deciding to gather up the papers and move to the more secluded reading room at the far end of the library.

the furniture closer to the door, setting it at an angle from the rest of the room. He debated for a moment before choosing to sit on the far end of the couch away from the main doors. More comfortable that he was at least in a private place, regardless of the ‘safety’ of the situation, Theodore nearly kicked himself. He’d been so caught up trying to make sense of what had happened tonight that he’d

allowed Whitaker to escape the room.

Damnit.

Theodore rubbed at his temples, even standing to pace a tight circle around the couch. Indecision was unlike him. There was a small part of him that knew better, that knew to run when he had the chance. But another, equally small part of him begged him to stay.

if what he said was truth? Theodore knew he would torture himself until the day he died if he didn't get at least a little bit nosy. One way or another, Theodore had to know for certain.

The Wolf's ears splayed as he looked down at the unimposing leather him. Theodore needed a damn drink.

the main part of the library. Sure enough, a small cabinet, centered between windows and shelves on the outside wall of the library, was there. Glancing any awkwardness he'd felt for being so tempted to help himself to a drink.

each a sickly shade of brown. The rack had been carved in such a way that, while the bottles themselves were nearly vertical, they were all tilted toward Theodore, as if to make it for easier selection. He'd had high-class alcohol

to expect.

Theodore raised the glass to his muzzle when he stopped and reconsidered.

Whitaker

the dark drink suspiciously.

the yeast? Dammit if he knew how bourbon was made; that didn't stop him of grains swirl.

He'd heard so many stories of things that got slipped into alcohol, growing up on the docks. Most of the beers that were given to dock workers were unsellable to any sort of discerning clientele. Madame Sybil, of course, kept higher-quality stock, but had forbade the whores in her employ from drinking, simply because of an issue of supply and demand.

"You're overreacting," Theodore muttered to himself, tipping his head back and throwing the drink to the back of his throat. Immediately after, the Wolf slapped the glass down with unnecessary force. The alcohol burned his mouth—the

Lupine ducked forward, his eyes snapping shut as he coughed violently.

Theodore blinked a few tears out of his eyes, grimacing distastefully at the strong drink. Shoving the glass away, Theodore pinched his muzzle bridge, then turned around to lean against the miniature wet bar. This was

Theodore kept his eyes closed, tilting his head back as if to look at the ceiling. The gentle buzz was already on its way. Soon, the alcohol would rush to his head, or at least that's what he thought happened. Theodore hadn't ever been truly drunk in his life, but neither had he shot at anyone before.

Far to his left, near where Theodore remembered the door to be, someone coughed politely and inquired, "Is everything alright, sir?" He turned his head, cracking open his eyes, suddenly having trouble orienting himself in

the doorway.

One of the servants who had greeted him at the door was standing in the entryway of the library. Theodore fought for focus before he realised it was the butler.

Theodore realised, was one of the butlers of the estate. The Feline nodded in his direction, but Theodore had to squint to even tell that it was a cat or not. He tried to shake his head clear. He couldn't even make out what was species the servant was.

"Very well. Is there anything that you would like to have considered for your room, sir? A hot bath, a change of attire?"

I've half a bed and something I can use as a pillow, I'll manage. Thank you, though."

"If you're certain, sir," The butler said rigidly. "The servants have left the main house for this evening for their quarters near the walls. Your room is up the stairs and it is the third door in the Eastern Wing. Turn left as you go

"Good night," Theodore responded, wavering on his feet for a moment

closed on the couch and Theodore slumped next to it, positioning himself as far from the door as the couch's slant would allow. He sat the glass of bourbon on the arm of the furniture and reached to tug the letter from the folds of the

at a rather graphic article involving dying brain matter, or some such that he didn't care to actually read. His gaze returned to the parchment in his right paw and leaned on the arm of the couch, propping his head up with his left.

How bad could this be? The Wolf mused to himself.
To my dearest son, Machiavelli,

uncertain of what I must precisely say. place to 'begin' telling you of what we have done. The inspired grasps towards those Golden Shores and the gates into the Great Beyond...

I do sincerely regret to inform you of all of this, but we have been complicit in crimes against Nature herself. We fought to pierce the veil between Here and There,
As much as I do desperately wish to tell you that we found some pocket of bliss—but

There was no balance, as there is in the natural world here.
But I must digress. If I continue much further without any form of discipline, I may
resort once again to the throes of this madness.
We forced Science and Faith to walk en tandem, instead of forcing them to opposite ends
of the room. It was in time that we learned just **why** they reviled each other and—

"Get to the damned point," Theodore growled, glaring a hole through the page as he passed several sheets that were this single letter over in his paws. He shook his head slowly, diving a few more pages into the letter to begin his reading once again.

been more out of place.
An endocrinologist by trade and a spectacularly combative atheist by nature, I couldn't rationalize what he could be doing at such a strictly religious ceremony. The ostentatious
In spite of it all, most surprising was that he was there to see me. He even sought me
academy in the Astronomy Tower.
He begrudgingly acknowledged that my ingenuity and—

Theodore pinched the bridge of his nose and stood, tossing the letters as he sighed into his palm.

He glanced down to the stack, picking it up only for a moment more of disgust and intrigue. He'd barely read four full pages. There were dozens contain a complete confession. At even the most basic of glances, Theodore knew letters were an aside. They felt far more personal than the rest of the "God damn," Theodore groaned, wincing as he sat the leather bound throat. The room was slowly beginning to spin around him. The Lupine's eyes clamped shut, his legs moving automatically to catch himself, stopping

He felt a light bead of sweat form against his brow and the Wolf tugged his shirt collar some. Had he become feverish? The Wolf unbuttoned the top most fastenings of his shirt, allowing air against his sweating chest. Theodore's breathing became more labored, his lungs beginning to feel as if

the culprit down to the glass of bourbon he'd drank. Was it the alcohol itself,

insisted upon him drinking. Perhaps the doctor had spiked it with something. He was a physician after all, he had to be at least somewhat intelligent—years of schooling didn't seem like the thing that could create an idiot.

before letting the thought slip away.

Conspiracy theories quickly replaced his disgust, scratching at the back of his mind; everything that the physician could have dosed him with and what it would have taken to bring his mind to spin as it was. Even the ground beneath his feet seemed to teeter as if it were the deck of a ship in the middle of a storm.

for any form of distraction as he began tapping the papers back into place. His eyes were beginning to get sore, even. Closing them against the pain, he found only slight relief. Herbs and things he'd been told to avoid all came

long for Theodore to decide that sleep would be the best thing for him; the butler had, after all, mentioned that a room was prepared. Theodore didn't make it a step before his legs gave out from underneath him—the Wolf was barely able to twist to land on the couch.

His mind was swimming, digging through memories with uncanny clarity: the wet rope lashing across his forearms, the steel beam colliding with his shoulder during an accident at the mills he used to work in. Theodore crossed his arms

over his stomach, doubling forward in his seat and groaning

him relive it. Each bruise across his toes from dropping things and each strike of a switch across his shoulders—all of it returned with stunning clarity and all at once, his very nerves burning with each shock as if it were fresh.

slowly to brace his elbows on his knees, which seemed to help. The Wolf stared down the bridge of his muzzle into the carpet, as if somehow it would

and closed his eyes tightly as a bead of sweat threatened to drip from his brow to his eyelid. He pressed his paws against the side of his neck, applying a steady grip to slowly try and ease some of the tension in his muscles. He kneaded until the worst of the feeling subsided, then dragged his open palms over his face and down the bridge of his muzzle.

He shook his head determinedly, forcing himself to his feet, only to have to steady himself against the leather couch. He closed his eyes against the pain once more and took another deep, long breath. Theodore nearly retched as the world threatened to spin again in spite of his attempts to right

Theodore's nose twitched at the hot, sickly scent of too much perfume. He reached up to cover his mouth, gagging softly at the overwhelming

muscles refused to obey for a moment—Theodore didn't know what to liken it to. It was almost as if his mind was moving faster than his body could react. Each light in the room felt somehow brighter; the indomitable presence of the lights forcing Theodore's eyes shut. A small stab of pain at the back of

eyes again. He could feel his legs beginning to quake, threatening to give out. He forced himself forward, taking a desperate step toward the bookshelf in order to right himself. Theodore's eyes clamped shut once more during the movement; motion only made the room spin more.

Carpet shifted beneath him as he staggered forward, half pulling himself along the shelves. He clung desperately to them, hobbling toward the door, tottering from the shelf to the wet bar and leaning heavily on the wooden shelves to keep himself upright. Theodore knocked over books and glasses as he continued to the far door. Whitaker could choke on the glass shards

Theodore couldn't stomach looking round or have the energy left over to

them out. It took a moment for reality to return, but Theodore could have corners of the room whispered conspiracies and the walls themselves seemed have been sure—hell, he *wanted* to believe he was only hallucinating the faces that pressed themselves against the wood grain. The features groaned shove their muzzles into it. Some of the faces even grinned in his direction;.

The stronger hallucinations subsided, but allowed more minor ones to come in waves. Just as soon as Theodore thought he would most certainly be taken by insanity, the world righted itself. His clothes were damp with his own sweat by the time he reached the door to the grand hall. Theodore's muscles were nearly too taxed from their tremors to push it open.

The glassy hall was now dimly lit. Servants had reduced the gaslights to curled and he stared, utterly paranoid into the darkness.

woodwork came once more and Theodore's head snapped to what he believed to be the source, his ears perked high. "God help me," He muttered into the darkness as silence once again consumed the room. The Wolf's ears lowered as he stepped forward cautiously into the hall.

Something screeched next to him. That was all the invitation Theodore needed to lunge to the stairs. The black language of vermin hissed in his ear as the Wolf skipped three, even four steps at a time, nearly dropping to a feral sprint as he crested the grand staircase, then down the hallway to what was obviously the guest room. It was the only door in the hallway that stood

a usual day, the gaslights now felt something close to salvation. The door slammed with an echoing bang throughout the hallway.

Theodore dove away from the solid oak after the locks were slammed shut. He scrambled away on his paws and rear, hardly realizing he'd tripped as the world went silent around him.

The Wolf's eyes darted to the corners of the room. There were no shadows here. His body trembled as he forced himself to his feet and dusted himself

in that drink? What *damnable* thing was this day turning into?

Theodore's chest heaved. He felt the onset of something else trying to creep into his mind. He grabbed his own ears, baring his teeth in response to it before it could invade any further.

Try as he may, he couldn't block out the unnatural caress against his bed, something there seemed to absorb the light around it. It lacked any *emanated* from

Why won't you let us in? ///// Chapter Five: The Waking Nightmare

Theodore's eyes were barely open before he scrambled from the bed. His sudden movement was met with an instant, searing sensation pain, gripping his ears and clamping his eyes shut.

The fever was gone, or at least had receded enough to allow him to keep his sanity... Or, he thought it could have been fever. His muscled certainly

He bared his teeth through the throbbing as he forced himself to his feet. Dazzled and blindly stumbling to the windows, Theodore drew the curtains closed, only to limp back to the bed and slump on top of it. He covered his aching head with a pillow, exhaling heavily into the soft fabric. He didn't want to believe it, but part of him knew he had been asleep for the better part of the day.

He ached, but somehow he'd knew that he would live for at least another day. *This is why you don't drink, Theodore.* He chastised himself. He laid there for some time, letting his head throb in peace before sitting up with a long, uneasy groan. The world spun around him for only a moment, but stopped the moment his feet hit the ground.

His toes curled in the dark carpet beneath him, his legs felt unsteady and his stomach was turning in knots Theodore dragged his feet, guiding

bed, guiding himself mostly with the telltale scents of soaps than actually watching where he was going.

He fumbled at the door frame for a moment, his paws blindly slapping about for the switch that would crank on the gaslights. He turned his head downward and away from the lights above. The red carpet ran directly up to

artfully designed, with some sort of pattern in each corner of each tile to tie it more directly to the next. He dragged his vision upwards toward the otherwise bland, dark wood walls, as well as to the porcelain tub that was framed so neatly as the centerpiece of the room. It matched the sink, which

towels and soaps. Theodore snorted at the thought, but couldn't help but to feel

that Whitaker was the sort of posturing beast that he'd match the

the gaslights, this way and that to act as water and gas supplies, creating a bizarre, though not unappealing aesthetic on the ceiling, only to disappear into the walls.

snort distastefully. Whatever opinions of Whitaker's pompous natures were
Whatever life had brought the Otter to, he was certainly rich enough. The

His fur was matted where he had slept so oddly on, pushed every-whichway. He took a moment to brush it back down, inspecting the nozzles that rested at the rear corners of the vanity.

The detail was worn away, but he thought he could read 'hot' and 'cold' on each of the spigots. Unlike the rest of the bathroom, which seemed to be the cutting edge of modern bathrooms, these nozzles and the sink had escaped the renovator's touch. Theodore amused himself for a moment,

pup at the thought of the chilled metal beneath his paw pads. He'd never been to a house where 'chilled water' meant anything other than 'room temperature', or 'fresh from a lake.'

The sensation of metal cooling against his paw told him that Whitaker The Wolf gave himself a warm wash across his muzzle and his forearms,
He splashed the water over his muzzle to ease the headache and the rest ridding him of the worst of the pain.

Theodore rubbed the coldest water he could into the deepest layer

a moment. He snatched one of the towels, shaking it loose of its staging before carefully drying his face. He left the cloth in a muddled heap next to the sink and rubbed his fur back down into a more natural pattern with his thumbs. He was only moderately displeased with his appearance, though

door's latches snapped open loudly and Theodore winced at the sound. He pushed open the door slowly, shivering in disgust as the hinges

resisted the urge to slam the door shut. Theodore never considered himself a lightweight, but he also wasn't one to drink often. Even so, he'd only had a single glass of the bourbon; there was no excuse to be this hungover.

Theodore clambered down the stairs, past tidy rows of maids and butlers alike, spoiling their choreography as he made his way to the library perch on the chocolate leather couch.

His ears perked as he listened for the nearby sounds of voices and exited the library once more. “Excuse me, miss?” The Wolf asked one of the nearby maids. An Avian, Blue Jay by the look of her, curtsied low. She was uncharacteristically tall for her species, standing almost up to the Wolf’s shoulder when her back straightened once more, he estimated. Theodore waved his paw dismissively at the notion, before asking further. “Professor Whitaker and Lady Ackerman, where are they?” He asked quietly.

“The dining room, milord,” the Blue Jay said smoothly, guiding easily sat thirty beasts stretched the length of the room. The sight of struck Theodore as utterly pretentious.

slept through the morning.”

“It isn’t uncommon for me,” Theodore growled, certain the Otter couldn’t hear him as he strode forward, past the ornate, cushioned chairs. Theodore couldn’t help but recognize them as the same build in Madame “Well I hope you slept well,” Marie said quietly, eyeing the Lupine suspiciously as he slumped into the chair opposite of the Feline. “I thought

she continued. Theodore nearly missed the lightning fast glower she shot Whitaker’s way.

“It was a hell of a night,” Theodore said, gripping the seat of his chair to scoot it forward himself, despite the waiter that all but materialized to help him.

close to automatic. “I can prescribe you something that will help you rest more easily.”

“Forgive me for not leaping at the thought,” Theodore grumbled. One of the waiters returned in short order with a steaming plate of food. Overly a modest helping of bread were placed before him. He arched an eyebrow

Marie watched with a small giggle and Whitaker ignored Theodore’s behavior entirely as he tore the bread in half and began to layer it with the other contents of his plate.

with a warm smile. Theodore shrugged.

“Washing myself is easy enough,” Theodore replied disinterestedly. as he spoke, dragging the makeshift sandwich through the oils left behind by the chicken, if only to further clean his plate.

Marie arched an eyebrow. “Going so soon?” she asked slowly. “Whatever for? I thought you were intere—”

“No. I am not interested in whatever the hell it is that the two of you have going on,” Theodore interrupted. “If last night was some sort of test, I

standing from the table, depositing the half-eaten sandwich on the plate as he turned away.

“Theodore, I believe I made the stakes quite clear last night,” Whitaker down and the safest place for you to be is here.”

Theodore said, turning from the Otter. “If you’re going to shoot me, do so now. I am not going to play along with whatever the *hell* you and this Vladislav guy have going.”

“If you are going to be this damned stubborn, maybe I *should* shot you,” Whitaker snapped back.

“Theodore, what is this about?” Marie asked. Theodore turned to face her, his eyes narrowing as he fought for words to soothe her concerns.

the counter, waiting to be had,” he admitted after a moment. “I’m not sure what it was, what was in it, or what. But I have *never* had a fever dream like that—that and Madame Sybil has told us what to look for as far as drugs in our drinks at the Ladle.”

“Drugs?” Whitaker barked. The professor stood up violently from his chair, both of his paws gripping the edge of the table. “What bourbon did you drink?”

eyebrow.

“It’s odd, Kendall. Why are you more concerned with which of your to begin with?” Marie asked softly, her almond eyes beginning to glare daggers at the professor.

Whitaker stood at the head of the table in uncomfortable silence, clearly looking for a way out of the thinly veiled accusation of possessing drugged alcohol. Theodore’s glare hardened, the Wolf’s muzzle contorting to a small snarl.

“Is there something I should know about, Whitaker?” Theodore demanded tensely. The professor stood in silence. Theodore could see his features twitch as he no-doubt calculated his response.

“There is a particular bourbon that—”

“On second thought, I’ve already heard enough,” Theodore spat, turning to storm from the room.

“Will you let me explain!?” Whitaker cried, starting to move about the table to follow his guest as Theodore strode quickly from the room. Marie’s

him from giving pursuit.

“The fact that you are willing to have a bottle of drugged bourbon around the house is more than enough for me to take my leave,” Theodore shouted over his shoulder, not particularly caring if anyone overheard him. On the contrary, Theodore tried to ensure that someone did, turning to face Whitaker to look at him as he continued. “God only knows what you have planned for whatever that bottle was, or is. But you can your entire ‘Congregate’ can burn in hell for all I care.”

Marie held onto Whitaker’s arm as Theodore exited the room, the Feline’s eyes narrowing dangerously in the Otter’s direction. She held him there, even as he tried to move after Theodore, waiting to speak until their guest had left the room.

“I will ask you again, Whitaker,” Marie murmured. “Why are you more concerned with *which* drink Theodore had, rather than there being a

Whitaker faltered, clearing his throat diplomatically and tugging his it to say, Theodore pointed out yesterday that I really don’t know *what* I am doing with regard to all of this.”

“Perhaps you can at least explain what you’ve done, then?” Marie

Whitaker shook his head softly as he stepped around the table. “I will be in the study. I need to check on what Theodore actually drank.”

“And why is it important, Kendall?” Marie’s tone hardened as she slid around the table to follow him.

“Because, Lady Marie,” Whitaker almost sneered over his shoulder. “There is one particular bottle of bourbon that contains the remnants of the Therasphetamine we tested in Fielora.”

Marie arched an eyebrow. “And why have you not gotten rid of the entire

stock?” She asked, her voice rising dangerously.

Whitaker inhaled slowly, looking after Theodore as they heard the doors of the grand hall bang shut. “I gave it all to my cousin, Victor and he was to dispose of it.”

“Then how did it end up here, instead of your cousin’s so-capable paws?” Marie demanded.

“Truth be told, Marie, I don’t know,” Whitaker said over his shoulder,

“I’ll see what I can do.” Marie scowled, keeping the table between them as both now headed to the foyer doors at the far side of the dining room. Marie split from his path to follow Theodore, but Whitaker returned immediately to the library.

scanned the perimeter of the room. From his desk, down the wall to the bar, the trail Theodore had left on his way to the door was obvious— more tidying up the study. Judging by the distasteful glare on more than one of the maid’s faces, Theodore had made quite the mess in the area.

“Yes, sir. It’s on your desk,” one of the cleaners replied, almost automatically.

“Nothing was moved—didn’t even straighten the corners,” She continued.

The trio of maids: two Otters and the Avian whom had spoken to Whitaker, hurried from the room, abandoning whatever dustpans they possessed. As leave her to her business, dirty room or not, they had begun to listen to her as if she were the one authorizing their pay.

Whitaker grunted as Marie stepped forward.

“Theodore is gone. I lost him in the crowds,” Marie said rigidly. “All the same, I paid for a cab driver to go from here, along the most direct route to

him.”

“Good,” Whitaker nodded, inhaling slowly as he looked down over the now-pristine wet bar. He reached forward, placing his paw atop the

dropped and he glanced to Marie.

“Figure there are a good eighteen ounces left,” Whitaker murmured.

“This was nearly full, if I remember correctly. I don’t entertain often enough to worry about others poisoning themselves, thank God.”

“How much does it hold?” Marie scowled as she approached.

had himself a full glass..." Whitaker felt his throat tighten at the mention of it. He turned to Marie and swallowed visibly. "I'm not sure how much of the Therasphetamine may have dissipated into the liquor. We never tested for—"

"Get to your feet!" Marie's voice interrupted Whittaker, her voice close to a feral snarl, several octaves deeper than the professor had heard in quite some time as she stepped forward to punch the professor squarely in the

his glasses from his face and knocking him to his knees. He gasped, staying tasted blood.

Whittaker's paw reached about, feeling for his glasses for a moment, his eyes closed against the throbbing in his head. "And what have I done, to deserve this level of violence from you?" The Otter asked plainly, his tone polite, but tenuous.

back upward. Marie's face was a mask of rage, contorted to a snarl that didn't suit her.

"The lab is half an hour's taxi drive away," Whitaker reminded her Otter didn't mind so much that as Marie's venomous glower.

"Then I suggest you get that bourbon you drugged Theodore with down

with," The cat ordered.

"Without knowing how much he drank, it's impossible to accurately tell."

"Then guess!" Marie shot. Kendall's whiskers dropped at the news, the Otter pushing his deformed glasses back over his face.

"You are aware then, this means that Theodore is likely going to die?"

on beating Whitaker within an inch of his life, part of him would thank her while she did it. It hadn't taken the Otter more than four days to kill another innocent beast.

"We have to at least *try*," Marie stepped forward once more. Whitaker stood his ground, squaring his shoulders to her.

"What precisely are we to do?" The Otter challenged. "Dash wildly for something that may not cure him, in a facility that certainly knows our faces and undoubtedly suspects a betrayal? After everything we have done, is it not kinder to simply let the Wolf die than to drag him through this hell?" Kendall raised his voice.

Marie stood speechless before him. “Let him die?” The cat demanded. Whitaker’s back straightened and Marie took another, dangerous step forward. “Let. Him. *Die!*?” she shouted. Again, the Otter made no response. “You drag him into this... *situation* aside as an incidental casualty?”

“*Marie*, consider what you are asking me to do,” the professor snapped back. “If Vladislav lets it out that I am the one who betrayed the Congregate and if he’s told everyone? That is me walking *directly* on the *chance* to save Theodore.”

“I am not asking you to do anything. I am *telling* you that Madame Sybil is someone we need on our side. She is an information broker of an incredible caliber. Theodore is our one and only attempt at recruiting her to our cause,” Marie’s face hovered but inches from Whitaker’s now, the cat glowering daggers through his eyes. “I hardly believe that to be unreasonable.”

“Have you *considered* the scope of what we are attempting?” Whitaker roared, his shout echoing through the library. “Do you have even an *inkling* of this Congregate? We are speaking of *world leaders* royalty, governments, scientists!” The professor continued. “Each of them in the public eye, each of them more than capable of being the alibi for any other, across any excuse we could consider throwing at them?”

“For God’s sake, Kendall, he—”

“No, Marie. You listen to me,” he ordered. “We had teams dedicated to contingencies and fallback plans. If we arrest one of them, there are triggers in place and pitfalls designed to land the case in the arms of a sympathetic

from the outside. Doctor LeVrane made for damn sure of that.” “And that is why you stole documents, Kendall.” Marie leaned forward, forcing Whitaker back a step. “That is why we are going to begin nearest to the center as we are able. Madame Sybil has taken more than a few members of the Congregate to bed. Her word is held in higher regard than

“The nearest we have to the center of this is me.” Whitaker’s paws Whitaker was restraining himself from grabbing her. Her withering stare invited a challenge that Whitaker knew better than to take.

“We began knowing you were the center of this hell, Whitaker. Why not involve the chief information broker of the century?” Marie pressed. “Madame Sybil has seen things that would remove even the most deeply guarded of individuals. The secrets that were whispered in her ear years ago turned the tide and allowed the

Republic of Fielora to successfully break away from the monarchy.”

Whitaker winced, his paws falling back to his sides as he drew in a deep breath, nodding slowly. “And Theodore is our only connection to her.”
her. If she hadn’t slipped those soldiers the information she did, I wouldn’t
nodded carefully. “We won’t get a second chance if he dies horribly. Worse still,
we would run the risk of Madame Sybil operating against us.” “I don’t know
how much Therasphetamine was in the bourbon,
one of the bottles and upended it into the bourbon weeks ago.”

Marie froze for only a moment. The Feline reached forward with a single paw to touch the side of the Otter’s muzzle. Whitaker recoiled “You intend to kill yourself if we fail?” Marie’s voice cracked. Whitaker rubbed the bridge of his muzzle. “If we should fail, my death

for an investigation.”

“Not if you let Theodore die it won’t,” Marie riposted. The Otter turned his head in her direction, his ears twitching some as Marie continued. “If he dies ahead of you of nearly identical symptoms, the Congregate will

a medication used by whores. Not only that, you will probably lose any pensions your wife may be owed.”

“For one bo—”

“Not if they dumped you in the Republic.” Marie reminded Whitaker.

trials of Therasphetamine were conducted; the failed experiment killed

of poisoned whoring stimulants. The Congregate followed up the initial reports, stating that other sources of the deadly drug were not found yet. Over time, more deaths from Therasphetamine surfaced and it was

Whitaker’s would shortly follow.

He turned away from Marie. The professor sat heavily on the couch nearest the bar, putting his head in his paws as he leaned forward. Whitaker drew in another deep breath. “What do you need to reverse the damage? I wasn’t part of the group that experimented with the inverse.” “I shall know it when I see it,” Marie responded. “I was never good with names of those drugs.”

The Mustelid gave a small, curt nod in response, straightening his back and setting his paws in his lap before nodding toward the door. “Shall I

“No,” Marie responded coldly, striding toward the door herself. “I recommend taking the bourbon to whatever lab you can get your paws on.”

“And do what, Marie?”

“You’re the professor, Whitaker,” Marie replied, her voice heavy with

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Theodore turned his head toward the Eastern District as he stormed from Whitaker’s estate, almost grateful for the clock tower. It had been designed so that, no matter where anyone was in Charinthosse, they could look to the East and tell the time. Theodore had always surprised himself

slept nearly three hours longer than typical.

The Blue Jay butler from the previous evening opened the gate promptly for him, not saying a word as Theodore strode past him. He the estate, glaring toward the Eastern Clocktower once more before turning his head to the other markers of the city.

While each District did have its own crowning achievements and purposes, they also hosted their own towers as well, a sort of layman’s compass for new arrivals or highly displaced citizens such as Theodore. No matter the grandeur of the buildings, it seemed as if the contractors had entered a sort of unwritten agreement that no building should be taller

District, a lighthouse in the South for ships, the Astronomy Tower in the North and the Beacon Tower in the West.

Theodore didn’t give a toss for each of their purposes beyond directions. He set his sights on the lighthouse, knowing that the sooner he got back to the Silver Ladle, the better. Madame Sybil would no doubt have his head over last night.

but he’d destroyed half the bar area, his own room... He’d be working for

He kept his head low as he stomped through Northern District, trying to keep from turning many heads, despite his unshowered and unkempt appearance. More than one of the ladies of the district turned their head

in the same street as they were.

He mumbled a string of curses under his breath, keeping his head tilted down and eyes narrowed. He wasn’t sure whether or not he’d

had put into his drink.

street when his concentration was broken by the honk of an automobile's

initially taken to the professor's estate trundled next to him. It had the same, open driver's seat and engine bay out front of a closed cab; the driver of the cab wasted no time pulling the vehicle out of gear and hopping out.

tailored suit. "Mr. Theodore Locke?" He asked pleasantly, folding his paws in front of him as Theodore looked him over.

"Who's asking?"

"I have been sent by Lady Marie Ackerman, assigned on commission

to escort you to wherever in Charinthosse you are eager to go." The cabbie bowed politely. Theodore shifted his feet beneath him to keep himself from teetering over, a sudden, if-only slight wave of nausea overtaking him.

eyes as he breathed evenly, trying to dispel the churn from his stomach. "She gave mention you were headed to the Southern District; this is the fastest route on foot," the driver explained. "She instructed me to give you a ride, if you would so choose."

"You familiar with the Silver Ladle?"

"Yes I am, Sir." The Wolf bowed politely.

"That's where I'm headed," Theodore grunted, not waiting for an invitation to climb into the back of the car. He'd half expected to see

Theodore drew the curtains closed as the car lurched forward after a moment or two, crossing his arms and legs as he rested his head against one of the padded sidewalls. It did little to help his tremors, but it staved

The car ride was anything but relaxing. Each pothole in the road at best, but even his bones felt as if they were throbbing. The hour long carriage ride didn't end soon enough for Theodore's liking.

When the taxi driver opened the door Theodore was propped up against, he nearly fell atop the beast. His muscles were weak with what he could only assume was fever. Theodore didn't even hear what the Wolf had said to him as he fought to get to his feet.

The cobblestones felt too warm on the pads of his paws, so much so that he lurched forward, stepping around the other Wolf that tried to assist him out of the

carriage. The interior of the bar was dark, blessedly so, with how sensitive Theodore's eyes were feeling. Several gentlebeasts were cleaning up the last bits of damage caused by the night prior. Theodore was surprised to see Patricia there, given the trauma the evening may have

Patricia said something—probably “My God, Theodore!”, or something

make it out. She leaned forward, her paws cupping his face to turn his head down. Concern crossed her features and she moved underneath Theodore's arm without an invitation.

carried him up the stairs to his room. The ringing in his ears had been replaced with a dull, numbed silence as he fell atop his bed. He managed to pull his own legs atop the blankets, propping his head up on one of the

Theodore felt a paw on his forehead and he rolled away from it, turning knew he was running one; but was too tired to seek any sort of attention for it.

Maybe Whitaker was right... Theodore thought, closing his eyes as he tried to make himself as comfortable as he could against the bed. *Maybe I should have just let him shoot me.*

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Madame Sybil's quarters were at the farthest end of the hallway from Theodore's—the only door that directly faced the staircase and the only door that wasn't an unattractive, solid slab of oak. The burgundy-stained door had the regal trappings of a conservative monarch: golden hinges, a slide-bolt peephole and even a mail slot for letters to be deposited through.

The employees rarely saw the door stand open to give any sort of view best carpets, shelves of liquor and perfume and thick curtains gave the stood open now, as Madame Sybil herself strode the length of the hallway between her own room and Theodore's.

Whatever had happened last night after the Wolf's departure had taken

before the moment Madame Sybil laid eyes on him. According to Patricia, she had helped him to his room and then immediately called upon the Madame.

No sooner had the pair entered the room than had Sybil dispatched Sybil's room. Until she could be sure that Theodore hadn't been infected with

something that could be spread, she couldn't take any chances. Of course, it also meant closing the Silver Ladle for the evening,

into a pair of old trousers, a thick cassock and oilcloth gloves that reached up past her elbows. Despite Theodore's need for a hospital, Madame Sybil recognized the symptoms he had displayed from a group of troubadours in

Months ago they'd sent word to her of a drug that had appeared on the mainlands, a nightmare drug that was being peddled in the war torn

assigned to it by the dockers was "Devil's Tongue," partly because of the incredible hallucinations that it could create, otherwise the name was probably founded out of melodrama. Overdoses were often fatal and Theodore's current condition had Sybil more than a little worried.

Patricia had been sent to retrieve a constable, leaving Madame Sybil alone with Theodore in the Silver Ladle. She'd brought in a chair to sit next to his bed, trying to carefully monitor for symptoms. She resolved that she

he began to sweat. Approaching whatever problem Theodore was having without even some form of a plan was not anything Sybil would consider.

His eyes twitched violently as he slept and Sybil felt her stomach churn as she thought of the dreams he might have been having. She reached forward, feeling his forehead. Theodore's ears twitched back at the cool palm of her paw and he stirred. He was feverish unlike anything Sybil had ever seen in her life.

"You called for a constable, ma'am?" A voice called from the top of the stairs, even before Patricia guided a stern looking Otter through the door. Sybil turned her head and stood, bowing politely.

"Patricia, if you would kindly leave us in peace for a moment," Madame Sybil requested, her voice uncomfortably tense. "I would like a word with the good constable."

The constable shifted, obviously unnerved by the gesture. His eyes followed Patricia out of the door and Madame Sybil waited until her footfalls faded before squaring her shoulders to the constable. He was dressed in the standard fare for Charinthossian Constables; a long-sleeved, tan shirt with black buttons and black pants, as well as serious looking, if not outdated, metal greaves and gauntlets.

“What is your name, Constable?”

The constable cocked his head, wetting his lips diplomatically before responding. “Travis Poe.”

considering some deeper meaning to the Otter’s name. “Will you deliver a report for me?”

“Madame, I am a constable, not a courier,” the constable scowled. “I was told that there was an emergency that required—”

“ *Terribly*

Feline burst into the room. Madame Sybil blinked in shock—she didn’t recognize, or even call for the Feline who barged into the room.

Patricia was close on her heels but the tan-furred Feline was obviously in a rush. She wore a simple black leather and red cotton dress. A more undiscerning eye wouldn’t have noticed the ornate embroidery on the long sleeves or that the coat and dress were in fact separate articles of clothing. She also knew that the coat and dress came with an accompanying hat, as was customary for any lady who would wear such attire. The hat was notably missing.

Madame Sybil arched a curious eyebrow to the newcomer to the room, who moved immediately past the Constable to Theodore’s side. “And, you are?” Madame Sybil demanded cautiously.

The Feline gave a small, polite bow in the Panther’s direction. “Marie Ackerman, Physician’s Assistant,” She replied chipperly. Madame Sybil’s unamused stare twitched with irritation, the Feline’s nonchalant shrug struck Sybil as utterly disrespectful.

“I’m sorry, Madame—I tried to stop her from coming in!” Patricia stormed in, hot on Marie’s heels.

toward the constable. “I am sorry for wasting your time so abruptly, going on, perhaps I can give you a more detailed report.”

“Is there anything you wanted to report now?” The constable asked,

“Unfortunately no. But I will be in contact shortly,” Madame Sybil replied, her gaze returning once more to the self-described physician’s assistant. The constable snorted irritably before exiting the room, followed closely by Patricia. The Panther waited until the constable and barmaid could be heard at the base of the stairs before turning to the other Feline in the room. “Marie

Ackerman?” She asked simply.

Marie nodded. “Yes Madam.”

“The same Marie Ackerman of competitive sword-sparring fame?” The Feline nodded again, looking up to Sybil with an almost wry smile.

“The one and only,” she said, stepping beyond Theodore’s bed to his vanity. risk an insult to someone who was only too eager to help. carefully in front of her. The assistant stood in front of the vanity, swinging a clumsily large box to the top shelf. The madame took a step to the side, craning her neck to see what Marie was up to.

The box she had seemed to be an antique apothecary kit. The size of a weekend-traveler’s suitcase, the entire ensemble opened to create its very own, rudimentary herbalist bench. The suitcase expanded like a sort of repurposed tacklebox, creating a neatly organized, if criminally thin group

not trying to hide anything. Madame Sybil stepped forward, uninvited, but Marie continued unperturbed.

Built directly into one side of the suitcase appeared to be a detailed almanac, complete with sketched pictures of herbs and their uses—Sybil also thought she spied directions on mixtures for tonics and poultices as

glassware and a small mortar and pestle. Sybil couldn’t help but arch an eyebrow, glancing over the entire collection with great interest.

“It’s an emergency medical stand,” Marie explained, obviously perceptive enough to anticipate Madame Sybil’s question. The madame said nothing, watching instead as Marie lifted the mortar and pestle to reveal a small, locked compartment. “It has everything that a physician would otherwise need to stabilize a patient in order to transport them to a hospital,” She continued, withdrawing a key from the folds of her blouse.

“You seem to know precisely what you’re doing,” Sybil remarked coldly as Marie opened the locked compartment. One of her paws disappeared into the gap, only to retrieve a small, nearly translucent pill. Marie placed the mortar on the desk, dropping the pill into the basin.

“Indeed I do,” Marie replied simply, turning to Madame Sybil. “You will not like

what I need from you.”

“An excellent way to enlist someone’s help,” Sybil responded, her eyes narrowing. “Particularly when the only information you’ve given thus far is your name.”

“Madame Sybil... Please,” Marie began slowly. “Theodore’s time is short and after we have administered the benzodiazepine—”

“I don’t need the technical terms, Lady Ackerman,” Sybil snapped. “What is wrong with Theodore?”

“This bitch’s associate drugged me,” Sybil turned as Theodore growled. The Wolf laid on his side, glowering up at Marie with a hatred that she’d never seen Theodore bear.

Sybil swallowed uncomfortably, glancing between the two as Theodore sat up. She nearly rushed to his side as he teetered, but the Wolf’s snarl made it obvious he didn’t want anyone coming near him.

Marie seemed not to notice, or at least as if she didn’t care. She continued moving skillfully between bottles, adding herbs to the pill and grinding them into a thick paste.

“What do you mean, her associate?” Sybil articulated carefully.

“I mean that son of a bitch, Kendall Whitaker,” Theodore growled.

“You’ve been dosed with something called Therasphetamine, Theodore,” Marie said, not turning from the mortar and pestle. “By my count, you took it almost 19 hours ago.”

“That’s about right,” Theodore said, not pausing to even consider she could be wrong. Sybil was torn between which of these two she wanted to slap more.

“We run the risk of having caught this too late then,” Marie grunted. Sybil turned to her. The Feline was scowling darkly into the poultice she’d

Theodore didn’t move, his glare still boring holes in the back of Marie’s head.

“Your shirt, Theodore,” Sybil’s voice broke his concentration. The Wolf’s

“I’m leery of taking *more* drugs, Madame Sybil,” Theodore grunted softly.

“If it was important enough for her to follow you here unannounced, we should at least hear her out.” Sybil stepped toward Theodore. She reached forward to place her paw on Theodore’s shoulder. She was never good with caring gestures—not with someone whom she actually did care about, at least. She immediately withdrew, as soon as her paw rested against his skin.

“Theodore, your blood may well be trying to boil,” Sybil gasped softly, rubbing the palm of her paw where it had touched Theodore’s sweaty, quaking shoulder.

“I don’t—”

“Lay down, Theodore,” Marie instructed, turning to face them now, holding the mortar in both paws. “Madame Sybil, I need you to get your strongest alcohol.” “I’m not taking anything more from *you*,” Theodore growled. His

persisted.

“Theodore, you were wronged,” Marie rushed. “Wronged in ways that I cannot even *begin* to describe to you. But please, I am now begging you. Let me help set this straight.”

“By doing what, exactly?” Theodore demanded, reaching up to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“Beginning something called an inversion therap—” Marie began before Sybil’s shouting drown her out

“*Patricia!*” Sybil yelled into the hallway. “Ice, water and the strongest *Now!*” The madame crossed the room in a single stride, cupping Theodore’s face in both of her paws and turning him to face her directly. The Wolf’s cheeks were burning. His face was almost uncomfortably warm to hold even as she was.

The Wolf blinked up at her, bewildered as she held him there and spoke carefully. “Theodore. This would not be something I normally enforce, you know that.” Her question came as more of a statement, but garnered a nod from Theodore all the same.

“Good,” She continued. “So I am telling you this; if it was important enough for Lady Ackerman to come down here after you, I believe that it is important enough to listen to her advice now.”

“And if it gets worse?” Theodore asked. The poor beast was obviously trying to keep the pang of concern out of his voice as he glanced in the Feline’s direction.

“Eyes here,” Sybil stated simply, leaning forward. Theodore appeared reluctant to do so, but made eye contact with Sybil once more. “I need you

“But—”

“Theodore, I understand your concern, I truly do,” Sybil insisted. “But time is running shorter and shorter. Trust her or not, we cannot delay this treatment if you are to survive.”

Theodore swallowed hard, his eyes darting toward the door as Patricia’s footfalls ascended the stairs. He said nothing as Patricia rounded the corner looking panicked and confused.

“Here you are, Madame Sybil,” Patricia breathed heavily.

“Give them here.” Marie stepped forward to intercept the alcohol and ice. Small

portions of each was sent directly into the mortar and stirred viciously. The water was thrust at Theodore and he didn't wait for an invitation to turn the bottom of the pitcher up.

Madame Sybil retrieved the rest of the ice, holding it in her paws to cool them. She scooted back on the bed as Theodore removed his shirt, only to give it to the madame. She wrapped the shirt immediately around the ice, then took Theodore's wrist and placed the ice against it. He

Theodore.

"Right away, Madame."

should be docked. They may have ice for sale. Get us two blocks for the freezer below. I don't give a damn for cost," Sybil instructed. "They may pick up their money from me directly."

"Of course, Madame Sybil." Patricia nodded, rushing out of the room once more.

propping up his head for what she could on the criminally thin pillows he kept on his bed. He shivered, but Madame Sybil didn't dare to act further against his fever without Marie's guidance.

"This may cause seizing, Theodore," Marie said softly, leaning forward put you to sleep immediately."

Theodore nodded, leaning forward to take a drink of the solution

gagging.

"You're not drinking it for the taste," Marie pressed, pushing the mortar back to Theodore's maw.

"Don't think I care for whiskey much these days... but hell with it,"

Theodore grunted softly, trying to lift a paw to take it. Madame Sybil ignored the gesture, instead guiding the bottle, carefully tilting it to allow him to drink.

"Not too much of it! We don't need your liver failing as well," Marie

turned his head from the whiskey bottle to the mortar.

Sybil turned away, partly irritated and otherwise unnerved at the distressed expression that accompanied Theodore's violent shiver of distaste. She didn't turn to watch Theodore lay back down with a small, almost agonized groan.

"Unless you're one of the lucky ones, this medication may have you seize,"

Marie said calmly. Theodore groaned in response. Sybil turned her pulled the pillow in closer to his shoulder.

Marie glanced at her, then turned again to the herbalist set on the vanity. “I would like you to wait here, if you would,” Marie replied, turning through the pages over the medicinal guide, settling on a page before pointing to it. “Can you read apothecary notes?”

“Yes,” Sybil replied simply, stepping forward to view the page Marie

to the author’s appalling penmanship, she realized it was as simple as any other recipe.

“If he begins to convulse more seriously, you may need to tie him to own tongue.” Marie lowered her voice, as if she was worried that Theodore would hear her.

where might you be going?”

“There’s some information that Theodore must read,” the assistant bowed her head politely. “A few certain things he has the right to know.” Sybil nodded carefully. “In that case, be quick.”

///// Chapter Six: The Heir of the Congregate

Despite Whitaker’s nerves getting the better of him, Marie had made an excellent point in the taxi on their way to the laboratory. *If you want to ensure that nothing seems out of place*, Marie had counseled Whitaker, *you must behave as if just that; pretend as if nothing is out of place.*

Whitaker hadn’t even tried to protest the tactic, even if it were shrouded in inverted logic. He knew that Marie was right. It made for a tense ride in the taxi from the front of Whitaker’s estate to the Astronomy Tower, at the furthest end of the Northern District. Thankfully, roads were bare of carts and most of these historic districts were built with the ancient building in mind.

There were taller buildings in the city now, but the Astronomy Tower had always been treated with a special reverence. As the oldest building in of thought despite being called the “Astronomy Tower.” Many had tried never seemed to truly capture public interest.

The ancient stone obelisks leading to the building were stained a pale blue. They circled a vast courtyard in front of the enormous dome. Other, more technologically advanced observatories existed now for studies in meteorology. Yet for all their wondrous progress through technology, they couldn't quite inspire the awe that the Astronomy Tower did.

Inside of the tower, there was little to remark at. A central open space stood empty of all desks, directly beneath a domed glass in the ceiling. Bookshelves and desks had been moved into the tower by experts and professionals over the years. Star charts and weather patterns were mapped in meticulous detail on scrolls, some of which predated even the discovery of the island where Charinthesse now stood.

The domed glass that rested on the top of the tower was masterfully crafted between artisans and scientists. Modeled after a ripple, the glass

those who studied them, they were a guide. Scrolls lined the walls with instructions of how to read the stars through the stained glass. The obelisks out front created a sundial, while stars that could be seen through the dome told of the time of year. Constellations could be viewed through the stained glass; in olden days the stained glass in the sky above helped to denote

studies.

Unless a lesson was being taught, there was always an unspoken rule against conversation partly for respect of the ironic, nearly-sacred site of science. It was a place where class didn't exist, focused instead on discussions of philosophy, society and other observations of existence.

The poorest of Charinthesse were welcome here alongside the scholars and professors, many even receiving formal education and tutelage, so long as they attended. The Astronomy Tower was, in many ways, the fruition of scholars the world over. Arguably, it was the purest bastion of science and learning in history.

centuries before. And now, it was the preferred meeting place for the new Congregate. Many members shared notes and discussed theories in broad daylight—often in view of others. No questions were raised, so long as no one admitted to anything particularly damning.

No one dared question the existentialism of their queries, allowing the Second

Congregate of Scholars to operate inside and around the Astronomy Tower with near impunity. More quick-witted members of the Congregate

heard of one such event that was explained away as a course in ‘creative writing’, focusing on penny dreadfuls and the popularized explorations of “cosmic horror.” As insane as it felt, Whitaker couldn’t help but grin at the ingenuity that the Congregate had displayed.

He recalled the Congregate’s younger days. There was an almost playful existential questions and muse over their endless fascinations with the stars. Or, at least, that is what it had started as.

Whitaker had never been a direct witness to the Second Congregate’s infancy—only ever discussed it with one or two of the disgruntled leaders who were upset with Victor’s direction and drive. The scientists questioned all sorts of things behind the back of their Interim Director, granting him the title only out of respect for his late father, Henry. None of the scholars

feeling of the Congregate itself.

Whitaker had nodded through a great many monologues from other doctors who aired their grievances against his cousin as if they thought they could inspire Whitaker to discuss their problems with Victor. While he

he had always stood by Victor through the thick and thin of it. Perhaps

Victor’s life that had ever really given him the time of day.

It was the chief reason he didn’t want to come back to the seat of the Congregate’s power. While Whitaker was nearly certain that Victor was out of the city, it still felt somehow wrong to approach the Astronomy Tower as he did.

The tower itself was nestled against the mountainside, one of the few buildings constructed as an extension of the wall surrounding Charinthosse. Historians to that day bickered over whether or not it was

building and extended out either side, as if the Astronomy Tower itself was a bead on a—

Whitaker shook his head violently, nearly throwing his glasses from his face as he passed a group of students that had assembled near the base of one of the

obelisks. *Distracting yourself with trivia doesn't help you now.* Whitaker snapped at himself. *Act natural. Act natural. Act. Natural.* His mind began to plead.

He cast his gaze around the circular courtyard, eyeing the ground for only a moment to try and determine the time. The sundial's unfortunately imprecise reading of 'late afternoon' didn't improve Whitaker's nerves much. It was common for such Congregate meetings to last well into the evening.

The professor dreaded every second of it.

Halfway across the courtyard, Whitaker scanned the area again. Still,

no sign of any Congregate members he recognized. He even turned about further. No one was in sight.

better word, eerie. Whitaker stood alone in the room, the only sounds were those of his own footfalls echoing back at him. The bookshelves that had once lined the outermost perimeter of the walls were gone, centuries of knowledge disappearing with them. Even the benches were missing!

The barren sight took Whitaker's breath away and he looked around in disbelief, swallowing a lump in his throat. "What the devil...?" Whitaker mumbled softly into the room.

The only thing he heard was the sound of his own question, echoed back at him through the hall. He turned from the empty room, swiftly exiting the Astronomy Tower once more. The dying light of day—according to the sundial—gave him three more hours to locate at least one of the other members of the Congregate.

The students were beginning to trickle out of the courtyard now and Whitaker lengthened his strides in order to catch them. "Excuse me!" He shouted after the group.

One of them turned—a young, bespeckled Blue Jay. "Good evening, Professor Whitaker!" She chirped in his direction.

"Good evening to you as well!" Whitaker called, praying that he remembered her name before approaching too closely. He had no such luck.

"What brings you to the Tower?" She asked with a small smile, hugging her books closer to her chest. She wore the standard fare for universities: a black vest, a white, long-sleeved shirt and a set of trousers to match the vest. Her gesture with the books covered the crest that was otherwise emblazoned on her

vest.

“I am... I...” Whitaker stammered before shaking his head violently and

professor,” He mused, hoping to draw a giggle from the Blue Jay. It worked, blessedly.

“You make a fantastic surgeon, but I don’t have you pegged for creative writing!” The student laughed. Whitaker gave her a small, wry grin.

“I am looking for one of the other professors from the college— Professor DuGall?” Whitaker asked carefully. The Blue Jay considered the question for a moment, then nodded slowly.

“He was by earlier, why is it that you ask?”

Whitaker blinked in surprise. Victor was supposed to be out of the city... What was he doing back here? He felt the bottom drop out of his

in a few weeks.” Whitaker nodded, trying to stammer out something close to the truth. “I thought he was out of the city. He’s my cousin, you know. I

almost cartoonishly and the Blue Jay nodded, wetting her beak softly. “If I see him. I’ll say something,” she said reproachfully. “Thank you.” Whitaker gave a small bow. “And... good luck in your

into the streets of the Northern District. He stopped himself, grinding his teeth for a moment before turning back to the Blue Jay. “And, Miss...?” The professor searched for the name and the Avian giggled softly.

“Eobart.” She gave a small nod. “Amelia Eobart.”

“Ah... Sorry, I should have remembered—”

“I was there at an Ophthalmology lecture you hosted some years back.”

The student shrugged as she closed the distance between herself and the professor, still clutching her books. “I would have been surprised if you remembered me.”

“That makes me feel a little bit better,” Whitaker chuckled softly. “The scrolls, from the Astronomy Tower—” The Otter asked softly, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his muzzle. “Do you know where they’ve gone?”

The Avian shook her head softly, shying away a step, a gesture that Whitaker found very peculiar. “I don’t know where they are, but they were all stolen four

weeks ago... did you not hear?"

"I was in the Republic of Fielora at the time..." Whitaker admitted, rolling his shoulders some. "News doesn't travel well across oceans and mountains, I'm afraid. Not yet at least."

Amelia nodded, giving a small sigh before returning her gaze to Whitaker. "When Professor DuGall was here, he said that he was looking for you—did I tell you that already?" The student winced.

"You didn't," Whitaker said, his expression turning more puzzled, before turning and striding away. "I don't mean to be rude, but I really must be going," He said over his shoulder.

"Have a good evening, Professor!"

"You as well!" He called back, before locking his gaze forward. Whitaker had long been Victor's one and only 'positive' relationship.

It was no secret inside of the family that Whitaker's uncle, Henry, was homosexual. Henry's marriage, even Victor's conception was out of spite for the rumors that plagued Henry's business dealings.

It wasn't that Henry was a bad parent, least not as far as Whitaker had ever noticed. But there had always been a clear, palpable resentment that plagued the household. No matter what Victor did in his youth, even when Whitaker had been around, he wasn't able to garner favor from either his mother, or his father. Or at least, nothing that felt truly genuine.

As shallow as Whitaker so often believed Victor's 'troubles' to be, many other experts suggested that his childhood would eventually take him to vicious places in his life. Whitaker hadn't ever seen any evidence of it though— nothing so direct, as many feared.

That aside, it was very unlike Victor to appear back home without at least sending word to Whitaker. His stomach sank as he considered the possibility of Victor knowing of his plot against the Congregate.

The thought nagged him through a fog that descended on his mind. Whitaker found it hard to focus on anything else, except for the possibilities of how the dialogue with Victor would go. His mind wandered to and fro, weighing

possibilities and outcomes.

If Victor came home without so much as a word to Whitaker, he was clearly intending to surprise him. He wasn't the type for pleasant surprises and that made the natural progression of thoughts feel that much worse.

How could Whitaker keep it from him? He hadn't moved the damned would be right out in the open if Victor decided to drop in unannounced.

Panic began to speed his gait, Whitaker's eyes locked forward as he dodged carefully between the few beasts on the Northern District streets. He tried to convince himself that he was worrying over nothing—that he

to be, as well as account for anything that Vladislav may have told him. A moseying ride from a taxi going from Whitaker's estate to the Astronomy Tower normally took Whitaker thirty minutes, give or take. On

The night security waved pleasantly to Whitaker as the professor stormed past, giving him only curtest of nods in response. The guard clearly didn't need to be told of the rush. The iron wrought gate groaning on its hinges as it swung open for the professor. It was barely open enough

He nearly sprinted across the lawn to the front door, looking up to see his butler, Julius, standing regally in the doorway. "You are home sooner than—"

"Has my cousin stopped by?" Whitaker asked, probably too quickly. The Blue Jay nodded.

"He did, Sir, but he is here and gone. Recounted a matter of utmost importance and requested that, upon your returning home that word be sent. He said that he could be here within the hour from that time." Julius bowed his head politely.

Whitaker felt his stomach drop. "Has that word been sent already?" He asked, trying to keep the strain from his voice. Julius chuckled softly, but shook his head.

Whitaker let out a dry, loud bark of laughter. He felt his knees quake slightly in relief as he straightened his back, then exhaled hard. "Thank you, Julius," Whitaker said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Did he give any indicator of what he wanted?"

The Blue Jay nodded again. “Indeed he did, sir. A letter. I’ve left it atop

“Thank you, Julius. Truly.” Whitaker felt the tension leaving his shoulders, but knew that it would be back the instant that he picked up the letter. It was a small reprieve for now, but a welcome one at least.

“Shall I send word to your cousin?” The Blue Jay asked. Whitaker shook his head.

The professor said, stepping beyond the butler and into the house. He tried not to seem too panicked as he strode to the library, closing the doors immediately behind him before moving the desk. Surely enough, the

top of it.

Whitaker sat heavily in the padded armchair, slumping against it as he stared listlessly forward to the envelope. No doubt it was a summons of some kind—it had the wax crest and seal, all the hallmarks of ridiculously important, if antiquated, documentation. Whitaker stared at it for several

of venomous snake.

Whitaker turned it over in his paws idly, eyeballing the wax seal only to turn and stare at the calligraphy that spelled out his address. He wet his lips carefully, his thumbs feeling each imperfection of the paper.

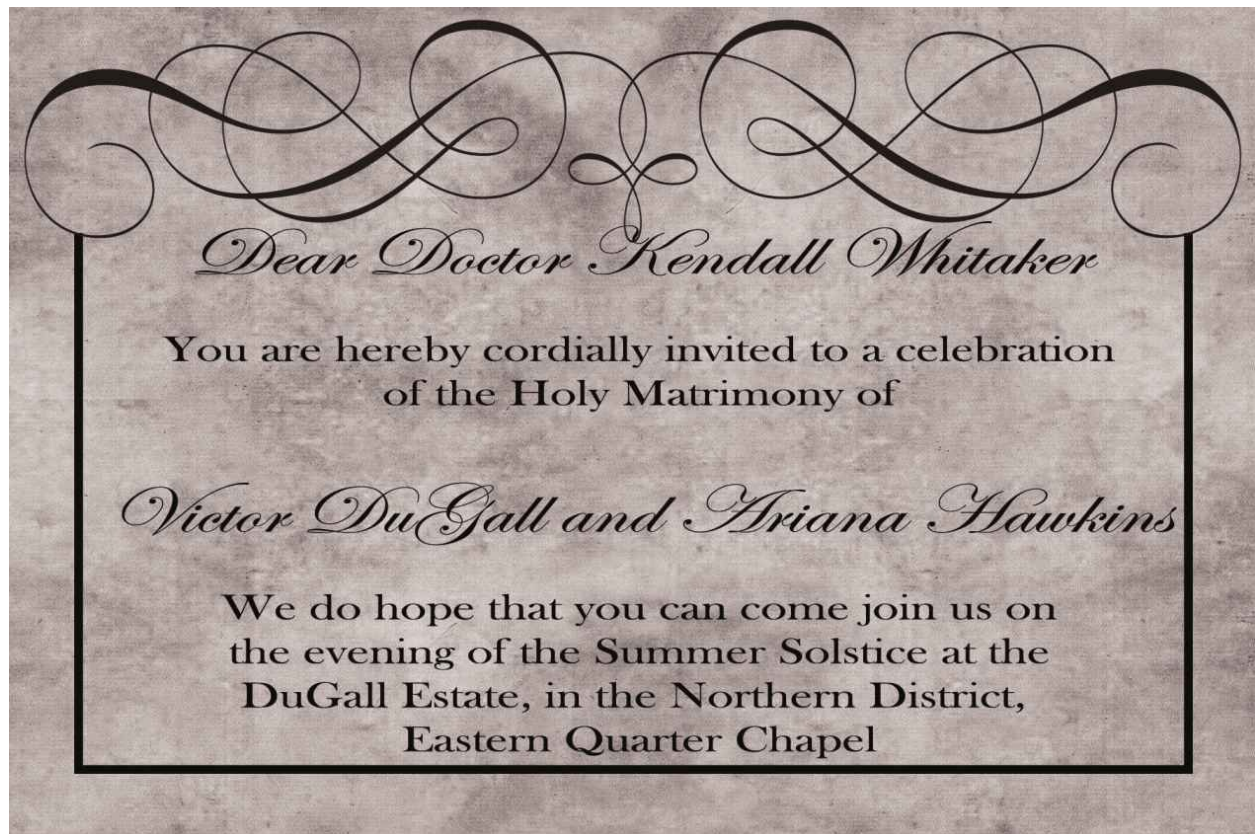
Unlike many of the formal, cotton-based drafting paper that Fielora Grand, or the Republic of Fielora shipped, this paper felt smooth—cool to the touch, even. Whitaker recognized it from the endless systems of texts that he’d read and papers that he’d written. It was a stone-based paper

Fieloran counterparts, usually reserved for only the most prestigious of occasions.

Or, in Victor’s case, the most vain of individuals. As much as Whitaker loved his cousin, he couldn’t deny that the Otter’s devotion to his own at the paper again. His brow furrowed and he slid a single thumb beneath the wax seal to break it.

A small, gorgeously calligraphed note fell into Whitaker’s lap. The professor gave the document a confused glance. It was a letter from Victor, but he didn’t

stop to read it. Not before picking up the card from his lap and gasping softly.



forgot about his worries over the Congregate for a moment, slumping back into the chair as he stared at the invitation in his paw. The tension in his shoulders was lifted and he couldn't stop himself from beginning to laugh.

For the years he had known Victor, he never assumed that his cousin would ever marry. The beast's dedication to his work had upended every friendship he'd ever had and by his own admission social entanglements were, as he so eloquently put it, "endless displays of narcissism, vanity and puppeteering." He'd only proclaimed that as recently as a year ago, now Victor was to be married.

A short wave of cynicism lobbied the idea that Victor was going by way of his father and marrying for the sake of money, prestige or business. But he had also once met this Ariana Hawkins that was on the invitation alongside of Victor. Kendall knew through secondary accounts that she was

Hoddrick Steel.

Whitaker shook his head, still grinning to himself as he opened one of sandwiching it between other a pair of volumes that called the musty den drawer. He didn't bother locking the drawer as he closed it, that ran the risk of looking more suspect in case Victor decided to get supremely nosy.

The professor pushed himself away from his desk, beginning to bustle about the room in order to make sure everything was straightened up for Victor's arrival. It wasn't so much that Victor cared over the state of the

the energy that panic brought.

Therasphetamine laced decanter to the lowest and least-accessible position on the shelves below. He replaced it with one of his favorite drinks.

Whitaker laughed softly to himself as he looked over the amber-tinted decanter, swirling the last bit of an old, oaky whiskey in the bottom of it. His father had given him that bottle at graduation and he'd only ever resolved to drink it on the most special of occasions. While it was painfully

next to the decanter

He turned his head as he heard one of the doors creak open and the face the double doors to the library, crossing his arms and grinning in their direction as his cousin swung the doors open.

The Otter was very similar in build to Whitaker, though he was a touch taller. Instead of Whitaker's chestnut-brown fur, Victor's was a deeper, uncommon shade of brown, nor did he have the scar drawing a line between his temples, as Whitaker did. Nor did he have a lighter chin or underbelly, as was typical of other Otters. He wore a three-piece suit, quite common among academics and beamed as he approached his cousin.

"Kendall!" he shouted across the room, grinning wide and throwing his arms up. Whitaker laughed softly and strode toward his cousin, accepting the embrace as the two met in the center of the library.

"My God Victor, it's been ages!" Whitaker laughed. "Particularly if it's been so long that you've proposed to the fair Miss Hoddrick since I've last seen you!" He grinned, clapping his cousin on the shoulder.

"You've not been in Fielora for a few months and it took a few weeks to track you down, admittedly." Victor grinned, stepping away from Whitaker and rolling

his shoulders. “But yes... it’s been quite the whirlwind!”

“Hearing you speak of it like that, I am surprised the two of you didn’t elope.” Whitaker shook his head softly. The nagging sensation reappeared in the back of his mind: the suggestion, whispering that the marriage was a ruse to get Whitaker to let his guard down... That somehow, Victor was more conniving than Whitaker had thought.

His heart skipped a beat when Victor’s paw disappeared into the folds

making ready to pull a snub-nosed revolver and shoot him dead. He even found himself retreating a step, his eyes moving down, utterly glued to the rummaging paw.

“Something like this requires a bit more of a celebration!” Victor

Whitaker nearly melted in relief.

“I’ve brought out one of the few bottles of Devil’s Cut that are left from my graduation party—”

“My *God* Kendall...” Victor exclaimed. “It’s taken you twenty-two years to drink a single bottle of whiskey!?”

“I happened to have been saving this for a special occasion!” Whitaker retorted as Victor interrupted. “Besides, isn’t that the normal thing to do? Break out the higher quality drinks for the better occasions?” The professor

“At what point did our lives become so disgustingly normal, Kendall?” swig of a beer poignant enough for Whitaker to smell it from a distance. hem of his vest.

“Truth be told, I don’t know. But I do welcome the change.” Whitaker of the whiskey. He turned back to Victor and raised his glass. “So, here’s to

before sitting back heavily onto one of the couches with a sigh. “*Hopefully* there’s a lifetime awaiting me at all,” the Otter grouched as he reclined on the couch.

“Issues inside of the workforce,” Victor stressed, glancing over his shoulder to the still-open door.

glass. “Issues?” He asked, trying to feel out the issue. “Workers, investors, or closer colleagues?” Whitaker queried, trying to stay vague enough for Victor’s

tastes.

They both knew that he was referencing the Congregate. Or... Whitaker's mind froze. Was Victor talking about the Congregate? The pang of uncertainty was enough to make Whitaker visibly shift on the couch, glancing to the open door himself.

Whitaker. The professor tilted his whiskey back, trying to take as long of a sip as possible to buy him time to formulate a response that wasn't damning.

"Which ones?" Whitaker asked at length, bracing his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"I don't know what to make of it," Victor mumbled, leaning forward as

as he looked at Whitaker. "But I think that someone is trying to undermine the Congregate."

Whitaker felt his heart leap to his throat and he cocked his head. "Why would you think that?" He asked, his voice tense to the point of cracking.

Industries?" Victor asked softly, glancing warily over his shoulders. *Giovanni's notebook*. Whitaker thought to himself, his toes curling against the carpet.

"What of it?"

Victor stood quickly, his eyes glued to the door in a suspicious glare the door, swinging it closed and latching it before returning to the couch in front of his cousin, obviously in a rush.

"You know that Giovanni has disappeared from the world, correct?"

Victor asked hurriedly.

"That sounds like a veiled admission of guilt, Victor," Whitaker hissed, baring his teeth softly. "What the hell have you done!?"

"I've done nothing, cousin. I swear to you!" Victor assured him. "But recent developments inside of the Congregate, correlating to things *very* suspicious!" Whitaker waited for a moment for his cousin to continue before snapping. "Well out with it!"

Victor explained. "More sympathetic voices to funding Research and Development inside of Giovanni's company have been quietly moved to one side—and out of the Board of Directors. They aren't willing to fund more things such as the Arligent Experiment, per orders of an unnamed, interim

Whitaker blinked, then cocked his head some. “An interim Head of Machiavelli.”

Whitaker’s heart pounded in his throat and he was forced to set the shiver fell down his spine.

“I suspect that designs are being made to undermine the Congregate, I couldn’t,” Victor pressed. “We even pulled the scrolls and the like from the Astronomy Tower to look them over—”

Victor scowled at him.

“Priorities. For God’s sake!” Victor spat.

“Sorry. Continue.”

The other Otter shifted uncomfortably in his seat, scowling softly as he

all missing.”

himself, true, but it was hardly one of the more technical of the books. memoirs on top of memoirs, names, dates, sympathizers, even dossiers and foundation of the Congregate’s progress—the documents and ideas that had pressed the boundaries forward and turned the Congregate of

“All of them?” Whitaker’s heart was beating hard enough to cause him pain and he leaned back, his eyes closing slowly. He forced himself to breathe deeply and allow his heart rate to slow as Victor continued.

Kendall. He never has been.”

“And that is a problem because it’s both a drain on resources and a potential exposure of the Congregate’s full activities,” Whitaker groaned softly, rubbing his paws over his face. “And here I thought we were going to have a disgustingly normal evening.”

Victor chuckled softly at Whitaker and the professor could hear his cousin leaning back against his own seat. “Disgustingly normal indeed.”

“Just tell me this much, Victor,” Whitaker said before letting his paws fall to the couch next to him. He leaned forward to look at his cousin in the

“Do. Not. Finish. That. Question,” Victor snarled.

“So long as you truly love her, I support you in this,” Whitaker said softly, nodding his head. “I hope you know that.”

Victor nodded softly, crossing his legs before leaning backward once more against the couch. “My father made enough mistakes with me. I won’t see them

revisited on my own children.”

Whitaker cleared his throat, reaching to his side to pick up the whiskey and take another sip. “That’s noble of you.”

Whitaker’s cousin shot him an icy glower, only to turn back toward the drink in his paw. “I’m not entirely certain if you were being sarcastic, Kendall.”

“I assure you, Victor, I am most certainly *not*.”

“He left me the goddamned Congregate when he died... It was in a private letter I got at the reading of his will,” Victor laughed with a small, dry chuckle. “As if it was his to give.” Whitaker’s ears perked at the mention and he turned his head slightly to look squarely at Victor.

“You don’t believe we’ve gone too far, do you?” Whitaker asked softly, the sudden remorse in Victor’s body language sending all sorts of mixed signals.

“I’m not sure what I believe anymore, Kendall,” Victor said, his voice tightening. “The only thing I know for certain, is that I have seen things in the last year that have made me desperately want to be happy in this life. Something to step outside of the existential dread for even a moment.”

while you take time away to raise a family, if you so choose.” “I feel honor bound for what they’ve done for our family, Whitaker,”

Victor said, making eye contact with his cousin. “I’m surprised you don’t feel the same way. You’re the one whose eyes were cut out.”

///// Chapter Seven: The Other Ones

Theodore didn’t know where he was standing, but he certainly wasn’t anywhere near the Silver Ladle. In fact, from where he stood, nothing was near him, save for the ground he could feel beneath his feet and the lantern he clutched desperately in his paw. He’d had no recollection of picking up the lantern, but he was grateful he had it regardless.

It was as simple as lanterns could be large enough for a decent amount of light, but small enough to not be too cumbersome. The brass and glass construction resembled the box fashion of many outdoor lanterns and housed a single, unassuming wick. It hung from a large, oblong-shaped ring, creaking as it swung. Theodore refused to look a gift horse in the mouth, instead raising the lantern high, turning his entire body as he looked about, trying to get his bearings in the oppressive blackness.

The lantern was, near as he could tell, the one and only source of light, or even

substance that he could discern. At his feet, there was nothing. No anything at all, even though it felt solid.

Theodore's breath sped up as he continued to turn, holding the lantern aloft as he searched for something—anything that could help guide him to... well, anywhere.

No matter what direction he moved, the sensation loomed in the back darkness. Theodore even attempted to turn the lantern higher—not even caring that the wick would burn faster, but his attempts were met in vain. Despite turning the knobs as much as he could, the wick wouldn't even budge.

hair. The Wolf drew in a shuddering breath before he rubbed down the bridge of his muzzle. "Hello!?" he shouted into the darkness.

There was no reply. There wasn't even an echo.

Theodore shuddered at the thought of being so isolated, but he knew that dwelling on it would be the death of him. He drew a deep breath, raising the lantern above his head and marching forward, choosing a direction and refusing to deviate from it. God only knew how long he would be walking—he didn't want to get turned around.

He didn't dare try and keep track of how long he walked. He feared that would only add to the feeling of anxiety that scratched the back of his mind. More than once, he switched the paws that held the lantern, continuing the scan the area in front of him.

A whisper came from somewhere to his left. Theodore nearly jumped out of his pelt as he turned violently, swinging the

of voices all began to whisper in agreement—somehow individuals, each

Theodore raised the lantern cautiously, not daring to close his eyes as he felt the voices close in around him. The whispers grew louder, more urgent, until Theodore couldn't isolate just where the individual sounds were coming

remained, rooted to the spot, his ears perked as he locked his gaze forward, making himself ready for whatever came.

After what felt like an eternity, the voices subsided around him and silence overtook the shadows once more.

You have not molted,
sounding almost surprised. The others didn't echo the phrase, at least not

directly. The ripple of whispers could still be heard, but whatever was speaking now was clearly in charge. Or... Theodore felt as if it was in charge.

“Molted?” Theodore asked, his voice nearly cracking from the sudden tightness in his throat. The Wolf’s eyes narrowed at something. He wasn’t sure what, but it caught the smallest hint of a gleam and inspired him to

head as he moved forward.

He immediately dropped the lantern, yelping and scrambling backwards.

He tripped in the process, his eyes wide as he stared upward at the form. It was only barely illuminated and remained motionless.

And unblinking.

The lantern’s yellow glow illuminated only the base most portion of an enormous eye, hovering just over the ground. Theodore stared up at the eye, which turned back at him. It was unlike anything he’d ever seen before.

Rather than a simple, white eye, it was black as pitch. Veins protruded, throbbed in a deep shade of gold. The jagged passageways stretched over the ball in a sick spiderweb, save for a single, perfect ring wrapped around a

It wasn’t attached to a face, or even a skull.

Theodore turned his head from side to side, daring for only a moment to dart forward and snatch the lantern from beneath the eyeball. He scrambled to his feet, turning to sprint in the opposite direction, only to stop before he

Ten thousand unblinking, unwavering eyes stared back at him, held at bay

No matter how he turned, the eyes drifted closer. There was no passage possible, not without running headlong into whatever could be behind those eyes. The voices began to come again, each whispering their astonishment. Theodore didn’t understand what they meant; whispers of “molting”, that Theodore was still “just one”, as if it was some sort of accomplishment.

You are unlike the others, The loudest voice, the one that Theodore thought was the “boss” said.

as he turned back to face the largest of the eyes.

its gaze. The others, The ball quivered, then unnaturally rolled about, as if to indicate the other eyeballs suspended in the air. Sent here, some even against their will, for

Theodore's eyes widened as he looked around. "Each one of them, a estimated count. The voice claimed once again.

It sounded almost remorseful as murmurs rose once more. Theodore couldn't keep track of the voices—but it seemed that each of them was trying to tell him of how they ended up... wherever it was that they were.

"I really hate just sitting around, repeating the last thing that's been said," Theodore grouched softly, his ears pinning back against his head. He turned back toward the largest eye, staring straight at it. His own gaze darkened as he spoke. "Would you do me the honor, of giving me a straight answer?"

The eyeball seemed to churn, twisting in place, as if considering Theodore's proposal. of things; what are you? What is all of this? Where the hell are we and why am I here?" Theodore couldn't keep the sarcastic bite out of his tone.

The masses of eyes surrounding him shuddered visibly and Theodore felt his grip tighten against the ring handle of the lantern. Nevertheless, he continued to stare forward as the voice came again.

We are Udun' The voice claimed, as if that should have meant something to Theodore. And these are the souls,

Theodore waited for the thing—this "Udun'Vrah"—to continue speaking, but nothing came. "So, next question... What is all of this?" Theodore asked, casting out his free arm to the eyeballs that surrounded him. They retreated, as if pushed by the movement of Theodore's arm, only to resetttle nearby once more.

They are the souls, sent to us for

The eye quivered. It didn't sound upset with Theodore for asking the question again. The Wolf scowled back into the eye all the same. "And why are they here and why am I here?" Theodore snapped, trying not to sound too irritated with whatever this thing was.

who sent you? The voice asked, almost confused. Theodore shook his head.

"I came here by an accident, near as I can tell," he admitted, running his tongue over his teeth before adding. "Or, at least... For Whitaker's sake, I pray it was

an accident.”

The once-quiet voices erupted into a clamor of shouts, jeers and obscenities that caused Theodore to drop the lantern once again, grabbing his ears in an attempt to silence the din. The noise itself sent him to his knees and the Wolf ground his teeth together. He couldn't make anything out, not directly at least; the very mention of Whitaker's name was enough single, deep throb that seemed to emanate from the largest of eyes in front of him. It caused the others to fall silent and deathly so. Theodore remained hunched over, not daring to open his eyes until the unnatural quiet became unbearable.

He tilted his head up slowly, raising his paws from his ears. The eyething, Udun'Vrah still stared down at him. He glanced around at the other

once more.

“Hit a nerve there, I guess,” Theodore said with an insincere chuckle. You are one of the few sent here that has

Udun'Vrah's voice came. Others have

The creature said, sounding almost curious, before the eye quivered slowly. What must it be like, away from

Theodore's eyebrows arched and he cocked his head slightly. “Ex... excuse me?” He asked cautiously. “Away from this place?”

Yes, the voice came again. Theodore thought he could hear the most wishful of tones now.

Theodore blinked cautiously, then turned his head slowly to look about the sea of eyes staring at him. “I'm not sure what you—”

Theodore landed against the ground in a sore heap and loud groan. He the other side of his eyelids.

He could hear footsteps darting up the stairs and feel them through the almost immediately. He tried to move, to give her some sort of gesture that he heard her.

“What happened?” Theodore groaned softly, trying to pick himself out of view. He turned his neck some to watch her snatch a wet cloth from

Theodore the cloth and he accepted it gratefully.

“You've been asleep for the better part of the day,” Madame Sybil explained as Theodore wrapped the cool, wet cloth about his neck. He

“And the aide, Marie?” Theodore grunted, rubbing some at his “She said that she was going to collect some information, things that you deserved to read,” Madame Sybil said, her hushed tone sounding equally concerned as it was urgent. “That was some hours ago, though.”

Theodore nodded, wetting his chapped lips before trying to stand. Madame Sybil took a step forward, as if to assist him, but he held a paw to stop her movements. The Wolf teetered on his feet, but was stable enough to stand on his own.

He took a moment to count his blessings. Madame Sybil closed the distance in a single movement, placing a single paw on Theodore’s shoulder before reaching to turn his chin toward her. “Your eyes certainly look better,” she remarked, features relaxing in relief.

“Did Marie say what had happened in any sort of detail?” “She did not,” Sybil admitted. “But I’ve the constabulary on alert. They will arrive shortly after she does—and they are even guarding the window entryway, should Lady Ackerman decide to get crafty.” The Panther nodded, her emerald eyes narrowing.

“Apparently, she’s one of those revolutionaries from the Fieloran civil war,”

Theodore lowered his voice, turning to Madame Sybil. “So... watch her.”

Madame Sybil blinked in surprise, her face a mask of confusion for only a moment. The Panther’s composure returned as soon as she realized Theodore was staring at her.

“That sounds almost like a sort of benediction, Theodore,” Madame Sybil remarked coldly.

“Madame—,” Theodore began, turning to face her. He thought for a moment on what he intended on saying, then closed his eyes and exhaled. “Can you give Marie my address and ask her to bring our mutual acquaintance?” Theodore asked softly.

Madame Sybil nodded, taking a small step away from Theodore as she looked over him reproachfully. “I certainly hope this has nothing further to do with whatever it was that you were given.”

“In a sense, yes,” Theodore sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his muzzle.

“But not for use, for information.”

“I assure you, that such things may be discussed here, on more neutral ground,” the Panther replied pointedly.

“And I promise you that the other clients do not want to hear what I have to say,” he crossed his arms as he spoke. “Particularly in light of what I’ve been told over the last two days.”

lobby last night,” Sybil reminded Theodore heatedly. “With that being said, is there anything you care to share with me?” She asked, arching an eyebrow and leaning forward ever-so-slightly.

“Depends,” Theodore muttered, shying a step away from her venomous glare. “What have your various psychologist patrons said about medical procedures against insanity?”

more. “Are you asking for legitimate purposes, or are you being facetious?” “Legitimate purposes, please,” Theodore winced as he spoke, a quick

“Electroshock therapy and lobotomies have been showing promise where trepanations were beginning to lack,” the Panther said simply. “Beyond that, other psychologists believe more in talking about the feelings and confronting their roots—psychoanalysis, I believe the term is—ahead of digging into someone’s skull with a manual drill.”

Theodore fell silent, then nodded curtly. “If I told you the truth now, what are the odds of you having me committed?”

“What do you have to say to me, Theodore?” Sybil’s short, almost irritated tone returned.

manage something of an innocent grin.

“We’ve closed down for the evening, if you haven’t forgotten,” she retorted, crossing her arms. “I’ve told the patrons that it is a lack of supply of beer, following destruction of what we *did* have that was torn through early this morning.”

Theodore nodded carefully, exhaling as he glanced toward the window he and Whitaker had escaped through less than twenty-four hours ago. With all that had gone on, it felt like a lifetime in a day.

“Are you alright, Theodore?” Madame Sybil asked, her tone probably more pointed than she realized.

Theodore shook his head, then looked back at the bed with a small sigh. “I’m not,” he admitted. “And the only one that can give me a straight answer is the last beast I want to speak with.”

“How do you mean?” Sybil asked carefully.

“Please, Madame Sybil,” the Wolf continued with a small wince, his ears tucking back as he retreated a small step. “When Lady Ackerman returns to the Ladle, send *her* to my address.”

Madame Sybil nodded as she watched Theodore for a moment. The

his wrists. “It isn’t wise for you to return to your apartment, Theodore. Especially unwise for you to attempt to *walk* there.”

them sit more comfortably against his fur. “I hadn’t intended on getting a

Theodore shook his head. “No... It’s on the overwatch—the old lighthouse keeper apartments,” he said. “It’s up the switchback, built into the foundation.”

that you are up to walking a full set of docks and then up a switchback

arrived here. That’s an hour’s walk for the healthiest of Wolves.” “I have improved,” he said heatedly. Theodore glanced to the window, then gave a small, curt nod in its direction. “And I intended on taking the Skyway.”

“The Skyway doesn’t take you anywhere near your apartment,

lap as her back straightened. “There is no quick way to get there and you would fall over before you made it even halfway.”

Theodore’s gaze darkened, his teeth baring. “I don’t think you can keep me here against my will. Not without breaking the law.”

“Theodore, I have the means to do so and given your proclivities and occupation no one would question the sight of you shackled to a bed. If you wish to pack so be it, but you are staying here,” Sybil said sternly. “You live alone. Given your current state that is entirely too dangerous for you to be spending any amount of time without someone watching to ensure that your condition doesn’t degrade.”

Theodore closed his eyes, then exhaled heavily. “I’m not convincing you otherwise, am I?”

“For a multitude of reasons beginning with your health, no.”

“I... for what it’s worth I’m sorry I’ve been a cur.”

“Trauma doesn’t heal overnight,” Sybil replied softly. “But you need help now. Lady Ackerman and Professor Whitaker are your best, if not your only chance to get better. They are the only beasts that know what is wrong.” “I suppose...you’re right.” Theodore nodded, trying to swallow the bitter realization that he needed their help, turning toward the edge of the bed to take a seat.

“Thank you for understanding, Theodore,” Madame Sybil said once more, reaching forward to caress the side of the Wolf’s head with the back

of her paw. “Get some rest while you can.”

///// Chapter Eight: The Bedside Confessional

Theodore sat at the edge of the bed, staring down at the canvas sack between his feet that contained all of his more important worldly belongings—the things left over from... Good God, had it only been the

It had been some hours since Theodore had seen Marie and he’d hoped to be gone by the time she returned. His body, however, hadn’t been ready for any sort of real movement and Madame Sybil had noticed. He’d tried insisting to the contrary earlier, but she told him that he had to walk down, retrieve his own belongings and come back to his room before she would call him any sort of cab.

Theodore had waited until worst of the sensations had gone away. When they had blessedly left him, the nausea and migraine was replaced with the post-fever aches that were, given the situation, only too welcome. It was something that Theodore could at least expect and hang onto, after all of this nonsense. A rap at the door made him sit back up and he inhaled slowly, his back straightening. He looked over his shoulder at the door before speaking. “Come in.”

The door swung open cautiously and Theodore felt his teeth bare in an ugly snarl as none other than Professor Kendall Whitaker himself came into the room with the satchel over his shoulder, as he had the night prior and a large, cherry-red box with brass hardware on the corners beneath his arm. He was closely followed by a rather stern looking Marie Ackerman, who didn’t seem to be able to decide who she was supposed to be glaring at, her venomous gaze travelling back and forth between Theodore and the back of Whitaker’s skull. “Theodore, we need to talk,” Whitaker began pointedly.

“Quite the opposite, Whitaker,” Theodore growled softly. “You and I have *nothing* to speak about,” he tried to stand up, but his fever-fatigued muscles made the process slower than he would have liked. “I believe I was *very* clear with you when I said I wanted nothing to do with this.”

“Be that as it may you are involved,” Whitaker scowled, stepping forward. Marie closed the door behind them, even doing the courtesy of locking it before stepping in completely. “And like it or not, we are the only two connected to the Congregate that don’t want to see you on a surgeon’s table, prepared for

vivisection.”

did tell you to go to hell.”

“Theodore—” Marie began.

“I rather liked it when you called me ‘Mr. Locke’, actually,” the Wolf

sneered. “At least then it felt like you were trying to *respect* me.” “We don’t have the time for this,” Whitaker murmured urgently.

“Please, at the very least can we give you something close to clarity or closure?” The professor asked, stepping away from the door, as if he was worried that someone was pressing their ear up against it, trying to listen in.

“I am headed home,” Theodore said plainly. “You may *not* accompany me.” Theodore forced himself to his feet, staggering a bit as he nearly tripped over the bag. Whitaker darted forward as Theodore lost his balance entirely, catching the Wolf across the chest with his arm and shoulder. “That would *not* be wise, Theodore,” Whitaker grunted softly, taking Theodore’s weight over his shoulder. “You are hardly able to stand, what if you had a medical emergency?”

now here?”

There was a sharp knock on the door before Whitaker could properly respond. “Theodore, your cab has arrived,” Madame Sybil’s voice called through the door. The knob was tested before Marie could snap the deadbolt open, only for the Panther to throw it open with enough force to make Marie retreat a step. “You have lost *all* rights to be locking *any* doors here, Miss Ackerman,” Sybil snapped, her voice dripping with venom before she turned to Whitaker and continued. “And you—”

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Marie’s insistence!” Whitaker shot back, leaning forward to try and look Theodore directly in the eye. “She said that Theodore was in perfect condition—”

“Which *begs* the question of how an ophthalmologist can be of *any* assistance!” Sybil snarled. “He would need a proper physician if anything—perhaps even a damned *witch doctor* for what you’ve done.”

“Witch doctors practice nothing but superstitious nonsense. It is pseudoscience at its purest—”

“Oh, *cruelest of ironies*,” Madame Sybil grunted in the professor’s direction. Whitaker snorted. “I was trained as a general physician in the Charinthossian Navy.”

The Otter sat the box he’d been holding down next to Theodore, reaching forward to grip the sides of the Wolf’s face. Theodore instantly recoiled, unwilling to let Whitaker even lay a paw on him, growling darkly.

“Don’t you *fucking* dare,” Theodore snarled.

“I echo the sentiments,” Sybil growled as well, stepping forward only for Marie to block her. Sybil’s icy glower rested on Marie for a moment, who only returned the gesture. Neither moved and the tension was enough to make Theodore even glance over his shoulder, rather concerned for what would happen next. “You will not leave with him, nor will you follow him wherever he may be. If he is well enough to leave, he is well enough to be left alone,” Sybil said softly, her eyes still locked to Marie’s.

as she held her ground. “This goes far beyond any of us.”

“The pronoun game stops at my front door,” Madame Sybil said, her voice now dangerously quiet. “Anything that you wish to involve Theodore in may be said in front of me, as well as any treatment rendered can be rendered here.”

“Madame Sybil, be reasonable—” Whitaker started. Sybil silenced him with a single gesture—an open palm that she didn’t even have to raise entirely to shoulder height.

“If I were being reasonable, I would have denied your entry to this

from Marie and stepping around her. Marie submitted, stepping aside as the Panther approached Whitaker. She towered over him and Theodore saw Whitaker swallow as her eyes settled on him as if he were a bad omen. Theodore was taller than Madame Sybil was, but somehow she managed to dwarf the Otter by her sheer presence alone. “Anything that you have to say to Theodore, you may say in front of me.”

“That isn’t wise, Madame Sybil,” Whitaker responded quietly. “Were it not for me, Theodore would never have gone with you last night,” Sybil snapped. “His current condition is a direct result of my shortsightedness into *your* character.”

“That is *entirely* uncalled for!” Marie protested, but Sybil continued. “Your entire family follows the same mantra, it seems,” the Panther’s

but one of intellect.”

“How *dare* you!” Whitaker protested.

“I knew your father growing up and his brother,” Sybil shot. “How

Henry took the name ‘DuGall’ after his mate, *a butler in his own employ*,” the Panther bared her teeth and Whitaker retreated a step. “Shall I go further, into the suicide of Henry’s neglected wife? Perhaps that *trophy* of a son they had —*Victor*, was it? With God as my witness, even his name exudes your uncle’s hubris!”

“You’ve made your point, cur!” Whitaker snapped.

“I don’t believe I have,” she challenged further, stepping forward to close the distance that Whitaker had retreated. “You’re a damn fool enough

toward the cherry red box. “And a no less? Only your family—only a *Whitaker* would be so daft! Your family seems to be destined for obscurity because none of your line have the sense to stop chasing the cart they’ve

record and you carry the torch of your forebears only to further your family’s isolation from otherwise well-deserved prominence. You need every aiding arm you can call on,” she bared her teeth dangerously. “Clarify your positions and be careful of what you say. You leave this bordello with either a pair of less-than-willing allies, or a *very* powerful enemy.”

Whitaker lifted his chin, staring the Panther bravely in the face, but the catch in his voice betrayed his nervousness. “What do you think that you could do to me that the Congregate could not?”

robbery gone poorly. At least, if they were even *remotely* as cunning as you seem to whinge on that they are,” Sybil said softly. “But when *I* with you, your children will have abandoned you in an unconsecrated grave and salted the earth around everything you’ve ever built.”

Whitaker swallowed visibly and inhaled sharply as Madame Sybil laced a shiver travel down his spine as she regarded Whitaker coldly, but said nothing more.

As if obeying some silent order, Whitaker turned to the bed and stepped forward. He removed the satchel from his shoulder and opened it in silence. Theodore scooted over to allow him more room to work with on the bed and the Otter

stared down at the papers, speaking quietly enough to draw all three of the others in closer.

“What would you like to know, Theodore?” Whitaker asked, still staring down at the endless sea of papers.

bourbon!?” The Wolf bit back a holler, his hackles raising as he stepped toward the Otter.

his back. “Hindsight is the only perfect vision, Theodore,” he replied teasingly.

it had seemed like an excellent idea. I seldom drink and don’t have much company. A grainy whiskey seemed the best option for its concealment.”

Whitaker’s whiskers drooped, the Otter’s gaze deadpanning as he
your life was in danger after, as Madame Sybil has put it, kidnapping you. I

I don’t typically keep stock of tobacco or other relaxants.”

“Nor would I have allowed you to come back reeking of it either,”

Madame Sybil added.

Theodore scowled darkly, turning his head away for only a moment before allowing himself to nod. “I suppose that makes sense... But what of the rest of it? You told me was that the Arlignent Experiment was engineered from the ground up to fail. Why?”

“Because the law doesn’t look for dead beasts,” Whitaker replied, almost automatically. “The Arlignent Experiment was designed to implode in certain areas, while exploding in others. While it is unfortunate that some of the scholars intended to fake their deaths actually *did* die—” “*Unfortunate*

“The bodies that were never recovered are members of the Congregate who are alive and well,” Whitaker continued unabated. “They faked their deaths in order to leave no trace or question behind when they devoted

“And what precisely *are*

casting his eyes down to the reams of paper that were so haphazardly on. The pile of papers, for whatever reason, made a shiver travel down the

all meant—that was entirely Madame Sybil’s corral—but he couldn’t help but to wonder if the professor had grabbed a few folders at random and taken them with him. It seemed like something the Otter would do at least.

for guidance before Sybil stepped forward. “You were asked a question, Professor?” Sybil demanded.

The Otter shivered visibly, only to look back down at his notes. “We believe we found something in the rubble of a landslide beneath Khami Rhus.”

copper veins in the world, some say.”

“I’ve heard of them,” Sybil remarked dryly.

“Well I haven’t!” Theodore spoke up. A glance from the madame

silenced him, then looked in Whitaker’s direction once more. “Does your father *not* work in Khami Rhus, Theodore? As a miner, no

less?” Sybil pressed. Theodore grunted and turned his head away. “Was that not the reason he sent you to Charinthosse? For a better life?” “I’ve not sent word to him in ages,” the Wolf admitted, his ears folding back for only a moment. “And I didn’t know they were copper mines

“Clearly not,” the Panther grunted, before turning back to Whitaker. “Please, continue.”

“The civil war that was started in Fielora by our very own Lady Ackerman has been used to hide the comings and goings of the Congregate for nearly two decades now,” Whitaker rushed. Theodore glanced in Marie’s direction, blinking in surprise. If she was truly old enough to have started a revolution, she didn’t look it. “The Congregate has also been using the war as a cover to funnel money and resources in and out of our—sorry, no... *their* operations for that time as well.”

“And what does any of this have to do with drug trials that give you

gaze returning from Marie to Whitaker. All eyes in the room fell to him and Theodore glanced at each of them. “Oh yes, whatever the hell it was, no thank you, not twice.”

“Theodore, what did it say to you?” Whitaker asked, his voice as curious as it was astonished.

“Well *they* said quite a few things. And they all hated your guts

“Finish your little tale, Whitaker,” Sybil said smoothly from behind him. The professor’s gaze recentered at the papers and he exhaled slowly.

“There’s not much else to say,” Whitaker admitted, staring forward and closing his eyes. “Some of the things that we’ve done, or that we’ve experimented on defy words. We wanted to pierce the veil between what we thought was ‘here’ and ‘there’—the Great Beyond, or whatever the hell else... We didn’t think we

would have actually succeeded.”

“So, *how*
Whitaker.

blinked, then his gaze turned to Madame Sybil.

“Pardon?” Theodore asked, an eyebrow arching. “I thought it was because he was a sodomite and wanted me to—”

“For God’s sake, I am *married!*” Whitaker protested.

“Enough,” Madame Sybil raised her voice to once again quite the squabbling. “I paired Whitaker with you, Theodore, because when he arrived at the Ladle and gave me the stack of documents he did. I knew that he needed someone who was more of a scrapper than most of the other workers,” she explained rigidly. “I know about your little hiding place as well

“Before, or after Whitaker pulverized the clay brick against the Tiger’s head?” “I’ve known for weeks, Theodore. Do not ever insult my intelligence again,” Sybil said sharply. The Wolf nodded and then fell silent before Whitaker cut in once more.

“Thank you for your perception, Madame Sybil,” Whitaker said simply.

“Without Theodore, I would most certainly be dead.”

“You are welcome, for now, Whitaker,” Sybil replied rigidly. “Do not make me regret my decision.”

“But go on, *for fuck’s sake*,” Theodore growled next to Whitaker. “This *I’m quaking*,” He grunted darkly.

ends against the middle and to keep an entire nation in perpetual civil war,” Whitaker enunciated carefully. “You understand, that part of the documentation that I have provides damning, if not irrefutable *proof*

a sitting justice of Charinthosse!—assisted in the kidnapping of a prince that reignited this civil war?”

“So put him on trial for war crimes!” Theodore snapped back. “What’s

“There is a wall of bureaucracy between here and there, Theodore,”

Theodore grunted softly, then turned to Madame Sybil with an almost playful sneer. “Madame, how long do you think it would take for *you* me, if I were to take up with such a deranged group?”

“Theodore, don’t be a fool,” Sybil grunted. “Marie is right. Judges and the

lawbeasts are too widely respected. There is nothing that we can do, except for turn the tides of political favor against them. That is a slow process at best, if it can even be done.”

end of the room. He tried to throttle a growl that threatened to crawl out of his throat, but it managed to make his breathing sound decidedly tense and irritated.

Whitaker stepped away from the edge of the bed, pinching the bridge professor groaned. “Turning public opinion is a charge of sedition.”

noble,” Theodore said heavily. All eyes turned to him, but he kept his gaze down toward his bag. “Perhaps you could *liberate* the prisoner?” “They won’t let any of us near him,” Whitaker said matter-of-factly.

“Well then,” Theodore said, clapping his paws over his thighs as he pushed himself to his feet. “Best of luck to you three, I hope we don’t cross paths again.”

“Theodore, where are you going?” Madame Sybil demanded.

“Home!” The Wolf said, grabbing the bag of his belongings before straightening his back. He was visibly uneasy on his feet, but didn’t teeter over as he had before. “Because I don’t have a damn thing to do with this little game of thrones the lot of you are trying to play!”

“So you intend on trying to outrun this for the rest of your life?” Whitaker asked, arching an eyebrow incredulously. “How far do you think that you’re going to get before they hunt you down?”

“I’m sure that would carry quite a bit of weight, but quite frankly I don’t give a damn,” Theodore said simply. “You’ve made your bed, now sleep in it. Because it is one that I *won’t* be dragged into,” The Wolf said, baring his teeth as he turned toward the door.

No sooner had he turned than Marie stepped forward and stopped him mid-stride. She’d drawn her blade quicker than Theodore had ever even heard of a beast moving—so quickly that he only knew she’d reached for it after she pressed the tip of the steel against his chest. He looked down at the blade she clasped in her left paw, blinking in surprise at the masterfully crafted steel. The guard of the sword was that of a rapier—steel wire swirling about the paw to protect it. The blade was long and looked thick enough to be nearly unwieldy, even if it wasn’t any longer than Theodore’s arm. He stared

Marie stepped forward and Theodore allowed her to guide him backwards at sword-tip. “Theodore, if you are not with us, you are a liability,” she said quietly.

“I want you to think very, very carefully about where you stand,” the Feline continued. Theodore glanced

to Madame Sybil, but even the mistress did nothing as Marie backed him up through the room. He kept moving back and Marie kept pace with him,

“This group must be stopped and their experiments must stop as well. They are willing to crush a nation under their heel to realize their ambitions. We must meet them head on or we will not succeed.”

“You have fun with that,” Theodore remarked coldly, reaching up to test Marie by attempting to move the blade away from his chest with his palm. “But as I’ve said, I don’t intend on—”

Marie’s blade didn’t move—Theodore even nearly reopened the cut on

“Marie, I don’t think that is entirely—” Whitaker began, stepping forward. She twisted in a duelist’s fashion, drawing her second blade in her right paw and lifting it in a deft arch upwards. She almost looked as if she was crossing her arms, a blade held in each paw as she threatened the pair

the closeness of the cut to his chest. The tip of Marie’s blade had sliced one of the buttons clean away.

“Theodore has been dosed with Therasphetamine,” Marie began simply. “He is, according to the series of events that I am familiar with, one of exactly nine to have done so,” the Feline’s eyes rested on Theodore squarely. The almost disinterested expression on her face sent a chill down his spine. “If he has truly achieved a sort of communion, then it is an advantage we cannot overlook.”

“Nor is it an advantage that you may *have*,” Theodore said, baring his teeth as he once again tried to move around the blade. “I’ve told you, I don’t want a *damned* thing to do with this!”

“And *I* have told *you* that you are out of options,” Marie bared her teeth as well, twisting her blade meaningfully in the Wolf’s chest. He heard the fabric of his shirt tear and felt the sharp pain against his skin, but he didn’t betray it to his aggressor. “My. Home. *Burns* because of scientists chasing you,” she snarled at Whitaker, before turning back to Theodore. “—and experiments *like you*,” Marie hissed.

“So you intend on using me as bait, then?” Theodore demanded. “If necessary.” Whitaker looked as if he was ready to say something, but Marie

anticipated the question, turning the blade in her paw upward, the tip now resting precariously close to the Otter’s throat. He thought better than to speak and Theodore himself scrambled for words before Madame Sybil stepped forward.

“Marie, lower your weapons,” The Panther instructed.

The sandy-shaded Feline’s gaze turned in the Panther’s direction and—much to Theodore’s dismay—Madame Sybil hadn’t armed herself, or even made a move to generate any sort of threat in Marie’s direction. Her eyebrow arched in Sybil’s direction as the matron came closer and Sybil’s eyes met Marie’s.

“When I allowed you leave of this establishment, you told me that you had things for Theodore to read,” Sybil said diplomatically, reaching forward easily with a paw and resting it atop the hilt of the blade at Theodore’s chest. “I did not expect the *entirely* unwelcome surprise of Professor Whitaker’s company, nor did I intend for you to threaten the Wolf whom you drugged,” the Panther pressed down and Marie, as if mesmerized by Sybil’s voice, allowed it to be lowered. Whitaker looked pleadingly in the madame’s direction for help with the blade at his own throat, but Sybil didn’t repeat the gesture. “I shall not abide more deception from you in particular. I hope that I am understood without reservation.”

Silence engulfed the room, but Marie nodded after a moment. Sybil

moment, before looking back to Theodore and swallowing visibly. “Theodore, she is right... If the Congregate gets word of this—of *you*—then there is no telling what would happen next,” Whitaker pleaded. Theodore’s scowl darkened and he looked down at the blade that had been against his chest.

“Please, Theodore,” Sybil stepped forward as the Wolf’s gaze turned down toward the blade. She placed a paw gently upon the Wolf’s elbow and he turned his head to look down at it. “At the very least, hear them out.” “They have an hour to convince me, otherwise I am gone—even from your employ, Madame Sybil,” Theodore grunted, his eyes centering on Sybil’s paw. He couldn’t bring herself to look at her directly in the face. “You threw me into this ring and I have no place being here.”

“I understand, Theodore,” Sybil said quietly. “Professor, there is a chair in my room, I would like it if you—”

“For *fuck’s sake* Madame!” Theodore snapped, sounding rather

employer?” Whitaker scowled.

“You? Yes. Aside from that—,” Theodore turned to Madame Sybil and cleared his throat. “It’s not the chair itself, it’s the implication. I do appreciate the concern, but you’ve got a business to run and you don’t need to watch over me, I’m not a pup—,”

“Theodore,” Madame Sybil said, her voice raising dangerously. The Wolf immediately fell silent. “Whitaker, the chair in front of my desk in the far corner of the room. While he is retrieving that, Lady Marie,” Sybil said, her stately composure returning. “Before you left, you said there was something Theodore needed to read. Whitaker—,”

“Yes, Madame?” The Otter asked.

“Head out the door and to the right. My bedroom is the last door

instructed. “The wooden chair with the red upholstery, in the far corner of the room in front of the desk. Bring that here, if you please,” The Otter nodded before turning and exiting the room without another word. The Panther’s gaze returned to Marie, who seemed increasingly uncomfortable with Madame Sybil’s obvious authority. “The documents you had for Theodore, Marie,” Sybil reminded.

of another patient who started out with the same run as Theodore has

He took a turn for the worse, but at least he had the sense to document the symptoms,” she continued, her gaze settling on Theodore once more. “Consider them a sort of warning to what you could go through.”

“Or what, you’ll run me through?” Theodore challenged. “You will not intimidate him in my presence,” Sybil growled, stepping into the narrow space between Theodore and Marie, turning to the Feline. “Nor shall you attempt to intimidate me.”

Marie’s stony glare settled directly on the Panther for a moment before she retreated a step, returning both of the bare blades to their places, hanging free of any scabbard at her side. She retreated wordlessly, turning to the satchel that Whitaker had left on the bed next to the cherry red box.

It landed with an irritated thump atop the box and Marie turned toward the door, beginning to move toward the exit. “I hope that, for your sake, you give it a read.” She snorted as she exited the room.

“Oh don’t you get pissy with me, Cat!” Theodore barked as she exited. “Your issues aren’t my fault!” He hollered after her as she stormed out of the door, then down the stairs. Theodore rolled his eyes in disdain as Whitaker

Whitaker didn’t know the stories behind what Theodore and the others called “Old Hickory”. The chair was never used for any evening escapades out of respect for the thing’s history, however fanciful. Theodore didn’t know the real story, but what he’d heard was Old Hickory was the price a prince once paid for Madame Sybil keeping his activities inside of the Silver Ladle a closely guarded secret. The weathered wood was heavy and the upholstery, elegant, even if threadbare. It was clearly well-made, or at the very least, heavy—Theodore almost felt bad for seeing Whitaker pant with

“Thank you, Whitaker,” Sybil said softly, then turned to Theodore. “Please, take a seat.”

“In Old Hickory?” Madame Sybil nodded, looking Theodore right in the eye. The Wolf scowled as he pulled the deceptively heavy furniture

chair against the wall before sliding into it, ensuring that no one could creep up behind him. Neither Madame Sybil or Whitaker made a comment to Theodore and he was grateful for that.

“Whitaker, please make your closing statements, if you have any and be on your way,” Sybil said simply, her movements deliberate as she crossed the room toward Theodore’s bed.

Whitaker inhaled slowly, then pinched the bridge of his nose before squaring his shoulders to Theodore. “I wish that you could believe me if I

“The last two days, things that have been in the works for months have

“So say it and be done with it already,” Theodore grunted. “I gave you

“Your involvement was entirely by accident, as far as I am concerned,” Whitaker growled through clenched teeth. “The Therasphetamine you took was *absolutely* not intended for you!”

“The pair of you, *enough!*”

having at one another. “Whitaker, if there is nothing else?”

The Otter stayed silent for a moment, inhaling slowly before turning to the bed.

“There’s only the documents in the satchel and the pistol in the

lesson in its workings.”

“I’ll come to you when I can stand to be within arm’s reach of you again,” Theodore sneered, to which Sybil promptly turned, striking the seated Wolf with the back of her paw. His entire head turned with the force of the blow and even Whitaker winced at the mere sound of it and Sybil stepped forward, baring her teeth as she leaned in dangerously close.

“*Theodore.*” Her gaze shot to the Wolf.

Theodore nodded carefully, not bothering to turn his head to face Madame Sybil. He instead nodded curtly and ran his tongue over his teeth to make sure he wasn’t bleeding at the gums.

“The chief causes of death by Therasphetamine are aneurysm or heart

before. “Please let Marie or myself know if you experience chest pains or migraines.”

“Madame, Theodore.” Whitaker nodded politely before stepping backward and exiting the room.

Theodore sat in place only long enough to hear the door close before he

lace in front of her lap as she looked down at the Wolf. “I do hope that

told ‘enough’, I expected that to be the end of it.”

“Madame Sybil, *he. Drugged. Me,*

“And I understand that, Theodore,” Sybil said almost soothingly. “But

the facts remain, that we are now both bound to this,” she raised a single paw as Theodore turned his chin up to her, as if he was opening his mouth to speak. The gesture caused him to fall immediately silent, but Madame

day, as will Marie. But for now, we absolutely must ensure that our well Theodore closed his eyes, inhaling slowly. The Wolf turned his muzzle leaving now—he was pretty sure he would be able to outrun Madame Sybil, if he had to... and the docks weren’t *too* far away.

“We must use Whitaker’s aid, at least for such a time that we can be certain that he hasn’t crippled you,” the force returned to her voice, “and if that means that

you are to be examined with guards present for Whitaker's safety, so be it."

Theodore snorted darkly and Sybil reached forward to grab his chin

a moment, before running her thumb gently over Theodore's cheek. "I never wanted this for you, Theodore," Sybil said quietly. "Ma'am?"

"The criminal underbelly of the world," she nodded. Theodore's ears perked and he arched an eyebrow up at the Panther, unsure of what to say. "You've always been something special, Theodore. You're wasted as a whore."

Theodore shrugged, then chuckled dryly. "If you think *that's* a waste, you should see me as a student."

Sybil gave Theodore a rare smile and an even rarer chuckle. "Theodore, in all seriousness," she said, continuing to slowly rub his cheek. "When

genuine sort of honor. Had I known of the gravity of the situation, I wouldn't have involved you."

"I've always wanted better for you and the girls, Theodore, I've made no secret of that," Sybil sighed. "You in particular."

Theodore sat in silence for a moment, then pulled his face gently from Sybil's grasp. "Because I'm a gent?" He quizzed. Sybil nodded.

"A beast reduced to whoring has its stigmas, Theodore," she explained.

it sound like you've been trying to get rid of me for years! I'm almost hurt."

"You're *disgustingly* loyal."

Theodore reclined in the chair, then crossed his legs with a wry smirk.

"Please, don't sound so upset by that."

"I'm not upset, Theodore, I'm concerned," Sybil explained. "Loyalty such as yours is a very, very rare thing and I'm worried it could be taken advantage of," He cocked his head in response, the scowl returning to his features. "I will know more, soon as I examine the documents that Whitaker left for me and those in the satchel."

Theodore nodded carefully, glancing in the leather bag's direction before looking up to the Panther. "And, what would you like me to do?" "I would like you to make yourself comfortable in your bed and rest,"

mattress. "I didn't have Whitaker bring that chair in for you, after all."

///// Chapter Nine: Thy Brother Thy Bond

Madame Sybil waited at the top of the staircase for Whitaker and Marie to leave. Patricia was a kind enough soul to have loitered at the base night. Sybil waited for what she felt to be an appropriate amount of time master switch of the bar lighting which was very near the top of the stairs,

needn't be before contenting herself to return to her room and retrieve the documents that Whitaker had so gracelessly given her. Even though her room was but a few doors away, she didn't feel comfortable leaving Theodore alone this evening.

For modesty's sake, Theodore had only stripped himself of his vest and shirt before falling asleep in an unceremonious, half-curled heap atop his bed. He didn't stir much and, if it weren't for the fact that Sybil could see his shoulders move with his breathing, she might have thought he had died. She'd pulled the blanket over his shoulder once already, but he'd kicked it

Rather than keep him up with the gaslights going and risk disturbing enough light so that she could read the pages from the comfort of her chair but the posture required for her to read made her unbearably warm. She'd pushed both the window and door completely open to allow the most air

he didn't allow himself even a single scone for a candle, nor a table to put one on.

light could catch one page at a time and diligently worked her way through the documents that Whitaker had provided. Sleep was a luxury she couldn't each connection she further drew between what she'd known already and what Whitaker had shared.

Madame Sybil had been acutely aware of a potential short sale or who tried to defend it in Giovanni's absence. The most interesting bit she had been widely unspectacular in its body, the back pages detailed quite a few traitorous lechers who were trying to deny Giovanni's eldest son his Sybil recognized immediately; she'd taken a few of the curs to bed in her earlier years.

The thought of having entertained even one of those honorless, feckless wretches made her blood boil—the gents had made designs to rip a birthright from the paws of an eldest son!—but there was nothing she could do about it now.

material aside. Sybil found mention of the Goats a curiosity, especially to hear about them in Charinthosse. They were a nomadic tribe that prided itself on their ability to remain out of sight. They hailed originally from Nurhald, or at least, that's what Sybil had heard. They were occult seekers

blackouts and subsequent hallucinations made her wonder what the Goats wanted—or more importantly, if they would be visiting Theodore next.

Fatigue only began to set in after the third or fourth hour of pouring over the documents. Most of the information was of little immediate proof of any sort of conspiracy. She almost wished he would have come to her sooner—she could have told him what to grab that would have been incontrovertible.

Whatever Whitaker managed to fancy himself, be he a soldier, spy or informant, he'd been decent or lucky enough to snag a few pages of at least be enough to spark curiosity, perhaps even an investigation, if they found, one could certainly be created.

Her thoughts trailed to and fro over the information she'd looked over, glancing to Theodore's sleeping form and sighing softly. He didn't care enough to try and understand what he'd been dragged into and Madame Sybil wished she could do the same.

Body horror seemed to abound inside of their experimentation— Whitaker had even provided a study he had done himself about the transplantation of eyes from a cadaver, into an orbital socket. He'd gone

any given organism. As chilling as the implications were, more so were the letters dated after the study was published, namely the concern of shortages of the eyes, or reapplying the study to add secondary, even tertiary hearts.

Whatever they were deciding to study, it didn't seem that a single one

not care. This 'Congregate of Scholars' was aptly named, Sybil decided. It was far more a religious commune than one of science with their studies of the macabre.

Sybil felt Theodore's anguish, though. The documents proved nothing and only raised even more questions. The pages that Whitaker had snatched implied there was not even the closest sense of direction, or

satchels to put in his own. If Sybil had to guess, her involvement with the documents was to act as navigator through the information, rather than retribution against those whom the documents would have incriminated. She gathered the papers she'd stacked in her lap, tapping the edges to more properly align them. Now, she had more to contemplate, particularly with the utter lack of direction Whitaker was displaying.

His resume claimed that the beast wasn't inept by any means, but his nervousness to behavior told another tale entirely. With Marie being—in stark and stunning contrast to the legends of the Fieloran revolutionary—*volatile* as she was, there was no question that she was not to be granted authority in any matters. Theodore would go where he was told to and excel at whatever he did, provided that he had someone to refocus him from time to time. The three of them had no chance against the Congregate.

Not without her.

She mulled her options over in her head, plans forming as she batted ideas to and fro. It was dangerous for Theodore to stay here and continue his work in any capacity, but to say she distrusted Whitaker was a criminal understatement. If the scope of Whitaker's concerns were true, Theodore

away and that would be the last anyone saw of him. Sybil's eyes narrowed at There were far too many variables for her to consider risking the Wolf's life and the combination of Whitaker and Marie inspired a devastating lack of

The best option for the lot of them would be if Sybil were to assume command of their insurrection. Many of the names hidden inside of these pages were names of gents whom she'd been in close proximity to. They couldn't attack her, even indirectly. She knew too many of their damning secrets. She could send them to work in a slaver's mine on the other side of the globe, should they become too aggressive with her. She was utterly untouchable. Perhaps that is why Kendall chose to bring the documents to

She could only speculate on the Otter's motives. Certainly he was cryptic and he seemed desperate enough, but she couldn't reconcile such a radical claim. Electricity existed—this much Sybil knew for a fact—but turning such a luxury into a commodity seemed far-fetched. Even more so that such a force of nature had been so completely mastered that it could be *engineered* to look like an accident. Lacking the technical notes,

recourse was to believe Whitaker and stand in something close to awe that a feat like that could have been accomplished. The entire situation did leave a sour taste in her mouth.

Her watchful gaze shifted to Theodore, who stirred in his restless sleep. Her heart went out to him and she felt the slightest of pangs of guilt for what had transpired. It was the type of pang that was immediately

with several professors, or artisans: lass and gent alike, trying to inspire *something* in his otherwise wasted potential. It was not Sybil's fault that Theodore's proverbial shove from the nest was to be drugged. The Wolf had received more than ample time and nudges elsewhere. While it wasn't quite Theodore's fault either, she had to force herself to admit, she detested that it had come to this.

She employed others that weren't as capable or able as Theodore. Other gents that had come and gone from her employ had found themselves trades, or other facilities to move onto. But something about Theodore kept him here and Sybil could never understand it. He seemed to have a certain

any interest in moving outside of the suites.

His loyalty was endearing (on some levels) but Sybil found his lack of ambition rapidly approached 'unbearable.' All the same, he was her responsibility for now.

exiting the room without so much as a further glance at Theodore. Had she laid eyes on him again, she would have most certainly convinced herself to stay. Even with no one watching her, the Panther's rigid posture returned as she strode down the hallway to her own room at the far end of the upper

moment.

"You were shot at already, Vladislav," she spoke to the open air, casting her gaze over her shoulder. There was no way she could have known if Mikhail was downstairs or not—but the feeling of being watched followed her down the hallway. "I would hate for you to be missed twice." She added,

The silence was deafening and caused a surreal chill down Sybil's spine. Her strides became more urgent and the hallways remainder now seemed some sort of damnable, eternal length despite the countless times she'd walked it before.

Her grip tightened further around the papers as she darted toward her room, moving as quickly as her graceful posture would allow, only to wheel around and face—

Nothing.

own breathing. Sybil was only vaguely aware that she could feel her own heartbeat as she scowled outwards into the darkness. What light that Sybil had neglected to stoke. The Panther stared into the darkness before taking a small step back into her room, her eyes glued to the hallway.

///// Chapter Ten: The Rats in the Walls

Theodore groaned at the chorus of rooster's calls from the nearby docks the next morning, smacking his chapped lips without daring to open his features. One of the bakers was in early and the scents of the loaves of bread being prepared for lunch were already beginning to drift upwards

The weakness in his limbs was gone by some stroke of fortune and Theodore felt as close to himself as the last few days would have allowed. All the same, he tried to keep his eyes closed for as long as he could, praying that someone, be they a lass or a gent, tried to stir him awake and

Nothing came for the longest time. Finally a small, timid rap on the doorframe persuaded Theodore to open his eyes.

"Are you awake?" Patricia's voice drifted over from the doorway. Theodore nodded his head against its place on the bed, but didn't otherwise move. He heard her advance closer, as well as the telltale shifting of a glass mug against a steel platter. His ears perked at the sound and he lifted his next to him. "What does the good doctor recommend for a throbbing headache that isn't brought on from alcohol?" Theodore grumbled, his parched throat threatening to crack his voice.

Patricia smiled some before turning towards Theodore and lean down.

Theodore's lips.

The water inside had a clump of ice which bounced almost

the glass to the Wolf. "I'm not your keeper," Patricia looked into Theodore's eyes. He returned her gaze with his own, cocky grin. "That caustic humor of yours is back, so you should be capable enough to drink on your own."

“Should be and are,” Theodore grinned, his voice still rattling from downing the rest of the glass of water in a single shot. He rolled himself over in deliberate stages. First to his shoulder, then again to his back, before

“Roosters have barely called the dawn,” Theodore harrumphed quietly.

“Manners don’t exist until at *least* after breakfast.”

“But of course not,” the Leopardess sneered almost playfully back to Theodore, before the gravity returned to her voice. “But how are you feeling?”

the cool glass against his bare stomach for a moment or two before glancing up toward his temporary caretaker. “I wish I knew how to answer that,” he was expecting someone there.

Patricia glanced in that direction as well, then down to Theodore. She placed a concerned paw on his shoulder and he looked up at her. “You may be honest with me, you know,” Patricia muttered softly. “The madame and I, we’re both worried for you—,”

“And I can’t even say you shouldn’t be,” Theodore grouched, rolling his

and he felt himself grip the glass entirely too tightly. Stopping himself from spiking the glass at the wall, he instead thrust his arm in Patricia’s direction, who nodded, as if she understood Theodore’s temptation.

“You’re well enough to be up and—”

“You can tell the Madame that I’ll be back to churning the sheets by the week’s end,” Theodore snapped, before immediately turning his head away,

“That is not what either of us mean for you, Theodore,” Patricia said after a moment, setting the glass back on the table before seating herself next to Theodore on the bed. She reached forward and placed a paw on

said nothing and didn’t make a move to look at her in the eye. “You’ve been on this bed, sweating and turning for the last three days,” Patricia pressed. “I’d… well, I’d like to take you out to the docks, perhaps even get you some fruit if something’s fresh.”

Theodore shrugged, then looked up to Patricia. “You’re not worried I’ll collapse on you in the street?”

levity to the conversation. “Beside the point, it would be good for you to get

fresh air, if you could.”

He glanced to the window as Patricia spoke, then dared the smallest of smiles. “Leaving that open isn’t quite good enough?” Theodore ventured, trying to keep his tone innocent and something close to glib. He was

forward and he immediately raised a paw to stop her. “Do I have a change of clothes?” Theodore asked, trying not to groan.

“You don’t,” Patricia said carefully. “I thought you’d grabbed that bag

since.”

“And that fuck hasn’t brought it back yet?” Theodore groaned.

“*Shocking.*”

“You don’t give him enough credit, Theodore—” Patricia began. “Credit for what?!” Theodore snapped, baring his teeth at the

Leopardess. “Sleepless nights? Oh, what about the hallucinations, or the...

whatever the hell you can call them! Dreams? Premonitions? Waking nightmares!?” he continued, sitting up violently enough to daze himself.

Patricia fell silent, her paws folding in front of her apron as she shied back.

His mouth was too dry to make anything more than the gesture, but he was certain his point was made before he continued. “Whitaker has the world to answer for, near as I’m concerned. The least he can do is give me my damn clothes back.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that—” “No one did,” Theodore shot again, scowling toward the ashes in the

“Owing to you being unconscious for the last three days, Theodore,” Madame Sybil announced her presence from the doorway. She slid into the room, taking two steps that would allow her to close the door behind her, but still stand at the foot of Theodore’s bed. “You needn’t take your pound

in days. He shivered at the sensation, only to shove himself to his feet once more. “I’m sorry, Patricia... for what that’s worth.”

“No harm done, Theodore,” Patricia murmured, bowing her head slightly. “I do think that the fresh air would do you good, however.”

direction of the footboard to catch himself. He growled at nothing in

“I shall fetch someone to help you down the stairs,” Madame Sybil said smoothly, turning to face the door before Theodore’s arm shot forward.

Theodore shook his head at her.

“I’ll make my own way down.”

“You will do no such thing,” the madame replied simply. “You’ve nearly

fallen moving this far, I doubt the staircase will be kind.”

“I’ll manage.”

“So help me God, Theodore,” Sybil’s tone became icy as she squared

her shoulders with the Wolf. Even though she stood a good deal shorter than him, Theodore fought the instinct to shy away from her venomous glare. “I will have you shackled to this bed and let Whitaker do as he pleases until you are healed. You will accept my help or you will resent my help. Those are your options,” the Panther warned. He glared back for only a moment and Sybil leaned forward, her voice boiling dangerously. “Let. Go. Theodore.”

Theodore stood up, releasing the Panther’s arm before glancing in Patricia’s direction, then down to the vanity that still held Marie’s open apothecary kit. “Where are the physicians?” He managed to mock as Sybil swung the door open, blocking Theodore’s view into the hallway for only a moment.

“They’re away to Northern District once more,” Patricia answered. “Marie had to get some clinical notes and Whitaker is, as I understand it, not allowed to visit.”

Theodore grunted in approval. “At least that’s something breaking my way,” he grumbled. “Anything else I should know about?”

Patricia faltered for a moment. Theodore could see her debating her words carefully before she spoke. “Madame Sybil sent word to your next of

“My father?” Theodore asked bluntly, arching an eyebrow. “She posted a letter all the way to Khami Rhus?”

The Leopardess shook her head. “No, the madame left word with Captain McGinnes.” Theodore’s eyebrows arched.

“McGinnes?”

“He *is* the one who vouched for your employment, is he not?” Patricia pressed, suddenly defensive. Theodore closed his eyes, then exhaled slowly.

“He intended for me to work security, or manual labor,” he muttered as a knot tied itself in his stomach. “I’m...” his voice trailed for a moment and

than below.”

“If he’s the type of gent I’ve been lead to believe he is, I doubt he would her way; whatever Patricia read in his expression however, gave her pause. “Unless he would care.”

not quite allow for gents to bed one another,” Theodore exhaled. “Hell, I’m nearly certain that he frowns on whoring as well—let alone half of my clients.”

“Then he needn’t have details,” Patricia nodded dutifully. “Though, if it means anything, I believe I heard mention that the Captain wouldn’t be docked in Charinthosse for at least another two weeks. There may be time to conduct a story that would suit all points.”

“Or die, that’s an option.”

“Glad to see your wit is returning,” the Leopardess tried not to sneer.

beat the ladybeast to the door by half a step, swinging it open cautiously. “Lady Marie,” Theodore’s eyes narrowed. “Do come in before I decide to close the door on you.”

“That would be quite unlike a gentlebeast,” the Feline narrowed her eyes at Theodore and moved to step through the door. Theodore tried to close it on her anyways, glaring as she gave a chirp of surprise, only to slide around the door and return the icy glare. “You don’t need to be a bastard with me!”

“And you don’t need to be here,” Theodore responded immediately. “I *leaving*, in fact.”

“Not in your condition!” Marie protested, trying to hold the door closed as Theodore yanked it open. He glanced to her belts before forcing her out of the way.

“You’re not nearly as intimidating as you are with those blades, are you?” Theodore snarled, not waiting for her response before moving into the hallway and slamming the door behind him.

Out of nothing but curiosity, he stopped to examine the opposite door in the hallway. It was bowed awkwardly from where Mikhail had ripped himself free of Theodore’s room and hadn’t been replaced. He would have turned to examine his own door, but Marie was already throwing it back open and pursuing him.

“For the love of all that’s good, Theodore, now is not the time to act a damn fool!” Marie spat as the Wolf turned to trot down the stairs. Each step

“Life is full of damn fool decisions and then we die,” Theodore said, not bothering to turn his head over his shoulder to address her. “Just teach one.”

Marie, for whatever reason, followed him no further. He didn’t wait to see what caused such a blessing. He was throwing open the saloon-style, batwing doors and into the open air before he could be bothered to be stopped. If anyone had called after him, he didn’t care, or mind.

he moved through the doors into the sunlight. It was as if his senses had more acute. Not only could he hear the murmurings of what few souls there were on the street in front of him, but also further down the road as well. He lifted a paw, covering his eyes as his ears folded back, biting

and everything in sight seemed somehow painfully obvious—or at least between those and the breads that the Ladle had made for lunch.

Somewhere, out of the incomprehensible din, Theodore could even hear Madame Sybil approach him from behind.

“Don’t!” he whirled about, keeping his eyes low to stare at the ground in the shadow of the Ladle. He nearly stopped dead in his orders, noticing the

to the wooden slats that made up the front porch of the Ladle. The hem of Madame Sybil’s dress entered his view and Theodore raised an open paw to her, gesturing her to stop. “Just... Don’t.”

“Theodore, you aren’t well.” She stated.

“Your grasp of the obvious is *inspiring*,” Theodore sneered through gritted teeth. “But I have had it with your solutions for the week!”

“Then what do you propose we do, Theodore?” Madame Sybil snapped. “Come back inside, so that we may have a more reasonable discussion—”

“All we do is talk!” Theodore shouted, straightening his back and throwing his arms out wide. He waited for Sybil to say something, but she only stood in stunned silence, allowing Theodore to continue. “The only thing that we have done about this *entire* shit show is talk! We need to act, at least in part!”

“This is a conversation for somewhere that *isn’t* the streetside, Theodore, you are making a scene.” The madame grunted pointedly.

“I’m not having this conversation streetside,” Theodore growled. “In fact, I am

done honorless bastard if I've ever met one. I'm not going to be his lackey, trying to clean up after whatever the hell he managed to do across the ocean," He turned from the Ladle, doing his damndest to keep his head low, lest he be blinded once again by the lights above.

Madame Sybil called after him once or twice from inside, but he ignored her calls, lifting his eyes only enough to scan the crowds that

clattered behind him and Theodore grunted back toward them irritably,

was no street, no beasts that roamed there despite the time. The world ended at the slats of the porch with nowhere to go but back inside. An ocean of ravenous, shifting darkness moved in front of him and he took a

Drifting forward from the furthest reaches of his vision, Theodore saw a shape begin to move toward him at disorienting speeds. It tore itself away from the clutching shadows and the eyeball's single, golden ring centered

reach of him, pausing only at the edge of the Silver Ladle's porch...

///// Chapter Eleven: The Professional Courtesy

Madame Sybil stormed after Theodore, shaking her head in complete disgust. She held a paw up to stop the security from following her before raising both of her arms to knock the batwing doors open. "Theodore!" She shouted, not bothering to hide the anger that bit in her voice.

The Wolf was not three steps outside of the doors before he stood utterly still, his head down. Sybil nearly ran headlong into him, stopping

of his palms were buried in his eyes, the Wolf's muzzle twisted into a sort of agony that shattered her stern complexion. "M... my God..." she muttered, the anger somehow utterly drained from her.

had come to expect of Theodore.

"Theodore, come inside, please," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She reached forward to gently place a paw on Theodore's cheek.

two steps forward, Theodore and you'll be inside. Please." Sybil's own voice carried the slightest of tremors as she drew Theodore back into the Silver Ladle.

he was told without any sort of sneer, or reservation. The bar had quieted noticeably when Sybil had stormed through—such displays were rare enough to be recalled for weeks to come—now the silence was voracious.

“We will be open this evening for dinner, gents,” Sybil called over her shoulder, steel returning to her voice. “Come back then and you’ll eat for free. Patricia, remember their faces.”

save for the three gents who worked security and Patricia, who stood behind the bar. “We fetching anything for...?” One of the guards, a Horse by the name of Jethro, asked quietly.

“A blanket, but nothing more,” Sybil replied. “Hang what I had threatened earlier about shackling him to his own bed. He will not be leaving in this state.”

“Understood,” The Horse said before nodding and stepping toward the well-disguised door that led to the kitchen and laundry. Sybil’s gaze returned to Theodore, who had braced his elbows against

dare try and make it out. “Patricia, I must ask you to stay with him,” the Madame said softly. She watched as the Leopardess drew her own chair close to Theodore and didn’t even try to suppress a wary smile as Patricia placed a paw on the Wolf’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Dare I ask why you leave me in charge of him?” Patricia asked softly, glancing toward the Panther, who was already striding back across the room to the staircase.

“You may ask, but silence grants you deniability,” Sybil warned sternly, back to his room as soon as he is able to walk.”

“Jethro, could you help me?” Patricia asked, glancing away from the Panther as she slid up the stairs. “I doubt he’ll be making it to his room on his own accord.”

The Horse stepped forward, slinging one of Theodore’s arms over his shoulders, all but dragging the stumbling Wolf back up toward his room. “What the hell happened?” Jethro shot back to Patricia, who followed in solemn silence.

Even though it was only a dozen strides from the front door to the stairs, the distance felt like an eternity. A solid lump had formed in

Patricia's throat. She wasn't sure she could bear the sight of Theodore in the state he was in, nor could she stand to tear her eyes away. She'd never even heard of anything so crippling in her life! Not two mornings prior,

look at the state of the poor beast who seemed only moments away from collapse, depending upon someone else entirely for support to walk.

Rounding the staircase made Theodore trip and give a slight yelp. Patricia couldn't stomach it further, turning on her heels and striding toward the door quickly. "A moment. Get him to bed," She ordered, claspings her eyes shut before throwing open the doors.

She breathed deep of the fresh air the moment that it was available to her—a long, shuddering breath that was the only thing she could muster

crisp. The cool breeze made the sensation pleasant for now, but when the sun began its true ascent, it would undoubtedly turn the gentle caress of morning dew into a heat that stuck to any beast's fur.

opposite of the row of whorehouses and bars that the Silver Ladle piloted. To her right, the gates into Charinthosse stood open and further to her left, the almost-unnecessarily wide thoroughfare reached all the way to touch Western District. The dawn train whistled some distance away and Patricia

the ingenuity of the Charinthossians that worked so hard to build this city...

Words travelled along telegraph wires to create some form of nerve system for the city. Cobblestone roads were gradually being replaced with bricks and even now workers were measuring and plotting gas-pipes for street-side lamps. Planter boxes were placed near benches to create scenic spots to sit, and bays built between the shop rows invited peddlers to trade between them. It wasn't much of a town square, but it was as close to one as Patricia knew that the Southern District had. It made her smile to think that it thrummed with the life that it did.

Her smile was immediately choked by the thought of Theodore once more and she turned her head toward the gates, looking at nothing in Madame.

Unlike the plain dress that she requested Patricia to wear as a barmaid,

command. The Panther had abandoned her red silks and black cottons in favor of an emerald green dress that brought out her eyes stunningly. A black-lace shawl adorned her shoulders and a similarly dark belt was more feminine curves. The display made Patricia's eyebrows arch.

"Making quite the statement," Patricia muttered, glancing over

then nodded. "I shall tend to Theodore."

"He is doing better already," Sybil murmured, her voice hardly above a whisper. "Jethro laid him back to rest on his bed and he has already showed signs of improvement. He is not to leave his mattress until I return; is that understood?"

Patricia nodded and curtsied even. "Yes Madame—"

"Patricia," Sybil snapped, causing the Leopard to freeze. It was then

Concern, deep and genuine. Sybil's tone lowered and Patricia wasn't entirely sure that she'd imagined hearing a crack in the madame's voice as she spoke. "I am going to leave word for Captain Nathaniel McGinnes. But

without another word, she stepped toward the docks.

"There's someone here who can help," Patricia said stubbornly—more to console herself than to remain contrary to Sybil. "It's Charinthesse. There must be someone who can help."

"My dear lass," Sybil said, her muzzle lowering ever so slightly. "I do pray that you are right."

Patricia glowered away from Sybil, then strode back through the saloon-style doors of the bordello. Jethro was now at the base of the stairs,

Three pairs of parallel rooms stood across from one another, with Madame Sybil's staring down the face of the staircase. Theodore's room was interested in, not yet at least.

She wet her lips carefully, before raising her voice and yelling into the hallway. "Who among you, if any, is a physician?" There was no response from any of the rooms and Patricia felt her heart sink. She silently prayed to whatever could have been listening that someone would timidly crack open a door and peer around from behind it.

No such moment came.

Patricia turned toward Theodore's room, her heart sinking further as she heard

him shift heavily on the bed. The Leopardess glanced once toward his door, only for her gaze to return to one of the escorts from the far end of the hallway. The Avian, Ymir, was usually a haughty Jay that preyed upon patrons of more exotic tastes with her unique, silver and blue plumage. Today, however, it seemed that she could sense the thrum of tension in the air.

The Jay stood in the doorway, peering out ever so slightly, her face a mask of concern. “What is going on, Patricia? Is someone hurt?”

“Ymir, please—if there is a physician—”

“There isn’t,” Ymir said softly, emerging from the room wearing a satin

someone hurt?”

through the half-open door. “She asks ‘cause the physicians I’ve got don’t know *what the fuck* is going on!”

The once-concerned composure of the Jay immediately deadpanned

“At least he’s improved already,” Patricia tried to stay optimistic in spite of the grinding of her teeth. “One of Theodore’s patrons decided it was a good idea to take him outside last night and things didn’t go exactly as planned.”

Ymir’s face remained stony, or at least so far as Patricia cared to notice. “If Theodore seeks such liberties, perhaps Madame Sybil should keep her whelp on a tighter leash. Great One knows that she enforces some semblance of rule and law upon the rest of us.”

Patricia said nothing, her face burning with anger before she turned and threw open the door to Theodore’s room. The Wolf laid in bed, half-curved and on his side. He rested one of his arms beneath his head, throwing the other over the top of a pillow to cover what was now doubt his throbbing skull.

“Feeling better after your tantrum?” She demanded. She found it

Theodore had also done this to himself.

“Lest they didn’t make good on Sybil’s warnings,” Theodore grumbled from the folds of the pillow, squeezing it tighter about his head. “Hate askin’ gents for blindfolds against even low light.”

behind her. “The day is still young, Theodore,” she muttered, latching the lock shut, before taking a spot at the end of his bed. “Let’s not tempt fate.” “Agreed,” the Wolf groaned.

She glanced over the Wolf, who had once again shed his shirt and vest to lay in

only his trousers. The Leopardess folded her paws neatly on her thighs and exhaled, trying to dispel what bit of negativity she could from her voice before she leaned closer. She placed a single paw against Theodore's shin and he instinctively moved it away from her, lifting the pillow only enough to glance in her direction. "Does laying down help?"

"I don't know what helps," Theodore grouched, turning to lay on his back, abandoning the pillow he'd held over his features. "But whatever it is, it clearly stops at the entrance of the Ladle."

"What even *happened* last night, Theodore?" Patricia pressed, feeling a pang of urgency in her voice that she hadn't entirely intended upon.

curiosity. "Theodore, I give you my word, your secret shall remain safe with me."

Theodore winced, forcing himself to sit up. He propped himself against

halt. "Patricia, I don't know what to tell you—,"

"You weren't.... *Assaulted*, were y—" She began, her voice heavy with concern.

"God no!" Theodore shook his head, his eyes clamping closed. He bared his teeth in a moment of disgust, then shook his head harder yet

all."

Patricia arched an eyebrow. "You've had physicians fawning over you and you have lost half a week to your own bed. Your regulars are worried and Sybil hasn't said anything."

Hickory, which still sat next to his bed. He nodded toward it, closing his eyes.

"Take a seat then, Patricia," he muttered. "I've some explaining to do."

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Madame Sybil had kept to herself for the better part of the afternoon and well into the evening. It was unlike her to not haunt the bar and kitchen to ensure everything was to standard, but this evening she felt the need for reprieve.

Behind the locked door of her own quarters, Sybil sat in as much silence as could be allowed in a brothel. The idle thumping against the walls notwithstanding, she turned her attentions to her private collection of books in a way that she hadn't been able to while she watched Theodore the evening prior. Most of her readings comprised of eastern cultures and their scholars, paying

particular attention to military philosophy.

While the games of military were strictly left to gents, Madame Sybil had found more than one piece of doctrine could be applied directly the world of business. Even though most beasts would be stunned at the of victorious generals to forge an empire that thrived beneath the tides of change. Those lessons were the same that set the Silver Ladle apart. Those lessons were the same that would secure her victory over any beast that Professor Whitaker could have brought before her.

The documents Whitaker had provided were utterly extraordinary. The attention to detail and masquerade was both impressive and impenetrable. There was no expense unaccounted for inside of the spreadsheets she could

Minutes bled into hours as she moved through what little Whitaker had managed to secure for her consumption. It was only past the supper hour that a knot began to twist in her stomach. Madame Sybil could not possibly outspend or outmaneuver this ‘Congregate of Scholars.’

The revelation fundamentally transformed her outlook on what she was beginning to understand as a nations-wide contingency loop. Financially, their bulwarks were impervious to attacks from the outside.

undoubtedly seen it before ever handing Sybil the documents.

Her tail curled in anticipation. A grin split her features, even though there was none to witness it. *The ultimate commodity in the clandestine art is trust*, the very notion of turning these beasts against one another.

There had been but three pages in the slew which detailed any sort of and fro. Madame Sybil poured over the letters as if they were gospels. The beasts were at the very least careful to avoid last names, lest easily be exploited for writing samples. The content of the letters was the only thing important to her now. split between only a half-dozen gents and what appeared to be a single

velocity of their writing for the sole purpose of sounding more educated. The seven beasts referenced more than a dozen names—names which were all immediately written on a separate sheet of paper so they could be kept track of.

Sybil worked through the entirety of a sleepless night by gaslight, her forehead all but pressed into the letters as she pried what clues she could

Two names were known to her already: Kendall Whitaker and Victor DuGall, the cousin scholars and, near as Sybil could tell, heirs apparent to the Congregate. A separate doctor, one 'Douglas' was less than thrilled with rest existed in a net which Sybil knew she could not unravel without more information.

The lass, one 'Carmella', was the quickest to discuss her feelings of

hypocrite's letters. She was vicious in her attacks of Douglas, Whitaker, Victor, Hector, Giovanni, Amon, Jacob, Peter and another beast she ardently refused to name. Their sins were anything that Sybil could have guessed an old crone would have been upset about: Whitaker didn't clean up after himself, Victor was always in a hurry, Douglas was a career bastard (there were four counts of this complaint. Sybil found herself curious if he was constantly abrasive, or if he had committed but a single trespass that

laboratory or labelling errors. It wasn't enough for anything close to a conviction, but it was at least a helpful window.

Sybil's brow creased as she glared between the letters and her own notes. Too many parts were missing for her to make further sense of anything and, at this unfortunate hour, the constabularies would be less than willing to accommodate any form of inquiry.

The pervasive silence of the evening brought no solace to her racing mind, her predatory instincts dilating to try and circle the problem once more. Late as it was, she didn't feel fatigue, not yet at any rate.

She found herself pacing the perimeter of her room, her eyes darting between nothing in particular as she mulled the problem. A corner of her mind suggested the meditation sleep so often brought, but she shut the inkling out entirely. She needed a step forward. She needed a...

Her step slowed as the realization began to creep up her spine. She needed a gent that knew what the inner workings of the Congregate looked like. Someone privy to the halls and the wiles of beasts who were nearly as clever as they believed themselves to be. Beasts with nothing to lose, but everything to gain from washing their paws of the Congregate entirely.

perfectly. \\\<()>///

Sybil stalked the halls hours before any other beast was awake, routinely watching the dawn crawl over the Eastern Wall from her front porch. She was stopped, however by the sight of none other than a guest at the bar this morning.

Patricia had taken it upon herself to be seated at the bar in the stool closest to the staircase. She'd helped herself to a glass of beer, which Madame Sybil didn't begrudge her in the slightest. The poor lass reeked of day-old clothing and she had clearly stayed the night. If Sybil were to

bet the Leopardess had fallen asleep sitting up in Theodore's room. "I am surprised to see you drink," Madame Sybil spoke softly so she certain you were the straightest edge I'd ever encountered."

Patricia didn't respond immediately, taking another drag of the draught she muttered into her beer before turning her head to face Madame Sybil. "You know what Theodore said to me last night?"

would you rather be frank?" Madame Sybil replied dryly. The Leopardess shrugged listlessly, then stared back into the amber of her drink.

"He told me he'd been hallucinating. He'd told me that he'd been drugged," Patricia muttered. It wasn't any stretch of the imagination to see that she had been dwelling on Theodore's words for some time. Madame

do to him?"

"We do not yet know, Patricia," Sybil replied softly, placing a paw on the *happens* to have a rudimentary understanding of apothetics?"

"Folk are rarely as they appear, Patricia," Madame Sybil warned the Patricia nodded slowly, then pinched the bridge of her muzzle. "I suppose you're right," she murmured before letting her paw drop to her lap. *contrary* to so much," the Leopardess' voice was heavy. Madame Sybil didn't entirely know how to respond.

"There is still much to consider, even though I know that is precisely what you do *not* want to hear," the madame tried to ease Patricia's nerves. She didn't seem to soothe the Leopardess much, resolving to continue in hopes she stumbled across something that would lay the lass's mind to rest. "I would like you to go get some rest, Patricia. If it would help your nerves, you may use my room to wash and sleep."

“That is too kind, Madame, but—”

“I’ve errands to run this morning. They will take me well into the afternoon,” Sybil continued over the top of Patricia’s concerns. “I should like to have you nearby, in case Marie or the professor happen by.”

Patricia cleared her throat, then nodded down at her beer. “I’ll send word to my sister and tell her I will not be home today. She’ll worry otherwise.”

“I shall send Jethro personally,” Sybil assured Patricia. “But for now, we must get you the rest you need. You are useless to Theodore if you are drunk and fatigued.”

Guiding Patricia up the stairs was no particularly easy task. Even though the Leopardess’ speech was impeccable for being as drunk as she was, her feet betrayed her utterly. By the top of the staircase Sybil had taken the entirety of Patricia’s weight on her shoulder. Further along the hallway, Sybil was nearly dragging the limping creature.

The Leopardess was scarcely interested even in undressing before she collapsed onto the bed, leaving Madame Sybil to move her legs more completely onto the mattress.

The Panther was relieved to see Patricia get such well-deserved sleep so quickly, but it did leave Madame Sybil to change on her own. She required an audience with Mikhail Vladislav, the Tiger responsible for the bullets in her rafters and the drugged Wolf on her payroll. Sybil had stayed up all night, working the tactic to a once again perfected note that would ensure the secrecy of her visit to the beast she held captive.

Her only quandary was a dress that she desperately detested. It had been given to Madame Sybil by one of her former suitors, she didn’t remember the one, but she did recall that it had been engineered with excess in mind. Innumerable pockets for things, neatly folded into an entire bolt of ghastly green fabric. From the laces upwards it had been crafted to make a statement and be practical enough to inspire everyday wear. It had

Even so, it wasn’t without its uses. Rather than reducing the fabric to curtains or upholstery, Sybil found that the display worked best as a distraction of sorts. Its royal elegance was seldom seen in Charinthosse

the fact that the beasts that saw her pointed her out—everyone watching to

The display was usually the talk of the block for hours after she passed through initially and hours more when she returned. It was a nearly perfect alibi, far as she was concerned.

From the entrance of the Silver Ladle, she moved strategically, deliberately cutting her path to cross as many beasts as she could on her way to the Southern Gate. From there, as so many times before, she would ascend the guard's quarters and move within the wall along an otherwise abandoned path, all the way back to the old smuggler's Skyways above Southern District.

Then began the tedious exercise of moving back to the Ladle, changing out of this monstrosity and retracing her steps in far less conspicuous garb. The amount of work required for secrecy was daunting, confusing and quite unorthodox, but it allowed a solid alibi: no one would recognize Madame Sybil by anything other than the dress she wore and would have only seen her as she moved between the gate and the Silver Ladle.

The beasts that she passed were folk she had seen dozens of times before; all of whom recognized her instantly. More than a few shop-keepers bowed their head in something close to respect for the uncrowned ruler of Charinthosse. Sybil didn't even attempt to acknowledge them.

These were the same beasts that would not spare her a glance on her

notice a face, or a voice. The drones only cared to keep their heads down and do their work, like honest folk. While it wasn't dishonorable by any means, the thought of not even remembering the faces of the beasts who helped to pay their bills was unpalatable to Sybil.

Fleeting senses of urgency began to nip at Sybil's heels as she reached the gate. The guards let her through without so much as a word and she'd acted as if it was a door hinge, ripped straight from penny dreadfuls and

Along this brick path, there was nothing but tangible darkness. It would stay as such for another quarter-naut as she travelled the interior of the Southern Dock wall. The empty scone that would lead her back to the lights of civilization opened directly behind what was now the Silver Ladle's own entrance to the Skyways.

Once upon a time, Madame Sybil had paid a ransom of ransoms of Queens to install the door and have it remain as inconspicuous as possible. It had always served its purpose well for her world of cloak and dagger.

air and choking darkness. The very heartbeat of the information industry silent footfall.

She'd feared this hallway, once. The unknowable stretch of madness Her paw instinctively moved upwards, tracing along the smooth-carved wall. Any moment now, it would brush against the scoring in the wall which would guide her sightless eyes directly to the sconce. Allowing her eyes to drift closed only for a moment, the Panther's of light appeared in the wall and she opened her eyes, staring at it. It took

sliding soundlessly into the Skyway.

The way cut at a perfect corner: forward was the Silver Ladle and to Sybil's left, an endlessly-long path that would have taken her directly over the blacksmith's shop and nearer to the paths that would lead to Western and Northern Districts, respectively. The Panther crept toward the Silver Ladle, vine and leaf crunching softly beneath her feet as her senses dilated, trying to ensure that no one would see her along this, the most exposed

close. For a moment, she debated a swift retreat into the tunnel, to wait if the way would clear, before she realized that it was Theodore's voice she heard.

Her ears perked and she leaned tactfully forward, craning her neck to listen. Still too far away, Sybil stepped to the left, toward Theodore's room, rather than to the right to head to her own.

Theodore explaining. She let a weary smile across her features—at least he was doing better already. Perhaps laying down was best for him. She sank further against the wall as she listened to Theodore recount his evening.

bourbon before, how the hell was I supposed to know there was drugs in it?"

"But... wait—" Patricia's voice came. "Why the hell would Whitaker dispose of the drug inside of bourbon? He could burn it, or wash it down the drain—something!"

"Damn it if I know," Theodore growled softly. "Maybe he was worried about dosing himself with the fumes, or putting it in the groundwater? But all I know is

that, whatever happened, I had the shakes like I'd never had them before: a goddamned fever dream about..." Theodore's voice trailed

"About...?" Patricia's voice sounded far more gentle now and Sybil's ears perked, straining to hear what Theodore spoke of next.

"I was in the middle of a... I guess a cloud," Theodore muttered softly, his voice tight with what the matron could only call irritation. "Of eyes... like... A quite literal cloud of eyeballs."

face in disbelief. *Eyeballs*? She mouthed, as if to taste the word. Silence consumed the room and she could only imagine how Patricia was reacting.

she slid away from the wall once more. Her strides lengthened, rounding the corner as silent as a whisper to crawl back through the window of her own room, to the sea of dark silks and crimson cottons.

Shedding the emerald dress immediately, the Panther changed into something less conspicuous for the trek ahead. A pair of leather trousers and a simple sailor's shirt, both of which had once been left by a sailor in a rush to leave. A tricorne completed the ensemble with a touch of low-tide elegance that Sybil approved of, allowing her to move freely about the docks of Charinthesse without anyone so much as batting an eye her direction.

The wind may as well have carried her back through the window and cavernous hallway to the guard tower. Her once regal strides were replaced with a purposeful gait. The Panther's gaze hardened as she exploded from the secret passageway, nearly forgetting to close the path behind her.

If Theodore had been telling Patricia the truth, then her mission for the day was made only more urgent.

themselves. They'd left their assailant—one Mikhail Vladislav—

one of Sybil's better card tables. While she couldn't fault them in the heat of the moment, she did not appreciate the fact they had left in such a rush and without so much as a word.

It had left her to do the clean up.

But, for as much as she adored the thought of turning over one of the more reputable assassins in the world to the police, he was of more use to her in *her* Sybil managed to have Vladislav bound, then secreted away before the Constables bumbled into her bar. They took notes and she gave them a general

description of a group of beasts, angered that one of their own had cheated them in cards and sent the constables away accordingly. Just after they'd left, the limp body of the assassin was properly trussed and taken along the path she walked now to his prison.

The Panther had Vladislav taken to the only place that seemed to

than Theodore Locke himself. Sybil thought it was appropriately ironic for him to be stashed in the very household of the beast he'd sought to destroy.

Additionally, Sybil was well aware of Theodore's 'side clients', that sometimes opted for a change of scenery and met him at his apartment. While Sybil intended to bring a full stop to the practice for safety reasons soon enough, the story provided cover enough for Sybil's own comings and

Not that any beast that Sybil knew would go searching for anyone near Theodore's abode. How the beast walked to and from work each day was utterly beyond her, the fastest time she'd ever managed to walk the naut between his apartment and the Ladle was an hour. It'd been a strenuous gait at that.

Today, however, she was content to take her time, travelling along the Cart Road that hugged the interior Southern Wall. Beasts were more

to recover from a crime spree of pickpockets. It was best she move methodically because the further south that she travelled, the less like the rest of the district it became.

The Silver Ladle could have acted as the landmark between the

roads narrowed as they headed upstream and due northwest into Western District. But the 'downstream paths,' as they were lovingly referred to, were far wider still. In decades past, ships were dragged up the mild slopes and into the city itself during the worst of the storms, or for keelhauling and barnacle management. With technology advancing as it had, such practices were rendered unnecessary by the ability to send beasts into the water with

salesbeasts, all trying to sell their crafts to any sort of passersby. Sybil strode forward, blocking out any beast that tried to cross her to shield her eyes with her tricorne. She needed to focus and the morning beggars were beginning already.

She'd no idea how to interrogate a beast such as Mikhail. Judges were intimidated by raised voices and the idle threat of recreational

Beasts such as he were truly that—pockets of violence and rage that could be unhinged and unleashed for the right amount of coin.

Whatever he was paid, Sybil knew she could not make him a better attempting to control nature.

Ever more troubling was the White Tiger's reputation. If it was to be believed, coin would be the only thing that motivated Vladislav. His reputation didn't allow for a family squabble, or some other avenue of attack.

It was truly and genuinely worrisome to Sybil; with no leverage, the only thing she had done was put shackles of ice on a beast who need only wait for summer.

Ideas and failures of conversations rehearsed in her mind plagued her throughout the walk to Theodore's abode. The ascent up the switchback that led to the lighthouse where Theodore lived was an experience that came far too soon for Sybil's liking. The Panther still wrestled with the approach to her prey, trying to perfect the balance between what the letters

Tiger.

Nothing came. Even after another twenty minutes of hike to the base of the lighthouse, there was no epiphany or trump card that revealed itself. She paused as she arrived to the weathered-smooth limestone, inhaling slowly as she braced herself for the reality that she was walking into the situation with nothing but good intentions.

How she detested improvisation.

The apartment that Theodore paid for was at the base of a lighthouse: a small hole in the wall that had once housed the workers who kept and

there was not much to speak of for windows, or a view of any kind. The rooms had not been built to live in—but rather, to house someone for a simple, two-day shift before sending them on their way.

Knowing that Theodore paid a Baron a month for the space made Sybil's toes curl in the gravel outside. His apartment was only one of four in the lighthouse and only one of two that were occupied. Sybil wasn't sure if the suites were identical, but she certainly assumed as such.

Theodore's apartment was the furthest on the right-pawed side of the

here, it had been immediately apparent: the gravel had been scraped away and

even replaced with a few slats of wood to form a patio and it was the only apartment that sported such. Sybil marveled at the construction each time she saw it, given the utterly aloof nature that Theodore approached the rest of his life with, she was rather stunned that he could have been bothered with such a nicety.

The interior of the apartment was meticulously cleaned and organized

each time she witness them, but she would never let the Wolf know that. Just inside of the door, there was the mudroom that one could expect from any self-respecting dormitory and a second door leading to the apartment proper. Just on the other side of the second door, crammed against the right side of the apartment, wooden slats (kept in impeccable condition) ran forward for a dozen strides alongside a waist-high counter of similar, oak construction. They stopped at the far wall, where an insulated, metal ice-chest stood as the only bit of the scene that was undusted. Faint scents of lavender and pine gave away the things that had been undoubtedly 'borrowed' by Theodore from the Silver Ladle for private maintenance of his apartment. Sybil made a mental note to check for evidence of such things and bill Theodore accordingly for the supply.

Such waxes were imported and expensive. She would even garnish wages, should the need arise.

Just to her left there were a pair of mirrored rooms: one that Theodore had reserved for himself as a bedroom and the other a study that Madame Sybil had turned into a makeshift cell.

She didn't have guards posted in Theodore's apartment; too many questions would be raised if gents were in and out of the Wolf's home while he wasn't there. Instead, she allowed the isolation to act as its own torment for her charge. Mikhail Vladislav was chained in the center of the room: pitched forward, with his palms twisted behind him to hyperextend his limbs. The stress position was made even more intense by the heavy manacles that ran between his wrists and an exposed beam above him. An iron bar ran

leash between his throat and the bar.

Vladislav was conscious when Sybil entered the room, the sweat beading his brow from the uncomfortably warm surroundings. The

apartment and Sybil had not cared enough to crack a window for him. "We're past pleasantries," Sybil remarked brusquely as she stepped into the room. The Tiger's eyes glanced upwards toward her and a snarl split his

features for only a moment before he spat in her direction. “Unless you care to stand on ceremony.”

The silver-and-black striped Tiger’s muzzle twitched into a slightly deeper snarl than before. “So, where does that leave us then?” Mikhail growled darkly. “I don’t believe you’re the type to try and measure our reputations against the other.”

“Absolutely not,” Sybil replied, stepping in front of her captive and squaring her shoulders. “I’d much rather strike an accord.”

He stood in silence and Sybil allowed him the moments to digest what it meant?

“It is less of what I have and more what I seek to prevent,” she corrected. “I would rather not have violence visited upon my establishment again.”

The Tiger gave a low, deep bark of laughter. The sneer was evident

her proposal. “I would like to remind you, my good Whore Matron,” he articulated carefully, “that after Whitaker’s attempt to ambush me, your bitch shot at me.”

“Though I am grateful you aren’t willing to mince words, I would rather his panic not cost him his life.”

“You assume that I am going to kill him?” Vladislav challenged, shifting some in the chains that held him.

“Your reputation is one that demands satisfaction,” the Panther pressed.

“Theodore marks part of an operation gone poorly.”

“He will answer for that in due time,” the Tiger’s eyes narrowed. He tried to straighten his back some, only to wince at the pressure that built on

if he believed slowing his words down would have had some extra weight to them.

Sybil wet her lips carefully, glancing up at the chains that held the Tiger’s wrists in position. Worry had crossed her mind for only a moment—worry that somehow they had come loose—but Vladislav wasn’t so lucky, or Sybil so unfortunate.

information at my disposal, as well as anything I can pry through favors, is yours. My only caveat is that Theodore is freed from your vendetta,” she

to acquiesce.”

Vladislav fell silent, then glowered up to Sybil. “I suggest you cut my throat while you can,” he grunted, yanking on the chains. ““Thy word, thy bond’, and all that moral fabric you and your island cling so desperately to. I gave my word to someone else already. I have no use for the sake of secrets, torn from the undergarments of a whore.”

“I urge you to reconsider,” Sybil retorted pointedly. “Keep in mind who holds the keys to your manacles.”

“How could I forget, Madame Sybil?” Vladislav almost cooed—allowing an icy slant into his voice.

“If not the wealth of information, what price could Theodore’s life *possibly* be worth to you?” Sybil snapped. “A hundred beasts have pointed their weapons in your direction and been spared; what makes Theodore’s life worth any more, or less than theirs? Or are you so petty because he saw your face and heard your name?”

“I was paid to see an end to whomever received the documents,”

less... Nothing else.”

Sybil felt her stomach roll and her bile rise as he she met Vladislav’s gaze. Perceptive as he was, Vladislav didn’t seem to notice. Instead, Sybil recomposed herself and turned to face the door once more. “Coin is all that is sacred to you?” She asked—equally curious and disgusted by the insinuation. Vladislav’s silence was more than telling; Sybil knew she would get no further with the beast.

“I suppose I can allow you to stew in your own sweat for a while longer,” she grunted in his direction. “I shall send someone along within a day or two to water and feed you, worry not.”

“In Nurhald there was a story,” Vladislav sneered after Sybil as she left. “A prisoner left to rot, who grew so thin his limbs fell free of their chains. He mustered strength enough to lift a rock against the unaware guards,” the Tiger cautioned. “There is wisdom in those old words.”

The Panther turned slowly, almost shocked to hear the Tiger speak of such, before she gave him a grin of her own. “Nurhald?” she asked softly. “Why the devil would a Tiger like you think of a place like that, while in a hole such as this?” Sybil watched Vladislav’s gaze harden and she grinned at the small

triumph. “Interesting... Here I thought that the thoughts of home

slowly and she gave a scornful grunt to her captive. “But then again, what about you isn’t?”

“For what you know, I’ve given you a ghost chase,” the Tiger sneered,

“The ghost I chase has a name,” she replied smoothly. “He even has a grave, somewhere in Fielora,” Sybil dug in, twisting the proverbial knife. “But of each of the countries he has haunted: Nurhald, Fielora Grand, the Republic of Fielora, the Contested Free States, even as far east as those sandy pits in Vyrrohalm; but it is, of all places, *Nurhald* which comes to a battered mind—a story told to pups to console them, even. Are you truly seeking solace from the world, Vladislav?” Sybil asked, as if she intended to clarify something she had misheard. She turned back and bent forward ever so slightly at the waist to look directly into the Tiger’s eyes.

“You’re trying too hard, whore,” Mikhail snarled at her, leaning forward in his bonds. Any sort of playful challenge was gone from his features.

Sybil could sense the rage that shifted beneath his stony, deliberately calm features. “I would give over your Wolf-bitch before you let a pelt cost you a roof.”

“Familiarize yourself as much as you think you’re able to here, Vladislav,” the Panther smirked, rising and turning to the door in a single, goad her temper. There was nothing. Sybil found the quiet both eerie and concerning.

Her captive’s silence followed her out the door and transformed into something meditative as she reversed her carefully laid course back to the Silver Ladle. Her mind wandered over what all she knew about the desperate state of Nurhald.

For everything that she’d ever heard, it was a mineral-rich, frozen wasteland at the top of the world. Many creation myths found their origins there and the imaginations of artists were drawn to the landscapes they thought were beneath the shroud of snow. Everything from magical kingdoms, to whispers of otherworldly horrors; all were equally irrelevant, locked away behind an eternal blizzard. Habitat for any sort of beast was limited to the shorelines of those icescapes.

It wasn't much, Sybil reminded herself, denying any pride that could accompany the revelation. "But then again," she murmured. "Does it ever take more than that?"

///// Chapter Twelve: The Fragment of Moonlight

“I’m not reading another damned book,” Theodore grouched as

them and he rolled over like an irritated pup, turning his back to the vanity entirely. “Last set of urban legends gave me more of those nightmares.” Patricia wet her lips irately, glancing down to the Wolf. “You’ve been

minutes?”

“In case you missed the events of the last few days—,” Theodore grumbled, turning back over to the Leopardess. “My head’s currently ‘unknown levels of fucked’ and, for *whatever reason*, adding a bunch of stories about fairies and legends of fae...? Doesn’t help.”

He couldn’t fault her for trying to help. She at least was trying.

Theodore hated the thought that, over the course of this afternoon, his condition had become something of a spectacle for the other employees of the Ladle. Rumblings of whether or not Theodore would be removed from Sybil’s employ drifted past his doorway and he pretended to not hear them.

Theodore had kept a lid on the facts for as much as he could—discretion and all that Sybil which stood for. He did his best to ignore the confusion that the evening at Whitaker’s had created, focusing instead on his recovery.

to measure it against what he knew for certain. Above all else, Whitaker was up to his ear-tips in bullshit. Everything else only served to support him and a bunch of other fragments of information that no one could truly decipher. He was involved with *something* that was in direct relation to the *speaking of eyes* there was the... *Thing*. Udu’n’Vrah.

But it was the things that he’d managed to piece together that concerned him the most. Theodore had kept his muzzle shut on the matter, but he hated it when Patricia left the room. It left him alone with the corners of the room that went untouched by light from the gaslights, or the

It left him alone with the whispers that drifted to him from the

thought he’d proven himself correct. After reading one of the books of folklore

(even though most of the tales were stories he remembered from his youth—familiar, if slightly less foreboding in text than when the endlessly-superstitious Captain McGinnes had told them), Theodore had

from a cautionary tale about coming home before dark. Out of the corner of his vision, he'd even convinced himself he'd seen the damn thing—its eyes.

one tugging on the tattered threads of his sanity as the hours drove on. They carried bits of conversation to him—whether or not he was imagining them, he couldn't tell. It was as if he was listening to all the voices at once, from the other end of a particularly acoustic hallway; a hallway that was slowly beginning to shorten itself at that.

"Any word on his condition?" Whitaker asked.

"Nothing yet. I intend on returning to the Silver Ladle as soon as Patricia sends word that Sybil has returned," Marie responded.

"Excellent. I checked the laboratory and the inversion therapy isn't there, so I am to return to Fielora to retrieve it." Theodore rolled over to face the ceiling, reaching behind him only to

as the cascade of voices grew louder.

"You'd think that she'd let Theodore go after a stunt like this.

snapped, conversing with a voice that Theodore didn't recognize. "She may intend to, but she can't very well be expected to toss him onto the street to die, could she?" the voice asked. It was a female's voice and she sounded educated—but that was all that Theodore could make out of it.

"The way she pampers the beast, it's as if she thinks he's somehow worth more than the bit of coin that he manages

"Classless cur."

"Now that is entirely unc—"

Theodore was snapped back to reality by the gentle feeling of a paw, back at him.

appeared to be quite the collection of stationary supplies on the vanity next to Theodore. "If you weren't willing to read, perhaps writing a tale or two could help occupy you."

small chuckle. "Had a good laugh, hadn't realized that the poor bastard had been something close to serious."

"Well, if you're bedridden, perhaps it's as good a time as any to begin

I think we both know that there's a good chance we both know I may not be longer here at the Ladle," Theodore inhaled slowly, chewing the inside of his lower lip as he fought for the right words. "Where do—"

"Oh come now, Theodore," Patricia snapped, turning to him with an exasperated

look. “Madame Sybil isn’t going to cut you out of the Ladle’s business for leaving with a client in fear for your life.”

Patricia went silent for a moment, then cleared her throat thoughtfully. “It wasn’t without good reason.”

“Think I did manage to wake up the whole damn neighborhood though,” Theodore grouched, glancing to one of the corners of the room,

Sybil’ll be back?”

“None,” Patricia admitted, exhaling and turning to face the Wolf.

She paused for a moment and looked to be tasting the air around a question before pressing. “If I were to send word to Whitak—,”

“No,” Theodore snarled immediately, his hackles raising as he leaned toward Patricia. “Besides, I think he’s in the process of heading to Fielora for something.”

The Leopardess arched an eyebrow. “And what makes you think, or say that?”

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He went silent and Patricia watched him as he swallowed. “It’s... call it unconvinced, but she didn’t press the issue.

She watched as the Wolf scooted toward the foot of his bed and made to stand up. His ears perked and he glanced in Patricia’s direction before chewing his lip for only a moment. “You didn’t say anything, did you?” Theodore quizzed, his eyes betrayed that he was clearly afraid of how Patricia would respond.

She shook her head, crossing her arms now. “What do you think

His ears snapped back and he gave a dark grunt her way, holding up a paw to keep her back before he muttered to himself. “It’s almost like I’m hearing half a conversation,” Theodore said softly, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the wall next to the vanity. “But the problem is there’s no one in this room that could be speaking.”

“That... that doesn’t make much sense,” Patricia said, her eyebrow lifting in confusion as she took another half-step forward. “Are you certain you shouldn’t be lying down still?”

“I’ve had enough of that today,” Theodore said, his eyes gluing themselves to

one particular slat on the wall. He stepped forward, then placed an open palm against the wood. He bit his lip, then scowled, tracing a few lines of the grain beneath his thumb. “There’s... There’s something...”

“Theodore, I really think that you should lay back down. You’re starting to worry me,” Patricia said insistently.

“Well I’m about to make you think I’m utterly unstable,” Theodore grumbled softly, turning toward the door to the hallway. “Because I swear, I’m hearing the rats in the walls.”

“Then you lay back down and I am going to send word for Marie,” Patricia said sternly, stepping after the Wolf. He ignored her utterly, glancing toward the wall as he exited the room. “Theodore. Theodore!” she shouted after him.

For being debilitated as he was, the Wolf now quite spry on his feet. She hadn’t managed to get all the way to the door of Theodore’s room before she could hear the rapping of knuckles against the next door over. “A word, if you would?”

Theodore’s voice drifted over.

“Oh goddamnit,” Patricia swore under her breath, hurrying around

Theodore and to see the resident soothsayer, Isolde, answer. “Theodore you get back to—,”

soothsayer—a Hyena, near as Patricia could tell—stepped into the hallway

The ladybeast wore a sleeveless dress and entirely too many bangles and necklaces, as well as beads down a delicately kept mane. Everything about her screamed ‘Wilderfolk’; Patricia had always assumed that the patchwork

part of her gimmick for her customers. The Hyena’s words staggered her as she spoke—“I’ve been concerned for him since his last charge arrived.” “And what *exactly* happened then?” Patricia demanded.

Isolde turned to face her, the Hyena’s emerald eyes looking over the Leopardess for only a moment. “You should come in as well. This is too public a venue for what news I have to bring.”

Patricia stood, dumbfounded, she watched Theodore step forward almost eagerly into the room. She hesitated only a moment before following, stepping around Isolde to follow her charge.

Just beyond the doorway stood a dwelling that mimicked Theodore’s— or it would have, were it not for the Hyena’s eccentric taste. The wall that

almost impossible network of hanging talismans, dreamcatchers and medley of

other things that Patricia didn't recognize. There was no proper bed inside of the room, only what looked to be a few sets of trade pelts laid out on the ground for a pleasant enough place to sit. They seemed

other place they could be put. The formerly wooden walls were menageries of almost-organized beads, crystals and runic charms. It had seemed as if

could have been even remotely 'spiritual' for the sake of playing a character. Isolde had been so dedicated to whatever role she'd decided to play she had even rid herself of a formal bed, as if to transform the spacious room into a cave. Theodore acted as if he hadn't seen the gesture. The Wolf instead took a small step toward her. "I... I hardly know how to begin to—," he stammered

pleasantly, lowering her arm. She moved to the tangle of charms hanging from the walls, considering each one rather carefully as she waited for Theodore to speak.

"It sounded like th—well *it*, I suppose—said something in a foreign language. I'm no linguist."

"For that I am grateful," Isolde murmured, her paws still searching for the proper charm. "After all, discretion is the highest priority of this establishment."

"What exactly is it that you do here, Isolde?" Patricia blurted. "I was under the impression that we were nearly exclusively a whorehouse."

"*Bordello*," Isolde corrected automatically. "And yes. But the key to your phrase is *nearly*," the Hyena's grin returned and she plucked a thin, braided cord from the masses on her wall and began to untangle it. "I don't open my legs for customers—haven't for a long, long time. I'm something of a soothsayer."

Patricia and Theodore both waited as the Hyena paused. The

braid and moved past Patricia to the window sill.

Isolde moved gracefully around a set of potted plants that sat on the

runic charms on her wall while Patricia found her gaze trapped with the pots on the ground. Confusion crossed her features only for a moment, before Patricia leaned forward to further examine the plants. They crawled upwards on the wall, disappearing over the ledge onto the narrow, Skyway path. "You're the reason for the vines...? My God, how long have you been here?"

“A haul longer than even Madame Sybil,” the Hyena responded blandly. “Take this, Theodore,” Isolde said, working a small, thumb-sized chunk of

paw wordlessly to receive the crystal—not that Isolde gave him the chance to speak. “It will guard against any sort of spirit who may attempt to contact you, as well as *help* calm any part of your mind.”

“Help?” he asked, cocking his head to the side. “What do you mean by that?” “I mean this is a cure for your untrained clairvoyance, but it won’t around the necklace.

“Was it not the Black Tongue of Rats that brought you to my side of the wall?” Isolde challenged immediately, holding up a single paw to silence the Wolf. “Discretion is our highest priority and I’ll not have you listening in on any counseling I seek for myself, or any of my patrons.”

Theodore held the crystal in his paw for a moment, rolling it against his palm, before glancing at Isolde. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

Isolde blinked, her back straightening, as if she’d shocked herself by being wrong. “Well... What is it that you want to know?”

“How does it work?”

Isolde froze in place, looking at Theodore for a moment as if to ask if he was serious. “It’s a necklace, darling,” the Hyena replied, trying to keep a bite of scornful laughter out of her voice. “You wear it.”

He raised the crystal to eye level, peering at the opaque surfaces as

falling to the endless bangles and necklaces that the Hyena wore. that Theodore was attempting to make. “This little fragment is from in the moonlight, which I suppose is good for the Bitter North, where

damned, or restless spirits. Wear the crystal low on the leather—near to your heart as you can. The heart is the source of the body’s energies; the worst of geists try to tear it asunder.”

“I give this necklace to you out of necessity,” Isolde said, her voice

answer your question, you shall render me one service.”

“But of course,” Theodore replied smoothly, slipping the necklace over his head.

Patricia expected him to buckle forward, or for some other dramatic

the least. No such gesture happened beyond the slightest of winces—and even then, Patricia wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't been staring at the Wolf's features, studying them for change.

"You've a regular," Isolde said, her voice still buttery smooth. Theodore's features hardened in defense and Patricia cleared her own throat, as if to remind the Hyena of the ruling of 'discretion.' The soothsayer continued unabated, "The second of each week the beast comes in and apparently has a fondness for the vanity."

"And?" Theodore snapped.

"I would like you to either relocate—be it your furniture, or your antics—to a place that doesn't knock on my wall," Isolde smirked triumphantly. Theodore grunted and looked away from her, robbed of words as she continued to speak.

"For each week I go undisturbed, you may ask about one of my runes and expect an answer. Do we have an accord?"

Theodore grunted softly, rolling his shoulders before nodding to her. "Yes."

directly align it with Theodore's heart. "For what it's worth, I think she is a lovely lass."

"*Discretion, Isolde,*" Theodore annunciated carefully.

"But of course," she said pleasantly before nodding toward the door. "Out you go."

"N... now hold on! What the hell are you two on about with the necklaces and these crystals?" she demanded. "Spirits? Calming minds? Just what the hell is it that you do here, Isolde?" The Leopardess demanded.

Theodore took his leave immediately, leaving Isolde and Patricia to stand face to face. Isolde waited until the Wolf was clear of the room before she stepped forward, her voice lowering slowly.

"When Madame Sybil wishes for you to know, she will give me permission to explain," Isolde said quietly. "But until then, I do request that you mind your curiosities."

"Is that a threat, Isolde?" Patricia asked, her voice now deathly calm. "It is an invitation," the Hyena said, the slightest of chuckles invading her voice. "I hope you follow Sybil down the path she has chosen. If you decide otherwise, however, be very, very wary... If you are not, you will only end up following her

once again.”

“What the everloving hell do you mean by that?” Patricia’s eyes narrowed.

“You spend too much time with Theodore, darling,” Isolde said quietly, a toothy grin splitting her features. “You’ve let it rot your brain and sour your tongue.”

“I suppose recent events have inspired me to be more direct,” Patricia grunted back. “What *exactly* are you warning me about?”

“Follow Sybil through this. That is all I have to say on the matter,” Isolde repeated, then nodded toward the door.

Patricia blinked, then growled softly before turning and storming from the room. She shut the door behind her, then paused in the hallway. Isolde was saying something—in a language that Patricia didn’t understand.

It made her pause and she stared at the door for the longest time. The language sounded nothing short of evil—but a single phrase caught her ear and held her attention.

Udun’Vrah.

///// Chapter Thirteen: The Commission

While he was admittedly relieved for the chance at a reprieve from Marie’s utterly bipolar nature, Whitaker couldn’t help but to sit at his desk, rather than to pack his bags for the impending trip. It seemed as if all of the willpower he had possessed had been expended on chartering a ship to take him directly to Fielora. The very ship that had ferried him away from those damned shores along with the very crew that would carry him back.

Though he’d sent word hours ago and he was still awaiting the reply, the captain of the ship, one Nathaniel McGinnes, was always eager to get work. The poor beast’s aging galleon was something of a family heirloom and the once proud Independence Shanty stood as a silent testament to days long gone. McGinnes kept her in operable and comfortable shape, but

closer and closer to irrelevancy with each moment.

The sinking feeling in Whitaker’s gut only swirled there, in spite of the preparations he knew he must make. The life of the Wolf in the Silver Ladle depended upon him entirely. The alliance with Madame Sybil relied entirely upon that. No matter how he tried to reconcile the problem, he kept bumping against the unfortunate reality of Theodore’s situation; If the studies all held true,

then he would be dead before Whitaker would ever make landfall in Fielora.

Nearly a thousand cases and nearly a thousand fatalities. It only took Whitaker two paws to count all of the survivors of the experiment. Whatever part of his mind which still believed in a God above prayed that Theodore would force him to use a third.

too capable of raining down upon him. If her reputation was anything to go by, Whitaker knew he would most certainly be driven to ending his own life. The professor's brain was all but steaming in its pursuits of how to ensure Theodore's survival. Packed bags or no, Whitaker felt that even if he His paws wandered over the cleared surface of his desk and he couldn't help but to stare at the polished, blank surface between his paws. The

the desktop, idly glancing from corner to corner. The desk had never been so sparsely staged before; papers that were once strewn over the surface were now stacked neatly. Pens had been returned to their abode in a small

the most basic of perfumes.

Though his mind was frozen somewhere in static, his paws deigned to act on their own, reaching down toward the drawer where Giovanni's

the Arligent Experiment itself. He came to a slow realization that he'd never actually hidden any of the documents, or scattered them as he'd intended. That seemed so far away now. So impractical.

Whitaker's eyes trailed down to the papers next to him, his brow furrowing as he looked them over. It was the master copy of a test that he hadn't ever administered. He was hardly a professor anymore. His academic career had been overshadowed by his amateur occulting—and he'd let himself be torn away from the classroom by the pursuit of what any reasonable beast would have called Madness.

He'd even gone so far as to lose his wits entirely. Whitaker nearly barked out loud at himself as he thought hard on what he'd intended on doing with the documents from the Congregate. Theodore had been right after all. Whitaker had acted a brash fool and was more than likely going to pay for it. The lingering dread of how the debt would be collected was another matter entirely.

His paws found their way to clasp his weary muzzle and the Otter exhaled

slowly as his thumbs pushed his glasses further up his face. He
The professor pushed himself away from the desk, but not before

hidden in. Whitaker didn't even bother relocking the—
He stopped, then looked back down at the drawer.
Had... had he even unlocked it? The thought rested at the corner of his

conscious and Whitaker felt a lump form in his throat. He was certain that
but he didn't recall unlatching the drawer lock, or even retrieving the key.
a favored pocket watch.
to rub the edges of the drawer with his thumb. His mind chased its own *I didn't
lock it. I couldn't have...*
he gave a slight yelp of surprise as the oak doors swung open.
butler, Julian, chirped from the entryway.

The Canine that threw open the doors to clamber through the entryway into
Whitaker's study was unmistakably Captain Nathaniel McGinnes. If ever there
was a visage to behold of a captain lifted directly from the pages

His unkempt, naturally golden fur was matted gray with dirt and grime. The
matted fur that hung from his face and ears gave his entire skull a rather broad,
wedge-like shape, although at least the beast had the

sashes wrapped about his waist over the top of a tan, pleated shirt and dress
pants. Once upon a time the visage had clearly been an attempt to emulate

the practice for the sake of patches and scarves. A more modern pistol sat on his
hip and a long dagger on the other—not to mention that the beast utterly reeked
of rum.

“Mother's love we *just got back*,” McGinnes growled as he stepped through the
doorway. The Schnauzer held what was undoubtedly the crumpled remains of
the charter Whitaker had sent him in a single paw, raising it above his head and
shaking it furiously. “My gents haven't even it. “We've been shored three days.
We haven't even completely restocked the ship.”

“As I *know* you've read by now,” Whitaker said, a bit more heat returning to his
voice than he intended. “The cost of expedited service will be covered two-fold.”

“That's very generous,” McGinnes said, his feigned grin far too full of teeth for

the Otter's liking. "But if my crew is drunk or whoring, who is going to stock the ship?"

"I'd assumed you had a method of getting them all to return," the professor replied, his tone cooling ever-so-slightly. "I hadn't realized that a two and a half day voyage was so exhaustive."

"The gents've been without a real payday for the last season," McGinnes shot back. "Guess Fielora is running out of beasts to bury."

Whitaker snorted. "Are you able to take the voyage or not?"

commission," the captain said warily. "But I will say this much; it will be expensive as all hell."

"Cost isn't an issue."

butler in the doorway. He brushed his paw on the desk and Julian took his leave, closing the doors behind him as he exited. When Whitaker's gaze

gleeful.

"I'll make you eat those words, Professor."

"A Baron to one and all," Whitaker snapped, drawing a long, low whistle

from the captain. "And I'll toss in a pittance of crests for anyone who is leaving a spurned love behind—be they bought or not."

"I crew three dozen, Whitaker," the Schnauzer reminded him carefully. "Thirty-six Barons in addition to provisions and grievance pay is a staggering bill."

split the bill with my cousin if it helps ease your mind."

a moment before clearing his throat. "That Otter can keep his shrunken heads to 'imself."

"We told you, they are ornamental. And he's not going to pack them everywhere he goes," Whitaker protested.

"I wouldn't give a sour breeze if he swore to the Saints; he's getting searched before he comes aboard my ship. I'm not having any of that bad luck aboard the *Shanty*."

"I'll ensure that he doesn't," the Otter replied testily. "After all, the *Shanty* The captain blinked at the Otter, then cocked his head slowly to the professor.

"I... I believe you used that turn of phrase wrong."

below his glasses. "Is that bad luck too, you superstitious git?" "Why tempt the fates?" McGinnes sneered automatically, standing and rolling his shoulders. The captain turned to the door, sparing only the slightest of glances to the professor, before grunting. "You bring your cousin in on this; I doubt that the gents'll much take your word in particular that they'll be paid."

"When have I ever shirked them?" Whitaker responded dryly. The captain said nothing as he made his leave, throwing the doors

after he left. Whitaker glowered after him, then pushed himself away from the desk only in time for Julian to reappear in the doorway. The Squall looked more than a little perturbed.

"Shall I send word somewhere, Professor?"

"To Victor," Whitaker said softly, prompting the butler to lean in closer to better hear him. "Tell him that I need his aid to return to Fielora."

"Is it an issue of budget, sir?" the Blue Jay quizzed. "If memory serves, your dividends from the Salvage Carrier are once again due; if the reports

"Not his money, but rather his word," Whitaker spoke as if his mind were elsewhere entirely. "What news of the Carrier?"

"Stock prices have exploded in the best of ways," Julian said chipperly. "Khami Rhus, to the North, lost a drill down their waterfall. The Carrier has been deployed to the scuttle and the engineering corps believes that the entirety of the drill can be salvaged."

"Julian," the professor said softly, then allowed himself the gentlest of smiles. "I invite you to ten percent of the stock dividend as commission,

amount of the money; any spare to be rolled back into my own account." "Sir?" the Squall blinked at Whitaker curiously. "While I do appreciate the bonus to all of us, why is it that you single me out for an entire tenth of the share?"

"You've managed my estate for nearly a decade now," the professor

unimpeded across nations. Take a tenth of the money." maintain his composure. "I... I see. Thank you, Professor Whitaker."

The Otter cocked his head some, then arched an eyebrow. "Is something wrong?"

The Avian glanced to Whitaker once more, his back straightening some. He gripped the hem of his waistcoat in something of a nervous habit, only to clear his throat meaningfully.

“I mean no disrespect, Professor,” the Squall said, his tone hushing immediately. “But there have been words of your uncle and the activities that he... *enjoyed*... with his own butler and I must say that while I am

The Otter paused for a moment, unsure of what Julian was saying before his eyes snapped wide. “Good *God* Julian! No! That’s *entirely* not what I meant!”

The Bird looked clearly relieved and exhaled heavily. He rolled his shoulders, then tapped his beak with a nervous, but grateful chuckle.

bonus? Why now?”

Whitaker fell silent, then closed his eyes for only a moment, before stated carefully before looking to the Squall more directly. The Blue Jay’s as deliberately as he intended. “I have set things in motion that could be the ruin of myself and I want to ensure that your family is taken care of.”

Julian froze and after a moment even forced himself to nod. “A... As you wish, Professor.”

“What? No questions beyond that?”

“None, Whitaker.” Julian nodded again. The Otter gave him a slow, but weary smile.

“Then I do appreciate your candor, Julian,” Whitaker muttered, before stepping beyond the Blue Jay and into the grand hall. “Please send word to have Victor meet me at the docks; tell him also that I have invoiced a Baron to each crew, with an extra three crests to the aggrieved.”

“Consider it done, Professor Whitaker.”

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One of the worst things that the silence brought with it was contemplation. Whitaker sat alone in the silence, with nothing to do but allow his conscience to bereave him. Stealing from the Congregate, drugging Theodore, the nightmare that he had invoked by handing the material over to Madame Sybil. He had signed his own death warrant.

as himself. The Otter had crossed a line that even whoring hadn’t ventured ethics. Beasts had been hanged by the neck for less.

if to feel the spot where the rope would inevitably cut in. He quivered at the thought, only to turn away toward the window, scowling at his own melancholy. *Keep your wits about you*, he warned himself. He closed his

knees to stare at the carpet beneath his feet.

Theodore had been right. Whitaker was absolutely out of his depth with this entire charade. He was no corporate spy, nor was he a vigilante. He couldn't even pin his motivations to a single moment of disgust beyond the Arligent Experiment's failure and even then, his excuse rang hollow in his own ears.

Whitaker knew for certain that there was nothing that was going to be able to tear him away from gazing into the occult. The morbid curiosity was too overpowering to him. To resist it felt pointless...

But embracing it would cost him dearly.

he looked up toward the door. Not more than a moment later, it swung open with and Victor hopped into the opposite passenger seat. "Southern Docks, if you please!" he called before closing the door.

Whitaker sat more upright, trying to feign something of a grin to his quiz.

Victor grinned back, clearly relaxed as he reclined into his seat. "She is well! Her parents are arranging quite the gathering, I hear."

"No plans to elope? It is slated for the Summer Solstice, after all."

"We're hoping for a small, but festive gathering, yes," Victor winked. "After all, Ariana hasn't ever been doted on."

Victor nodded carefully, then allowed himself a long, slow exhale. "In truth, Kendall... I'm glad you've asked me along."

The Otter's ears perked as he looked to his cousin and Whitaker leaned forward once more, shifting uncomfortably. "Why is that?" He asked quietly, trying to swallow a lump in his throat.

He bided his time carefully, only for his gaze to recenter on Whitaker as the silence threatened to become permanent. "I intend on leaving the Congregate, Kendall."

Whitaker blinked, his whiskers drooping at the thought before he cleared his throat. "I didn't realize that was an option."

"I'm making it one, Kendall," Victor replied forcefully. "We crossed a line." Whitaker nodded, biting his lip as he crossed his leg. He cleared his throat as the tension between them became palpable only to nod carefully in his cousin's direction. "Which line are you referring to? The corpse we stapled together, the hallucinogen we manufactured, or the lives we destroyed?"

"Let's start with what we did further back with that—the experiment with the eggs, if you remember," Victor grunted dryly. "Amunculae?" Whitaker shuddered at the thought—remembering the dastardly experiment they had wrought with chicken eggs and sperm. The results had been horrifying at best, creating some sort of half-alive, malformed

himself. "That all seems so novice now."

"Kendall," Victor pressed softly, clearly uncomfortable with the *stop now*."

Whitaker cocked his head at his cousin and Victor recoiled from the concerned gaze. "What are you trying to say, Vic—"

"We keep too many secrets in our family, Kendall," Victor turned his head away. "My father with his... *lover*... myself with this Congregate. You with your own wife and son. We have *failed* as a family because of these secrets. We have to be the ones to stop it."

"The secrets, or the cycle?" Whitaker asked. He began to hear his heart pounding in his ears as Victor's eyes settled on him.

my family... you know that."

thighs. "I understand, Victor."

"When we return to Fielora, I intend on giving my resignation over to Doctor LeVrane and Judge Zedoch," Victor nodded solemnly. "It's time that we stopped poking at these demons."

"Victor, I must ask that you *don't* cousin froze at the notion as Whitaker pressed on. "When your father gave you the reins of the Congregate, he recommended you ahead of Doctor LeVrane. That alone is enough to bring legendarily bad blood to that feckless tyrant of a beast. If you wish to see these demons left alone he must not be any sort of executor of decisions."

"Kendall, I don't think that—"

“He would see this scholarly pursuit degenerated to a cult by the next waning moon,” Whitaker growled. “That sort of avarice was only endearing to a point; his ambition would run unchecked with the slightest of whim and ‘opportunity.’”

Victor fell silent, then nodded carefully as he considered his cousin’s words. “What would you suggest?” He asked at length, looking directly at Whitaker.

“I wouldn’t know, Victor,” Whitaker replied, his voice heavy. “It seems that this last few weeks have been dedicated to prying into my mind to expose whatever whim of idiocy it can. Truth be told, I’m not certain how much more I can take of it.”

“How do you mean?” Victor asked softly.

“Where did we go wrong?” Whitaker asked, shaking his head slowly at himself. “Three out of every four beasts believe in some form of god of mercy that loves them for whatever they may be... Was it so wrong for us to

Victor nearly reached forward to place a paw on Whitaker’s shoulders, only to rescind it and nod. “There are some mysteries that must remain that way, unfortunately—”

“And we took it upon ourselves to peel back the curtain,” Whitaker snorted.

“It is why the Congregate has to come to an end, Kendall,” Victor replied, his voice barely above a whisper. “We cannot continue to go down this road—two thousand beasts are dead by our own methods. Even that doesn’t consider the legions of soldiers that were sent to war by our manipulations.”

Whitaker gave a dark, dry chuckle and shook his head slowly. “My God we sound like conspirators now,” he laughed softly. “Plotting the direct and terrible end of the Congregate of Scholars...”

“Would that be a bad thing, Kendall?” Victor pressed. “Granted, we would all be put to death if our exploits were to ever reach the light of day.”

Whitaker’s paw moved back towards his throat and he rubbed at it softly again, his eyes drifting closed. “Yes... I suppose we would.”

///// Chapter Fourteen: The Arligent Experiment

Victor and Whitaker had hardly spoken at all throughout the duration of the taxi

that took them to the Southern Docks and even less aboard the ship that ferried them to the Fieloran Shores. Any time

Victor would shut the conversation down—often by not even giving Whitaker the dignity of a response. After an entire day of trying to pry conversation from the grasp of Victor’s stony silence, Whitaker gave up entirely.

Whatever anxiety that Whitaker had felt previously had only doubled until it became a gnawing sensation that wound its way around his body— at times chewing on his stomach and at others the back of his throat. Distractions of dice and cards with the crew felt hollow and Whitaker found himself unable to concentrate on even the most basic of rules.

With each hour the ship traveled, the sensation grew more and more desperate. On more than a few days, Whitaker stayed in his bunk, looking at mostly-blank sheets of paper as if he was trying to read. In truth, he was more than ready to try clawing his way out the side of the boat’s hull.

Studying the details of the ship surrounding him was the only way he knew to stay sane. The *Independence Shanty* was McGinnes’ pride and the pages of history and tales of swashbuckling pirates and fancy. The main deck was well kept: oiled and properly sealed, with actual benches to sit on rather than wooden slats on stilts. The upper deck teemed with

inwards, the purpose of which Whitaker could only guess. Good sets of

set, along with a stage designed expressly for performers. Just beyond the kitchen was a staircase that lead down to the crew bunks, which were surprisingly comfortable, though they were stacked atop one another with little regard to any poor beast’s muzzle.

McGinnes had the makings of a luxury cruise liner, a reality that

days, there was little demand for such charters. Beasts were more preoccupied with stocks trading and trying to sail with the gusts of innovation. Without the Congregate’s patronage, near as Whitaker could tell, McGinnes would have become insolvent with his debts inside of his own waterborne palace.

Whitaker was half curled on his own bunk, trying to snatch whatever rest he could from his ever-maddening bouts of anxiety when landfall was announced. It

seemed so far away—a passive fact, even. The numbness had grown all-pervasive; his senses felt overridden with a tinny, keening hum that drained him of all rational thought.

only intensifying as they hailed a feral-drawn carriage to take them to the foothills of the Addan’Vos delta, where the husk of the Arligent Experiment waited.

The city itself was among the most bizarre of creations that Whitaker could have dreamt of. Buildings hugged roads that sprawled in all directions, but there wasn’t a single building that was unattached from the main thoroughfare. It was less a city, by the cramped standards of Charinthosse and more a collection of buildings, built in rows.

Ninth Rue had been funded in its entirety by the Congregate. It connected the docks to the delta and wound through a thicket of trees with a troubling, serpentine suggestion. No doubt the winding road had

but there was little that Whitaker could do save for allow the carriage that carried him to toss him in his seat. Poor testing had caused pits to form beneath the road. The cement which had been poured was now rough, and uneven with potholes despite the road’s almost new construction.

Whitaker wasn’t entirely certain of which scholars were still on site assessing the damage. If Victor had told him, he’d either forgotten or hadn’t been paying attention.

The carriage lurched upwards at a steep angle and Whitaker was forced to catch himself against the seat once more as they ascended the last few vertical strides. His ears twitched as he listened for the telltale signs of hooves clattering against concrete, announcing their arrival at the edge of the dam.

When the carriage was brought to a stop, Whitaker could only feel wave after wave of nausea. His feet touched the smooth concrete of the dam’s roof and his knees nearly buckled beneath him. Spanning the

intended to use the currents of water to spin turbines, which would in turn generate electricity, though Whitaker was ultimately clueless as to how the conversion took place. The far end of the dam was where the damage was; the hole that was ripped through the side of the structure was large enough to send

the Independence Shanty through with room to spare on the sides. The river that had once been stopped by the construction was once more unimpeded in its pursuit of the ocean. Teams of beasts surveyed the damage from afar, but there was little that could be done without heavy machinery—none of which Whitaker could see anywhere near the wreckage.

Orders were shouted and Whitaker found himself trotting quickly to the edge of the damaged portion of the dam—or at least as far as he was allowed. His path was barred after only a moment by a chain drawn across the twenty-odd strides wide that it was. His eyes narrowed through his glasses and Whitaker tried to pick out the faces of any gent he may have known that worked on the twisted metal, but found none.

“Whitaker, over here!” Victor called from some distance behind him. He turned toward his cousin, who waved him over to a small group of faces that Whitaker knew all too well.

the Congregate of Scholars, as well as a scientist with whom Whitaker had personally studied.

proud testament to the Canine species, LeVrane stood head and shoulders above even the taller of his companions. He was broad at the shoulders,

what Whitaker understood, LeVrane was an endocrinologist, as well as a cardiologist. Some study with regard to cardio-synchronicity was his bread and butter inside of the experiment and the Husky’s reputation touted him as something of a genius among geniuses.

His accessories glinted with polish—from the astonishing, tripled

that glinted silver on his wrists. He was the type of gent that, of all beasts, brought Theodore back to mind, but Whitaker didn’t even want to understand why.

The second was Whitaker’s own mentor, the aging lady-Otter Carmella Adkins. She wore the same, threadbare professor’s uniform that she always had—a gray petticoat, white shirt and black, ankle-length skirt. Her rimless glasses rested atop her wizened muzzle and she smiled at Whitaker as he approached.

unfamiliar with. There wasn’t so much as a reputation, or even a name, until Victor stepped between the pair to make the introductions.

The Wolf's fur was, for any number of reasons, tinted with a midnight shade of blue that was so complete it managed to drown out any other distinguishing features he may have possessed. His green eyes settled into

before Machiavelli—no... *Mako* spoke again. "Special Operations of the to Whitaker before continuing. "Much to my father's chagrin, the blue was

not soon enough for family gatherings."

Whitaker gave a small bark of laughter, then cocked his head up to the Wolf. "I was going to say... It's quite unusual."

Mako's toothy grin remained and he gave the slightest of bows.

"Anything to help make a statement in the business world, I suppose."

grinning to Whitaker and Victor. There was something lurking in his smile though, something urgent and irritated. "I happen to know that one of orders of our house?"

It took Whitaker only a moment to realize what LeVrane was saying;

If nothing else, it would be an opportunity to examine the further

Theodore was still alive, that was. The Wolf would pick his brain in private and in proper context, as well as scour for the documents that could suggest a practical inversion therapy .

"We'll accompany you so far as the divide in the hallway, I suppose, then be straight to work," Whitaker bowed his head politely before the posse turned and began to move towards the edge of the dam.

Just over the edge, hidden from view unless one knew it was there, was a staircase leading down the face of the dam. There weren't any guarding rails and the staircase itself was little more than reinforced mesh to keep the worst of the water spray from the river from creating any sort of slick

beyond Whitaker's reasoning.

"We've kept a tight lid on the overall reports of the damages, Mr.

"I am unversed in the technical aspects of the failure, but it is my understanding that the metal used to create the turbine expanded beyond anticipated tolerances. The unfortunate result was the blades digging into their housing and turning the entire unit into a battering ram."

“Steel wasn’t hard enough, I suppose,” Mako replied disinterestedly, looking out toward the mangled steel of the wall. “That’s one hell of an as well.”

Tension crossed LeVrane’s shoulders, as if he was somehow irritated with Mako for stating what he knew, but the Husky didn’t allow his

million Queens, seven Barons, two Crowns and three Crests to repair all of the damage, as well as pay for the life-insurance policies taken out by the families.”

Mako tutted his tongue softly, as if considering what to say. LeVrane said nothing more himself, instead leading the small group to the base of the staircase and through a door, into the interior hallways of the structure.

“This is where we make our leave, I suppose,” Whitaker said softly, stepping around the other four beasts and taking Victor with him. “We shall meet shortly! I do apologize ahead of schedule if there is any mess.”

“I certainly hope there isn’t, Professor Whitaker,” LeVrane said with a carnivorous grin. “We shall be along shortly.”

Victor’s strides lengthened until he was able to stand nearly shoulderto-shoulder with Whitaker in the wide hallway. The pair’s eyes scanned for were able.

highly-technical notes, they were placed in such a way to deter all but the most dedicated of individuals, while creating ease of access for those who were familiar with the system. Whitaker had designed their system for hiding things himself; it was part of the reason he’d nearly used it again inside of his own library. Tan folders were mundane information about the experiment: the technical notes, the budget, the endless ins-and-outs of

something hidden inside of them. The worries of espionage or incidental disclosure of the Congregate’s activities was always present, but mitigated them.

The pair immediately set to work, snatching the red folders and piling them up into a single stack on one of the desks.

Victor took another lap about the room and Whitaker took a moment to begin digging through the piles, glancing desperately through the pages for the study he was searching for: the mortality rates of Therasphetamine and how they were reversed.

“Kendall, do you really have time for—!?” Victor snapped, darting it tight.

his ears perking as he heard the sounds of footfalls from further down the hall. They’d forgotten to close the door behind them and he swallowed hard.

“What *exactly* could be so important *right now*?” Victor snarled, glancing toward the door himself as he grabbed the rest of the red folders.

“If I tell you, you are *sworn* to secrecy!” Whitaker hissed back, lowering his tone carefully. “And I do mean against *everyone*, even and especially the other members of the Congregate!”

“What are you on about *now*, Kendall?” Victor shot, turning immediately toward one of the cabinets and swapping one of the red folders with a tan one. “What could be so—?”

tightening. “Another *Therasphetamine*

his head clear and continue to replace the documents, scattering them as he was able. “How the hell did that happen?”

“It is a desperately long story,” Whitaker said, now moving to help his cousin more urgently, peering through the red folders once more before shoving them into the cabinets. “And what time we have is precious short.”

“Why didn’t you say anything at any time over the last *several days*!?”

Victor demanded.

“Damnit if I know, Victor!” Whitaker hissed. “My mind has been in wracked shambles ever since—,” he bit back his own words, turning away from his cousin for only a moment. Victor took a step towards him and Whitaker backed away. “I am not certain what’s been coming over me of late, cousin,” he admitted heavily.

“That’s utterly transparent,” Victor shot back, his voice lowering to a hiss. The footfalls were beginning to echo throughout the hallway, causing Victor to close the distance between himself and Whitaker far more quickly than either gents would have otherwise approved of. “But I thought we destroyed the Therasphetamine.”

“That may have been overstated,” Whitaker felt his throat tighten involuntarily, as if his own body were trying to choke him from saying anything more. “But nonetheless—”

the door—Professor LeVrane’s voice now drifting around the corner Therasphetamine’s inversion therapy.”

“*I kept those notes myself you daft git,*” Victor growled through a locked hallway.

LeVrane’s voice carried through the doorway before he stepped through,

Mako didn’t step into the room. Instead, he regarded Professor LeVrane rather coldly before turning to move back toward the stairwell. The trio of professors that had travelled with him blinked, dumbfounded for a moment before rushing after the oddly-colored Wolf without so much as an acknowledgment to Victor or Whitaker.

Whitaker hadn’t ever been so relieved to see beasts go. His knees threatened to give out, but a sharp grab above his shoulder turned him to

carefully.

“So far as I know, yes,” Whitaker admitted. “But we *cannot* tell LeVrane or the others!”

“And why not!?” Victor hissed.

“The beast is in the employ of Madame Sybil Herald,” Whitaker closed his eyes, struggling to control his breathing. “And she possesses enough information to bring ruin to the whole of the Congregate of Scholars.” Victor’s expression was struck dumb, the beast taking a step back from his cousin, only to cover his muzzle with both of his paws. “H... how did this happen?” He asked, his voice only slightly above a whisper.

Whitaker stammered for a moment before clearing his throat, trying to compose himself before speaking softly. “She acquired documents from this very room—I believe there was enough to expose the warmongering of

can be used to open an investigation into money laundering.” “*How!?*” Victor demanded, his voice a strained whisper. Whitaker swallowed the lump in his throat, chewing his lip for only a

moment before straightening his back. He squared his shoulders to Victor before he replied.

“I gave them to her.”

///// Epilogue: The Waiting Deep

Even as he slept, part of Theodore could feel the shadows hovering over him. They were never more than an arm's reach away and breathed deeply as they stared downwards at him, encroaching upon him with every

his dreams and guiding his mind further into the arms of endless weariness and nightmare.

... their children, taken...

...curse to their house... ... the one she killed... the one who took her place... ... a bastard raised by a murderer...

... its face, contorted in utter agony, in silent scream...

for the vanity where he had laid the crystal necklace that Isolde had gifted him.

He managed to snatch it, but couldn't save himself from falling to moment to see if anybeast was coming to his aid.

To his surprise and relief, no one was on their way, or at least not in any great rush. He turned the cord about in his paws, fumbling for only a moment before he slid the necklace back on and centered the crystal over his heart.

blackness retreating back to the corners of the room and leaving Theodore on end and he felt himself shiver, despite the summer heat.

The Wolf pinched the bridge of his nose, inhaling slowly and chewing his lip as his other paw clutched the faint blue crystal about his neck. Having the thing nearby wasn't enough anymore and he'd only been given the necklace but yesterday. It could have only meant that he was getting worse and the thought made his skin crawl.

He needed air.

around the otherwise empty room. Everything was precisely as it should

desperate need of a new log, but nothing was out of place. He nodded, trying to restore some of his own certainty before crawling back over the bed.

Theodore reached to retrieve his trousers, not even bothering to don his short clothes beneath them as he tugged them up about his waist and laced them snug. The Wolf exhaled slowly, rubbing at the side of his neck, even if only to make for damned sure that the necklace cord was seated properly against his pelt.

He hated the thought of disturbing anyone with the door creaking open to the hallway and the inevitable, heavy footfalls down the stairs. Instead, Theodore

opted to take the window out into the night air and onto the skyway. He tread rather lightly on the vines, now trying to step between them to the uncovered bits of stone beneath them. Moments later, he was

The night air felt marvelous in his fur; cool, albeit humid and utterly refreshing. A bounce invaded his steps as he took the skyway anywhere that his feet would take him—anywhere that wasn't the Silver Ladle, at least for now. His paw, however, didn't stop clutching the crystal next to his heart.

There was an almost unbearable lightness to the world around Theodore, who peered over the edge of the buildings to spot the guards, meandering by torch and lantern below. He spied a few of the cheaper whores rutting gents and lasses alike in the darker corners of the streets,

owed to the precious trinket held so tightly in his paw.

His eyes scanned the gaslit streets and he found that he hardly minded the fact that each one of them was attached to a vein that threatened to his self-rationalized-terror of the gaslights had managed to fade, or at least been eclipsed by giant eyeball monsters and drugged bourbon.

Whatever the case was, Theodore was grateful to even be able to be on his own two feet again. He carried himself lightly and all the way past the blacksmith's shop, to a staircase that lead down toward the market level. It

The cobblestones of street felt as if they were brand new, worn to a smooth polish from endless travelers marching across them; dust swirled through the shades of gaslight and night air. With the moon and stars in of clothes if nothing else. He'd nearly made himself heave at the thought of having worn the same clothes for the better half of the week.

Theodore allowed himself only a small burst of speed as he walked past the porch of the Silver Ladle. One or two of the gents who recognized him managed a call toward him. He waved at them, then continued on his

evenin'!"

From there, Theodore was out of the walls of the city and down the

take the scenic route this time, but damnit if the night wasn't welcoming for it. The cobblestones ceased quickly, turning into wooden slats and from there to

cobblestone once more as Theodore descended to the barren shipyard and the docks.

His eyes scanned the waves as they crashed against the shores and then turned upwards toward the lighthouse. He watched the listless spinning of the beacon for a moment, only for his eyes to trail down to where he knew

He cocked his head and Theodore leaned forward. He squinted at the out from where he stood and scowled some. It looked like someone loading something into a boat, but he couldn't be certain.

He glanced about, but didn't dare call out for a guard. If they were doing something illegal and realized they were being watched... Theodore didn't want to think about the consequences. There were enough tales

throats slashed.

Theodore wet his lips, then took a rather brave step forward, only to stop himself halfway between it and the next. An idea formed in the back of his mind and he glanced over his shoulder toward where he knew the Silver Ladle to be. He thought back to his hallucinations, his mind lingering on the moment of clairvoyance that had dragged him to Isolde's room.

His thumb brushed over the smooth, blue crystal and he turned his gaze somehow... somehow learn to *control* the sensations... The thought sent a delighted shiver down his spine and his optimistic mood felt the world bow around him.

He teetered for only a moment, clamping his eyes shut. He anticipated the whispers returning to him immediately, but none came. Theodore's shoulders bunched and he dared open a single eye to glance at the world around him.

Everything had been precisely as he'd left it. There wasn't any apocalyptic visions, or ghosts scaling the walls, as his room had made it seem. Almost to Theodore's disappointment, it was rather tame.

He allowed his eyes to wander for only a moment, before glancing toward the the attention of an audience.

"Alright, uhh... Spirits..." he muttered under his breath, lest somebeast overhear

him speaking to himself. While getting committed was certainly on Theodore's

he wanted to know whether or not he was *actually* insane. "What are they up to?"

dingy.

He clutched the crystal more tightly in his paw and nearly dropped it as it

in his palm, but still held the gem by the leather cord as it seemed to respond to his request. The Wolf grunted softly, shooting something of a glare down to the crystal before glancing once more in the direction of the dingy.

It wasn't the dingy that caught his eye though. It was something further away in the water. A black shape, perfectly round...

With a solid golden ring centered, as if it was staring at Theodore, with veins to match.

Does this one seek Communion now?

Theodore immediately turned, putting the necklace back over his head as he stormed back up the hillside toward the Silver Ladle. His paws shook beside him as he stubbornly strode forward—damn the beasts at the base of the rocks and

investigate.

His strides lengthened as the noise from the Ladle drifted down the hill towards rounded the corner toward the bordello. He heard one or two of the beasts greet him, but he didn't pay them any mind, moving directly past them and into the bowels of the Ladle.

The bar was crammed to the gills, which was very odd, considering that payday was... Hell, Theodore had even lost track himself if it had been three, or four nights ago. He shook the moment's confusion from his mind as he approached the edge of the bar. Patricia nearly dropped the decanter she held when her eyes fell upon the Wolf, but he didn't return her glance.

"Madame Sybil, a word?" Theodore barked over the noise to the Panther who stood at her usual perch at the foot of the stairs. Madame Sybil regarded him coolly

her. "Of course, Theodore," she said reproachfully. She lead him up the staircase and toward her own room, stopping only for a moment to glance into Theodore's to

ensure he didn't have a client in waiting. "What is this all abo—"

“How much do you know about what’s been... well, ‘going on’?” Theodore pressed, lowering his voice and stepping slightly too close for Madame Sybil’s comfort.

“I’ve read what studies that Marie left for us. Wh—?” she began before Theodore turned her about, his paws latching to her biceps as if to shake her. Sybil nearly snarled at him only to fall immediately silent as she saw the mask of desperation that was on the Lupine’s face. “My God, Theodore.” she murmured. “I... I can’t live like this, Madame,” he said, feeling his voice crack as he spoke. He glanced over his shoulder toward the staircase below. The Wolf swallowed a lump in his throat, then looked back to the Panther. “What’ve... what’ve you read

for any sort of a cure for this?”

Madame Sybil’s face was anything but comforting. The clear markings of

could help, Theodore. If what I’ve read is in fact accurate, you are one of sixteen said, unable to keep the concern out of her voice. “For whatever reason, you are an anomaly.”

Theodore let his paws lower from Madame Sybil’s arms before taking the slightest of steps backward. “That is hardly comforting, I’ll admit.”

softly, closing the distance as Theodore tried to retreat. She allowed his back to land

front of her waist once more. “If it is within my power, I am going to put a stop to their utterly *anane* practices.”

madame. “But how does that help my...” Theodore lowered his voice as footsteps clambered up the staircase toward the pair. He and Sybil both stepped aside to allow Ymir a chance to lead an utterly drunken Canine toward her bedroom, her strides nothing more than a haughty strutting passing Theodore as if to make a statement, only to close the door behind the pair. The Wolf waited for a moment before clearing his throat and returning his gaze to Madame Sybil. “How does that help my new *condition*?”

“I am certain the answer will present itself in time,” Sybil said cautiously,

glancing up and down the hallway herself now before stepping forward to whisper to Theodore more directly. “But for now, we must—”

“We?”

makes you think that I want *anything to do* with your little crusade?” *my* establishment. You see things that no mortal should ever lay eyes on. You keep asking for answers as if I will magically have them if you badger me enough,”

Madame Sybil replied sternly. "You are intrinsically tied entirely up to you."

Theodore fell silent, then closed his eyes. He pinched the bridge of his muzzle and inhaled slowly. "Then what, *precisely* do you need of me, Madame Sybil?" softly. "There mustn't be a beast anywhere that is aware anything is amiss. If you can

"I do wonder what one of the doctors would say," Theodore sneered back. "What is *usually* prescribed for hallucinations of rats in the walls?"

such as it is, has returned," she shot, only to glance down the staircase once more. "In all seriousness Theodore we cannot let others know something is amiss. The slightest change in atmosphere could be devastating."

"To the business, or to your little crusade against over-educated curs who pretend to study God?" The Wolf grunted darkly.

"Skepticism is *not* something I would have expected from the gent that only last breath complained of imaginary rats," Sybil challenged. Theodore fell silent. The madame looked at the Wolf expectantly before continuing. "If you can earn, then

care, but I cannot be rid of you or make excuses."

"Of course, Madame," Theodore said automatically, looking away from the Panther. She gave a slight nod, then turned to move back down the staircase towards the guests once more. "But what of these... *things* that I can't control?"

"If you stare into the abyss, be wary, as it too stares back at you'," Sybil quoted from a philosopher that Theodore didn't recognize. She turned to face him, looking

him over carefully. "You are an intelligent beast; braver than you let yourself be, even

if the bravery is born from spite."

"Thank you for the compliment," Theodore rolled his eyes. "Certainly my ego can save me from insanity, if nothing else."

"Not your ego, Theodore," Sybil pressed, stepping forward as she lowered her voice. "Professor Whitaker."

Theodore fell silent. He studied Madame Sybil's expression as if to make sure she was being serious, before retreating a half step. "I'm not sure what you want me

to say to that, Madame," he replied softly.

"I cannot *begin* to understand what he has done to you, nor am I naive enough

to believe that it can truly be forgiven. But your attitude toward him is utterly unbearable. If you truly seek to be free of whatever is happening, you *must* yourself to at least tolerate him.”

“Madame,” Theodore began to protest. Sybil silenced him with a single, raised paw before she slid backward toward the staircase.

more. Sybil paused near the top of the staircase, as if reconsidering her descent for a moment before she turned back to the Wolf. “I am not asking you to serve him in any capacity, but I need you well.”

“Of course, Madame,” Theodore replied, his voice equally rigid. He waited for her to disappear down to the customers below before turning and entering his

scents of burning cedar and heady mint from the window. He leaned his back against the door, only to tilt his head back and rub at his forehead with a single paw. The necklace that Isolde had gifted him was beginning to feel warm uncomfortably against his pelt. He racked his brain to remember if that was one of the markers of the crystal working as intended, or if he was beginning to hallucinate sensations as well.

The Wolf exhaled mightily into his palm, closing his eyes against the churn of other side of his head.

“Theodore?” Isolde’s voice drifted through the planks. He debated for a moment of how, or even if he intended to respond, but the Hyena continued, making his decision for him. “I understand what it is that you are going through. Gazing into the abyss is one of the most unharrowing things that can happen to any beast, most

of all to one unprepared for the view,” her voice faltered and Theodore could hear

her clear her throat, as if she was trying to ease it of tension. “Folk don’t understand

that when you stare into the abyss, it too stares back at you.”

“And this is supposed to be comforting?” Theodore asked softly, unsure if Isolde could hear him or not. There was silence for a moment, but he resolved that he wasn’t going to open the door for her.

At length, Isolde replied, “Theodore, you’re a strong Wolf, even though you are at times misguided,” she spoke through the door. “Take this advice, or don’t...

The abyss stares into you with every advantage—but you of all folk could give it something that it has never seen before.”

“That is?” Theodore interrupted, turning toward the door to scowl through it to the Hyena.

“Find it in yourself to grin.”

To Be Continued in Book Two: An Invitation for Crows

//// Afterword: From the Journal of Giovanni Wolfhardt

The following is an excerpt of the letter that Theodore found within Giovanni

To my dearest son, Machiavelli, In truth, I have discarded nearly a dozen drafts of this letter and I So many things have been experimented upon and sought for, that it The inspired grasps towards those Golden Shores and the gates into the Great Beyond... I do sincerely regret to inform you of all of this, but we have been complicit in crimes against Nature herself. We fought to pierce the veil between Here and There, As much as I do desperately wish to tell you that we found some what we assumed would be there, either. There was no balance, as there is in the natural world here. But I must digress. If I continue much further without any form of discipline, I may resort once again to the throes of this madness. We forced Science and Faith to walk en tandem, instead of forcing them to opposite ends of the room. It was in time that we learned just why they reviled each other and the dangerous effects that such a union bore. I suppose that, at its core, this letter is but an admission of guilt. succeeded. admittedly my surprised overshadowed all other emotions. It was the Winter Solstice Gala this year held at our own Wolfhardt with a brilliant display to welcome the near year. One of her former acquaintances had managed to bind the wicks of a series of candles truly a sight to behold beneath the skylight. place. An endocrinologist by trade and a spectacularly combative atheist by nature, I couldn't rationalize what he could be doing at such a strictly religious ceremony. The ostentatious decorum was

anything but In spite of it all, most surprising was that he was there to see me. He even sought me out inside of the party itself! I was but a neophyte

in the Astronomy Tower. He begrudgingly acknowledged that my ingenuity and faith had caught the attention of several beasts who wished to speak with him

I escorted him to the gardens, far away from the nearest bit of reverie when he gave me his proposal. I laughed myself nearly sick and had it not been that such a religious ceremony had no alcohol, I would have insisted

dissertation written by one Kendall Whitaker. It was something that would immobilize the head for the transplant of an eye. Now, mind you, was still a military physician some years ago. While the machine was far from ready to be tested formally (after all, I only knew of cadaver testing), I instructed him that he knock on the or connectivity to the brain itself. It would have required a far steadier set of paws and keener mind than mine. me from escaping. He produced, for my horror, a detailed schematic that he insisted I study for only a moment. This experiment was to cover something that could only be described as inane. wished for me to do: reconstruct a skeleton from tissues of the recently deceased, then deny my Faith in order to pursue a study in diabolism! He began to try and reason with me—that somehow we could study God through the lens of a desecrated cadaver. I struck him then and there time and again until his glasses shattered

the assault that he so richly deserved, or admit to his heretical request, I stayed the night in the jailhouse by my own volition. Anger tempted my mind as it had never before, but there was something else whispering to me from the shadows as well.

Certainty. The process I could take that would allow me to truly know what the Beyond held. I didn't sleep that night for all of my questions. Was this a test from God? Was I to oblige in this

cabalistic quest for a truth that I wasn't owed? Was God right to keep it from me? I prayed to whomever—or whatever lurked on the other side of the veil for guidance... Guidance that was provided. At the stroke of the Solstice's end—the sunrise of the next day, I the hospital that I had sent him to, both to apologize to him and to offer my services.

GLOSSARY:

Charinthosse: (*caren-thoss*; 'caren' rhymes with barren, and 'thoss' rhymes with 'boss')

- *An island city-state. It is considered a pocket nation by other neighboring kingdoms because of its military power, and economic exports, as well as its unique position in the geopolitical landscape. It bows to no formal crown or parliament. It is the largest manufacturer of textiles, as well as the seat of Arrowman Steels and*

Fielora: (*fay-lora*; 'fay' rhymes with 'hey', and 'lora' is pronounced as a proper noun, Lora)

- *Once the largest kingdom in the world, Fielora saw a vicious civil war when into three smaller sects; the Republic of Fielora, Fielora Grand, and The Free State of Fielora.*

Khami Rhus: (*caw-meh-roose*; roose rhymes with caboose)

against the rock face to access a copper mine, mid-way up the mountainside.

The Arligent Experiment: (*are-leh-gent*)

Therasphetamine: (*thair-es-fet-uh-mean*; 'thair' rhymes with 'hair')

- *A drug manufactured by the Congregate of Scholars for use in the ARLIGENT Experiment. It is an unreliable psychoactive drug, incredibly addictive and lethal in uncontrolled dosages. It was designed to dilate the senses to the paranormal, but*

owed to high mortality rates and limited success.

Udun'Vrah: (*ooh-dune-vrah*; "ooh" rhymes with "shoe", 'vrah' rhymes with bra)

- *An entity claiming to be from a world beyond reality, referring to it only as "Threshold". The being is also called "The First That Was", and in some closed*

circles,

even considered to be God.

Appendix A: Charinthossian Societal Footnotes

Coins:

Crests: Lowest common denominator. Usually used in bartering of foodstock and minor debts.

Crowns: The most common of denominators. Usually seen in the bartering of wages and minor services earned. It is generally accepted that a Crown is equivalent to ten Crests.

Queens: A most unusual piece, reserved for the highest quality, or reception equivalent of ten Barons. Units of Measure:

‘Ransom’: Generally used when counting coins—and a multiplier of ten. A Ransom of Crests is ten crests, or equal to one Crown. A Ransom of Crowns is equal

who often would steal something and ransom it back to kingdoms in trade for coin that sustained Charinthosse’s inception.

‘Naut’: Short for ‘nautical mile’, equal to 1.15 miles, or 1.85 kilometers.

‘Pittance’: Generally used when counting coins—pittance usually refers to two, but in rare occasions three of a given currency.

Commonly Used Terms:

Gent : Shorthand for “gentlebeast” or “male”, situational dependent. **Lass** : Shorthand for “female”

Squall

Jay

Ransom : Unit of measure—multiple of 10. Never used for more than 100 (i.e.

“a ransom’s ransom of Barons”)

Naut : Unit of measure—typically referring to distances travelled.

Approximately equal to 1.15 miles, or 1.85 kilometers.

Beast : Utilized similarly to ‘person’, does not imply poor manners **Feral** :

Usually used in reference to poor manners, or to imply a genuine disgust of character. Can also be used to denote an animal that does not have sentience.

“I Give You My Word” : A phrase only reserved for the most absolute of promises. To utter this phrase is to stake your entire reputation upon the promise being made: it is the cornerstone of Charinthossian Society. “Thy Word thy Bond,
Thy Bond thy Brother, Thy Brother thy Life”.

Appendix B: Attributions

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