The Natural Philosopher and the Nonlinear Terms

by Rastaban

Summary

"Soon the two greatest minds of the Empire will be here. Together. If I could get these rivals to cooperate they could create weapons and tools of unimaginable power. If I could command both of them-- Well, I'll wait and measure their disposition towards one another before following that line of thought."

In which Anton Sokolov wants a drink, Piero Joplin wants revenge, and neither of them wants to be killed by the City Watch; in which surviving a siege may be easier than surviving each other; in which the city is dying and two obsessed, dysfunctional, brilliant madmen are the only way to save it.

Notes

"In the spring of 1948, still in the shadow of the bomb they had made, twenty-seven physicists assembled at a resort hotel in the Poconos Mountains of northern Pennsylvania to
confront a crisis in their understanding of the atom. ... They were indulging a fantasy, that their work could remain a small, personal, academic enterprise, invisible to most of the public, as it had been a decade before, when a modest building in Copenhagen served as the hub of their science. ... The bomb had shown the aptness of physics. The scientists had found enough sinew behind their penciled abstractions to change history."

-- James Gleick, *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*

See the end of the work for more [notes](#).
Hard Start

Second Law (thermodynamics) 1. The statement that entropy in an isolated system can only be held fixed or increased.

Piero Joplin tapped the old brass key to the hound pits on his cutting bench, and stopped when he caught himself doing it.

There was no reason not to go. Piero had been waiting for this moment for months - years, if he were being honest. He hadn't been able to focus on anything after Admiral Havelock had come to him and asked, ever so casually, where Anton Sokolov spent most of his time. Of course Piero knew. And then Corvo had gone out and brought him back, snoring over the assassin's shoulder, and Havelock had put him in the old hound pit cage in the warehouse, like it was nothing, like they hadn't just kidnapped the most important object in Piero Joplin's personal universe. Then they had gone in there and talked to him! Just...talked! To him! Now he was sitting there like any other prisoner and everyone was simply going about their lives, as if he weren't just fifty meters away from Piero Joplin's workshop. Him! Anton Sokolov!

When Corvo had donned his mask and Samuel pushed off from the dock, Piero had counted the minutes until they returned. But after Havelock and Corvo had returned from the interrogation and Havelock had dropped the key to the pit cage on Piero's desk "so you can have your chat," he was gripped by a sudden cold. His limbs felt leaden. His thoughts spun in a useless tumble, like a flywheel disengaged from its parent mechanism. After so long waiting, the moment was finally here - and he found he couldn't do it.

Piero made excuses. Corvo had a party to attend tonight. That meant preparations. Piero cleaned the mask and pasted on a few gaudy bits to make it look more like an aristocrat's idea of frightening. He checked the crossbow; Corvo did well enough taking care of the weapons he knew, but the little pistol bow was Piero's own creation and the assassin could not be trusted to look after it properly. The spools needed oiling and he replaced the heavy coiled mainspring that drove the mechanism, just to be sure. Corvo had asked him for several more of the tranquilizer bolts and a few vials of remedy. Piero lingered over them, mixing chemicals up until the moment Corvo came to pick them up before he left, and at no point admitted that he was distracting himself.

And then Corvo left for his party, and Piero was alone with the brass key.

Evening slouched towards night as he walked across the riverfront yard. Waves slapped at the crumbling quay. Across the water the city was lighting up. A mere two decades ago it would have glowed with candlelight; now the streets crackled with the pale, steady radiance of electric arcs. Far, far out to sea he could discern the long straight line of lights running along the harbor breakwater, the great wall of dun-colored stone that had given the first town its name. The ruined buildings in the setting sun cast long blocks of shadow, carving out black pits in the shining surface of the river. He looked away; the image made him uneasy. Piero marched up the crumbling brick steps to the old warehouse that housed the kennels and the pit cage, stood before the door and took a deep breath. Straightened, unconsciously, the lapels of his ancient coat. Resettled his spectacles on his nose.

Piero would be the first to admit that he had some difficulties conversing with human beings. He preferred to plan out his responses far in advance; otherwise his mouth outran his head and said
things he would rather it didn't. And this particular scene, oh, he had turned this moment on the lathe of his mind for years, working out all the variations. How he and Sokolov would meet. What he would say first. How he would demonstrate the clear superiority of his own work and the mistake Sokolov had made in allowing him to be expelled from the Academy. Piero had mapped out all the ways the conversation could go, whether he would gloat or simply enjoy his triumph, quiet, magnanimous in victory. Running through those scenes in his mind drove him on through the dark times, comforted him when the world pressed down on him and everything he brewed turned to ash. And now this moment that was the sum of a thousand daydreams was about to happen, and he had imagined it so many times that it no longer seemed real.

He opened the door and stepped inside.

The pit cage covered most of the first floor of the building, a wide square with open bars reaching three times a man's height. Electric arc lights had been fixed to the rafters, spotlighting the arena below. Two long blue metal crates were fitted to openings on opposite corners where the hounds would have been released, back when the beasts had torn each other to pieces while the pub's customers roared. Now the cage held a narrow cot, a table, the remnants of a meal and a half-empty bottle. And Anton Sokolov, lying on the cot with his coarse green jacket thrown over his face.

The warehouse door clicked shut behind Piero. He stepped up to the bars and cleared his throat. Sokolov didn't move. He looked like he was sleeping. Piero wanted to be angry, triumphant, proud. Instead he felt light and hollow inside, moving as if he were underwater. He unlocked the cage with the brass key. The hinges squeaked as he entered. That, too, prompted no reaction from the natural philosopher stretched out on his cot, dead to the world. Piero walked to the edge of the little bed and stopped, feeling like a fool.

Anton Sokolov had become, in his dreams, a shadow and a menace. The last he had ever seen of the man was Sokolov in the black robes of the Head of the Academy, rejecting his appeal, and this was the image that had stayed with him: Sokolov standing above him all in black, dismissing him. At the Academy Sokolov had occupied a level so far above Piero it had made his head spin, and what times he had seen the man had been brief and from a distance. Until that one terrible day.

Now he was here, the man and not the image, and he looked - like a man, one who had been dragged from his home and forced to stay in an old pit cage for a day and a night. Sokolov was wearing a gentleman's dress shirt and a waistcoat, but they were of rough, durable cloth, and his trousers were spotted with food and chemical stains both old and new. He was breathing - Piero could see the rise and fall of his chest - but he gave no other sign of life.

"Um," he said, and despaired at the waver in his voice. "I am Piero Joplin, and I am a natural philosopher and I want to talk to you." The words echoed in the high rafters and died away into silence. He felt like even more of an idiot, like the Void ought to open up and swallow him right then.


Piero blinked. This had not been in any of his scripts. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said while his mind spun.

"The darts, man. Those stinking forsaken darts that idiot Attano stuck me with," rasped out Sokolov. Piero had only heard him speak a handful of times, but he was sure the man didn't normally sound like he had swallowed gravel. "Our erstwhile Lord Protector is handy with a blade, but I doubt he is familiar with the chemical arts. So I have inferred, because I am a genius, that whatever wretched sedative they were loaded with is your doing, and I would like to know what in the Void it was.
Because I can assure you that, listed among its many properties, ought to be 'does not interact well with King Street Brandy.'

Piero stared at him. It was a good thing Sokolov's head was still buried in his coat in an attempt to escape the arc lamps that blazed down over the arena. A distant corner of his mind fit together the pieces and pointed out that, yes, the bottle on the little table was indeed the measure of King Street Brandy Corvo had bought off him earlier, and the level was a quarter of the way down the glass. The rest of him was trying to play catch-up with a reality that had already gone far off the rails.

"I am - my name is Piero Joplin," he began again, trying to get things back on track.

"Yes, you already said that," interrupted Sokolov. "If you're not going to be helpful, you can piss off."

"I - don't know you know who I am?" He was breathing fast now. He felt lightheaded.

"Should I?" said Sokolov. "What have you ever built?"

"I designed a--" but he had never built that "and I perfected the method of--" but had he ever told anyone? "and I developed-- I am Piero Joplin, and you had me expelled from the Academy!" he shouted. Sokolov flinched involuntarily at the noise. Piero shut his mouth, astonished at himself.

"Did I?" said Sokolov when the echoes had stopped.

"Yes!"

"Sounds about right. Go away now." And Sokolov turned over to face the other side of the cage, wrapping the thick cloth tighter over his head.

Piero stood over the cot, mouth open. His mind was full of a rushing noise, a sonic blank, like the ocean roaring on the other side of a seawall. He had no idea what to do. He was not equipped to handle this situation. Some automatic survival routine turned him around and marched him out of the arena and out across the ruined dock, as the sea breeze whipped up and the stars fought through the pall of oilsmoke that wrapped Dunwall in its shroud.

Corvo went to a party. Corvo came back. The crossbow springs needed adjusting afterwards. He bent to the familiar motions. Havelock's mood brightened. Callista asked for more watercolor paints for Emily. Pendleton asked for something to make him sleep through the night. He tried to read a book, but the only new one he had was the Academy history of the Pittman Expedition to Pandyssia, and everyone knew Sokolov had ghostwritten it. Cecelia brought him a sandwich; he ate. What have you ever built? He ought to make one of Sokolov's own designs. That was what he should do. Piero would build it and then he would go and invite - invite - Sokolov over to his workshop, and there would be one of the man's own creations, but better. He began to sketch. He sent messenger sparrows from the loft window arranging meetings for parts, materials, chemicals and powders, sent Cecelia out with coins concealed in her boots to fetch them back. He sat down on the narrow bed in his loft and drank a measure of the dull green tonic he kept next to it. He slept. He did not dream. He woke up. He went back to work.

He would build the arc pylon. That was it. Piero felt the rightness of that idea, like fitting a gear snug against its fellows. He would have liked to replicate the first invention, the one that had made Sokolov's name, but after due consideration he could see no way to fit a whaling ship inside the workshop. Perhaps later, when he was Royal Physician. When he had all the time and space and tools in the world.
The day dawned clear, but low clouds lurked on the southern horizon. Piero checked his weather notebook and calculated. In this month said clouds indicated a late rain three times out of five. He pulled the shutters down in the workshop accordingly. Corvo's mask needed looking over one last time. He replaced the bow's mainspring again. Samuel pushed off from the dock and pointed his little skiff's prow to Dunwall Tower. Piero sketched. Then he drew. Then he planned. He could see Havelock passing in front of the window every thirty seconds, pacing with military precision.

Pendleton staggered in smelling of wine and asked him what were the most toxic substances he knew of. Piero had to think about that. He consulted a few of his older notebooks, where he had compiled various lists for easy reference. Liquid distillations of certain metals, the venom of Serkonan pit vipers, and a Tyvian poison made from a kind of mollusc, he informed Pendleton, so that the man would leave. Pendleton went away. He traced designs on metal and began to cut. The howl of the mill and the lathe filled the workshop. Sparks showered down on the floor. They sizzled in spots where traces of whale oil had soaked into the stone. The brass key gleamed on the table in his loft.

Evening fell. A brief rain swept over the riverfront, then passed off to the north. The street speaker up the way, on the other side of the quarantine wall, crackled to life, and the voice of Hiram Burrows boomed out across the city. Piero listened for a little while, then found a sheet of foolscap and scribbled "Pandyssia - rats."

Corvo came back.

It was done. The now-former Lord Regent was on his way to Coldridge Prison. The kingsparrow fluffing its oil-sheen feathers on the ridgepole of the Hound Pits had brought the message from Martin's man on the inside. All the lights in the pub were lit, the audiograph player hauled out of the pantry to fill the bar with music, even Emily woken up and brought down from her tower room to share in the festivities. Pendleton broke out the good vintage, or at least what good vintages he hadn't already drunk. The pylon was taking shape on the floor of the workshop. Piero regarded it in the golden light that spilled from the pub's windows and smiled. Then it faded. He listened to the noise coming from inside the pub, filtering out on the salt air, mixing with the tang of brine and fish and drifting out to sea.

Piero pulled down the wide shutter that covered the open wall of the workshop, locking it out of habit. He had had too many valuable components pilfered before, and it was always so hard to replace them. Starting tomorrow, he wouldn't have to worry about that ever again. He would have everything he needed, when he needed it, and no tedious questions to answer about why. It didn't matter what Anton Sokolov thought of him anymore; whether he remembered Piero, or had ever known his name. Everything was going to be different, starting tomorrow. He walked across the dark alley that separated his workshop from the pub, put his hand on the doorknob. And froze.

There it was again, that leaden weight composed with a paradoxical lightness, as though he might float away at any second. His stomach churned. His muscles were buzzing like he'd grabbed the wrong end of a wire. He clenched his jaw. Resettled the spectacles on the end of his nose. Tried not to be sick. Turned the knob and opened the door.

Inside the bar was hot and close. More people were packed into it tonight than it must have seen in years. Piero did not run, but he did think about it. Corvo, Havelock, and Martin were all standing in a knot, their faces flush with victory and drink. Pendleton was barely upright, already leaning against the bar. Emily sloshed away in a corner with the new watercolors, Callista sitting across from her with a little stack of papers. The roaring in his ears doubled when he looked at her. He glanced around hurriedly for something to drink.
"There ye are, my boy," said a gruff voice from behind him. Piero turned to see Samuel already holding out a mug half-full with dark beer. "I was wondering if we'd winkle ye out of your shop. Nobody ought to go thirsty on a night like this." The grizzled sailor had stationed himself behind the bar and had even managed to fix up one of the ancient taps.

"Thank you," he said, taking the mug and sipping cautiously. The beer was thin but tasty, as good as could be expected in a quarantined city.

"No trouble at all," said Samuel amiably. "Reckon this might be the last a lot of us see of each other, and it does a man good to say his farewells over a strong drink. I owe ye for taking a look at the boat, anyhow. She's running the sweetest I've ever heard."

"Oil the bearings every three weeks and again after sleet," said Piero automatically. "You have to get the stuff they make at Greaves, the Rothwild grease is just not refined properly."

"Aye, aye, I remember," said Samuel, weary but with a twinkle in his eye. "Go on, drink up. Pendleton's paying for it."

Piero's eyes drifted across the room, back towards Callista. He swallowed and took another drink. Then he set the mug down on the bar and strode over before he lost his nerve again.

Callista looked up when he blocked her light. A fleeting expression of disgust passed over her face before it settled into a smooth, professional visage. Piero cleared his throat and wished he had brought his mug and stammered out, "Ah, so...that's it, then."

Callista was unmoved. "I suppose it is," she said coolly.

"Yes," said Piero. That was clearly the end of that conversation. He cast about for another topic; all he could think of was the pylon. "You might be interested to know that I have been building a new design in my workshop. It is a great improvement over--" Callista looked suddenly horrified. "No, it is not, um. It is an electric device. Meant to stimulate the nervous system, it's--" The look of horror only magnified. His ears were ringing. He wanted to throw up. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Emily had stopped painting and was watching in gleeful fascination. "I-- just. Um." He took a deep breath and stepped back a few inches, closed his eyes and talked slowly, so he wouldn't stutter.

"I apologize for my ungentlemanly behavior," he said stiffly, the heat in his cheeks letting him know he was probably blushing a bright red. "I am glad everything has worked out well. I hope you find the life at the Tower that you deserve." He backed up another step, then belatedly declared, "And. Congratulations, your Majesty," towards Emily.

Piero turned and pushed his way back through the crowd. There couldn't be that many people in the pub, and yet the room seemed full to bursting, ringing with noise, voices churning together and flooding his senses. Laughter brayed, too loud; he imagined they must be laughing at him. It was so hot. Pendleton was nearly comatose, Havelock and Martin were shouting; even Corvo was swaying on his feet. It seemed like an age before he was on the other side, out into the clear salt air.

Somewhere there had to be a tincture that provided courage, a preparation that gave eloquence, a salt that granted camaraderie. He had never found them. Despite years of careful study that mysterious alchemical interaction of the human animal only dissolved in his hands and left him staggering in its wake. His brain added this most recent misfire to its long and comprehensive list. He squeezed his eyes shut and wondered how long it would take before he could forget it. The memory of Corvo catching him looking through the keyhole rose unbidden, and he felt sick again. Callista would never stop looking at him like that.
He had focused on the arc pylon until it was almost out of his mind when he registered a soft rapping on the half-raised shutter, heard only when he paused to let the torch cool. Piero put the torch down and pushed the goggles up onto his head. Cecelia was standing half-bent to one side so that she could look into the shop.

"Mr. Joplin?" she was saying. "Is it safe?"

"Yes, come in."

Cecelia ducked under the sill of the metal shutter. Her skin, too, was flushed with the heat and drink from inside. She was holding two mugs of beer, her own and the one he had been drinking. "You left this," she said, setting his on the table by the open wall.

"Oh," said Piero. "Thank you."

"Of course," said Cecelia. She laughed nervously. "You know what Samuel's been saying all night. It's. Everyone should be celebrating on a night like this."

"I suppose so," said Piero. He came over to the table.

"To Corvo," said Cecelia, lofting her mug. "And her Majesty, of course. Long may she reign." Piero raised his in silent agreement and drank. The beer was still good.

"Oh, that reminds me," said Cecelia, reaching into a pocket with a little grin. "I picked this up while I was out getting the food for the party." She drew out a flat black spool and placed it on the workshop table. Wound on it was a thick copper wire.

Piero picked it up and pulled out the end of the strand. The copper bent smoothly, but held its shape. He held it up to the light. It had a ruddy tint to it.

"This is Serkonan copper," he said, astonished.

"I know," said Cecelia.

Piero kept himself from clutching the spool of wire to his chest, but only just. Real high-grade drawn Serkonan copper, thick and capable of carrying a heavy load without sparks or heat. He hadn't seen it since before the quarantine blockade. "Where did you find this?"

"Would you believe some rag-diver on the street?" said Cecelia, naming the peddlers that dove for salvage in the ruins of the Flooded District. "It must have come up from one of the old warehouses' workshops. I saw it in her cart and got for two coin. She had no idea what it was."

"This is perfect," said Piero, excited. "This is just what I needed." He left the mug on the table and went to measure the copper wire against the man-height skeleton of the arc pylon rising on the shop floor.

"So. What is it?" said Cecelia, gesturing towards the object.

"An arc pylon," said Piero, still measuring.

"Really?" said Cecelia, sounding amazed. "Like Sokolov's?"

"Better than Sokolov's," hissed Piero, with more force than he meant to. He wrapped the wire back on the spool. It was perfect. It would be just long enough. He came back to the table and took another drink.
"I bet it is," said Cecelia. She glanced down at the floor. A few wisps of red hair had come undone from beneath her pageboy cap, and they curled in the damp air. "So, uh. After Emily moves to the Tower. Are you going to go too?"

Piero considered the idea for a moment, contemplating the remainder of the beer. "Likely not," he said at last. "Not enough space around the Tower. I will have to find some open ground to build a new laboratory."

"But you're not going to come back here," said Cecelia.

"Once I have moved my equipment, no, I think not," he said, and drank the last of the beer. "The facilities are not adequate for my work. As the Royal Physician I will need a lot more room."

"The Royal Physician. Of course." Cecelia was still looking at the floor. He set the empty mug down on the desk. She picked it up. "Well, um. I'd better get back. But, um. If there's anything else you need tonight, just, um, let me know. Okay?"

"Mm-hmm," said Piero, only half-listening. Now that he'd stepped back from the pylon, he could see that one side of it needed to be rearranged before he welded on the next piece. It was good he'd noticed that. Otherwise he would have regretted it afterwards.

"Okay," repeated Cecelia, mostly to herself. She took the empty mug and vanished back to the pub.

Piero relit the welding torch and went back to work.

When he lurched upstairs, already half-asleep, and took a slug from the bottle of tonic next to his bed, he spotted the brass key gleaming on his desk in the moonlight. *I'll show you*, he thought, and it was a familiar burn. *I'll show you who I am.*
Deflagration-Detonation

hypergolic (adj) 1. (rocketry) Two chemicals that ignite on contact, without the need for a spark.

Piero woke late, from shattered dreams. Fragments of images that had fought their way through the drug haze were embedded in his brain. He pulled them out one by one. An echoing cave. A comet blazing in the night. A brilliant red that ran like water. A delicate spiral whose folds twisted even as he examined them closer. That last one seemed promising, and he reached for the notebook he kept at his bedside. But the lines of it dissolved before he could catch them in graphite. He replaced the notebook and lay for a moment while reality settled back in, assessing. Today is the first day of the rest of your life, he told himself. You're going to have all you ever dreamed of. Everything is different now.

It didn't feel different.

He dressed and examined his blueprints. The arc pylon would work, he told himself. He had only ever managed this kind of inductive current flow in theory, but - it was a good theory, and he was sure it would work. The proper firing sequence had taken him all last night to work out in a way that he was almost certain would not cause the entire rig to detonate. He didn't remember calculating the last few values, but they were scribbled across the firing circuit diagram in his handwriting all the same. A thought struck him. He rolled up some of the blueprints and crossed to the pub.

It was strangely quiet inside the Hound Pits. A hush had fallen after the carousing of last night. The air felt heavy and still. Mugs of beer were lying on their sides behind the bar. Piero climbed the steps to the second floor, feeling vaguely ill and unsure why. He had hardly had enough to drink to blur the edges of things. Perhaps the beer had been off. Perhaps he hadn't taken enough tonic.

When he reached the door to Havelock's room he heard a low, fast murmur of conversation from the other side. As he approached the door the voices suddenly stopped, falling into a wary silence. He knocked on the door, then said, "Admiral Havelock, if you have a moment."

Metal scraped on metal on the other side. There was a moment's silence, then the admiral called, "Alright, Piero." Piero tried to open the door, was puzzled to find it locked.

The bolt clicked back. Havelock opened the door. He looked worn, his eyes red-rimmed and lined with dark circles. Celebrating late into the night. The admiral stood in the doorway, blocking it. He had his cutlass at his side. "Yes?" he said, his voice tight.

Piero unfolded the blueprint from under his arm. "I've been working on a new design for the last few days," he began. Martin looked up from where he was standing over Havelock's wide desk, examining some map. Tension was written through the lines of his shoulders and back. Lord Pendleton lay half in and half out of a chair under the window, sullenly twirling a wine bottle. "I thought you might be interested. It's for an improved arc pylon. I'll need a few more components to complete it, but it could be quite useful." He tried to unfold the blueprint, but it was too large to be held at arm's length. "Hmm. Here, I'll show you..." He moved towards the desk.

"That's not necessary," said Havelock quickly, moving to block his path. He took the blueprint. "I'll take a look when I have a chance, Piero. You understand the situation is complex at the moment."
Piero blinked. "I would think the hard part is over," he said. "Do you know when we will be moving, by the way? I need to ready my equipment."

"Your equipment," Havelock repeated blankly.

"For the trip to Dunwall Tower," said Piero patiently. "I do not intend to stay there, though. There is not enough room for a proper laboratory."

"Yes," said Havelock distantly. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Your equipment. Good. Get it ready. You'll be moving...shortly."

"I will have to send Samuel for some of the heavier items," said Piero.

"Just...let him know," said Havelock. "Thank you, Piero, that will be all." He moved to close the door, but Piero stepped forward and said quickly, "I would also like to know, ah, when you are planning to move Sokolov."

"Sokolov," said Havelock, still sounding distant. "Right. Sokolov." For some reason he glanced back to Martin. "Sokolov will be...well...he's got too many powerful friends. I expect we'll have to...let him go. Sometime today."

"Let him go?" repeated Piero, surprised. Martin was still looking at him from behind Havelock, a calm, calculating gaze. It was unsettling. As though the Overseer were measuring him. "But I am not finished with..."

"Obviously, he can't remain the Royal Physician," soothed Havelock. "Too close to the former Lord Regent. He'll have to step down as head of the Academy, certainly. But why muddy the waters?" He regained a little of his usual joviality. "Let him go into exile, just like you had to. You can go tell him, if you want. How appropriate, eh? A fitting revenge. You'll like that."

"I suppose," said Piero.

"Well. You'd better get your work together," prompted Havelock.

Piero frowned as he tallied a mental list. "I will have to get the experiments out of the sewer," he said. "Moving the river krust larvae will be a problem."

"Yes, good, you have a lot to do," said Havelock, closing the door. "We'll talk in a little while, Piero. I'll find you."

"Oh, Admiral, my blueprint--" began Piero, but Havelock had already shut the door. Damn. He raised his hand to knock again and ask for it back, but hesitated. The Admiral had seemed unhappy. He might be angry if Piero bothered him again. His guts rebelled at the idea of confronting him. The look Martin had given him lingered like an itch between his shoulder blades. That calm assessment. He heard the lock click. It was awfully quiet in the Hound Pits pub.

Piero went back to his workshop and stared around it. This is the last day you'll see this place, he told himself. Tonight you sleep at Dunwall Tower, and Anton Sokolov will be sent off somewhere to toil in obscurity. Yes. It fit with all the designs he had sketched out in his head; telling the natural philosopher that it was his career that was over, his work now to be belittled and ignored. The arc pylon wasn't finished, but Havelock had said sometime today. It was now or never. He would go over to the cage right now and finally have his perfect moment.

And the prospect he had treasured for so long seemed strangely dull, now that he looked at it closely.
Piero found the brass key and walked across the riverfront yard. Samuel's boat was missing from the dock. He would have to find the boatman later to arrange the transport of his larger tools. As he went he wrote out his speech in his mind. He wouldn't mess it up this time. He would say exactly what he meant to say, and Sokolov would have to sit there and listen. Just like Piero had, the day they had convened the board that threw him out of the Academy, the day its leader had ignored his pleas to reconsider.

He stepped inside the warehouse, closed his eyes to make sure he got it right, and declared, "It is a basic tenet of natural philosophy that all things have their opposites, and everything in nature is in balance. So too, I believe, with the fates of man." He opened his eyes.

The cage was empty.

Piero's mind lurched again, like a poorly-balanced axle. He scanned the cage with a calm he did not feel. Anton Sokolov was nowhere to be found. And then a rough voice boomed, "Hells, you're back."

The sound echoed weirdly, seemed to come from everywhere. Piero opened the barred door with the little brass key and walked inside, looking around.

"Down here, dammit," ordered Anton Sokolov's disembodied voice. Piero squatted down before he thought about it, then spotted a pair of legs.

"Are you in the hound crate?" he blurted out, surprised.

"Of course I'm in your damn crate," said Sokolov. Despite the ire in his words, he sounded more tired than angry. "It's the only place that's dark in here."

Piero crab-walked over to where the blue metal crate was fixed to the bars of the pit. He peered in. The crate was built to hold a full-grown wolfhound; it was as tall as a man and half again as long. In the gloom he could make out a vaguely human form. "How did you get in there?" he said, feeling almost giddy as he did.

"I broke the lock on the door," came Sokolov's voice. The metal crate echoed it in odd ways. "Because, as I have previously mentioned, I am a genius."

Piero felt off the rails again, moving dreamlike, surreal. He tried to compose a reply. "Belladonna," said his mouth.

"Eh?" said Sokolov, then, "In the darts. Ah."

"Yes," said Piero, his brain catching up to his mouth. "It interacts badly with--"

"Niseroot extract, which is in King Street Brandy, and it explains the sensitivity to light, no need to state the obvious," muttered Sokolov. He was silent for a moment. "Belladonna stimulates the blood," he said, sounding more awake. "Why would you put belladonna into a sedative?"

"To balance the tincture of coldwort," said Piero.

"You can't put coldwort in a sedative," said Sokolov, alarmed. "You could have stopped my heart."

"That is what the belladonna is for," said Piero.

Sokolov was quiet. There was a rustling in the crate, and the dim shape moved. Piero backed up from the mouth of the crate, sat down cross-legged on the cold stone floor. Sokolov's face appeared
in the opening, wearing a thoughtful expression. Piero was surprised by how old he looked. There were bags beneath his eyes, lines in his face Piero didn't remember, and his once-neat beard had gone entirely to hell. He hadn't seen Anton Sokolov in person since the day he'd been expelled. That was, he suddenly realized, fifteen years ago.

"Overly complicated," Sokolov said dismissively. His voice was still the same distemperate growl. "Laudanum is simpler."

"Too slow," said Piero. He felt strangely calm.

"Not with a blood stimulant in the mix," said Sokolov. "The accelerated heart rate--"

"Would speed absorption. Hm." Piero hadn't considered that effect. "It would reduce the complexity of the distillation..." He stared off at the warehouse wall, thinking, only to be struck by a terrible sense of wrongness. This was not what he had come out here to do. He felt as though he were seeing double. There was the man he had come to see, the thunderous spectre who had condemned him to suffer in lonely exile, and the man who was sitting in front of him, debating drug preparations. Pride and panic warred within him. He cleared his throat and looked back at the crate, tried to regain some of his composure. "I have wanted to speak with you for some time," he began.

"You picked an odd way to go about it," said Sokolov, sitting cross-legged inside the crate. "Most people just send letters."

"I did send you letters!" snapped Piero reflexively. The burst of anger faded and he stared down at his lap. "Well, I... I wrote letters."

"And?" Sokolov sounded genuinely curious.

"They were never good enough to send," Piero confessed. "I never got them right."

Sokolov was still watching him. There were bits of old straw stuck in his wiry black hair. The belladonna had left his pupils unnaturally dilated, so that the irises were swallowed up by black. The effect made Piero uneasy for a reason he couldn't name. "Now I remember you," he said suddenly. "You make that remedy." Piero's heart lifted; he was embarrassed at how good it made him feel. You do not care if he knows who you are, he reminded himself. You are going to be the Royal Physician. Sokolov stared at him more intently. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Oh," said Piero. "My workshop is just--" He pointed. "Out that way, across the yard."

"No, with them," said Sokolov. His tone had gone from curious to suspicious. "Tangled up in this mess with Attano and that brute Farley Havelock. Trying to overthrow the Lord Regent."

"We did overthrow the Lord Regent," corrected Piero. Sokolov looked taken aback. "You must have heard the news."

"I've been in a crate," growled Sokolov. "Indulge me."

"Oh. Well. Hiram Burrows has been arrested," said Piero. "He confessed to causing the plague."

"What?" said Sokolov, jerking upright and nearly bashing his head against the metal roof. "How?" he demanded. "What did he do? Specifically? When? How did he start it?"

"Pandyssian rats," said Piero. "Burrows deliberately released them into the Dunwall sewers. He was trying to burn out the slums."
Sokolov sat back in the darkness of the crate. "So that's it," Piero heard him hiss. "I knew they were a crossbreed, but... Pandyssia. It makes sense."

"It opens a lot of avenues," said Piero.

Sokolov sat forward again. "But I tried the Pandyssian formulations," he said. His eyes were burning now, the age lifting from his face. "The response wasn't at all what it should have--"

A gunshot rang out, loud and close. Piero flinched without thought; he heard Sokolov move in the crate. For a moment neither of them breathed. Piero closed his eyes and stretched his senses. Years of noise from his machinery had left a constant ringing in his ears, but he could discern a faint shouting outside the building. Someone cried out. Then the sound trailed off into a final choking gurgle.

"The Watch," whispered Piero. More shouting from outside. "Oh no. They've found us."

"No," started Sokolov, and then another gunshot cracked the air. Then they both heard the heavy tread of footsteps climbing the steps to the warehouse door.

Piero froze, lifting to his feet and crouching instinctively. Time seemed to slow. He felt pinned beneath the electric lights of the arena. His gaze darted frantically around the cage. There was nowhere to hide - not that hiding would help - but some animal instinct wanted him to scurry, to bury himself, to put anything between him and the men outside with their guns and their blades. Except there was nothing in the cage besides the cot and a small table - the handle of the warehouse door began to turn - and of course the place where Sokolov was--

Piero moved forward at the same time Sokolov reached out a hand to drag him inside the crate. He tumbled into the dark space, skinned the side of his head on some projecting metal rib and nearly cried out from the pain, biting his lip. One hand went to his nose, clutching at his spectacles. The crate had been just about enough room for one person; for two it was more than close. The floor was covered in musty straw. The walls were dirty with something he could not name and did not want to see. Sokolov was an invisible shape, rough cloth, a source of heat that smelled of brandy and unwashed skin. He could hear his own heart hammering away. Inside the metal cave sound was oddly muffled. They both crouched, frozen.

The heavy warehouse door swung open. "Anton, we've been discussing the matter," called out Havelock brightly, "And I think it's time we talked about--" Havelock's voice cut off. "Damn," he said, quieter, colder. "Where the hell's he gone?" Piero's heart slowed. It wasn't the Watch. Corvo must have scared off whoever that had been, and now Havelock and Martin were checking that everyone was alright. He leaned forward and opened his mouth to speak.

Sokolov clamped a hand across it, muffling his outraged squeak. He could feel the terror in the other man's body, sudden and genuine. And perhaps it was the way Havelock had been talking all morning, or the way he didn't seem at all concerned about the gunshots in the yard; or perhaps it was just the way those voices had sounded behind the admiral's locked door. But Piero bit back the words and waited, quiet.

Havelock was still walking around the cage. Piero heard him climbing the steps up into the rafters of the warehouse. Another set of footsteps entered the warehouse. "Havelock?" called Martin. "What're you after?"

"Sokolov's gone," Havelock called back. There was a brusque, military cast to his voice now. "Bastard must have picked his cage lock somehow."

Martin's footsteps moved. "Piero's key is in the lock," he said. "Joplin let him out."
Havelock came back down the stairs. "So it is," he said, when he had reached the door. He laughed a little; there was scorn in it. "Piero's probably trying to show off his workshop."

"I looked inside on the way over," said Martin. "Nobody's in there."

"Hmm," said Havelock. The cage door squeaked. Martin's footsteps moved inside the arena. His ankles hove into view, framed in the square mouth of the crate. All he would have to do was notice the broken door and that would be it. Martin would drag him out and Havelock would do...what? Piero didn't know. He wasn't sure. He had known Farley Havelock and the other conspirators for half a year, but now the two men walking outside seemed like strangers. He didn't know what they wanted. He didn't know what they were capable of. He felt lightheaded. Corvo would know what to do right now, he thought with a strange detachment. But he wasn't Corvo, and neither was the man crammed into the crate with him. He could feel the tension in Sokolov, the fear, and he knew it had to be mirrored in himself.

"The sewers," said Havelock suddenly. "Piero said he had to get some experiments. Bet he's down there."

"Ah," said Martin. "That'll save time with the bodies."

"It could be tricky, if they're together."

"Actually, I think it'll help," said Martin. "We should keep one."

Havelock sounded skeptical. "How? They won't stay quiet."

"They're not soldiers, Farley," sneered Martin. "They're boys who play with shiny toys all day. And they are geniuses. It's a waste to get rid of them both."

"Hm," said Havelock. "What did you have in mind?"

"Grab them both. Kill Joplin," said Martin. "Once he sees you do it, Sokolov will be so desperate to live that he'll say whatever you want."

"I'd rather have Piero," complained Havelock. "Sokolov's an ass."

Martin snorted. "As if Joplin's better."

"At least he's quiet about it," said Havelock.

"Sokolov will knuckle under," opined Martin. "Give him his booze and his whores and I doubt he gives a shit who sits in Dunwall Tower. And someone might notice if he went missing. But Joplin won't beg. He'd die happy if it meant he kept his pride."

"Fair enough," admitted Havelock. "Well, better now than later. Wine cellar or basement entrance?"

"Wine cellar," said Martin. His footsteps wandered back out of the cage. Piero could hear him reloading the breech of his pistol as the door shut. Sokolov was frozen next to him.

Then all of a sudden the other man unbent. "Out," he hissed, punctuating the words with a shove. A thick Tyvian accent was leaking into his words. "Out, out, get out." Piero complied, still trying to think. He spilled out onto the stone floor of the arena, followed by Sokolov, squinting and wincing in pain when he came out into the light. Piero stumbled as he got to his feet. The warehouse spun around him. His body was numb, distant. He felt locked into one of his bad dreams, the ones where everything went blue and he couldn't wake up.

"Yes," said Piero, blinking. He tried to point, but Sokolov had an iron grip on him. "On the other side of the yard--"

"Does it lock?" demanded Sokolov.

"It has safety shutters to seal the building," said Piero.

Sokolov glanced around the warehouse, considering, then dropped his hands. "It'll have to do. Come on." He went back to his little corner and grabbed the half-empty bottle of brandy. Then he went to the small window set into the door, rubbing at the grime with the sleeve of his jacket.

"What?" said Piero, still standing in the middle of the cage. "Come on where?"

"To your workshop," rasped Sokolov. "Away from the men with guns who want us dead. They won't be down in the sewers for long."

"They cannot have--" Piero's mind reeled. "They must have been talking about... Havelock would not--"

"Havelock just did," said Sokolov. He cleared away the film of dirt and pressed his face to the glass, peering out. Then he looked back at Piero. "Stay here, come with me, do what you want. But you'd better decide now."

"I--" A thought formed in Piero's mind. "I am not letting you into my workshop without me around," he said, drawing himself up. Sokolov choked on a laugh. But he waited until Piero had come up next to him at the door. They both went quiet again, listening. Then Sokolov turned the handle and swung the door open.

The riverfront yard looked the same. The sun shone between the clouds. The gulls cried in the distance. The Wrenhaven lapped at the dock, tugging at seaweed and swirls of old brown foam. And two bodies lay out in the dust, facedown and bleeding great dark circles into the ground. Piero stared at them and felt split in two, one half of him looking down with a clinical regard, thinking bodies again, middle-aged male, middle-aged female, this one killed with a gun, that one with its throat cut, the rats haven't gotten them yet. And the other half was yelling that's Lydia who drew your bath two days ago, and now she's meat on the ground.

Sokolov's expression darkened at the sight. He looked away from the corpses, back to Piero. "Come on," he repeated, and grabbed Piero's shoulder again. "Joplin! Which way!"

Piero pointed wordlessly. The open wall at the front of the workshop still gaped open across the yard, the half-built arc pylon framed inside it. It felt a million years old and infinitely far away. Sokolov scanned the yard. He was wound as tense as the crossbow spring. The hand clutching the neck of the brandy bottle shook like a leaf in a wind. Whatever he saw did not lighten the grim mask of his face, but he set his gaze on Piero's workshop, took a deep breath, and ran.

"Wait!" called Piero without thinking, and then he ran after Sokolov as if tethered on an invisible cord.

Piero had walked across the yard dozens of times, but this was the longest it had ever taken; he could feel it stretching out, dreamlike, as if the distance were expanding as he went. Familiar things seemed bent into new and twisted forms. He was exposed, an ant crawling on the face of the earth beneath a loathsome sun. He expected any minute to hear another shout, to see Havelock or Martin on the
balcony of the storage house of the pub. To hear the crack of a gun. To see Corvo on the ridgepole of the shop. Where in the Void was Corvo? Breath ran hot through his lungs. He was running forever, waiting for a bullet between the shoulderblades.

And suddenly he was there. He crashed into the open front of the workshop without slowing down. Ran to the wall, fumbled open the latch of the control box. Pulled the lever that sent the heavy metal blast shields sliding down over the windows and doors. They crashed into place, ratchets clicking as steel bolts drove into the stone floors. In the silence afterwards he leaned against the wall, taking deep breaths.

Sokolov's bushy head appeared over the loft railing. "That's quite a safety system," he remarked. His voice vibrated with something kept under tight control.

"I installed it myself," said Piero. He was suddenly shaking. "It - it's in case of - of accidental detonation." He sat down on the stone floor. "It is not in - intended to be used to - to hide from...oh, hells..." He was trembling all over. "Oh hells, w-what are they doing...

"It appears there are a few too many Loyalists for your co-conspirators' taste," said Sokolov. That mysterious emotion still ran hot beneath his words. Piero could hear the clang as he paced on the metal loft floor. "An Empire is a tempting prize.'

"Th-th-they they k-k-k-killed W-wallace a-a-and L-ly-dia..." The stutter Piero had battled most of his life claimed him; the words stuck in his throat. He buried his face in his hands. "Th-th-they used-d-d-d m-m-e...th-they w-w-w-w-ere going t-t-to k-k-k-ill me..."

"Of course they used you, you idiot!" The power in Sokolov's voice condensed suddenly into fury. "What did you fucking think was going to happen!?" Piero could hear him banging around in the loft. He curled in on the darkness of himself, hugging the sudden terror into his center like a white-hot ball, shaking in its aftermath.

"How many were there?" snapped a voice, yanking him out of his panic. He peered between his fingers. Sokolov had come back down from the loft and was now walking a tight circle in the workshop. "I talked to Havelock and Attano," he said. "Overseer Martin's obviously with them as well."

A few parts of Piero's mind began to move, battling against the gale. "C-c-orvo's n-not in on it-t," he stuttered.

"No, we'd be dead already," agreed Sokolov. "Who else?"

"P-p-pendleton," forced out Piero. Sokolov stopped pacing. "Those hideous twins?" he said, shocked. "They were part of it?"

"T-t-treavor."

"Oh. The little brother." Sokolov tilted his head as if trying to shake a memory loose. "I'd forgotten about him." He mulled the problem for a moment, moving his head in sharp jerks as he followed invisible threads. "Then their next step will be--"

A pepper-crackle of gunfire interrupted him, a sharp splatter like hard rain against a window. It came from the direction of the ruined tower. Piero bolted to his feet. "C-callista!" he shouted, and raced up the creaking stairs to the loft before he remembered that the blast shutters had sealed off the window exit. He raced back down the stairs, went to the control box - and Sokolov had his hand across the lock.
"M-move, d-damn you!" said Piero, trying to push him away. "She w-was in the tower, they'll c-come for her too! They're coming f-for everyone, I have to w-warn them!"

"And what do you suppose you're going to do about it?" snapped Sokolov. He was stronger than he looked, even after a day and a night in the cage, and fear and rage tangled across his face. He spoke fast, as though a fuse were burning down. "Go out there and I guarantee you'll get yourself killed."

"C-callista is with her M-majesty, she will n-never let them t-take Emily--"

"Good," said Sokolov. "She'll buy us some time."

Piero stared at him. "You b-bastard," he spat, "how can you--" and then he ran out of words and grabbed at Sokolov's shoulders, trying to pull him away. Sokolov shoved him hard against his chest, sending Piero sprawling on the floor next to the half-built pylon. The shock of the cold stone was like a bucket of riverwater. Piero's ears rang.

"Because I'm very good at staying alive," said Sokolov above him. "And I am capable of thinking clearly. Everyone heard those gunshots. This Callista's in charge of the Empress? Then with any luck she'll keep the girl away from them, and I suspect she's much better equipped to do so than you are," he said. "And if you open those shutters we will die. So I would rather you not."

"You-- I should have left you--" spat Piero, and he was interrupted by a loud banging on the door. Both men froze, turning towards the sound.

"Piero?" came Havelock's voice, sunny and calm as if nothing had happened. "Piero, if you have a moment, I'd like to talk about your arc pylon design."

Sokolov gave him a dumbfounded look, completely derailed. *Arc pylon?* he mouthed, incredulous. Piero pointed silently to the skeletal structure next to him. Sokolov's confusion redoubled.

"Piero?" Havelock called again. "I can't hear you in there. Could you put the shutters up?"

Piero stood up slowly. Sokolov watched him. He didn't move from his place in front of the control box. Piero resettled the spectacles on the end of his nose and closed his eyes.

"No, Admiral," he said loudly. "I am not coming out."

A pause from outside. Then a forced laugh. "I know you're busy, but Samuel's here and we need to start loading for the trip to the Tower. Come on out so we can get everything together."

"I would rather not right now," said Piero. He walked slowly towards the door, couldn't help it. An invisible tether was reeling him in.

"Piero, this is no time for you to have one of your fits," said Havelock, more sternly this time. A tightness wound beneath his words. Piero pressed his hand against the cold steel of the blast shutters. "I need you to come out. Right now."

"You killed them!" Piero burst out. Sokolov looked horrified. There was only silence from outside the door.

Then Havelock's voice came again, filled with a slow menace he had never heard before. "That's how you want to play it, then," he growled. Piero shivered. Sokolov pressed back against the wall. "I'm sorry it has to be this way, Piero," continued Havelock, raising his voice. His tone was cold and clear, the kind of voice a man used to shout orders through a storm on the deck of a heaving ship. "I really did like you, you know. You are brilliant. But you knew that already, I suppose. Brilliant
enough to know that you can't stay in there forever. We already have Emily." Piero's heart plummeted. "No one's coming to help you. It's just a matter of time, my boy. Just a matter of time."

Piero stopped a few inches in front of the door. He could imagine Havelock on the other side of it, the cutlass on his belt streaked with red - no, it wouldn't be. Havelock was a professional. He kept his weapons clean.

"Why?" he said quietly.

There was no answer from the other side. Havelock was gone.

Piero stood in front of the door for a long moment. He looked back at Sokolov, who tensed. Then he turned and walked around the arc pylon, to the point opposite Sokolov, so that the pylon blocked his view of the other man. He sat down on the cold stone underneath the worktable and hugged his knees against his chest and hid his face. After a few minutes he heard a rustle of cloth from the other side of the room as Sokolov sat down too. Piero let the minutes spool out in silence. Time slipped away from him. The feverish pulse of his thoughts beat below the surface; he let them run.

Havelock had betrayed him. Martin, Pendleton, whoever else. Maybe Callista too, who knew, maybe everyone had been in on it but him. They had used him and thrown him away. Perhaps they had been planning to do so all along, planning it from the day Havelock had found him in Pearl Street after his latest landlord threw him out. All their promises of wealth and more, of resources, of opportunity, of recognition at long last, had been worth less than smoke on the breeze. He had been a fool to ever believe it would work out. There was no future in this world where he got what he wanted. What he deserved. He was destined to be alone, forgotten, unjustly condemned. Fate had given him this genius to torment him; fate had given him his gifts, his brilliance, his drive, only to make it more amusing when it snatched away his reward. The sick tide of the old familiar rage and misery and self-pity rose up around him, spiraling like a whirlpool. Dragging him under.

Piero didn't know how long he sat like that. There were noises around him; he ignored them. Then he registered a cool touch of glass on his skin.

"I generally find this helps," Anton Sokolov was saying.

Piero raised his head from where he had buried it in his arms. Sokolov had sat down next to him and was proferring, of all things, the half-empty bottle of King Street Brandy he had taken from his cell. Piero hadn't even noticed it had made the trip. He searched for the anger he wanted to feel towards the man, but it wasn't there. It had been dragged down into the whirlpool, and only a leaden emptiness remained.

"I don't drink liquor," he said. Technically it was true. The dreams had long ago ceased to yield to mere inebriation. It took a much more potent cocktail to let him sleep the night, the dull green potion of his own design that he kept next to his bed.

"Call it a special occasion," said Sokolov. The rage and fear had settled in him, as if knowing he was cornered was somehow reassuring.

"Call it a special occasion," said Sokolov. The rage and fear had settled in him, as if knowing he was cornered was somehow reassuring.

Piero took the bottle by its narrow neck and pulled the stopper. The smell of the dark liquid sloshing inside hit him like a posset of herbs tied around a brick. Despite the name, it wasn't true brandy. Alcohol was the least of the pungent substances that went into the brew. It looked disgusting. His nose was busy cataloguing everything he could smell in it and letting him know how many possible adverse interactions there were.

Then he felt a sudden, giddy lightness. Farley Havelock is going to kill me, and I'm worried about a
drop of brandy? he thought. He put the bottle to his lips and drank.

And sputtered, barely keeping the mouthful down. It was just as disgusting as he had imagined. The brandy burned, and not simply the regular fire of alcohol. It had layers, it was injury with nuance. "Aughhh," he managed to get out, once he had choked down the liquid. He could feel it slice its way down his throat and go to work on his stomach. He pushed the bottle back at Sokolov. "Why would you drink that?"

Sokolov looked amused as he took it. "It may be an acquired taste," he conceded.

Piero worked his jaw, trying to figure out what he had just swallowed. The trace it left in his mouth kept changing. "It tastes like ink."

"That's the whale oil," agreed Sokolov. "Ink, and that smell after a wire shorts."

"What is that," said Piero.

"No idea," said Sokolov. "Some kind of gas." He took a drink himself, a big mouthful that he held onto for a moment before swallowing. Then he leaned back against the base of the work table and stretched out his legs, resting the brandy bottle between his knees, and let the silence flow back in.

Piero broke it. "Why did you hide?" he asked, puzzled.

Sokolov tilted his head to look at Piero, but made no other move.

"You heard Havelock and Martin," continued Piero. "You could have called out. Let them find you. They were going to let you live. You want to stay alive so badly. They gave you the chance. Why not take it?"

Sokolov was silent. His pupils were still dilated from the belladonna; he kept blinking even in the shadow under the table. "Why do you care?" he rasped.

"Because it does not make sense," said Piero.

Sokolov snorted, amused. He let his head roll back and closed his eyes. After a moment he said, "Why were you expelled from the Academy?"

Piero blushed hotly as the rage rose in him. It was an involuntary reaction; he hated it. "You ought to know," he hissed.

"Believe it or not, I do not recall every detail of every day of my life," said Sokolov airily. "The Head of the Academy has a number of demands on his time." He looked over at Piero again, measuring. "Your predilection for arsenic derivatives in your remedy says you were there about fourteen years ago. But you aren't old enough for that."

"Fifteen years ago," corrected Piero. "And I was nineteen."

Sokolov's eyes opened wide. "Impossible," he declared, startled. "Even I was twenty."

Piero made no effort to keep the gloating out of his voice. "The youngest ever admitted," he said with pride. Then it soured. "But not to graduate. Garvey saw to that."

"Garvey, Garvey, which one was Garvey," Sokolov muttered to himself. "Not fat old Master Chemist Garvey?" he said, surprised.

"Master Lecturer in the Alchemical Arts," pronounced Piero, laying out each syllable with care.

"He was my tutor," said Piero.

"Interesting," said Sokolov, thoughtful. "Yes, I can see it. The damn fool knew his potions."

"I knew them better," said Piero quietly.

Sokolov sat up a little. "Oh ho," he said. "Now we're getting somewhere." He sipped at the brandy and narrowed his eyes, appraising Piero as though he were laid out on the dissection table. "Let's see. Entered the Academy at nineteen. Your first name's Serkonan, but not your last. Your family settled here recently, didn't they. Mother married a Gristol boy out in farm country. They lived the Serkonan dream. Growing crops somewhere pirates don't come and take everything you own."


"Potterstead, yes, it fits," said Sokolov. His focus was back, that sudden spark of intensity. An electricity that was his alone. "Out in some hick farm town. You were the smart one, the smartest child. And so your parents saved up what little coin they could for years on end, until they could afford the fare all the way to Dunwall. For their brilliant son to go to the Academy." Sokolov wasn't looking at him anymore. "Not enough for tuition in full, of course," he continued. "So you had some shit job they stuck you with, serving your wealthy betters. Washing their clothes. Washing their dishes. Fetching their food at meals. Even though they had servants. They made you do it to make sure you knew your place."

"Sweeping the rooms," said Piero.

"Mine was filling the lamps," said Sokolov.

Piero was silent.

"What," said Sokolov, when Piero didn't respond. "You didn't know?" He took another sip of the brandy, looked like he was keeping himself from drinking more. "They took that part out of the official histories. Not appropriate, I suppose. For the exalted Empire of Isles to owe its wealth to a Tyvian shepherd's son."

"Or for a country boy to contradict the Master of Alchemical Arts," said Piero.

"Hah," said Sokolov bitterly. "Nineteen years old and a charity student, and you told him he was wrong."

"You do remember," said Piero.

"I don't," said Sokolov. "I don't need to. I know what happened. He took you on as a student and that's when he got a good look and realized you'd have his job in a year. And he got scared and drummed up a charge and had you thrown out. Because you were smarter than him."

And that was it, unlooked-for. His perfect moment, his perfect absolution. Anton Sokolov saying that Garvey had been wrong, that the entire affair hadn't been his fault, that it had all been the jealousy of lesser minds. Never mind that he was barricaded in his own workshop, that serious men wanted him dead, or that only a lack of liquor was keeping Sokolov from getting too drunk to stand. He held this, glowing warm, this little piece of light. And felt an unexpected loosening of the dark coils that had wrapped around him so long ago that they had turned to stone.
"Technically," he heard himself saying, "he was not wrong about the incident in the trans lab."

Sokolov's eyebrows rose. "That was you?" he said. "You were the one who blew up the third-east chemical lab?"

"It turns out distilled trans and red fuming nitric are contact explosives," Piero admitted. Sokolov's eyebrows rose further. "I discovered that," said Piero, halfway between misery and pride. "That was me. I found that out."

"Good job," said Sokolov.

"But he lied about the rest of it!" said Piero. He felt the blush rising in his cheeks along with the anger. Now that he had started talking, he couldn't stop. The words poured out, overrunning all his planned speeches like floodwaters through a dam. "He lied about everything! I never stole anything from university storage. I did not copy the designs for those mechanisms, I made them myself! The lab detonation was an accident, I swear. No one had done that experiment before. And they put the fire out, eventually. And if attempting to revive the dead were an expulsion offense, half the Academy would be looking for new quarters," he finished with a huff.

"True," admitted Sokolov.

"But when Garvey said it all, everyone believed him," said Piero. He hated the waver in his voice as he did. "No matter what I did. No matter who I told. Even though I was right. Nobody listened."

Sokolov was quiet. "And I suppose you appealed," he finally said. "And they brought it before a faculty board."


"And me," said Sokolov.

"I tried to tell you!" burst out Piero, his voice breaking. "I said I could prove it! And you just..."

"Ignored you, most like," said Sokolov, not looking at Piero. The Tyvian accent was leaking back into his speech. He found the brandy bottle again, restricting himself to a single sip. "It wouldn't have mattered what you said. Garvey was a damn fool, but he'd been Master Chemist for twenty-three years. Hawthorne and Wells went through the Academy with him and they stuck together like burrs." There was no anger in his voice, no bitterness. Only resignation. "I was barely twenty-seven. I'd been the Head of the Academy for a year and my inventions had put a quarter of the old faculty out of business. I'd had Esmond, but now Esmond was dead. Five years ago I'd been sitting in lectures from most of the men I was now in charge of. I had half of them measuring my office and the other half measuring me for a box. Like hell I was going to cross Garvey for some brat kid who'd already blown up one lab." The glass clinked against the stone floor. "That's how it was," he said wearily, closing his eyes. "You got a stinking deal, Joplin. Sometimes shit happens."

"How can you just say that!?!" thundered Piero. The indignation forced him to his feet. Sokolov stayed where he was, slumped against the underside of the table far enough that he was nearly horizontal.

"It was quite an expensive lab," muttered Sokolov.

Piero stuttered, searching for words. "It - it - it was not fair!"

"None of this shit is fair!" Sokolov bellowed. Piero blinked, taken aback. Sokolov hadn't moved, but
his eyes were open, and they were burning with a new fire. "Is it fair that I have given this city its every gift, and in return I'm hiding in a ruin waiting for the Lord Regent to slit my throat!?" he roared, slapping the stone floor next to him for emphasis. "Morley would have left this forsaken Empire if it weren't for my ships. Farley Havelock would have had nothing to sail. Am I accounted a hero for this? Esmond gave Dunwall everything, and the city drank him dry. Was that fair? I give them wonders of the universe, bottled and distilled, and what do they do? Turn them into yet another way to plant their polished boots on their own people's necks. This plague will rip us all to shreds if it is not stopped. And what do they do about it!?" he shouted. "Throw a fucking party!"

The echoes of his rage rang in the narrow space of the workshop. They lingered in the high rafters of the loft, dying away. Piero bowed his head, pressing his fingers to his forehead. He could feel the start of the fever in the back of his brain, a clenching hand, a maddening distortion. It was a wonder the stress of the day hadn't driven him to incoherence already. A heat was building behind his eyes.

"Farley Havelock, well, he was a good admiral. Maybe even a good man," muttered Sokolov, calmer now. "Or at least not much of a bad one. But a man changes when he sees a way to get what he wants. I've watched these treacherous noble cunts climb over each other's bodies for nearly twenty years. They're all rats. Dangle the meat in front of them and they'll eat each other alive. Fair doesn't mean much after that."

"Maybe that's good enough for you to salve what's left of your conscience," spat Piero. "But when Farley Havelock learned the truth about the Empress, he did something about it. I did something about it."

Sokolov was unmoved. "Oh, be serious," he said, fixing that intense focus on Piero. "Did you agree to help him because you believed Hiram Burrows had to be deposed? Or because he told you you would be the Royal Physician?"

"It is no more than the world owes me!" Piero burst out. His voice was breaking again. He felt lost, loose, like all his strings had been cut. The heat behind his eyes was welling up into water. He turned away to face the opposite wall, hiding the tears staining his cheeks.

"The world owes you nothing except a death at the end of it," said Sokolov behind him.

"Well," said Piero in a small voice. "And here it is."

"Here it is," agreed Sokolov. He lapsed into a silence broken by the slosh of the brandy bottle. Piero stayed facing the other wall, letting the water run from his eyes, letting it all fall out of him and leave him behind. After a long time he drew a long, shuddering breath and wiped his face and came back to sit atop the workbench by the door, pressing the heel of one hand into his brow as if he could stem the rising headache.

Sokolov was still slumped against the back of the table, lying in the shadow of the workbench with his bottle in the crook of his arm. "Did you really start building one of my arc pylons?" he asked in the quiet.

"Better than yours," said Piero reflexively.

Sokolov gave a strange half-laugh, a hint of a smile appearing under the beard. He leaned back and looked up the length of the half-completed structure as if appraising it for a portrait. Slowly the smile faded, replaced by a thoughtful stare. His eyes narrowed.

"How far did you get?"
Kinetic Solution

kinetic solution (n) 1. (physics) A solution to a set of governing dynamic equations, a prescription for motion. 2. (US military slang) "to employ a kinetic solution" to blow something up.

"Well, I knew it was too good to be true. Seems that the conspiracy tried to use old Piero for their own gain and then discard him. But they have erred, and delivered to me an ally almost as brilliant as myself."

The tearing sound of a grindstone meeting metal blared through the workshop. Piero moved the pause lever on the audiograph recording and leaned back towards the railing of the loft.

"Do you mind?" he said when the grinding stopped. "I am trying to compose an audiograph."

"What for?" shouted Sokolov from downstairs.

"I am composing a message in case Corvo returns," he said.

"What good is that supposed to do?" shouted back Sokolov.

"In case he returns while we are not here," said Piero.

"If he comes back and we're not here, we're probably dead," said Sokolov. But the grindstone spun back down to silence.

Piero turned back to the microphone. "Old Sokolov and I will hole up here until we can blast the ruffians outside and make for the Academy," he finished. He touched the pause lever again and wondered if there were anything to add in case Corvo found the audiograph and not - and not him. Faced with the idea of last words, he found he had little to say.

"Do you have anything to record?" he called downstairs.

"Fuck the lot of you," said Sokolov. Piero decided that went without saying.

He struck the lever to print off the captured sound. Keys clicked and bit through the heavy card, then ejected it with its pattern of punches. Piero left it next to the audiograph and went back downstairs.

"Done?" said Sokolov, and started the grindstone back up without waiting for a reply. The workshop filled with noise and sparks as he touched metal to its humming surface. Piero went to the worktable where the revised blueprints for the arc pylon were spread and checked the single candle burning safely behind its screen. He kept no mechanical clocks in the workshop. Their tick grated on his nerves. He had hourglasses for the timing of experiments and had placed a series of marks on the back wall that told time from the angle of the sun. They were, however, quite useless with the shutters closed. Sokolov had found an old candle in the back of a store cupboard and hatched it off in what he insisted were hour intervals. They didn't seem the right length to Piero, but he had never been on speaking terms with the passage of time. Based on the candle, it was just past sunset. Sokolov's brandy bottle sat next to the lantern. He hadn't touched it since they'd started work.

Having another person in his shop was unsettling. The sound of Sokolov kept making him jump. And Sokolov made an awful lot of noise. He was perpetually in motion, always complaining or clattering or slamming drawers. Piero found himself making his own movements especially quiet and
deliberate, as if to balance him out. Yet the man also laid out his tools and materials with ruler precision, keeping track of every instrument. Piero had instructed him on the organizational system of the shop and been surprised to see him follow it exactly.

Piero had never needed to explain the organizational system before. No one else had worked in any of his shops with him. He had simply assumed no one wanted to, or, alternately, that no one was worthy of it. He was still torn on that second point. On the one hand, it was Anton Sokolov, author of his life's misery. On the other hand, it was Anton Sokolov. Piero had long been in the habit of posing questions to himself out loud while he worked, and had nearly sliced a finger off the first time Sokolov answered back. But Sokolov's answer had been right.

The tearing stopped. Sokolov left the grindstone humming as he examined the end of the steel probe he was grinding to a fine point. "I don't know why you expect Attano will come back here at all," he said.

"Corvo will go wherever the little Empress goes," asserted Piero.

"Conceded," said Sokolov. He blew on the steel and polished it on his sleeve, which only made it more dirty. Piero tossed him a rag. "But the little Empress won't be here for long. They'll take the girl and hole up somewhere to get the paperwork in order without interruption." He inspected the point, sloshed a few more drops of cutting oil on it, and went back to the grindstone.

"If you are having second thoughts about this course of action," began Piero when the grinding stopped again.

"The time for second thoughts was four days ago," said Sokolov. "We harpooned this damn whale and now we've got to haul it in. The more important point is, your faith in Corvo's return is very likely misplaced." He stretched his left arm, rolling his shoulder. Piero had noticed that he did that often, as if it stiffened quickly. The motion of it was slightly shortened.

"You have met Corvo," said Piero. He had been turning the question over and over in his mind and been unable to come to a conclusion. It had only just struck him that he could request Sokolov's opinion on the matter. "Do you think they managed to kill him?"

"Doesn't matter," said Sokolov. "He'd drag himself back out of the Void for Jessamine Kaldwin's daughter." He dried the steel with the rag and inspected it again, holding it gingerly up to the bright arc lamp over the toolbench and squinting. This time the point met with his approval. He laid the metal probe next to two other identical components and picked up another piece to be ground.

"Whether he's planning to come back here is another matter entirely. Our survival is incidental to keeping his promise to his dear Empress."

"He loved her," said Piero.

"That he did," agreed Sokolov.

"You knew him back then," said Piero.

Sokolov shrugged. "I suppose," he said. "The Lord Protector was a bit like the furniture. Never got a good line on him. I only saw him for longer than an hour when I was painting her portrait. Then he sat there the entire time."

"I'm surprised you did not make him leave," said Piero. Sokolov's artistic temperament was famous when it came to his portraiture.

"Why would I make him leave?" said Sokolov. He oiled the blunt point of the steel, readying it to be
ground into a needle sharp enough to conduct an arc. "He made her light up. She never took her eyes off him. I painted her, watching him, watching her. One of the only decent portraits I ever did." A shadow passed across his face, deepening the lines of it. He bent and put the steel back to the grindstone.

A hammering on the shutters split the workshop. Sokolov jerked the metal away. In the sudden quiet Havelock's voice boomed out, this time from the back door.

"Sokolov, come out of there," ordered Havelock. The military sharpness had returned to his tone. He sounded like he was ordering a recalcitrant captain into battle.

Sokolov's eyes went wide. He opened his mouth to speak, then paused, glancing at Piero.

"Admiral?" said Piero. "I am not certain whom you are addressing."

"Anton Sokolov, we know you're in there," said Havelock. He broke off to listen to a muttered conversation.

Then Martin's voice came, smooth and clear. "Anton, surrender yourself to the proper authorities at once, by the Lord Regent's command," he ordered.

Sokolov set the piece of metal down, an inscrutable expression on his face. He switched off the grindstone. His eyes darted towards Piero, then away.

"Admiral--" began Piero.

"Why should I?" Sokolov said, loud enough for Havelock to hear him outside.

"Dunwall has need of your services," answered Martin.

"You mean you do," said Sokolov.

"The Empress requires her master of inventions," said Martin stiffly. "The city cannot afford to lose its most brilliant mind in a time of crisis."

"Mm." Sokolov seemed to be enjoying a private joke. "And if I do not?" he declared calmly.

"If you do not surrender yourself shortly, we will be forced to treat you as a fellow enemy of the Empire," said Martin.

"Quite a set of options," said Sokolov. He was standing in the center of the workshop now, in the shadow of the pylon.

"Listen, Anton, you're a brilliant man," said Martin. "You're smart enough to know the odds. I'd expect this kind of thing from Joplin, but you're a man of the world. I can hear Piero working on something in there. I assure you, whatever he's told you about his crazy inventions, it won't work. You're betting on the wrong man. You won't be able to make it out of here on your own. And even if you did, where would you go? We speak with the Lord Regent's voice now. We speak with the Empire's voice. You would be a wanted man. A fugitive. Come on out, Anton. It doesn't have to be this way."

"Teague Martin, yes?" said Sokolov. "I don't believe we've met."

"Indeed."

"You're the snake who put his knife in the High Overseer's back," said Sokolov.
Martin gave an uncertain laugh. "I don't believe you and High Overseer Campbell got along," he said. His voice took on a smoother tone. "In fact he collected quite a file on you. Whispers and accusations of heresy. Witchcraft. Black magic. All sorts of nasty things. All hearsay, of course. But you were interested in something in the Abbey's subcrypts, weren't you? Very interested."

"Campbell's black book found a new home, I see," said Sokolov. His voice was the same disinterested growl, but Piero saw a sudden tremor in his hands.

"Come now, Anton. Those days are over," said Martin, slick as wet metal. "The Abbey's leadership is long overdue for a change. You and Campbell didn't see eye to eye, it's clear. He used the Abbey to pursue his personal vendetta. Picking over your research. Censoring your books. The things he collected about you. I'm curious. What really did happen in Pandyssia?"

Sokolov stayed silent, his expression turned inwards. Martin gave a little laugh. "Perhaps we'll talk about it later. Times change, Anton. It's something to consider. Take your time. Think about it." Martin's voice hardened. "But don't take too long."

"You have until dawn," Havelock broke in. "After that I have to give the order to bring this place down."

"It's all right, Farley," said Sokolov with a sudden firmness. "I can give you my answer right now." His voice rose. "The Void can take the lot of you piss-licking cunts, and the moment I get out of here I'll cut off your rocks and roast them on a spit. If Corvo Attano hasn't done it first."

A frozen silence from the other side of the door. "I don't want to do this, believe me," said Havelock finally. He sounded regretful. "But I will. You have until dawn." Piero heard the sounds of several footsteps leaving with him. Sokolov made an obscene gesture at the door, something Piero hadn't seen before but which was evocative all the same. His hands were shaking as he did it.

"You did it again," said Piero, watching him. "They would have let you live."

"Do you always ask so many fucking questions?" Sokolov roared, turning on him. Piero did not shrink back, but he felt the force of it all the same. "No wonder you pissed off Garvey."

The old rage flared in Piero like he'd struck a bruise. He pressed his lips together, biting down on the anger, and turned back to the blueprints. Sokolov went to the workbench and restarted the grindstone without another word, a thunderous expression on his face. He looked much older than he had five minutes ago, the full measure of his more than forty years, and he pressed the steel to the grindstone with more force than was strictly necessary.

The candle burned in its metal box. Piero bent to his task in silence. There was no talk in the shop now. He let himself flow into his work, leaving the construct of Piero Joplin behind and immersing himself fully in the wires and gears and mechanisms. After a timeless stretch he had nearly forgotten Sokolov was there. He did not think about the men outside, about the fact that he was trapped inside this steel room; did not let himself think about the chill in Farley Havelock's voice, the gunshots from the tower, the question of where Cecelia or Samuel or Corvo were. All of that belonged to the man, and he needed the mind. He was no longer present in his body; he was in the turn of steel, the stretch of copper, the slosh of oil. The fever was building in his brain, gathering strength, pressing in pain and pinpricks of light bursting behind his eyes. He battened against it, holding it back, unwilling to take his tonic lest it dull his mind in this moment when he needed it the most.

He needed a distraction, another focus. *What really did happen in Pandyssia?* he let himself wonder. Piero had read the account Sokolov had published, of course. It was the closest thing to a reliable source on the mysterious sunrise continent. Sokolov had chronicled the entire Pittman Expedition in
grim detail: half the crew dead before they even sighted land, with Pittman himself one of the first to go. Death had ravaged the expedition until the young natural philosopher with his formality of a command was the only officer left. Sokolov had managed not only to keep the remainder alive and get them back home, he had brought back marvels in the bargain: sketches of that strange land, trade goods from alien cultures, samples of plants and animals wholly unknown in the Isles.

But the mess had soured the Empire on any further ventures for the last two decades, despite the vast leaps that had been made in shipbuilding. And it had been the beginning of the change in Sokolov. Before the three-year gap of the Expedition, Piero had held out some hope that if he could just get in touch with the Head of the Academy, he could have the entire affair straightened out. Surely the bright-eyed revolutionary would have some sympathy for a fellow iconoclast. But the Sokolov who had returned from Pandyssia had been a different man. He retained his title, but drifted away from the Academy, left the Masters to run it. The official line held that he had gone out to Kaldwin's Bridge to establish a greenhouse for the propagation of his Pandyssian transplants; but he never came back. He withdrew from high society, became more and more erratic. The whispers started. *Probably went native in that wretched place, it isn't healthy, they aren't like us there*...

Piero had never considered there might be more to the situation. The heavy hand of the Abbey's censors had been obvious in Sokolov's original account. At the time Piero had put it down to the Overseers' usual fanaticism. But Martin had implied something else, something even Campbell hadn't felt safe noting down. That piqued Piero's curiosity to an almost unbearable degree.

The silence hung heavy beneath the sound of their labors. Piero did not ask about Pandyssia.

The neat blueprints disappeared under a rats' nest of scribbled corrections. They turned wood, fitted glass, strung wire, meshed gears. Lines drawn in grease pencil and charcoal stick began to emerge into reality. The candle burnt out. Sokolov prepared another. Piero broke open a tin of jellied eels stashed in one of the lockers and spread it carefully over bread, making sure to achieve the optimal ratio of jelly to surface area. Sokolov took a slice and ate, quiet. They spoke in quick bursts strictly confined to the work at hand.

The problem was the walls. The arc pylon's action was confined to those persons it could reach with its electrical emanations. Thin barriers like the crumbling plaster of the Hound Pits would not stop it. The metal lining that reinforced the walls of the workshop, however, would. Piero had not considered this when he placed it. The prospect of firing it had not entered his calculations. Now his life hinged on that same prospect, and the walls were a problem.

The solution came as he manufactured the pylon's emitter and began to consider how to link it with the signal generation coils Sokolov was building. He touched Sokolov's shoulder. "Consider our current dilemma," he said, framing the emitter in two outstretched hands. "Why should it and the generator be in the same place?"

The look on Sokolov's face started at confusion, ran headlong into consideration, and burned straight through to excitement. "The roof. Brilliant," he said. Piero felt a little thrill at how fast he had understood. "The losses along the wiring-- we'll require much more power than the usual arrangement, but--"

"But we were planning on augmenting the current flow in any case," noted Piero.

"Yes, yes, I think if we could - what's the distance to the ridgepole, how much do we have to work with..." Sokolov went to one cabinet and hauled out the thick snakes of power cabling. The conduits were thick as a man's arm, insulated in layers of cloth and rubber. He took one armful and Piero took the other, stretching it out to see how far it would reach.
"Hmm," said Piero, estimating. "Enough to link the generator. Not sufficient to run the power."

"We'll have to put the tanks up there," said Sokolov. "The extra distance will require..."

"At least three," hazarded Piero. Sokolov did the figures on a sheet of foolscap.

"Three with no margin," he announced. "Four if we want to be sure. And I would like to be sure."

Piero, however, was inspecting the gauge that read the level in the whale oil cistern beneath the shop. "We have sufficient quantity for three tanks plus filling the pylon's resonant chamber," he said. "Assuming one-twentieth lost in spillage and evaporation."

Sokolov sighed. "Three it is, then." He filled the tanks while Piero slotted the final components in place for the emitter. The delicate spiral of the emanation coils went last. Piero stepped back to inspect it. The bowls that held the coils would need to raised up, opening to the sky, and spaced a precise distance from each other. The entire assembly still stood about man-height.

Sokolov came back. "Tanks are ready," he said. He looked the emitter up and down. "That's going to be a bitch to carry."

"How do you suggest we proceed?" said Piero, hoping Sokolov had a better idea than "you take one end, and I'll take the other."

"Well, you take this end, I'll take the other," said Sokolov, pointing.

Together they manhandled it up the loft stairs with a minimum of disaster. The tanks and cabling could be left unhooked, and the emitter was much lighter than the pylon itself. But it was still a few stone of steel and copper, and Piero found himself tiring quickly. Sokolov surprised him by not seeming burdened at all. There was a rangy strength to him, like wire wrapped over bone.

They tipped it up on the floor near the shutter that led out the second-story window. Piero assured Sokolov that there was a platform outside, but the prospect of using the ventilation duct that ran along the building to access the slippery rooftop with the weight of the emitter on his back gave him pause. He descended to the workshop and returned in a few moments with a large coil of rope threaded through a block and tackle. They lashed the cabling to the struts of the emitter.

"I'll go up top and haul it up," said Sokolov, eying the structure. "Follow me with the tanks." For once Piero was not inclined to dispute. While he had been finding the block and tackle Sokolov had, for some reason, fetched his brandy bottle again, and had now stuffed a rag into the neck as a crude stopper. Piero desperately hoped he wasn't planning on a nightcap.

The electric shutter controls all ran on the same circuit. It was all or nothing, everything up or down. Piero fetched a prybar and they levered the narrow tongue beneath the bottom edge of the loft window shutter until he could get a jack underneath it and twist it up all the way. Before they lifted it Sokolov held up one finger, went below and extinguished all the lights. With any luck no one would notice a slightly darker square of shadow opening in the side of the building. As the metal rose a breath of fresh air flooded in beneath it, salty and cool on Piero's skin and wonderfully welcome. Moonlight shone through, pale as ice. Waves thumped against the quay.

Piero gestured for Sokolov to wait, then climbed up in the window. He crouched over the sill and froze, suddenly trembling. The fever pressed against his awareness, lying in wait. Letting him know it would have its due. His hands clenched on the metal edge. He could not uncurl his fingers. The last time he had stepped outside he had been waiting for a gunshot. The last time he had stepped outside his world had been upended. In the moonlight and the shadow everything looked strange,
and he was too terrified to do anything but breathe.

Someone shoved at the small of his back. "Move," whispered Sokolov.

The fear disappeared in a flash of annoyance and he was outside before he registered the motion. Piero unfolded himself, standing up straight, feeling a new relief at stretching out of his confinement. He breathed in the scent of brine and the faint hint of sulfur. Then he frowned. Sulfur was not supposed to be there. He held up a hand to halt Sokolov, crept cautiously to the edge of the balcony, and peered down.

Then he scrambled back to the window and gestured frantically. Sokolov looked baffled. "A drawbridge?" he finally hissed.

"Tallboys," Piero hissed back. He could see the whites of Sokolov's eyes as they widened. Sokolov climbed up on the windowsill. Piero backed up to let him creep out and peer over the edge himself. He recoiled just as Piero had. The rhythmic thump continued as the insectile stilt-walker made its circuit of the riverfront yard. Little sparks flared in the yard as Watchmen gathered. When they were both back inside the window Piero whispered, "Now what?"

"Now we do this very quietly," Sokolov whispered back.

"That is not a plan!" he hissed.

"It's what we've got," said Sokolov. "Let's get this over with." He had picked up the brandy bottle again, as if it comforted him.

Piero went back out, crouching low behind the cases he had piled along the balcony railing. Sokolov followed. Piero pointed and the natural philosopher scrambled up the side of the shop and onto the roof, carrying one end of the block and tackle. He disappeared out onto the ridgepole, then returned carrying the end of the pull-rope. When Piero saw him come back he reached inside the window, gripping the emitter along its length and hauling it towards himself. One outstretched pole struck the metal of the sill and they both dropped down, hugging the ridgeline and listening.

The tallboy's rhythmic tread remained steady. Piero breathed out and gripped the emitter again in its coils of rope. The breeze that had felt so fresh before now cut through his coat, freezing his fingers where they touched the metal. He swung it up and free of the windowsill, letting it hang by the ropes, steadying it so that it would not bang against the brick. Sokolov hauled on his rope. The pulleys squeaked slightly, then smoothed out. The emitter began to rise.

When it cleared the eaves Piero ducked back inside the workshop. The three tanks were waiting next to the filling station, glowing with the soft blue radiance of trans. He wrapped the first one in canvas to hide the light and snuck back outside. Sokolov had pulled the emitter over the edge. A moment later his wild fringe of hair reappeared over the eaves. Piero handed him up the bundles of cabling. Then the first tank. Then the second. Then Sokolov didn't come back.

Piero waited, crouching. The metal was cold beneath his fingertips, rough with rust and scraped paint. His hands and feet were freezing. He could hear the tallboy walking the yard. Three paces, pause. Three paces, pause. Three paces, Turn. Sokolov didn't come back. He swallowed and made the climb up the side of the shop himself.

A huge moon had risen over the Wrenhaven. Dusty blue light poured over the river, illuminating the roof like a floodlight. The dark wall of the Hound Pits pub rose on the other side. Sokolov was a shadow crouched in the milky expanse of the slates. He had gotten the emitter upright, hiding it among the sheet metal and wooden poles Piero had added for the occasional experiment that had to
be exposed to the elements. The two tanks were socketed and linked. But the power cable to the emitter wasn't connected, and Sokolov was kneeling near the base of it. He had somehow, and Piero could not in any way conceive of how, gotten his brandy bottle all the way up here. The dirty rag stuffed in the mouth of it fluttered insouciantly in the breeze.

Piero moved low along the ridgepole and knelt next to him. Sokolov wordlessly showed him the junction. Piero bit back a curse. An entire bundle of wires had torn loose during the move. Sokolov was reconnecting them, but in the moonlight it was nearly impossible to tell their color to match the ends back together. The tallboy walked the yard; three paces, pause. Three paces, pause. Piero took the bundle from him and pointed at the empty spot for the third tank. Sokolov nodded and began to move. Three paces. Turn. Piero pulled the pair of clippers from his pocket and began to trim the ends of the wires, twisting them back together from memory. Three paces, pause. Three paces, pause. Three paces. He secured the last of them and maneuvered the clippers to push the bundle back inside the device. Pause. And then his numb fingers fumbled the instrument.

The metal clippers clattered against the slate tiles loud as a shot. Piero froze in horror. Sokolov ducked below the other side of the ridgepole. He held his breath for a moment, hoping--

"Hey!" someone shouted from the yard. The thud of the tallboy. Turning. "You up there!" The tallboy aimed its beam at him. The light was blinding, pinning him to the spot. "Get up! I need some help over here!"

Shouts in the yard. More sparks kindled. Running. The beam trained on him, piercing, holding him transfixed. He raised one hand to shield his eyes but it did no good. The smell of sulfur and heat, very strong--

"Hey!" someone bellowed from behind him. The beam darted away. Piero blinked, dazzled in the darkness. Sokolov had stood up from the ridgeline. The beam was following him. "Joplin!" he shouted, darting away along the ridgeline. "Get the candle!"

The what? thought Piero, blinded, his mind spinning. He cast back over where Sokolov had been working. There was no candle, nothing remotely like one. He looked again, frantic, passing his hands over everything. The tanks. The cables. The emitter. No candle.

And then his gaze fell on Sokolov's bottle with the rag stuffed in its mouth and his brain went click.

He didn't think. There wasn't time. The tallboy was drawing his bow. Piero grabbed the glass bottle and jammed the end of the rag into the gap above the oil tanks. A spark jumped. The oily rag caught fire at once. The tallboy sighted in.

"Don't you know who I fucking am!?" Sokolov shouted at it.

The tallboy paused.

Piero hurled the bottle with its flaming wick.

It sailed through the air like a comet blazing its trail across the heavens. The glass smashed broadside on the tallboy's side armor plate. Liquid sprayed and the brandy ignited in a cloud of blue-red flame. Piero smelled something burning and jumped when he saw his own sleeve had caught. He dropped to the roof slates, trying to put it out, and Sokolov was suddenly there next to him, grabbing his arm and hauling him towards the end of the roof. The tallboy thumped frantically this way and that as he tried to beat out the flames that coated his armor. Then the fire found the oil tanks on his back.

The explosion split the night with a whumph. Piero felt it slam through his chest like a blow. It
slapped at his ears and staggered him. The plume rolled up into the sky behind them, burning a mingled blue and gold. Pieces of metal rained down out of the night. They reached the edge of the roof and dropped down, tumbling onto the balcony and pulling themselves through the window. Sokolov kicked out the jack. The shutter slammed down onto the sill with a bang. They lay there on the metal floor, breathing hard, listening outside as chunks of the tallboy crashed and rattled against each other.

"Good shot," said Sokolov finally.

Piero burst into laughter. He couldn't stop it. It welled up inside him fierce and unstoppable as the brandy flame, burning its way out of his throat. He curled up and laughed. Next to him he heard Sokolov give in to it too, both of them sliding down the adrenaline crash into sudden hilarity.

Sokolov managed to catch his breath first. "You figured it out," he said, still wheezing, belatedly surprised. "You saw what to do."

"What in the hells was that," asked Piero between fits of laughter. He was half scorched and half freezing and it didn't matter. The lightness bubbled up inside him.

"We made them in Pandyssia," answered Sokolov. "Sailor's trick, for scaring off sea serpents. They call them the Outsider's Nightcap." He mimed toasting an imaginary monster. "'Here's to your health!'" he shouted. Another metallic crash answered him from outside. Piero laughed harder. He felt lightheaded. It was hard to breathe. Stars pricked behind his eyes.

"Joplin?" said Sokolov, sounding suddenly concerned. "It's not that funny."

Then Piero was coughing, choking, all his muscles spasming at once. The fever hit him with all the force of a dam breaking; its power so long denied, its fury overwhelming. An invisible hand clenched his head, tightening until he felt the bone must crack. Pain shot through him like nails. He was seizing, writhing on the cold metal floor. In the darkness he tried to find his bed, tried to sight in on the bottle of nerve tonic at the side of it, but his body only lurched halfway up and stumbled to the side, falling against the railing and narrowly missing a tumble to the floor below.

An iron hand gripped his shoulder, pulling him back and pinning him expertly to the decking. Sokolov forced something between his teeth. Piero bit down, tasted wood. He tried to point to the bed, to the bottle, but the spasms had taken over his limbs. He knocked Sokolov off him and curled up, shaking, while black waters welled up inside his mind.

He was dimly aware of Sokolov shouting his name; and then the rising tide claimed him for its own.

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The tea is always excellent. He remembers this first, every time.

Piero sits beneath the arches of a high stone pavilion and sips tea from a porcelain cup, looking out across the Void. The pavilion's foundation drops off into jagged rock, then nothing at all, a few meters from where the tea service rests.

"You are distracted," he tells his host.

"Hmm?" says the Outsider. His attention has drifted to a point out in the blue, watching some event unknot itself in the coils of reality.

"If you are not interested in a conversation, then I would rather leave," says Piero.
"Oh, where's the fun in that?" says the Outsider, turning his pitch-black gaze back to his guest. "Besides, I am. The last few hours have been most fascinating."

"At least someone is enjoying them," says Piero. He sips again from his cup. The porcelain is delicate beneath his chapped skin, its white surface spalled with a strange patina. He can never discern if the tea exists or not. It is an interesting philosophical question that he has considered, off and on, for many years. Whatever the answer, it is always excellent.

He puts down the cup and walks to the edge of the pavilion. He does not remember this one. It is genuinely new to him, or else the Outsider has not left him with a memory of it. The building has five sides, its five arches opening above them into five exquisitely fluted vaults. Lichen has crawled over the pillars and blotched them in patchwork colors. The floor is a mosaic laid in precious stones, cut so fine it is difficult for the eye to distinguish the tiles. The pattern it depicts spirals out with more depth than stone ought to have. It is ringed with an inscription in an alphabet whose glyphs seem on the verge of moving of their own accord. Piero peers out over the edge.

"It looks rough out there," he comments. Near the pavilion a patch of blue space bubbles up slowly like seafoam. The reflections off its surface do not show the world around them.

"It's been a rather complicated week in Dunwall," says the Outsider behind him. Apart from the coal-black eyes the being sitting at the table looks like a pale young man, although one whose cheeks are a little too drawn, whose skin has a sallow, drowned cast. But Piero has long experience in telling the difference. Weight does not hang quite right on his clothes. Light reflects off him in the wrong way, as if it is coming from a great distance, as if it is coming up through deep water.

In the clarion blue of the Void Piero remembers everything, as usual. All the other times the Outsider has visited him like this. All the other times the being has found it interesting to have a chat. All the other times Piero has sworn that this time, somehow, he will find a way to tell his waking self the truth about what he dreams every night. He feels the same surfacing that he always does, like breaching a sea he did not know he was submerged in. Rising through the layers of emotion; of shock, and anger, and frustration, and then the memory of frustration, the memory of how many times he has remembered this before. His own mind interrogating itself, falling after itself in an endless spiral. And after it the knowledge, sick and heavy, that this will happen again the next night, and the night after that.

"Corvo is alive," says Piero.

"Of course," says the Outsider. "Mere poison does not touch those whom I favor. Though dear Corvo had some additional assistance in that regard."

"Will he come back?" Piero asks.

The Outsider smiles and remains mute.

Most nights he does not see the Outsider in person. Most nights it is only some portion of the Void landscaped in reality's shrapnel. Sometimes there is a task prepared for him, sometimes there is not. But there is always at least the tea, set out as one might welcome a familiar houseguest. At times a note comes with it; a sketch, a diagram, a fragment of text in a language whose letters he does not know but whose meaning still comes clear in his mind. Those things he has the dispensation to carry back across the border into his waking life, because the Outsider wishes them to enter the world. No matter how clever he is, these are the only things he can take. Piero Joplin is a ferryman permitted to cross between two worlds, permitted to remain in neither.

Piero regards the blue currents of the Void. The emptiness branches endlessly, a sprawling chaos that
shifts from moment to moment. He walks back to the little table. Beneath his feet the pattern twists. Fish leap from the looping curls. Leviathans move in its depths. "Did you do this?"

"I do not do," says the Outsider. "I give potential, and I watch what happens. All existence is built on potentials. It is the essence of energy, sliding down the hill. Humans are an interesting sort of potential. Born at the top of the hill and sliding your way down to the grave. You find so many ways to spend the energy along the way."

"And what is waiting at the bottom?" asks Piero.

The Outsider smiles again, and the shadows that cling to him thicken. Piero only pours more tea. There are trays of food with the tea service as well; little sandwiches on Piero's side of the table, a bowl of tiny silver fish that swim in clear water on the Outsider's.

"But if you are asking if I have chosen to trap you in a little shack with Anton Sokolov, I should think I would come up with someone more interesting to shut you in with," continues the Outsider.

"No," says Piero. "I think you want to know what happens when I am caged with the man I have dedicated so much of my life to hating. I think you would find it fascinating."

"He wants very much to meet me," says the Outsider.

"He is welcome to you," says Piero.

The Outsider laughs. It sounds like the clacking of driftwood on an empty shore. Piero wonders about the face he wears, smooth and drowned; if it is something borrowed for the moment like a suit of clothes, or fashioned out of pure fantasy. For a time he wondered if the Outsider wore no face at all, and if what he believed he saw was only his brain's defense against what was really there.

"No, it is chance that has brought you together," the Outsider says. "I am only an interested spectator."

"You admit, then, that you are interested."

"And you admit, then, that it is interesting." The Outsider leans forward over the table, steepling his fingers and regarding Piero. Still, after all these years, his gaze makes Piero nervous. Like the tugging of waves at his ankles. "How could it not be? When you have spent so many years carving a vessel in his image and filling it with all your jealousy and bitterness. And now at last you meet, and you find he has better things to do than play the villain in your drama." The being's borrowed face twists in a petulant frown. "Even if they are such boring things."

"He is not boring," says Piero. He sees it all clear now, in the blue emptiness. He always does. It is difficult to lie to one's self in this place. The clarity does not last, though. Sometimes he thinks it is just another trick. "He is rude and angry and a little bit mad. But he is not boring."

"He is tremendously so," says the Outsider, disgusted. "He dreams the universe should follow rules, that twisting at the heart of existence he will find some perfect order. You know better."

Piero takes his cup and stands at the center of the pavilion's mosaic, regarding the pattern. There are towers half-hidden in its intricate figures, waves and bones that are not human. The shapes that scallop the edges make him think of the folds of the emanation coils of the arc pylon. Something about repeating forms. An idea begins to form; he lets it simmer at the back of his mind.

"I am interested to see if you can solve it," says the Outsider from the table. Something akin to humor dances like a marsh flame in those black eyes. "I am so curious to see if you can. At first I was
certain he would. Then I was certain you would. But he would take the universe apart to find the tick, and you are too petrified to step outside the borders of your narrow little world. The combination, though. I am so curious."

"A week ago I would not have wondered why," said Piero, looking back at him. "I would have said that of course I am more important than him. I believed he was a fraud and all his success a mistake, that he had stolen what was rightfully mine. I was wrong. So no, I still do not understand why you reject him and torment me, if he searches for you."

"Not every shrine to me is built of wood and bone," says the Outsider. "Anton Sokolov studies the scratchings on runes and charms and imagines they are an alphabet he can decipher. He wishes to write it in the words that will bind me to answer the question that has burned in his mind since he saw the sunrise lands. But those signs are meaningless. It is the pain, the hunger, the jealousy with which they are cut, that speaks greater than any work of the hand. And he will never understand this." He toys with one of the silver fish, trailing a fingertip in the clear water and flicking it up into the air, so a curl of liquid hangs in space and the little fish swims through it like a falling star.

"So. Why you, Piero Joplin?" says the Outsider. He pins him with that onyx gaze. "Because you built me a shrine that few have ever rivaled. An injustice was done you; well and so. But what you did with it, oh, it was a work of art. You took that slight and made it the core of your existence. You devoted yourself to honing its edge in bitterness and imagined persecution. You made an altar of your loneliness and your hatred, and on it you offered up your entire life. And you have so much potential to waste. With every choice you made to cut yourself away from the world, you carved another rune in your tribute to me."

"I don't want you!" Piero bursts out. "I don't want any of it! I don't want to be alone anymore!"

"And if the price of it is your genius?" asks the Outsider, playing with his fish.

Piero hesitates, his heart in his throat.

"That is not in your power to give," he says at last.

"Perhaps it is in my power to take away," says the Outsider idly.

"You will not," says Piero. "Then I would no longer be interesting."

The Outsider laughs again. He lets the water splash back down into the bowl with its passenger. "I would miss our little chats, it's true. And I do hope you survive your confinement. But you are correct. I do not give and I do not take away. I only come where I am invited. What harm you have suffered is self-inflicted, and the remedy is the same. I wonder if you have the strength for it, though," he says, with a crooked smirk. "Without your revenge, what are you left with? Does anything remain of Piero Joplin, or has bitterness and misery gnawed it all away?"

"You are interfering," says Piero. "You are twisting things by inches."

"Perhaps," says the Outsider. "Perhaps I have seen potentials move like wavelets on the surface of the sea. Perhaps I have seen futures where Anton Sokolov drinks himself to death while the city burns down around him, where Piero Joplin twists the fuse on a charge packed into the foundations of Kaldwin's Bridge and declares that this time, this time they will know his name." A jawbone smile like a skull picked clean and grinning. "Perhaps I am working an alchemy of my own, pouring and mixing. Testing the reactions."

A patch of the Void strobes like distant lightning hidden in a thunderhead. The Outsider looks up
"Matters are moving quickly," he says to himself. The blue warps and takes on another form. Piero goes to one of the open archways and looks out up into the depths. When he turns back, the tea service has gone; when he turns again, so has the pavilion. The Outsider is simply standing there, looking concerned.

"Time for you to go," he says, distracted. The image is unraveling. Piero can feel an irresistible buoyancy pressing him back up to the waking world.

"Wait," said Piero, grasping at the edges of the dream. "Tell me. What is the question? What does Anton want to ask you?"

"He fears he has discovered the truth," says the Outsider. "And he wants me to lie to him. Farewell."  

"What truth?" he tries to ask, but all at once the Void dissolves in a hammer-blow of light. He clutches desperately at the memories, repeating the scraps to himself; but they slip through his clutching fingers, melting into nonsense, and he cries out in pain and frustration, and this, too, he remembers every time.

- - -

His ears were ringing.

Piero woke slowly, fighting his way through black fog. His limbs were leaden and reluctant to obey him. As awareness returned he realized that they had been bound. He was lying on his bed. The top sheet had been stripped off and left in a pile at the foot of it. He could smell the sour stink of vomit coming from it.

A voice shouted something from below, but his mind was still too clouded to make out the words. The ropes were slack. He recognized them as the kind of loose restraints used to keep a seizure patient from harming themselves. After some awkward maneuvering he managed to get the fingers of one hand to the wrist of the other and unknotted them. He sat up and found the little green bottle of nerve tonic. Too late for that, he thought. He took a sip anyway, letting the thick numbness coat his throat, and replaced it. The stove that heated the space glowed a dull red.

"Hello?" he called.

The sound of someone climbing the stairs. Anton Sokolov appeared. "You're awake," he said. He sat down next to the bed, staring intently at Piero's face. He held up a finger and watched his eyes. "You're focusing correctly," he pronounced. He had a grip on one of Piero's wrists before Piero knew what was happening, taking the pulse with a practiced gesture, then releasing it. "Blood is weak, but not ill. What in the Void was that?"

Piero rubbed his wrists, trying to force the blood back into them. "I will be fine," he mumbled.  

"I've never seen a brain fever come on that fast," said Anton.  

"It's not..." Piero felt a sudden shame. "Unusual."

A thunderclap of noise slammed through the workshop, making them both jump. Piero's ears rang again. A flash of light silhouetted the edges of the shutters. The bottles on his shelves rattled. Dust drifted from the ceiling. A smell of sulfur permeated the air. Anton stared out towards the yard with a grim expression. When he could hear again, Piero asked, "What is happening?"
Anton looked pale. "Dawn."
Resonance

strange attractor (n) (mathematics) A fractal surface in solution space towards which chaotic trajectories inevitably bend.

The position of Head of the Academy of Natural Philosophy, and by extension that of Royal Physician, was marked by a heavy gold signet ring. Alchemical sigils incised the band and the bezel at the top was set with a queer crystal whose facets changed color with the light. Lore held that it had been forged the same year the Academy itself was founded, in the Year of Golden Tides when the Baefric dynasty brought all of Gristol under one rule.

Anton had tossed it onto a windowsill next to a row of old glass bottles Piero had saved from meals to reuse. "Bah," he said when Piero pointed it out. "Damn thing gets in the way."

The two pistol crossbows were serviceable, but there were only three bolts. The sword had no edge on it and the large folding bow was unstrung. Piero and Anton looked down at the contents of the small combination safe with a mixture of worry and disappointment.

"That's all?" said Anton.

"The functional pieces are with Corvo," said Piero.

"You had a gun safe, I assumed you had guns," accused Anton.

"Havelock provided it out of safety concern," said Piero. "Miss Emily has an unfortunate fascination with projectile weaponry." The safe had soothed his own mind as well. He was not comfortable with armaments once they were functional.

Anton picked up one of the pistol crossbows, testing the pull of the wire. "Interesting mechanism," he said, inspecting the stock of it.

"I designed it," said Piero.

"I can tell." Anton managed to cock the crossbow and slotted a single bolt. He sighted down the bow. Then he sighed, removed the bolt, and decocked it with the armature inside the safe. "Two pistol bows aren't going to help, not against an entire Watch detachment and Void knows how many tallboys in the bargain. All it will take is one spark near the oil tanks. We'll never make it off the roof alive."

The incendiary bolts came every few minutes now. The Watch concentrated their fire on the largest shutter, the one that faced the yard and covered the open wall of the shop. A burning smell hung in the air, touched with ink and electricity. The arrows the tallboys fired from their compound bows carried a tube of sulfur paste tipped with a whale oil charge to set it alight on impact. The flash came first as the arrowhead struck and the trans detonated, rattling the bottles on Piero's shelves; then the heat, the glow, as the sulfur paste stuck and burned. But Piero had fitted the heavy steel shutters to take the blast of an exploding oil tank, and they held firm even as the Watch hammered away with arrows and grenades.

Piero had a suspicion, from the mingled embarrassment and anger on Anton's face, that he might
have invented the arrows.

"Perhaps we can adapt the pylon to run on only two tanks," suggested Piero, but he held out little hope even as he said it.

"And perhaps Havelock will take a flying leap off Dunwall Tower and spare us the trouble," said Anton.

"Perhaps we can get Corvo to place the third," said Piero.

Anton snorted in disbelief. "Attano's miles away from here by now, hunting for Farley Havelock's scalp."

"He will come back," asserted Piero.

Anton shook his head but said nothing. He left the pistol bow on the shelf above the gun safe and dropped the bolts next to it. Piero closed the safe back up.

Anton had made himself at home in the shop during the few hours Piero had been unconscious, foregoing sleep in favor of emptying a half-bottle of Tyvian red and completing the arc pylon's signal generator. Without Piero to protest he had taken his grease pencil to the blueprints and reshaped them substantially. Piero had bristled at first, defending his original plans to augment the pylon's reach and strength, but as Anton explained the changes Piero had to admit that the initial design would in all likelihood not have functioned. This new one, though, this new hybrid would be a marvel.

Working against Anton was making him stretch. Piero felt the pull of mental muscles that had not been tested in many years. For the first time he had to defend his ideas to someone capable of spotting their flaws. Anton forced him to be precise about his designs, to check and double-check his assertions. Alone, Piero had fallen into the habit of working on inspiration and intuition, foregoing exact sums and ratios in favor of letting trial and error home in on the correct answer. He had long dismissed the rigorous repetition of variations on the same experiment as make-work for the Academy's limited minds. But Anton was methodical. Anton tested everything and made sure he knew what was happening, and the benefits of that approach were subtly apparent. Anton knew what worked and what didn't, he knew precisely when and why they stopped, and he knew what to change to make them work again.

They breakfasted while the last batch of arc conductors plated in an electrolytic bath. The meal was another tin of jellied eels, the last of the bread from yesterday, and what water they dared draw from the shop cistern. The smell of sulfur drifted through the air and settled on the food. They ate sitting on the stone floor next to the blueprint table, the conversation punctuated by intermittent explosions. When a particularly violent impact rattled the shutters Anton would shake his fist and curse in the direction of the Watch. After the third time he did this Piero said, "I fail to see how that is productive."

"It makes me feel better," said Anton. "Don't change the subject. It's not normal."

"And I suppose you know what normal is," replied Piero. The water had an oily aftertaste. He hoped he had cleaned out these glasses after using them last.

"Yes," said Anton. "It's not having a seizure and collapsing every night."

"That is not what happens--"

"Because you drug yourself half-dead before it does." Anton had taken one sniff of the nerve tonic and recoiled. Piero should have known better than to let him touch the bottle. Anton had already
guessed half the chemicals in it, and the recipe was not for the faint of heart.

"It is simply a precautionary measure," said Piero.

"What kind of precaution?" said Anton.

"Otherwise I dream," said Piero, and instantly regretted it. He was coming to learn that you could not give Anton Sokolov any leeway, any purchase at all. Leave the merest hint of a loose end and he would tug until he had unraveled the entire tapestry.

"Dream," repeated Anton. "Dream about what?"

A crash of noise sliced through the conversation, a solid impact on the steel. Dust rose from the brick. The shutters shivered in their frames. Before the echoes had subsided, Piero seized his chance and said quickly, "I still do not believe it is necessary to amend the primary resonant feedback loop."

"It won't work," said Anton, diverted.

"The original design is much more efficient."

"It's efficient, it's elegant, and it won't work. The resistance of the oil is too high," said Anton, finishing his slice of bread and reaching for another. The folds of the cloth that had wrapped the loaf were empty. He sat back, dismayed. "The chamber will heat and the trans will catch, and that's farewell arc pylon. And surrounding neighborhood."

"The resistance can be lowered," Piero persisted. "If we can construct a means of refining the oil to the grade it requires..."

But Anton was already shaking his head. "We'll never purify it that clean in time. The other arrangement is less than ideal, but it will work with the regular grade."

"A better refinement of oil--"

"Is not available," said Anton firmly. "Hold out for perfection and the Watch will turn us into inconvenient soot. This is what we've got, and we're going to have to work with it. Dreams about what?"

Piero bottled up a sigh. Nothing, he almost said.

But although the hysteria that had preceded his seizure last night had left him, the lightness remained, resting strangely in his chest. This had never been in the plan, sitting on dusty stone and sharing bread with Anton Sokolov while the City Watch laid siege to his workshop. His daydreams had left out the grit beneath his hands, the lingering pain from the burn, the Tyvian profanity Anton was distressingly fond of. He was exhausted in mind, wrung out in body, hungry, thirsty, and had raised his voice more in the last day than he had in the previous year. Yet he felt an irrational comfort with the situation, the lessening of an ache that had pained him for so long he no longer noticed it. Reality had a meat to it that made all his most fevered imaginings seem now like a thin gruel he had been subsisting on for years.

This had not been in the plan.

Perhaps the plan hadn't been any good.

So instead he said, "Flashes of things. Sometimes old places. Ruins. Everything is blue."
"Everything is what?" said Anton, startled away from his search for more food. Piero suddenly found himself the target of Anton's full attention. It was unnerving, the focus the man could bring to bear.

"Everything is blue," he repeated. "Those are the bad ones."

"How often? When did they start?" Anton demanded.

"Why do you want to know?" said Piero, surprised.

"Is there water?" continued Anton.

"At times," said Piero. "It is strange."

"What's strange about it?"

"It flows upwards," said Piero. He frowned. It was an odd detail to be consistent about, now that he said it out loud. Then again, he was not certain what the dreams of others were like. Perhaps levitating water was a standard occurrence. "Why are you so interested?"

Anton was muttering to himself now, ticking off items on his fingertips as he ran through them. "Blue, water, ruins, accompanied by fits, can't wake up," he listed. "Listen, Piero. Have you ever talked to anyone in one of these dreams? Was there ever someone with you?"

Piero searched his memory. "Not...that I can recall," he said.

Anton relaxed, but only slightly. "It can't be a coincidence," he said, half to himself. His focus returned to Piero. "I need you to tell me everything about your dreams. It's very important."

"What if I don't want to?" said Piero.

Anton froze. Piero was surprised to see that he could read the emotions passing over his face, curiosity and surprise and some overriding need. A fire had kindled in his eyes. "It's very important," Anton said at last.

"If it is that important, then I propose a deal," he said. "I will tell you about the dreams. If you answer a question for me. Truthfully."

"Yes," said Anton instantly. "Whatever you want to know. Tell me."

"You answer first," said Piero. "Why did you turn down Farley Havelock?"

Anton got up from their little meal on the floor.

The skeletal arc pylon had put meat on its bones. Without the emitter attached it lacked the characteristic swooping lines of Anton's own creations. Instead it was a blocky obelisk of massive shapes bolted together in a web of wires. Piero could see a dozen mistakes he itched to correct, but Anton was right; there were no materials and there was no time. It was beginning to take up a large fraction of the workshop, and Anton orbited it as he walked.

"You're still on about that," said Anton finally. "Why do you care?"

"Because I want to know," said Piero.

"Why?"
Because I do not understand how you work, and now I find that I want to. "Because it does not make sense."

Anton paced a few moments longer. He stretched his left arm again, rolling the shoulder as if it pained him. As he moved Piero realized he could see the forces tugging the man back and forth, read the struggle in the lines of his face and the set of his shoulders. It was so plain to him now that he marveled he hadn't seen it before. He had the sense of something between him and the natural philosopher, something that registered in his mind like a thin wire. It was invisible and wholly without substance; yet he felt it nonetheless, and he could see it tugging at Anton too. Anton wanted to keep his own secrets. But he wanted to know very badly about Piero's dreams. The man's jaw worked silently, trying out words. He stopped on the other side of the shop, so that the pylon's bulk partly hid him from view.

"Esmond Roseburrow," he said finally. Age had returned to his voice.

Piero leaned back, placing his palms flat on the dirty stone. His brow furrowed. "The natural philosopher who discovered the trans distillation?"

"Esmond was my patron out of the Academy," said Anton. The words came reluctantly, rising from a place that saw little use. "I owed him everything."

Piero still failed to see the connection. Sokolov had been Roseburrow's protegé, yes, he remembered that. Roseburrow's patronage had helped him secure his place as Royal Physician. Sokolov's appointment had formalized the Empire's complete adoption of Roseburrow's technology. But he did not see what that had to do with their present predicament. "And...he...did not approve of Farley Havelock?" he tried.

"And then he committed suicide," said Anton.

Piero searched his memory, frowning. He would admit that he did not always have a good grasp on politics, but in matters of natural philosophy he made a special effort. "Esmond Roseburrow was assassinated by an anti-whaling lunatic," he said.

"Esmond Roseburrow shot himself when he understood what the Empire meant to do with his inventions," said Anton. An ugly memory twisted his face. "And I designed the gun."

"And you said nothing," said Piero, seeing the sudden contradiction like a miscoupled cable.

"He wanted everyone to know why," said Anton heavily, and Piero knew he was right. "It was all the protest they had left him. Then the Empire robbed him of even that. And I let them."

Piero said nothing. "It seems like you shouldn't be able to get over something like that," Anton went on. He had his eyes fixed on the pylon now, as if tracing the flow of imaginary currents, the genesis of sparks. "But it turns out you can, or at least you can convince yourself you have. Fame, fortune, and large amounts of alcohol help." He tilted his head. "And then I saw Hiram Burrows kill Empress Jessamine."

Piero gaped at him. "You knew?" he said, astonished.

"Of course I knew," said Anton. "How could I not? I was hardly thirty meters away when it happened. Trying to make that oaf Campbell look like a work of art, there's a hopeless quest. I was at the Empress' side before the breath had gone out of her, while Burrows was dragging Attano away screaming. It was I who pronounced her dead." A weariness hung from his words. "I am the Royal Physician, after all."
"So you knew Corvo was innocent!" said Piero.

"Of course the idiot was innocent!" barked Anton sharply. "Who could have doubted it? He'd cut out his own heart before he harmed a hair on the Empress' head."

"You knew the truth!" repeated Piero. "And you let him go to prison!?"

"And what was I to do?" said Anton. There was a note of desperation in his voice now. "Burrows became Lord Regent because he is a powerful man, and he and other powerful men and women decided it would be so. The truth simply didn't enter into it. Every path I saw ended with the cell next to the Lord Protector and two necks on the executioner's block instead of one. Yes. I let Corvo Attano go to prison for a murder he did not commit. I let the Royal Spymaster kill my Empress. And I said nothing."

"Because you were frightened."

"Because I believed it wouldn't matter!" said Anton. Something was unraveling in his voice, cracking open. "I sat in my lab and convinced myself, well, what could one man do? And I forgot about it as best I could. Just like Esmond.

"Then one man put down the High Overseer. One man removed those loathsome twins. Suddenly one man had the guilty of Dunwall running scared. And then one man came and picked me out of my own home. When I woke up in that cage, when Havelock threatened to throw me to the rats, I thought that was it. The bill for my silence had come due at last. And then Attano stopped him." He shook his head in quiet wonder. "I let him go to prison and he bought me a drink."

Anton let the silence hang heavy after that. The smell of sulfur thickened the air. Piero wondered if he had been imagining the waver in his voice.

"Perhaps I could have forgotten that," said Anton eventually. "I suspect I would have. I'm good at it. But then..." And suddenly Anton was looking straight at him. "Then you had to come and talk to me."

"M-me?" said Piero, startled. "What do I have to do with any of this?"

"Havelock and Martin, talking in the warehouse," explained Anton. "'Sokolov will knuckle under. But Joplin won't beg. He'll die happy if it means he keeps his pride,' " he quoted. "And I was just... I was embarrassed."

"Embarrassed in front of me?" Piero could not believe his ears.

"You reminded me of Esmond," said Anton. "Esmond killed himself before he let them use him. Esmond wouldn't have stayed silent. And all I could think was how disappointed he would be."

Piero did not know what to say to that. This was another situation he was not equipped to handle. But Anton did not seem to require him to say anything. The heavy sound of his voice convinced Piero that he had told the truth, but it all seemed so strange a concept.

"And there it is," said Anton finally. He pushed aside a pile of metal scraps and leaned against the cutting bench. "The small and rather sad truth. The lines in his face cut deep as the grooves he had pressed into the steel. His expression wound between disgust and relief. He looked up. "Now you."

Piero hung his head. "There is not much to tell," he said. He drained his cup and looked into it sadly. The Watch had cut the pipes from the pub and now the water had to be saved to cool the heavy tools. There was no point in slaking their thirst if they could not run the lathe. "I never slept well as a
child. It was hard for me to rest. My mind buzzed with thoughts. Mother found me sleepwalking some n-nights. I-I had the fits once or-r twice," he admitted. The words stuck on the memory. "M-mother h-hid them. Once I heard a sound from the rushes by the riverbank. An old bone charm had washed up. It felt warm in my hand. I brought it home. When Mother found it she th-threw it into the water. The other children were s-scared of m-me. I drew pictures of...th-things. Th-things I c-cannot remember. Mother threw those in the water too, and told me to keep silent about what I saw. She was f-frightened for me," he remembered.

Piero was not prepared for the sudden hollow crack that opened inside him when he mentioned her. He had not spoken to his family since he had been expelled from the Academy. There had been so many good reasons not to, at the time; only now they seemed faint and far away, and looming large instead was the thought that in truth he had been too ashamed to face them.

Anton was still listening. He swallowed the sudden tightness in his throat and went on. "Mother's family did not hew strongly to the Abbey. But F-f-father's did. She thought that if they found out, they would send me to the Overseers."

"Savages," pronounced Anton with contempt.

"When I went to the Academy, it was easier," said Piero. "Perhaps my mind was properly occupied, or the work exhausted me so much that I had no strength for dreams. Then..." The words caught in his throat. It was still hard to speak them aloud.

"Then, yes, you were kicked out, then what?" filled in Anton impatiently.

"After I - l-l-left - the dreams came back," said Piero. "They came stronger when I was angry or upset. They started to turn b-b-bad. The fits came more often. I did not sleep for d-days. I started brewing my Remedy to cure them. It worked on some of my test subjects. But it never worked for me. The fits come when they will. They are worse during the full moon, I have noticed that, worst of all during spring tides. I take the tonic and it lets me rest and keeps me from dreaming, most nights. At times I remember pieces. I s-s-saw Corvo's mask there long before Havelock asked me for it."

"You made Corvo's mask?" interrupted Anton.

"Along with the rest of his instruments, yes," said Piero. "I... I had a dream, and... and it would not leave me until I created it. But I cannot control what the ideas are. Many of them are...n-n-not useful." He trailed off.

"That's it?" said Anton when he had been quiet for a little while. He sounded disappointed, and a touch of something else.

"I wish I could tell you more," said Piero, and was surprised to find that he meant it. His own peculiar affliction seemed meager compared to the weight of what Anton had told him. He did not know what to do with that new knowledge, sitting heavy in his mind. He did not know what to do with the confidences of others. In some way he regretted having asked. But he found a strange warmth in the idea that Anton had trusted him with it. "I do not understand them. I do not know why they happen. I never have."

"They're a sign of the Outsider," said Anton.

Piero ducked his head, pushing his spectacles up on his nose. "I f-figured that much. It is not easy to find information that the A-abbey has not burned."

"No, they keep the good stuff for themselves. I have done...a large amount of research into this," said
Anton. The hunger that had flared up when Piero had mentioned the dreams had settled into a steady burn. "It means you're marked. Favored in some way. It means the Outsider is close to you. The Abbey would have thrown you off a cliff, that's for certain." He pushed away from the bench and returned to his endless pacing, spurred on by that burning desire. Piero was beginning to think Anton did not know how to stand still. Even when motionless he gave the impression of idling like an engine, turning gears and waiting to be connected back to the load. Smoke curled in his wake, silvery in the lamplight. Piero's eye followed the shapes it made. A notion twitched at the back of his mind, about folding. About repetition.

"I don't understand it!" Anton barked abruptly, gesturing wildly at the air. He choked on his frustration. "There has to be a reason! What's the pattern? Why this one and not the other? Why does he stay away for decades, then mark eight all at once? How does he choose them? What does he do to them? Why? Why you and not me!??"

"That is strange," said Piero as the thought occurred to him.

"It isn't fair!" bellowed Anton. His voice was coming apart the way it had when he had talked about Roseburrow, exposing an edge raw as snapped bone.

"Oh. No, not that," said Piero. "I was thinking that I have not heard a shot since you began talking."

Anton paused, caught up short. He listened to the silence. Then he took a short breath. Then another. The smell of sulfur hung heavy in the air.

"Is something burning?" he asked.

"Oh dear," said Piero. He went to the bench nearest the open wall of the workshop and looked up into the corner. High up on the wall a small vent pierced the brick. A thin trickle of grey smoke drifted through it.

"Shit," said Anton, all business once again, closing over the tear that had opened up. Piero climbed up onto the bench, picking his way gingerly through the half-built innards of the pylon. Inward he was astonished at how calm he felt. There was no hurry in his mind, no quiver in his voice. He gripped the louvers of the vent and gave it a sharp yank. The metal grate came free. Smoke poured in more freely.

Anton was behind him with a thick lump of canvas. Piero dropped the vent cover to the bench and Anton stuffed the cloth into the hole, but grey wisps still curled from under the edges. The air reeked of sulfur.

"Hold that down," instructed Piero. "I have been waiting for them to attempt this."

"A little sad it took them so long to think of it," said Anton. "The Watch isn't what it used to be."

"Nothing is as comforting as discovering your enemy is a fool," said Piero, going to one of the tall cabinets and retrieving a small box from the top shelf. It was made of a dull grey-blue steel and had no visible lock. He set it down on top of the blueprints, then ran his fingers over the metal. Tiny squares clicked and slid with his motions. After about a minute of manipulation the box gave a deep click. Piero lifted the lid and examined the contents.

Anton looked over his shoulder from where he was holding the canvas against the vent. "Oh, not fair," he breathed. "You've been holding out on me."

Piero removed two of the slim glass vials from their compartments in the neat, square rack. Their stoppers were sealed with black wax. He held first one, then the other up to the light, giving them a
little shake to check the consistency of the liquid inside. Then he hunted through the equipment they had pushed aside until he found a large glass retort, the bulbous hollow fruit of the vessel tapering to a long, downturned neck.

"If smoke can get in, smoke can get out," said Piero. He pulled himself up onto the bench, knelt, and broke the seals on the two vials. "Would you mind?" he said, holding the retort out to Anton.

"Not at all," said Anton. He shoved the canvas plug firmly into the vent, then knelt and took the retort in both hands. Piero poured first one, then the other vial through the small hole at the top of the vessel. The instant the two liquids touched they began to bubble. A thick white vapor formed immediately, lying heavy on the surface of the liquid. Piero took it back. Anton quickly stoppered the hole. The vapor oozed upwards, climbing towards the neck of the retort.

Piero stood. Anton yanked the canvas plug out. Grey smoke fountained out, reeking of sulfur. Piero carefully inserted the narrow end of the long neck into the vent, holding it steady while the liquid bubbled inside. The glass warmed beneath his fingers. Anton stuffed the canvas around the vent, resealing it with the retort stuck through the middle.

They waited in silence. Anton got down off the bench and checked on the electrodes in their plating bath. Piero felt the glass grow hot, but he flexed his fingers and kept his grip. The results would be unpleasant if any of that white vapor escaped inside the shop. He could imagine it now, pouring from the spout of the retort, running down the vent as it sank through the air and pooled on the ground outside.

From the other side of the shutters they heard a sudden shout, then an explosive coughing and sputtering. The sound of running. Someone retched and choked noisily on their own vomit. The sounds faded away into a strangled wheeze, then quiet.

Piero held onto the glass until it had cooled again and the liquid within had shrunk to a brown film. Then he extracted the retort and replaced the vent cover. No smoke wafted through it now. "Do not threaten a chemist with vapors," he said calmly.

An explosion burst against the wide shutter, shattering the quiet. The steel banged in its frame. Piero could see the flat surface rock back against its hinges, screeching with the impact. The metal bent before it sprang back. His stomach twisted.

"Plating's done," announced Anton from the other bench. They returned to work.

The emitter had been completed. The amplification circuits waited to sing out. The junctions that fed power to the device had been tuned with care. The modulators to distinguish the arc pylon's targets had taken longer, and Anton admitted he was not wholly certain of their function. They were elbow-deep in the machine now, making the last and most vital connections. Anton had given up keeping track of time, but the light that crept in around the shutters brightened towards midday. The incendiary shots hammered the walls. He could hear men shouting outside, giving orders. Metal scraped and squealed under protest. Piero saw Anton go to the largest shutter and examine the hinges that fastened it at the top. His worried expression told Piero all he needed to know.

The smoke had ceased to flow into the shop, but without an open window to refresh the air a thick haze remained. It rubbed Piero's throat raw. Anton began to cough, a steady, slow wheeze. Piero did not like the sound of it, and kept after him until Anton confessed to a childhood ailment that had left him with a weakness of the lungs. Piero found the fine-woven cloths he used for filtrations and cut squares to use as masks. Anton wound one around his nose and mouth, leaving only his eyes exposed, watering and red-rimmed. He looked exhausted and Piero scarcely felt better. His spell of unconsciousness had been far from restful, and the continual focus of the last day was becoming
harder and harder to sustain. His sight blurred behind the lenses of his spectacles. He left the mask down around his neck; otherwise he could not seem to get enough air. The deafening noise of the incendiaries began to numb his mind, making everything distant and half-understood.

The pylon towered over them both. In his mild delirium Piero felt as if it had taken on a life of its own, as if after springing from their combined minds it had grown larger than either. The rhythmic salvos fired by the besiegers outside became a monstrous heartbeat. With every circuit they completed it seemed less a construct and more a mosaic they were filling in, tile by tile, placing physical form around a waiting design. There was a presence coiled in that nest of wires and steel, nearing emergence. Near to waking up.

Anton melted tin and lead in a small crucible over an oil flame while Piero slit the heavy burlap sacks and dumped the sand inside into a wide metal tub, mixing it with water and a powdery clay. Then he pressed the machined template piece into the surface of the sand and carefully withdrew it, repeating the motion several times. Anton took the tongs and poured the contents of the crucible into the shapes left behind. The silvery metal pooled and bubbled, its surface shivering every time an explosive landed. When it had cooled back into solidity they dug out the new pieces and filed them down and fed them to the pylon.

The steady percussion of the Watch went on. Piero found himself cringing in the brief silences as he waited for the next blow. The thread of daylight that outlined the largest shutter widened to a cord. Something was bothering Anton. Piero could tell. It amazed him that he could divine such a thing. Neither of them had exchanged words on the subject, and yet he could feel a twist in the air that told some fundamental part of his mind: something is bothering Anton. It was in all his little glances, his occasional muttering, the many times he opened his mouth as if to speak and halted, mute. But as rare as it was that he had figured this out, Piero had no idea what to do about it. Perhaps it was nothing. Perhaps in his current state he was imagining things, or had misjudged the situation as he had so many others. At last he decided that if it were serious, Anton would say something, and if it were not, well, it was not his problem; and so he let it lie.

They drained the last of the water to polish the electrodes to a razor sheen. Their needle points flashed in the light. Together Piero and Anton cleaned and oiled the glass vessel that would form the pylon’s electric heart. They wiped the resonant chamber free of any dust or grit, any speck that might foul the trans and interrupt the clean harmonics of the energies folded within. Anton cleared a space on the cutting bench and laid the glass globe down. Piero rummaged in a drawer and pulled out a flat black spool, measuring it against the diameter of the sphere.

"Is that Serkonan copper?" said Anton, astonished.

Piero pulled the ruddy copper wire out from the spool. "Cecelia found it for me," he said. Another unexpected crack inside him. He bit down on it.

"I haven't seen any since the blockade began," said Anton, still staring at the wire. He took the spool from Piero and examined it in the light. "This will be perfect for the resonant coils."

"I would have thought you would have had access," said Piero, surprised.

"Not for lack of trying," grumbled Anton.

"I cannot imagine the Royal Physician encounters many obstacles in his work," began Piero stiffly. Anton burst into laughter, but it broke down into a coughing fit.

"Oh, you have no concept, do you," he said, when he had regained his breath. "No concept of the amount of shit I must endure. It consumes every hour of the day. Nobles must be persuaded to part
with their coin. The Empire must be bribed and flattered into listening. The Abbey must be soothed, lest it shout 'Heresy!' and trample over matters it has no comprehension of. Even natural philosophers must be trained like snowhound pups to run in harness and leave off savaging each other. It's a wonder I have any time for my own researches at all."

"You have the time to paint," said Piero.

"Not what I want!" exclaimed Anton. "I loathe those portraits. How is it that, given the entire world to choose from, the sight these people most want to look upon is their own face? Not a penny to feed a weeper, but bars of gold to immortalize their own ugly noses." He sighed. "But every coin those weasels pay to gaze at themselves is one that I can put to something worthwhile."

"At least you have the coin," said Piero quietly. Anton looked taken aback. "Havelock found me after my last landlord threw me out of my lodgings. I couldn't make the rent even for a half-size flop on Pearl Street. Without an Academy signet ring, there is no work for a natural philosopher, not even as a druggist or a maker of weapons. And the Academy keeps it that way." He gestured at the small workroom around them, the loft above. "This shop is the most space I have had to call my own in a long while."

"Well," muttered Anton after a little while. "I suppose it isn't all bad."

Anton had fashioned the coil forms while Piero had been out, cutting the templates by hand, from memory. The grooves carved into the steel cones marked where the copper wire would be wrapped and pressed into the complex shape of the resonant chamber's harmonic coils. As Piero inspected them he found the sinuous lines held a certain mathematical beauty, an intimation of structure behind them, a sense that they traced out the edges of an invisible whole. The curves were right, Piero could tell. A part of his mind understood instinctively that they hewed to an underlying rule. And yet another shape itched at the back of his thoughts.

As Anton unspooled the thick copper in preparation Piero held up a hand and said, "Wait."

He took the copper from Anton's hands, staring at it, unsure himself what he was going to do. He began to bend it, watching his own motions as if they were a stranger's.

The curls of smoke. Curves. Seafoam, bubbles nestled up against each other, big and little side by side. The wavelets that lapped the shore, the cliffs of water that crashed against the breakwater. A man and a city. A pattern that twisted around itself, laid out in stone across a floor he couldn't quite bring to mind. A single idea wound beneath them all, an idea Piero could only trace around the edges of, grasping at fragments. The small and the large, folding together, falling after itself, forever.

He reached for a pair of sharp-nosed pliers without taking his eyes off the wire. Anton handed them to him silently, watching in rapt and baffled fascination. Piero turned a sharp corner in the copper and almost closed the loop. Left a gap. Moved on. A shape formed beneath his fingers, pointed like a snowflake, a larger form that divided into smaller copies of itself.

When it was completed he held it up to the light, examining. Anton took it from him gently and turned it over and over in his hands. The thing that was gnawing at Anton took a sharp bite; and then it was gone so fast Piero decided he had been imagining it.

"What in the hell," he said finally.

"I do not know," said Piero, suddenly embarrassed. He dropped the pliers to the workbench. "It seemed th-the right shape."
Anton held it up to his face, peering at Piero through the strange coil. "Hmm," he said, running his fingers along the shape. "Fine detail for the narrow harmonics... But the overall shape will conduct the wide ones..." An excitement built in his voice. He laid it flat on the workbench and waved a grease pencil over it, pointing. "Yes. Yes, this could function. Better than function. We can expand the range of the emanations greatly by tuning the contact points. Where are my electrodes..." Anton fished around in the pile of parts.

Piero took the spool, clipped through the wire to free the first coil, and began to form a second. He remembered Cecelia pressing it into his hand. And like the single leaf that blocked a drain, the moment he moved that memory aside a flood came pouring through. He remembered the impromptu housewarming party Pendleton had hosted when they had moved into the Hound Pits. He remembered Corvo taking up the instruments Piero had made for the first time, admiring their craft. He remembered the quiet glow on Corvo's face when he had returned with Emily, the girl sitting on his knee and demanding to know where they were going. He remembered the day Samuel took her and Callista out on the Wrenhaven for a quick boattride, how she had shrieked when she returned, "He let me steer!" He remembered Martin's homecoming after they had given him up for dead, how Havelock and Pendleton had greeted him with embraces and quiet relief. He remembered the joy of the victory party. There were so many memories he had not known he had. The lives of others had been happening all around him even as he had hidden in his loft and waited for his to start. He remembered the day Havelock had found him in Pearl Street, slumped onto one of the public benches with what he could salvage of his equipment strewn around him.

*I need something custom-made, and I hear you're the man to do it,* Havelock had said.

*What are you building?* he had inquired.

*A revolution.*

The memories cut him even as he brought them to mind, and it seemed that now they must all be soured by the knowledge of how it had ended. Yet he found that, far from bitterness, they still held a certain glow. Havelock was trying to kill him. But Havelock had once given him a shop, security, and more than that; a purpose, a goal, a way out of the pit he increasingly understood his life had become. It went bad in the end. But once it had been good, and the sweetness remained.

He pressed the wire between two palms, an unlooked-for gift. "Thank you," he said to it quietly, so Anton wouldn't hear.

The resonant chamber was a tangle of glass and copper and steel. Held between the points of the electrodes, the strange folds of the new coils gave it an unsettling look, as if the sphere contained more space than it ought to. The angles of it did not seem to add up in the expected way. Piero held it beneath the spout of the oil pump and closed the mouth with a rubber seal to catch every drop. The vessel was heavy in his arms and he would rather have given the task to Anton. But the man's hands had begun to tremble, and Piero did not think it was from fear, not when Anton had asked him twice if he was certain he had no more wine forgotten in the shop. Anton pulled the lever to open the valve. The pump whined to life and thick translucent fluid splashed into the globe. As the level neared the top the pump sputtered, draining the cistern to its dregs. Anton slammed the valve closed as soon as it was full; Piero detached it and carried it with the utmost deliberation to his desk in the loft where it sat, glowing with a faint blue light.

Anton checked the cistern gauge. "That's the last of the oil," he announced. "No second chances."

They waited for an interlude in the brick-rattling explosions and linked arms to carry the heavy chamber down the stairs. Anton inspected the many little vials Piero had secreted away in his lockbox. Finally he selected three, cracked their seals, and poured them into the chamber. The oil
hissed and gave off a sharp smell of ink, seething like a living thing. The glow brightened.

The cavity at the center of the pylon gaped like an open chest awaiting its heart. Piero almost shied away at the last second. When they maneuvered the sphere into position, when Anton locked the main junctions into place, he backed away in instinctive apprehension. The pylon was complete, he knew it. That waiting potential had been realized. He felt no sense of victory. Anton did not seem satisfied either; the phantom was gnawing at him again, and he looked as if he had been abruptly confronted with an unsavory task.

Piero edged away from the device and checked the master blueprint. A concussion smacked the other side of the wall; dust sifted down. He brushed it away irritably. Parts had been outlined in red pencil as they were completed. The entire structure was now so delineated with the exception of a small cylinder near the top.

"The firing circuit is next," announced Piero.

"I did the firing circuit," said Anton, still busy with the wiring. "We're all done."

"You did not mark it on the schematic," said Piero, annoyed. He flipped through the stacked sheets that outlined the many parts of the pylon, looking for that component. "What have you done with the blueprint?"

"I didn't touch the blueprint," said Anton. He connected the last junction within the pylon and went to the back cabinets, searching the shelves.

"You said you constructed it," accused Piero.

"I know how to build a firing circuit," shot back Anton. "I don't need a piece of paper to tell me how to build a firing circuit."

"That piece of paper contains the pulsation sequence," said Piero. Worry began to itch, the feeling that he needed to remember something. He reached the bottom, let the stack of papers flop back onto the table, and began to look through them a second time. "If the coils are not energized in the correct order, the consequences will be entirely unpredictable."

There was a sharp click behind him. Someone had cocked a crossbow. Piero ignored it, annoyed that Anton was messing around with the weapons again instead of helping him search for the schematic. He thumbed through the papers, examining them more closely and trying to come to grips with time. He had drafted the blueprints two days ago. He had begun manufacturing the first components after that. He had laid them out. He had gone to visit Sokolov. He had--

A cold jet of fear lanced through his body. Piero stiffened in horrified realization. He had brought the firing circuit diagram to show Havelock.

Piero turned to tell Anton that they had a problem, and Anton was pointing the bow at him with a hand that did not tremble at all.
"I need you to leave the papers alone and come stand in the middle of the room," Anton told him.

"This is no time for experiments," said Piero, now thoroughly irritated. "That blueprint is--"

Anton jerked the crossbow towards him. "Piero, I'm threatening you," he said, exasperated.

"What?" said Piero, confused.

"I am going to shoot you if you don't do what I tell you to," explained Anton patiently.

"Why?"

"Because shut up I have the crossbow, that's why!" snapped Anton. "Dammit, you're being difficult on purpose!" His voice shook but the square tip of the bolt remained steady. There was a manic gleam in his eyes above the cloth mask.

"I have never been threatened with a crossbow before," said Piero, still trying to understand what was happening. The constant barrage of explosions had numbed his senses; a day and a half without sleep had dropped a bromine veil between him and the world. "I am not aware of the procedure."

"The procedure is tell me what I fucking want to know!" shouted Anton. That edge had broken open in him again, that raw and bleeding madness. "I know you lied to me before. I know it. You have to tell me the rest of it!"

"The rest of what?" asked Piero. He kept the words calm even as a tremor infected his limbs. His brain began to wake up to the idea that Anton might mean it about shooting him.

"The mask," said Anton. A fever was on him now. The words tumbled out. "Corvo's mask. I know he's in contact with the Outsider somehow, who knows what he had to do to get it. I was certain Corvo had gotten the mask from him. The death's head, with blue eyes and the jaw sewn shut with gold. It's an old sigil. Not one someone would know, not without access to the Abbey's archives, the real archives. But you made it, not him. That means you're in contact too. The Outsider is in contact with you. You have to tell me how!" His voice rose sharply. "You have to tell me how you did it!"

"That is what this is about?" said Piero, aghast. "I told you, I saw it in a dream! That was it!" He was deeply, suddenly furious. The blood rose hot in his cheeks. It was absurd. The Watch was beating down the door and Anton was willing to shoot him over a matter as pointless as a dream about a mask.

"I don't understand why you would lie to me," said Anton. He sounded almost as hurt as Piero felt. "I told you the truth. Why would you lie?"

"I did not lie! I did not do anything!" said Piero. A helpless rage boiled up in a flash. The sense of that invisible wire strobed in and out of his mind, hovering on the edge of existence. "I never wanted these dreams!" he spat. "I do not know why they chose me! I wish I understood!"
"Why won't you just tell me!?” barked Anton. There was no mistaking his voice now for that of a sane man. A mania had gripped him, a haunted look. "I just need to-- I just need to ask-- I have to know, you don't understand, I have to know--"

Two loose ends, illuminated in perfect clarity. Piero's mind connected them.

"What happened in Pandyssia?” he asked.

Anton stared at him, stunned, mouth agape.

"How dare you,” he growled. "I am the Head of the Academy, and I will not be questioned by a man who never even earned his ring!”

The rage rose faster than thought in Piero's chest, his cheeks flushing. How could Anton say something like that, when he knew how Piero felt, how could he--

"You're baiting me!” exclaimed Piero in sudden realization. "You are making me angry so I will stop asking you!” The guilty flash across Anton's face told him he'd struck true. The rage vanished into an intense curiosity. The problem snapped into focus, when the gears meshed and the way ahead became clear. "I am right,” he said, advancing. "You saw something!"

Anton leveled the bow at him. "Stop,” he said urgently. "Stop right there."

Piero ignored him. He felt a strange calm, a sudden awareness of reality. This was real, the dirt beneath his fingernails and the sweat under his arms was real, the crossbow Anton held was real and it could really kill him, if Anton sent the bolt through his heart he would really die. And in the space of that keen awareness he understood at last that Anton was real as well; that he was alive and breathing and had a past and a mind and a heart and hopes and fears and at the center of it this one overriding madness that drove him to do what he had done. To him Piero Joplin was only a bit part, a minor player in the drama unfolding within his head. And in his mind assembled all the glimpses and fragments that outlined the whole, and that understanding pressed him forward against the merely human concern of imminent death.

"You saw something so awful even the High Overseer is scared to write it down,” Piero declared. "You fled to Pandyssia to escape Esmond Roseburrow's ghost and it frightened you into running straight back. You are willing to summon a creature of the Void, a being the Abbey fears like no other, just to ask a question. You are so desperate for any kind of lead that you will threaten your only chance at survival just to get a hint. What is so awful to deserve all that, Anton!?" he shouted, and was amazed to hear himself shout. "What happened in Pandyssia!?"

Anton backed away. He still held the crossbow steady, the point aimed with anatomical precision. But the manic fixation had been swallowed by a deeper emotion, welling up like a leviathan breaching in dark waters, and now Piero saw that it was fear.

"I can't," he managed. "I can't."

"A man changes when he sees a way to get what he wants," quoted Piero sourly. "I ought to at least know what my blood is buying."

"I can't," repeated Anton.

"Why not?"

"Because it will kill you," he said. "It nearly killed me."
"You have a crossbow pointed at my heart," said Piero. "I cannot say I am altogether worried."

"Then you are a damned fool," said Anton, flaring up again. "There are worse things than death."

"And what do you know of them?"

"More than I would like!" shouted Anton.

Another incendiary crashed against the shutter.

The heavy steel had been forged in the mills of Dunwall to bear the strain of a warehouse on its back. The shutter had been cast to withstand the power of an exploding oil tank and contain the shrapnel of the blast. But it had not been meant to take blow after blow, heating and cooling, straining and sagging back. The hinges at the top had twisted and pulled at their brick anchors, bending away from the frame. The gap at the top had widened to a hand’s-breadth.

The tallboy nocked the arrow, pulled back his string, felt the tension in the springs and pulleys of his compound bow. Breathed out. Sighted in. Released. The arrow dropped through the air to strike true on the panel of steel. The trans detonated on impact. The arrowhead burst apart as the oil within vaporized in a flash. The paper tube of paste behind it caught fire at once, still hurtling forward with the momentum of the shot, tearing open and spraying in a hot arc.

And a glowing mass sailed through the gap and stuck on the wooden lab bench, burning merrily.

It took Piero a moment to notice it in the aftermath of the sound. He pointed and yelled and Anton could not help a glance over his shoulder. His eyes widened and he dropped the bow.

"The trans!" shouted Piero. If the arc pylon or their last oil tank caught, it would be the end of them, and the building besides.

The fire spread, hidden in a dark cloud. Some chemical in the paste burned to produce a thick black smoke. It boiled up like a solid wall, like a jet of water that sprayed upwards and broke against the ceiling. Piero ran for the emergency hose affixed to the wall, but when he slammed the valve open the rubber tube gave a hissing gurgle and deflated. The water cistern had run dry.

More than half of the cutting bench’s surface was now aflame. He could see the coat of embers glowing dimly through the smoke. The wood sparked and popped as traces of chemicals that had soaked in long ago now found a new chance at life. Then Anton re-emerged from where he had been searching beneath the stairs, a bulky brown object folded in his arms. He flung it out across the burning wood: the thick burlap sacking that had held the molding sand. Smoke curled out from the edges. Anton stepped back from the bench.

A clatter sounded at the shutter, making him turn. A dark object sailed through the gap and landed clear across the workshop. It skittered along the stone floor until it knocked against the supply crates stowed underneath the stairs. Piero drew breath to shout, but the moment he inhaled the smoke reached thick grey fingers down his throat and choked off the words. He doubled over, hacking, fumbling the white cloth mask from around his neck up over his mouth and nose. His pulse roared in his ears. Then the object burst with an incandescent flare, a deafening concussion following on its heels.

When Piero's vision cleared he saw the entire pile of supply crates burning with a merry flame.

Dense black smoke filled the workshop. The electric light that speared down through it was red as blood. Anton had disappeared into the cloud. Piero stumbled forward, dizzy. He saw shapes in its billowing folds, grotesque and human alike, looming and reaching for him. The smoke churned like
river-mist, lying low and heavy over the Glaiwes at sunset, and imagined cries filled his ears. The high piping of childish voices, a blind and idiot sound, wreathing around him as he hid in the reeds along the riverbank. Where's he gone? Run home to his mama again. You see he had a fit when Bradley chucked his stupid book in the water? I saw, swear he was foamin' at the mouth, like a mad dog or summat. One day he's gonna bite you. Yeah, yeah, you'll catch bein' a weirdo too...

His shin caught some short object and he fell with a sharp cry. Piero caught himself on his palms, bright pain stabbing through his wrists. He groped for his spectacles and found them against the object that had tripped him. A dented tub filled with something heavy. The sand mold.

He bolted to his feet, grabbed the rim of the tub, and went for where the smoke was thickest. His eyes watered and he could not take off his spectacles to wipe them clear. The mask pressed against his mouth as he panted, gasping for air. Everything smelled of sulfur and burning wood. He hoped it was only wood that was burning. Metal crashed on metal somewhere in the grey. The pylon's silhouette loomed out of the smoke, tall and strange. In his delirium it became another person, a third man who watched with interest as he dragged the tub across the floor.

The memory of the river left him, but another followed fast. The smell of burning wood slipped into the scent of polish, hot in the morning sun where it came slanting in through the tall windows of Baefric Hall. They had left him sitting there while they retreated to the Masters' Commons. It could not have been more than half an hour that they were gone, measured by the great mantel clock whose tick burrowed inch by inch into his brain while his thoughts chased each other. They cannot fail to see the truth, he reassured himself. They will see the truth and put this injustice right...

The Masters re-entered in a whirl of black robes, a sea of white hair and distracted expressions. Half of them were already carrying on conversations amongst themselves. All bore the colored slashes of specialty and tenure on their sleeves save for the man who seated himself at the center of the table, the man all in black who took up the gavel and impatiently rapped the meeting to order.

His foot struck metal. Something clattered away. He heard a sudden twang, felt a dart of wind nip at the leg of his trousers, and knew the crossbow bolt had just missed him.

The flames glowed dull through the heavy smoke. The heat pushed at him as he neared the burning pile. He lifted the heavy tub into his arms and wheezed as he raised it to shoulder height. The weight of the tub shifted awkwardly. He leaned back, then tottered forward and tipped the tub's load of sand over the flames. It sagged out in a thick brown pile. He kicked at it, spreading it over the burning wood. Smoke fought its way up, but the wet sand pressed down over the embers, choking the life from them.

Piero dropped the tub to the ground and bent over, wheezing. The air was still opaque with swirling grey. Water ran from his eyes. The silhouette of the pylon regarded him with amusement.

Air, he heard in his ear, clear as if someone were speaking to him. He whipped his head around, searching for Anton, but no one was there. The smoke was full of half-seen shapes. Such a simple need. How do humans take it so for granted, when a few moments of its lack are enough to kill?

Piero stumbled forward, searching for the metal staircase that ran up to the loft. Distances seemed wrong, angles wobbling and inverting. The smoke only thickened as he ascended. The memories dissolved into fragments that plucked at him, scraps of voice and place and sight. He kept one hand fixed to the railing, bent almost double. He heard a sharp bang, or perhaps he had hallucinated that. Another, the sound of metal on metal. The mask was wet across his mouth, soaked with breath and sweat. He reached the top of the stairs. He could see no further than his outstretched arm. The solid grey played tricks on his vision, fading in and out, blurring into a blue emptiness.
Swimming at the bottom of an ocean of air, he heard, a voice speaking high and far away, faintly amused. It held a chill entirely divorced from his own recollections. **Humans so love to picture a roof over their heads, keeping the darkness out. What a comforting lie.**

He kept a desperate grip on the railing, following it around the loft until he came to the wall. With one hand he felt for the metal windowsill; with the other he searched out the prybar they had used last night. His fingers closed around the cold iron. Piero walked his other hand up the brick wall until he found the windowsill. He stood and groped blindly for the edge of the shutter, wedging the tongue of the prybar beneath it. He threw his weight against the end of the prybar. The shutter cracked open a few precious inches. The jack. Where had they left the jack?

*Chase the sky. I dare you. Chase it as high and hard and fast as you can. You will grasp nothing, until all around you is blackness and you turn to see that it was where you started all along.*

Piero flailed around desperately, still leaning his weight on the prybar's end, until his hand knocked hard against metal. He grabbed the jack and pressed it under the edge moments before his strength gave out and the shutter crashed back down. It landed on the pad of the jack. His vision was narrowing, black water rushing in. He put his face down near the crack at the bottom of the shutter and took a few deep breaths, steadying his hands. Then he began to turn the screw of the jack, winching the metal upwards inch by inch. A square of daylight grew before him. The curls of smoke billowed and wavered. The square widened. The fresh air seared his throat. He gulped at it in great, welcome breaths.

When the jack reached its full height he dropped his grip on it and slumped back against the wall. The smoke around him was thinning, but the rest of the workshop was still filled with an impenetrable cloud. He could not see if the fire was still burning, if the pylon was still intact. He could not see--

Anton coughing in the haze a few hours before. *A weakness of the lungs, he had confided in Piero. An old sickness. Can't abide smoke.*

Piero lay against the brick wall, suddenly frozen.

*And now we ask the most interesting question,* said that voice. The smoke surged around him like an incoming tide. Daylight penetrated only a few inches into its gloom.

*Do not bother,* said the familiar curves of his life. Leave him down there. It will not hurt. A few more minutes and he will simply never wake up. Better than he deserves, after what he did. That moment when Piero had seen the sharp square point of the bolt aimed at him, felt that sudden pain; it all broke open, an old wound that had never healed, only scabbed over and become part of him. The strike of the gavel, and then the words.

"Piero Joplin, charged with conduct unbecoming a scholar of natural philosophy, is stripped therefore of the rank of Underclassman and expelled forthwith from this Academy..."

Anton had not even looked at him as he said it.

Piero had trusted Anton, had believed him, had truly believed for a brief moment that he had been wrong. That his expulsion had been an unfortunate act by a pathetic and frightened man. That the world could be kind. And then Anton had shown his true colors the moment he thought the pylon was complete. It had all meant nothing to him. Piero had let himself be vulnerable and received a sharp lesson in return. That spectre haunted him in black robes, eyes distant, voice careless and cold. He felt as if he had been locked inside a dark room all his life, unable to open the door himself, wishing, hoping, screaming for someone to come in and find him.
Forget about him, whispered the leaden voice inside him. The same familiar misery welled up, his boon companion, bitter self-pity compounded with rage. Forget about everyone. The blind idiot laughter, the weeping in the reeds along the riverbank. Why are they like that? he cried, trying to understand. Because they are jealous. Because you are not the same. Because they are afraid. The world took much from him and gave nothing in return. The world was cruel and humans were never worth the price. To connect was to introduce complication, to risk so many frightening variations. It was not worth the pain. Return to loneliness; return to safety.

Everything in nature is in balance, and so too with the fates of man. The tide came in, the tide went out; it all summed to zero in the end, and left him alone on the shore. He felt again split in two, except now it was himself he was seeing, and the split continued on forever, until the mirror images blurred into a blue infinity. The open square of the window gaped behind him. He saw himself moving in the distance, letting the shutters up; saw himself escaping out onto the balcony, slipping down into the yard and away along the riverfront as the Watch were distracted with the discovery of Sokolov.

All he had to do was walk away and he would have it at last. His pride, his dignity, his perfect revenge. All he had to do was walk away and leave Anton behind. Anton, who had betrayed him. Had used Piero just like Havelock had, threatened him to get what he wanted. And placed against that final justice he had - what? A few scraps of kindness? An irrational conviction?

Wide pupils watching him with hazy interest, half-drugged and still sharp. A warning to keep silent. The weight of a secret told and trusted to be kept; a fiery comet blazing through the night air. The strength of a creation born from two minds and greater, somehow, than either.

A moment when he had understood that someone else existed.

Piero was back into the grey cloud before he could think twice, inhaling one last deep breath of fresh air like a whale preparing to dive. He stumbled on the stairs and went down four of them all at once, striking pain from his ankle and catching himself by the railing. Down here the smoke had been trapped by the overhang of the loft and churned beneath it, looking for a way out.

He found Anton sprawled near the shutter, one hand still holding a sledgehammer in a loose grip. Piero pushed at his shoulders and chest, calling to him, but Anton did not respond. Finally he heaved the body up and pulled one arm across his own shoulders, a chill part of him wondering if he were already carrying a corpse. But when he stumbled to his feet the motion woke something in the other man, and Anton stirred dimly and managed to get his legs under him.

"Hold on to me," Piero said, and Anton did not need to be told twice. He leaned hard against Piero as he lurched towards the stairs, fumbling for the railing with his other hand. He could hear Anton's breath rasping hard in his chest. A loud scraping came from back in the smoke. Anton stumbled on the stairs and fell forwards, pulling Piero down with him. Piero himself was beginning to feel lightheaded again. That blue blankness wavered like a heat haze on the edges of his vision. The weight of Anton dragged at him like lead.

"Come on," he urged him. "Come on."

Anton managed to get himself up on hands and knees, then, shakily, to his feet. Piero took the steps slowly. They lurched their way up, and as they did the air cleared slightly. The square of daylight at the other end of the loft shone through the grey. He dropped Anton against the brick wall at the base of the window and collapsed himself, yanking the mask down from his face and sucking in the fresh air. Anton still had his own mask on. The once-white cloth was now black with soot and smoke. Piero pulled it down for him.
Then for a few long moments he closed his eyes and let himself float on the surface of his exhaustion, savoring the simple joy of air while the daylight poured through the window in long beams.

When he opened his eyes again the smoke had thinned enough to see back down to the workshop. He leaned to one side, peering past the loft railing, and assessed the situation. Now he could see what Anton had been after with the sledgehammer. The top edge of the shutter where the fatal gap had opened up had been smashed and twisted back against the frame, closing the hole in their defenses. But the damage had been done. Fire had mangled the wooden cutting bench, charring its working surface black and eating through the trestle supports until the table listed like a ship in a gale. The heavy cutting tools had fallen from it, their smooth lines warped by the heat. The supply crates and all else that had been stored under the stairs were nothing more than charcoal awash in dirty sand. The metal cabinets were streaked with soot. Stray embers had scorched the floor and burned holes in the surface of the other worktable. Anton must have thrown more sacking over the blueprint table, protecting the papers from igniting as well, protecting the last oil tank that glowed in the shadows beneath it.

The pylon rose in the middle of it all, untouched.

Anton's breathing was steady, but he did not stir. Piero went back downstairs and found the little crossbow where he had kicked it across the floor. The bolt was stuck an inch deep in the table across the room. For a moment he considered holding on to it himself. But the power of the weapon in his hand frightened him as it always did, the constant awareness of its potential to harm, and he dropped it back into the safe and spun the combination dials.

As he shut the door a loud screech of metal made him jump. He stayed frozen for a moment, listening. When the sound did not repeat itself he approached the shutter cautiously. He could hear voices shouting on the other side, the clipped tones of orders issued and expected to be obeyed. The dull clunk of thick iron. The Watch had finally found some heavy equipment.

When he returned to the window Anton's eyes were open. Piero sat down on his left without a word.

"I do not think I would have shot you," said Anton at last. His voice was a tortured rasp, as charred as the cutting bench.

"Pardon me if I do not care to undertake the experiment," said Piero. Anton smiled, but it faded quickly.

"I did not lie to you," said Piero quietly. "I have told you all I know. Whatever you want, I do not have."

"I know," said Anton, sounding wretched.

"I do not think you do," said Piero. Frustration mounted in his words. "Do you realize what I endure? You say the Outsider is close to me. I say that he uses me. I bear no mark. I made no bargain. I am helpless in the hands of a power I cannot even put a face to. There are parts of my life I cannot remember. Whole days have passed that I have no recollection of. What have I done? What has it done to me? Would you pay that price for your curiosity?" He told himself the water leaking from the corners of his eyes was only the smoke, and swiped at it angrily with the back of his hand. "If you want it, then - then you are welcome to it!"

"You don't understand," said Anton weakly. "I am already paying. You don't understand what I need to ask."
"Then help me understand," said Piero.

Anton blinked, pulling back slightly. Piero had surprised him in some way, he could tell. He looked as though he were struggling to comprehend some wholly new invention.

"You do not want to know," he said.

"I do," said Piero.

"No," repeated Anton. "You're saying that because it is a locked door and you cannot bear the wondering. But I am on the other side, telling you, no. You do not want this."

"I live my life in the grip of a power I cannot fathom," retorted Piero. "You have-- You have seen what it does to me. I have told you myself that my actions are not always my own. I do not think there is much that will burden me further."

Anton did not have an answer for that. Piero touched his shoulder, so that he was forced to meet his gaze.

"Anton," he said. "What happened in Pandyssia?"

Grey eyes dropped from his, returned to searching the smoke, as if its motion spelled out a message in some cipher he had forgotten how to read. And then he started to speak.

"The sunrise continent is vast," Anton began. "It is largely unexplored. And there is a reason for that. Even those native to its shores do not venture willingly into the interior. But we were shipwrecked and desperate, and so we dared. And that is where we saw it."

"What was it?" said Piero. He could not hide a burning curiosity, this close to unraveling the mystery of Anton Sokolov. "What did you see?"

Anton's face changed, and in it Piero saw a despair he had never before beheld, intense and profound. A wound that had struck through the meat of the man and lodged in his soul.

"Cities," whispered Anton.

Piero blinked. He must have misheard.

"P-pandyssia has..." he said, his own voice barely above a whisper. "The c-continent was n-never settled."

"I saw cities," said Anton, firmer now. The first incision had been made; he grew bolder. "Swallowed up by the jungle. Bleached under desert sands. Cradled by mountains on vast plateaus of ice. I saw the ruins of empires."

"T-that is i-impossible," said Piero. "There are n-no records of a-any such thing."

"Precisely," said Anton.

"You - are lying," he said. There could not be cities in Pandyssia. The continent had never been inhabited, could not be. Any further than a hundred miles and the land itself seemed determined to be rid of invaders. Expeditions staggered back with a handful of survivors, if they returned at all.

"I wish I were," said Anton, closing his eyes. "If only I could convince myself of that. A great civilization ruled there once. Perhaps several. And they lived and died so long ago that we have no memory that they ever were."
Piero's mind reeled, trying to fit this idea into his concept of the world. It would not go. It seemed almost... The only word that came to mind was blasphemous. He never thought he would have cause to use it. "The A-abbey has c-c-calculated, from the life of the sun," he protested weakly. "It cannot have burned more than a few thousand years, or it would have used up its f-fuel. The world c-cannot be any older..."

"I tell you they are wrong," said Anton, warming to his topic now that Piero had not run screaming. The old fire crept back into his voice, that electricity. "Humanity is old and this world is older still, far older than we can comprehend. Our entire concept of our existence, of our place in the cosmos, is wrong. The Abbey has lied throughout our history. It is all a lie. What we know and hold to be true is nothing but the thinnest rind around the meat of reality." He paused, catching the words. His voice dropped, as though he feared even now to be overheard. "Some of those places... Some of them I am almost certain were not built by humans at all."

Piero stared at him, aghast. Now he knew Anton must be mad. Pandyssia had broken him, that much was clear. "N-n-nonsense," he said. "Y-you were d-dreaming...d-d-delirious, or..."

"Is it truly so strange to think? Forget what the Abbey has told you," said Anton. He gestured at the ground below the metal floor of the loft. "Dunwall itself is built on the corpse of a city dead centuries past. I have unearthed its bones in the deep cellars of nobles, keeping company with the latest vintages. They call a fifty-year wine 'ancient' when next to it is the stone of a hearth a thousand years cold. The harbor breakwater was here before the first town. There are signs carved into its base that the Overseers have mortared over, out of fear. The old rulers’ citadel is beneath Dunwall Tower." Some of the color left his face. "You don't want to know what's underneath the Abbey."

Piero lay back against the wall, his mind still spinning. Madness. And yet. It tallied too well with what he felt in his gut, in some part of him that had always known this. The salt scent of the sea curled in through the window. How ancient its depths; what wrecks did it keep? Humanity was old. The Earth was older. And the Earth itself nothing but a speck in a vast darkness that circled round, and what they saw and knew and felt every day - dissolving into dreams of madness and empty blue, waiting always beneath the surface, waiting for one careless misstep that would permit it to swallow them whole...

"We crossed near one of them," continued Anton. "All the rest we saw from a distance. We could tell ourselves they were tricks of the sun or the snow. Then we crossed near one, in the deep jungle. Built of huge blocks of onyx stone, quarried from who knows where. For days as we labored through the trees we saw its black towers on the horizon. They had a queer, alien shape to them. They spoke to me of an intelligence so close and yet so far from ours, of matters beyond any we had dared to contemplate. They called to me. And I could not resist. I went."

"Y-you w-w-went in!?" said Piero, incredulous, sitting upright. "Y-y-you dared to g-g-go in t-t-t-o one of them?"

"The men refused," said Anton. "I cursed them for cowards and took a torch and went alone." He seemed now astonished at his own past self. "I was a colossal fool. I have paid the price ever since." He shifted and stretched his left shoulder unconsciously, where the motion was a little shortened.

Piero waited for more, half eager, half in dread. But Anton's expression had twisted inwards, a ghostly echo of terror floating across it. When he spoke again, he said only, "We staggered into Dunwall Harbor starved and scarred, but alive. The worst had passed. Or so I thought. But as I walked through the city, the capitol of the Empire, the city that had once seemed so grand to a shepherd's boy... As I stood in the shadow of all its brawling chaos I could not help but see the lines of those empty towers, blind and lost to the ages. I could not help but think... Why?"
Anton spread his hands in a beseeching gesture, palms upwards, stirring the smoke. "Why struggle in vain to produce a light that cannot stand against the black weight of time?" he implored. "Why bother to scrabble in the dust? All that I have ever accomplished means nothing against the skill that wrought those onyx towers. I passed through the tombs of empires. I saw civilizations that rose so much greater than us, and only the leviathans remember their names. What chance do we have when those far better have fought with all their wisdom and craft, and earned only a crumbling silence in the darkest jungle?"

He dropped his hands back to the cold metal floor of the loft. "So now you understand why I must find him," he said, his ruined voice near to breaking. "He is not of time and space, not as we comprehend it; and so he is the only one who can tell me if this will be our fate as well. If there is nothing we can do to avert it. If all we build must someday come to dust, and be forgotten, and form only ruins for some distant primitive to shrink from in fear. I know that it sounds fantastic, like a fever-dream or some jungle delirium. But I tell you it is the truth, and I will not rest until I have my answer."

"I believe you," said Piero.

Anton turned his head, a look of wonder supplanting the pain of recollection.

"You do?" he said, incredulous.

"I do," said Piero. "And I think..." He cringed from saying it aloud. But the memory of that feverish hunger was still fresh in his mind, the manic gleam in Anton's eye. He felt as he did before an amputation, telling the patient the arm would have to come off. The shrapnel had lodged in his soul, the infection had set in; he marked it out with a physician's eye. The disease would eat him alive if it were not treated. "A-and...you do not need to ask."

Anton's face contorted in pain. "I have to know," he repeated desperately. "I have to ask him. Just this one question. I only have to know the answer..."

"You already do," said Piero. The weight of the bonesaw in his hands. "You know that it is true."

"No," said Anton, denying it with all the ferocity of a child, with the stubborn pain of a child who has been told a parent is not coming home. "It can't be."

And why did it hurt so much to say it? Piero had never shrunk from a truth before, no matter how grim. Men had come to him with wounds gone raw and septic and begged him to say he could save them. Mothers had brought him their children raving with fever, already bleeding from the plague. He had told them the truth, no more and no less. And yet this cut him almost as much as he knew it would hurt the man he meant to help.

"It is true," he pronounced, and he felt a shadow on the words, an echo like the crashing of black waves. The syllables engraved themselves on the air with a leaden finality.

"Then how do we go on?" burst out Anton, all bleeding desperation, a wild sorrow. "How do we go forth in the face of such horror?"

Piero opened his mouth to reply, then found he had no words to answer with.

He knew he would one day die in the same abstract way he knew the planets that wandered through the night. He knew, too, that he would never have a family of his own. He would never found cities, fight wars, write poetry to echo through the ages. All he was, all he would leave this world when he passed from it, were his creations.
Yet to imagine the world itself capable of dissolving, everything he had built left to rot and pass from all memory, the accumulated lives of millions crumbling to dust... It boggled the mind. He felt the same cold touch that wrapped around Anton’s heart and squeezed the life from it, that chill weight that whispered this universe is old and cold and cares nothing for us, and all our efforts only a match-flame struck against an endless darkness. The blind idiot laughter of children, the petty cruelty. The jealousy and the rejection and the sheer bleak unfairness of it all, the indifference of humans to each other and of reality to everything within. It sucked the marrow from his dreams and left them cracked and dry. What was the point of it? Of anything?

"I w-will not lie and say I have never thought the s-same," he began, halting and uncertain, fumbling for words as he spoke. "It does not take the s-s-sight of --" he could not say it "-- of w-w-what you h-have s-seen, to make a man d-doubt the worth of all he has done. And there are days when it has seemed to me all our race has created is nothing but pettiness and vanity, and that we would be b-b-better served if the sea swept in and drowned it entire. And yet..."

Then why did you keep going? asked a tiny voice. I ask because it does not fit. Why did you not step off the parapet of Kaldwin’s Bridge, take just one draught more of your tonic and drift away, never to wake?

I wanted my revenge. He had clutched at the dream of his just reward, warmed himself at its flame. But had vengeance been all that drove him on? What, then, brought you to the door of the Academy? whispered that small voice. What had pushed him from the only home he had ever known and sent him alone and penniless into the terrifying grandeur of the Empire’s capitol? It had frightened him to his bones and yet he had gone.

"I only know that...d-dark as I may find this world at times...I do not wish to leave it, either," he said. The first day the farmer’s cart had come within sight of Dunwall’s towers spearing up from the banks of the Wrenhaven. The first day he had stood on the Academy steps. So many memories he had not realized he had. They flared up within him in a sudden light like burning magnesium. Even, yes, even the memory of the first lecture, delivered in ringing tones by a man all in black, grey eyes blazing in a pale and foreign face.

"There are so many things I do not understand," he said. "So much to do, so much to build. So much to see and make and find..." And now he knew that Anton was listening and thought as well What brought you down a Tyvian mountainside to fight until you bent the city itself to your design? "This world is so big and we are so small, and we know so little of it. How can we not seek to unravel its secrets, to discern the way it is made? And if what we discover is dark and unwelcome, well, it is still the t-truth, and it is more truth than we had before..."

He lapsed into silence, unable to articulate the pressure he felt. Anton said nothing, his gaze aimless, his face a mask as still as if he slept. But Piero knew he was listening, even if he could not have said how he knew. The quiet had another texture, a wrung-out feeling, as if it had become saturated with something untouchable. Rage, fright, tears; they had all passed, and left them behind like driftwood cast up by the tide.

He forced out a laugh instead. "In truth I think you will not have to worry much longer," he said with a false lightness that could not mask the despair. "I do not believe we will escape here. The Watch are already at the door. The metal has been turned once. It can be turned again. And Havelock has the activation sequence."

"Havelock?" said Anton, startled out of his reverie. Surprise made his broken voice squeak.

"I left that blueprint with him earlier. Before..." Piero made a weak gesture that took in the wreckage of his home. "All this."
"Can we recalculate the sequence?" said Anton.

"We can try," said Piero.

"Will we succeed?"

Piero's shoulders slumped. He was exhausted in the truest sense of the word. He had run out. There was nothing left. "No," he admitted. "Not before they force their way in."

"So it was all for nothing, in the end," said Anton. His voice was unreadable.

"Yes," said Piero. He felt a curious contentment. "Still, though," he heard himself saying, "I do not regret that we tried."

"It was a good try," agreed Anton quietly. He slumped further against the wall. It reminded Piero of the way he had looked beneath the workbench when they had first barricaded themselves inside the shop, a day ago, a lifetime ago. Nothing had changed in the realm of the material; yet everything was different, all the same. "A good try."

Piero weighed the options. "What will they do if they capture us?" he asked.

"Havelock will interrogate us, throw us into prison, interrogate us again to be certain, and then have us executed," said Anton. "Before that the Watch will get us, and we killed at least one of them."

Piero felt sick at the idea. "Then we attempt the sequence. Either it works and it takes care of our pursuers. Or it does not, and the pylon fails, and it..."

"Takes care of our funeral arrangements," filled in Anton.

"Just so," said Piero. He left the idea hanging in the air with the smoke. Specks of soot flashed as they caught the light. The air smelled of wood and sulfur and the sea. In the calm space between them he found the thought of such a death did not frighten him as it once had. The sense came to him again of that invisible bond. Alone he knew he would have trembled and raged at the idea; yet somehow the mere presence of another made it bearable. A strange alchemy indeed.

Anton stirred. "Did you know I'm the only one left?" he said conversationally. "Every other man of the Pittman Expedition is gone. Knifed in a bar brawl, vanished overboard in a storm, arrested by the Overseers. Death took them all. And yet I never truly believed it would come for me as well." He shook his head in disbelief. "I tell you, it is foolish, but all I can think now is how rude he is."

"He?" said Piero.

"The Outsider," said Anton, slashing the air in annoyance as if discussing a troublesome student. "I cannot believe that after all this he will not even send me any sign. After all this, after all I have done. He owes me that much."

"The world owes you nothing but a death at the end of it," said Piero.

"And here it is," said Anton.

"Here it is," agreed Piero.

They let the silence back in, ebbing and flowing with the curls of smoke. The grey trickled out the window in a steady stream. Sunlight poured in to replace it, setting the air aflame.

A crash broke the stillness as the Watch tried some other implement against the wrecked steel at the
top of the shutter. "Well," said Anton in its aftermath. "I suppose we ought to get started."

What components had not already been installed were slagged from the flames. Piero pieced together a makeshift relay while Anton spliced a cable leading from the firing circuit. Piero was not certain what would happen if the pylon fired on only two tanks. *Likely the wreckage will only fly half as far,* he thought.

Someone shouted outside the shutter. Piero could see the metal bend inwards. A crack of daylight reappeared.

Anton had his hand poised over the knife switch at the base of the signal generator where it met the power cabling. "Ready?" he said.

Piero twisted the end of the cable to one side of his salvaged relay. "Ready," he said.

Anton threw the switch.

The pylon began to hum.

A clang came from the upstairs window. Piero flinched on instinct. Anton had retreated to the workbench and now ducked beneath it. More shouting from outside. Piero hid beneath the slope of the ruined cutting bench. He did not know why. It would do no good. Yet it comforted some animal part of him. His palms were sweating. The relay was cold in his hand. If he made a fist, closed those two contacts, the spark would jump and travel down that cord and then...

Another clatter from upstairs, footsteps on the metal floor of the loft.

"Here they come," said Anton. "Last words?"

"Fuck the lot of you," said Piero, feeling almost giddy as he did. The world came to him in sharp bursts, every moment imprinting itself on his memory. "Your turn."


Then he felt a rush of black as if cold water had been poured down his spine. And Corvo Attano dropped down from the loft to land lightly on the workshop floor.

For a moment Piero could not understand the sight of him. Corvo was a relic from another time, an emissary from a world that had ceased to exist. As he stood from his light crouch he looked around as if searching for someone, but his attention was at once arrested by the arc pylon.

Piero dropped the trigger hastily. Corvo's head snapped around at the sound, and his hand went to the hilt of his sword; then dropped away as Piero unfolded himself from under the wreckage of the bench, brushing the sand off his coat. Corvo looked as though he had been keelhauled. His hair was matted close to his head and all his clothes were torn and sodden. Heavy bruises bloomed along one side of his face. He reeked like he had taken a nice long bath in the Flooded District and rinsed off in the sewers afterwards. But the man's face slipped into relief when he saw Piero, touched with puzzlement as Anton emerged as well.

"Welcome back, Corvo," Piero said politely.

"Outsider's balls, man!" exclaimed Anton. "What happened to you?"

"It's been a long night," said Corvo, calm as if he were standing in the throne room of Dunwall
Tower. His soft voice had been roughened by thirst and fatigue. He glanced around, taking in the destroyed workshop. "You've been busy." It was half a question.

"We constructed an arc pylon in order to defeat our besiegers," said Piero. Corvo was looking between him and Anton, a question clearly forming in his mind. But he said only, "A sound plan. Piero, I need your assistance--"

A loud squeal of metal cut him off. There were shouts from outside the shutter, then the low, fast murmur of conversation. Someone was asking questions. Piero caught the words disappeared and workshop and roof access. "Damn, man," said Anton, glancing towards the open window. "You weren't followed, were you?"

Corvo had gone tense, his hand returning to the hilt of his sword. "Now might be the time to activate your pylon," he admitted.

"Ah...well..." Piero did not know how to explain the situation. He picked at the lapels of his coat in a sudden, obscure embarrassment. He felt as if Corvo had walked in on him before he was entirely dressed. Not until the man was there did he realize how much his world of the past day had shrunk to him and Anton. He had forgotten in that span of time to see himself from the outside. Now reality was returning and with it all his usual nervousness.

"We don't have the firing sequence right yet," cut in Anton. Piero could see him changing as well under Corvo's gaze, the man who had broken bread with him retreating behind the mask of the Royal Physician.

"I had it written down on the blueprints," explained Piero. "But Havelock was inspecting them when the..." He ducked his head, mumbling. "When the killing started."

Corvo unslung the soft cloth bag that lay flat against his back, under the cloak, and searched inside it. Weaponry clinked and rattled. The shouting outside grew more definite. He drew out a flat packet of paper. "You mean this?" he said, handing it over.

"Astonishing!" said Piero, taking it. He could see his own handwriting scrawled across the outside.

"What? What is it, let me see," said Anton, grabbing for the papers. Piero batted his hand away and unpeeled the outer layers. Anton settled for looking over his shoulder. The firing circuit diagram was folded in the center like a grubby pearl. Piero could see his own numbers traced over the diagram. It seemed like years since he had written them. They had been penned by another person. "We can certainly complete it now," he said, unfolding and handing it to Anton.

"This is it?" said Anton as he read, a growing excitement in his voice. "This is the sequence?"

"Assuming my original calculations were correct, it should guarantee our escape," said Piero. He was already searching the tool racks in the cabinets. The lightness was infecting him too. A few moments ago he had been certain he was taking his last breath, and everything had ceased to matter. Now hope rushed in as swiftly as it had left. Corvo had come back. He should never have doubted it. Everything would be taken care of.

"Flat screwdriver and a pair of sharp calipers," Anton told him, all business now. Piero lifted the tool he had picked out into the air so he could see. "That'll do," said Anton. Piero returned to the pylon. Corvo had backed off, looking as if he wanted to interrupt, but he held his tongue. Anton stood before the pylon as if bracing himself on the deck of a ship.

Piero pulled out the central barrel of the firing circuit and exposed the gleaming brass relays. Anton
began to read the numbers off. Piero turned the screws as he did, changing the size of the gaps, pausing to measure each with the calipers. He hardly needed the verification. As he locked each one into place he felt the rightness of them, as if he were listening to a melody whose notes had only slipped his mind. That presence felt it too, felt the nearness of its awakening. Beneath his hands, the pylon was waiting.

"Then down half a volt?" said Anton, sounding skeptical. "That does not seem to follow."

"It is correct," argued Piero. "The drop allows the secondary coils to cool before energizing the primary chamber."

"You said you had this sorted out," said Corvo, dubious.

"Never fear, Corvo," said Anton heartily. "This device will reduce our enemies to ashes."

"Ashes?" echoed Corvo.

"I believe it will be more akin to a charcoal-like substance," Piero volunteered as he worked.

"Impossible," said Anton. "Given the fraction of the human body that consists of water."

"Does it have to be ashes?" said Corvo.


"Nonsense," said Anton.

"I mean, must we kill them," said Corvo more firmly.

Piero and Anton looked at each other. "An arc pylon is not meant to fire a warning shot," lectured Anton. Corvo did not appear impressed.

Piero considered the problem. "If we truncated the terminal pulse width, it should stop short of causing a true fatality," he mused.

"In theory," said Anton reluctantly. "Provided they do not have a weak or nervous constitution," he added.

"Do that, then," instructed Corvo.

"Oh, very well," said Anton grudgingly. Piero loosened the final screw by a quarter-turn. He checked the relays one last time. Purely out of habit; he knew they were set correctly. A twist of the cylinder and the firing circuit slid back in to the pylon's mechanism. When it clicked into place and the relays met up with the junctions they would trigger, a shudder went through the entire structure. Piero had all at once the same sense that he did when he had held the crossbow: the power to harm, the coiled potential. He yanked his hand away and backed off to a few meters' distance.

"Is it ready?" asked Corvo.

"Not quite," said Anton. He was hauling the last tank out from under the blueprint table. He tipped it up and rested it on its bottom ring, looking at Corvo. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to run this up," he said.

"Where is it meant to go?" said Corvo.

"Roof," said Anton.
"Roof?" said Corvo, puzzled.

"Otherwise the shielding effects of the metal--" began Piero.

"Roof. Got it," said Corvo. He stooped and lifted the tank onto his shoulder as if it were a bale of cloth, then turned his sight back up to the open window, clenched his left hand as if hauling on an invisible rope, and disappeared. His passage left strange trails in the smoke. Anton stared after him, a brief glimpse of that hunger showing through, and it struck in Piero a treacherous spark of fear. But Piero saw him smother it the next moment, and he came to stand with his arms crossed, glaring at the pylon as if daring it to make a move.

Piero fished out the trigger from under the workbench, holding it loosely in one hand, and regarded the pylon. It seemed all at once unfamiliar, alien and unreal. He tried to grasp the shape of it in his mind, but the whole of it eluded comprehension. Anton stood next to him in silence, contemplating their creation.

"That is it, then," said Piero. "It is complete."

"Assuming a circuit doesn't short and blow us all into the Wrenhaven," said Anton.

"It will not," said Piero. He knew when his devices were finished. "How will we know when he has placed it?"

"Oh, we'll--" began Anton. A clatter interrupted him from upstairs. "Dammit, Attano! What now?"

A blue-coated head and shoulders poked through the window.


The Watch officer spotted them through the metal grating of the loft floor. "You there!" he shouted, getting one foot up on the window sill and drawing a pistol. "Surrender at--"

The pylon interrupted him with a low pulse, a strange booming sound like a mechanical crow. A thrumming built in it, resonating in the stone beneath their feet. Dust rose into the air. The lingering smoke vibrated in strange waves.

"That's it!" shouted Anton over the noise. "Go!" But Piero was frozen in the depths of the sound like a rabbit pinned by the wolf's gaze. The pylon loomed. All at once he could not do it. The officer aimed his pistol. Anton reached over and wrapped his own hand around his and squeezed the relay shut.

The thrum shot up the scale. Piero dropped the trigger and covered his ears, but it did no good; the sound rattled his chest, plucked at his bones. A high whine rose up. He had the sense of gears turning somewhere he could not see. A sheet of shimmering white light formed on the pylon's skin. Deep inside the resonant chamber hummed with the strange song of electricity, a single bright note building within its heart. It rang louder and louder until it seemed the air itself must crack apart with the force of it--

Then the white light burst outwards, for a moment overwhelming his senses, flooding the world. And at the heart of it he thought he saw the pylon's shape; only it was the silhouette of a man, wearing a slight smirk, and he heard a voice in his ear say Most fascinating indeed.

- - -

Piero's vision cleared gradually, like river-mist burning away in the sun. He was on the ground. He
sat up, bemused. Anton was lying next to him, regarding the ceiling. He looked in no hurry to move. Piero brushed off his coat and got to his feet. The workshop was silent in a way it had not been for days. The air reeked of ink and electricity. The only sound was the gentle tick of cooling metal.

"C-corvo?" he called. No answer. A shuffle behind him was Anton resigning himself to renewed verticality. Piero started up the stairs.

The Watch officer lay limp across the windowsill, his body half in and half out of the building. Blood trickled from his nose and ears. Piero pushed him gingerly to one side and wiped his palms on his coat. Anton took his pistol.

Corvo was lying on the ridgepole a meter away from the emitter, one hand thrown over his face as if to ward something off. Piero bent and checked his pulse. "I told you the targeting circuits needed work," he said, irritated.

"Oh, he can take it," shrugged Anton, going to the emitter. And indeed Corvo was already shifting, his eyelids fluttering open. Piero joined Anton at the emitter.

"Amazing," he said, inspecting the emanation coils. They seemed untroubled by the tremendous pulse that had rung through them, though there were scorch marks on the nearby metal. "Simply amazing. It performed beyond my greatest expectations. It defies description."

"I've a description for you," said Anton, wearing a smug expression as he looked down on the riverfront yard. His face was quite suited to it. "'Most satisfying.'"

Piero followed his gaze. The yard was strewn with the blue-coated forms of Watchmen. They sprawled with abandon, felled where they had stood. A knot was gathered outside the wide shutter, the lines of prybars and heavy shears discarded at their sides, a blocky shape squatting between them. It glowed with a pale blue light visible even this far away. Another group had split off and had been standing under the balcony, waiting as their officer made the climb. Now they were a mingled heap of blue lying prone against the workshop wall. The wreckage of three tallboys lay flung across the yard like an anatomical diagram. Their operators were lost somewhere within it. Piero suspected they had not survived the fall from their machines. He did not feel any particular remorse. They had tried to kill him; he had tried to kill them; he had been better at it.

"Amazing," he repeated. "A device like this will ensure Dunwall's security for a century."

Anton's snort said what he thought of that, but he did not gainsay the idea. Corvo had risen to his feet and approached them, now rubbing the back of his head. The carnage in the yard took him aback. But another concern soon overrode it.

"Piero, I spoke to Callista," he said urgently. "She told me you had arranged a series of signals with Samuel, to call him from across the river. I need to know what they were."

"Callista?" said Piero, surprised. Another human from the world he had forgotten about. "She is s-safe?"

Corvo gestured towards the skeletal tower that rose several meters away from the workshop along the river's edge. "Quite safe, and barricaded therein," he said. "And well-armed, I would warn you. She nearly shot me when I entered."

"I am g-glad she weathered the s-storm," said Piero. His gaze sunk towards the dark brown spot in the dust of the yard where the bodies had been. "The others were n-not so lucky."

"Cecelia at least made it out," said Corvo, and another little weight lifted from him. "Piero, the
"Oh. Yes, of course. A moment," he said. He descended the roof and climbed back inside the workshop. The little bookcase near his bedside where his research notebooks were kept was mercifully undamaged by fire and smoke. He extracted one and turned to find Corvo standing a few inches behind him. Piero yelped and dropped the volume. He glared at Corvo as he retrieved it. The man had the grace to look ashamed, but he did not back away.

Piero leafed through the pages, stilling the tremor in his hand. "Here we are," he said, placing his finger on the page. "Second day, Month of Rain. Considering the problem of signaling to a distant observer and confirming that an ally is relying the message. All existent methods rely on: first, the prearrangement of signals; and second, the adversary's ignorance of said arrangement. Perhaps there is a better way. Discussed with Samuel the use of certain flares in naval maneuvering. He reports that--" 

"Piero, the sequence, please," urged Corvo.

"Yes, well," said Piero, skimming the next several lines. "Ah. 'In the interim until the secure system is properly developed, agreed upon three green flares and one red should rapid transport be needed from the Hound Pits location.' " He had hardly finished the sentence before Corvo vanished, leaving nothing but a swirl in the lingering smoke.

"Rude," muttered Piero to himself, snapping the notebook shut and returning it to its place among its fellows. As he scrambled back up onto the roof he heard the dull thuds of the flares launching. Corvo came out onto the broken ledge that surrounded the narrow tower, staring intently across the Wrenhaven.

Anton gave him a cheerful wave, then cupped his hands around his mouth. "I hope it goes well," he shouted to Corvo. The man glanced up. "Killing people, I mean," he clarified. "I sincerely hope it goes well."

Corvo looked baffled, as far as Piero could tell at this distance; but any reply he might have made was cut off by the sound of a riverboat engine. Samuel had not reached the shore before Corvo made a fist of his left hand and vanished from the ledge.

Piero sat on the ridgepole of the workshop. He knew in the abstract that they ought to make good their escape immediately, make their way out into the city and back to some secure place. But in the cloudless afternoon the terror of the last day and a half became distant and unreal. He lay down on the metal sheeting that formed the walkway, staring up at the bright blue sky, and closed his eyes. After an indeterminate length of time he heard Anton get up, go to the door of the tower and exchange words with Callista. It sounded as if she were still disinclined to come out. Piero could not blame her.

Reality seeped back in like water finding its way through stone. His employer had attempted to kill him. His workshop was in ruins. That left him without a job, without a home, and without the majority of his equipment. All of those concerns would need to be addressed, now that it appeared he might survive until the end of the month. Might. After all, he did not know what the outcome would be of Corvo's confrontation with Havelock. He and Anton might have only bought themselves the chance to die in prison after all. But the die was cast, and if he did live - and it occurred to him that he would wager his life on Corvo's victory; and that was good, because, in effect, he had - he did not know where one went from here. He did not know what one did after overthrowing the Lord Regent.

Footsteps on the metal walkway leading back from the tower. And now, of course, there was Anton
in the mix. He did not know where one went from here. If there were anywhere to go. It was all so new and strange. He did not know any of the rules. Two unknown reagents in the mix, bubbling in his retort, and he felt that strange thrill that came with wondering what would happen, if it would end with a miracle or his hair on fire. Or - he felt the burn of smoke still in his throat - perhaps both.

And simmering away underneath it all, what Anton had told him. The nearness of the blue, and the paradoxical distance. It was waiting, he knew, waiting in the back of his mind and on the other side of the sky. Waiting for the sun to burn out and the Earth to go silent and all the cosmos to dissolve into blackness and a final cold. Waiting, always, waiting...

Still it all stayed mercifully distant. For now the sun shone and the sea breeze blew and he heard Anton sit on the ridgepole a few meters away, dangling his legs over the side like a schoolboy. Piero wanted nothing more in this moment than to breathe the air and lie in the light and soak up the fact that he was alive.

"Piero, have you heard the phrase 'dangerously intelligent'?" said Anton finally.

Piero opened his eyes and searched his memory. "I do not believe so," he replied.

"It's what we're going to be," said Anton, and grinned a wolfish grin.
Etiology

_impulse response (n) (mathematics) The reaction of a dynamic system to an external change._

Dunwall Tower is upside down, and the Outsider takes his tea on the wrong side of the roof.

"How lovely that you believe crowning an Empress will solve your problems," he says with a hooded smile. "The thrones of man mean nothing to the tide."

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Piero awoke to a strange ceiling.

He jerked halfway upright at the sight, jolted onto one elbow as fear turned all his blood to ice. He lay on a small cot slung close to the floor. Steel hemmed him in on one side and tile closed him off on the other. He did not know where he was. He did not know how he had gotten there. A dull ache pressed in a crown round his head. His fingers brushed across a thin cotton sheet, and he threw it off him as if it burned. Underneath he was still dressed. All his muscles buzzed in electric panic. What had he done this time?

He raked his fingers along the side of the cot, searching for his spectacles and jamming them onto his nose. then threw himself up and out of the alcove in a dizzy motion and found himself in a long room. Shelves and tables stretched down one side of it, bulky metal shapes down the other. The cot Piero had been sleeping on - if indeed he had been sleeping - hid in a niche at the end. One of the tables had a viscous mess strewn across it, a thick stench of rotten meat soaking the air, and his heart skipped a beat. He approached it slowly, terrified of what he might see, reluctant to let his mind resolve it.

Then he saw the shape of a large river-eel halfway through cleaning, the gooey mess of a rotting onion. It was only the grisly remains of a meal left out for too long. His mind began once again to parse what he saw. Food. Tables. Soot-streaked steel - no, a stove. He was in a kitchen. He had fallen asleep in someone else's kitchen, on the cot the scullery maid must have tucked next to the stove to catch its warmth. Now he noticed his own battered pack slung at the foot of it and knelt before it, unstrapping the top. It had been stuffed with mismatched clothing and a few books. He pulled the ball of clothes out and unwrapped it. Stashed in the middle were his grey lockbox of vital reagents and, wrapped again in oilcloth, his research notebooks. Safe. He sat back on his heels and exhaled, letting his heart settle in his chest.

The memory of the trip faded back in at last, linking the last day into a coherent chain. The change in location had involved nothing more eldritch than a boat cadged off Watch Captain Curnow, despite his warnings that it was no time be out on the Wrenhaven in a river skiff. The evening winds had been whipping up, the breeze blowing in fierce from the sea. On any other day Piero would have gripped the boat's gunwales till they pressed red lines into his palms. But he had been too exhausted to do more than keep himself upright.

A lot of gear in the stern of the boat. He remembered that now too. The high pile caught the wind and made the boat rock from side to side. Bilgewater slopped along the keel. But they could not lighten the load. The pylon had to be taken somewhere safe.
Anton had insisted.

*Kaldwin's Bridge*, he remembered at last. You are at *Kaldwin's Bridge*.

Oh dear. Piero froze in a mute terror of all the unknowns. Kaldwin's Bridge. Anton Sokolov's personal laboratory. He might as well have woken up on a raft adrift at sea; the thought of trespassing into so strange a space made him dizzy all over again. He groped for the little pile of notebooks and held the most recent one close to his chest for a moment, closing his eyes and shutting out the world. Tiny streaks of soot marred the cover where flakes of ash had settled on it, and when he laid it down again they had smudged the front of his shirt. He found a pen that had not leaked too badly in one pocket of his pack and turned pages until he found the entry marked 27th of R.

*I am near to completion on the new arc pylon. Soon I will be ready to demonstrate its action...* Piero read the most recent entry with a sense of total, mildly amused detachment, then paused at the final sentence. *Tomorrow everything shall change, I know it.* That drew from him a short and unexpected laugh. He skipped down a line and wrote 2nd of W. Then he stopped with his pen held in midair and failed utterly to frame the next sentence.

It took him a long time to complete the entry, and not because of any bulk of words; in fact it required only a short paragraph to describe the events that had shaken his life since the last time he had put pen to paper. By the time he placed the last full stop a pain in his gut was making itself more and more insistently known. The hunger had pressed at his spine since he woke up, and now that he recognized the kitchen it refused to be ignored any longer.

Even so he still hesitated. He did not know where the food was kept, or what was meant for eating. So many uncertainties. But concern disappeared rapidly into the growling noises of his stomach. The kitchen cupboards gaped open, doors leaning on their hinges, and their shelves were curiously bare. At the end of the row he found a door into a small pantry, but its contents had been thrown onto the ground, boxes broken open and gnawed by rats, dented cans leaking into the mess. Under a pile of flour heaped on one shelf he found a tin of hagfish in brine and a pear just ripe. Piero ate them standing in the pantry in the mess of spilled sugar and grain and oil. Then he returned to the kitchen and found a tap and drank a liter of water without stopping; his throat felt raw as fresh meat.

The smoke. The fire. The siege of the workshop arrayed itself in painful detail, and with the recollection a wave of boneless fear. How close had he come to death? Now that he could see it in full it terrified him far more than it had when it was happening. He could not imagine finding the courage to do all that. The burn still pulled at his skin when he moved his right hand, and he thought he could never get enough water. But it all seemed as fantastic as an adventure tale in some penny dreadful.

Piero finished the water and set down the cup. In the darkness of the kitchen he could not tell the time. The soft dense ache at the back of his head told him that he had slept for many hours, but exhaustion still pooled in his bones. He had a childish urge to go back to the cot and pull the sheet over his head. But now that he had satisfied his hunger another urge pulled at him, the natural consequence of drinking so much. He made another circuit of the kitchen, but found only another pear. Nothing else for it: he would have to go outside.

Piero put a hand on the door and froze again. His body tensed as if expecting a blow. His hand trembled on the latch. Then he clenched it into a fist, pushed open the door and found himself two stories in the air.

He slumped back against the doorframe, clutching at the latch as if he would fall over the edge of the balcony revealed beyond. The kitchen opened straight onto a narrow walkway, and on the other side of the steel railing nothing but a long drop. He had assumed he was in the basement of the building;
in fact he could see the rafters. The ground that felt so solid beneath his feet must be high in the air. After a moment Piero forced himself to let go of the latch, then stepped out and looked cautiously over the balcony's edge.

The Kaldwin's Bridge facility had been a warehouse before Anton had commandeered it, and the intent of its builders still shone through. The wide-open core of it stretched four stories floor to ceiling. Light seeped in from far above, but the electric lamps hanging from the rafters were dark, leaving the air thick with a bluish gloom. The balcony whose railing Piero clutched as he leaned over jutted out about halfway across the space, held up on pillars like a dock above the waves. What he could see of the floor below was furnished more like a wealthy townhouse than a working laboratory, as if a strip had been cut like wallpaper from a noble manor and pasted over the brick and stone.

The metal under his hands vibrated with a faint but steady hum. Piero closed his eyes and listened. A slow pulse, felt more than heard, betrayed the workings of some great machinery buried deep in the building. But he heard no human noises, no sign of life. He began to try the other doors, moving as if still asleep. The thick blue shadows blurred the world into a watery gloom, as though some terrible change in the river had drowned this building as well. He still did not wholly believe where he was. His footsteps rang on the metal and he felt sure they would call forth some response, but the quiet remained undisturbed. The rooms shaded more elegant as he moved along the walkway, from the kitchen he had woken up in through a stockroom, a dark and cluttered study, and then - a library.

The sight stopped him dead, catching the breath in his throat. For a moment he only leaned against the doorframe and stared, his quest forgotten. Bookcases stretched from waist-height to the ceiling, made from dark, carved wood, housing more books than Piero had seen in his entire life. Electric arc fixtures had been mounted behind shades of colored glass, but they too were dark. The faint light filtering in through the open door outlined the shapes of heavy furniture. His shoes sank into the carpet as he crossed the room.

Piero found what he was looking for behind a small door at the back corner, presumably kept for the convenience of the reader. When he came back out his foot knocked against something lying out on the carpet. He bent and picked it up without thinking and found himself holding a book. In the fan of light spreading from the door he could see more strewn across the floor, flattened face down with their pages crushed against the carpet. Piero wavered for a moment in the middle of the carnage, then began to pick up the volumes and replace them on the shelves. He paused, resting the first one on a carved wooden ledge; he did not know Anton's system of indexing.

But quite frankly, he thought as he found cracked leather spines and torn pages, the man deserves to have his books out of order if he treats them like this.

When the last one had been restored to its rightful place he stood for a moment to admire the sight. But the triumph faded quickly into an insistent sense of forgetting, as though he had set down some important object and was now trying to bring it to hand. His memory after the boat trip fragmented into moments spliced together like illustrated plates. They had made it to Kaldwin's Bridge. They had unstrapped the crates and brought them within. There his recollection splintered, drowned in exhaustion, and as he tried to reassemble it one image kept repeating itself: Anton's worry. Anton pacing and nagging and twitching. It had to be put somewhere safe, he kept repeating. The situation is too delicate. We cannot lose control of it.

An elegant dining room waited last and most luxurious in the row. The walkway ended at the far corner, forcing him inside. Piero crossed it as if the room itself might frown and order him out. Large open-fronted cabinets stood guard over a table with chairs for a dozen guests. A huge mechanical clock ruled the room. But its tick had been silenced, its bronze pendulum stilled, and the hands were frozen at five minutes to midnight. The cabinet doors gaped open, their shelves as strangely bare as
the kitchen cupboards.

Out the door on the other side he found a second walkway parallel to the first. He followed it down to a double set of stairs covered in a thick red carpet and stopped at the head of them, one hand still holding the railing.

"Oh dear," he said into the silence. Up close he saw where wall hangings had been pulled down, where the heavy furniture had been dragged and tipped over. It occurred to him at last that perhaps Kaldwin's Bridge was not always in such a state of disarray.

Piero descended the stairs carefully, still listening, still hearing no one. The slow beat of machinery strengthened to a pulse he could feel in the soles of his shoes. A few meters to the left and the gloss stopped as if it had been sliced off with a knife, giving way to the area that had been hidden beneath the mezzanine. It sheltered a riot of half-constructed shapes, a spectrum of projects in various stages of completion. A smell of dust and ink hung in the air. His steps slowed when he reached the base of the stairs and left the carpet, and he stared around himself, wondering. He passed between four huge blocks of marble, white and untouched like standing stones. A dead frame for a wall of light lay sprawled out across the floor, hooked to a silent generator. In one corner he found a scale model of a modern whaling ship, its hull and interior decking only half-constructed.

And then at the other end he found the arc pylon.

It, too, was partly disassembled. The body of it had been cracked open like a river krust shell and the pearl of the resonant chamber removed to a workbench. The trans still rolled in its glass bubble in a smooth, ever-churning motion, the curious images of the coils immersed within bent and refracted. The pylon itself rose black and bulky as he remembered. Piero circled it warily, mindful of that power. But the high distant lights of Kaldwin's Bridge diminished it, made it seem smaller than it had when it crowded his little space. No longer did he feel that presence lurking within. He approached it gingerly, laid his palm flat against its metal flanks. No longer did he sense that frightening, brilliant potential. It had become a merely human thing.

_We cannot lose control of it._ With this he had struck down more than a dozen armed men all at once. At the sight of them prone on the ground he had wanted to laugh and shout in triumph. And yet even with a gun pointed at his heart he had not been able to pull the trigger. How could two such opposite sentiments bloom from the same root? It was a victory; it was a nightmare. It was a marvelous achievement that would make his name. It was a terrible violence that he had unleashed. He had brought into the world a weapon that had not been before.

Then he heard a clink of glass, and a quiet, painfully human sound.

Dim white light spilled across the floor at the far end of the open space. A suggestion of shadow moved against it. He knew what it had to be, stood for a moment pinched between a push to flee and another pull, deeper and without as clear a name. It had to be Anton, and Piero did not know if he was ready to face him. He felt exposed somehow, as if the smoke had rubbed more than his throat raw.

He moved quietly along the east wall until he reached an open door. Watery sunlight poured through a clear glass roof on the other side. Wooden cabinets filled what space he could see, their forms familiar but their drawers all strange, some flat and thin and others small and square and arranged in grids. Clumps of them had been yanked out and left canted at crazy angles. Directly across from him were two easels set against the far glass wall, one bare, one supporting a canvas half-covered in greens and blues. And Anton, sitting on a stool in front of the easels with his head in his hands.

Again the push and pull, catching him as neatly as the crisscrossing fibers of a net. He did not know
what to say, did not even know what to think. Around Anton huge streaks and swirls of lurid color
covered the studio floor, and patches of it smeared his clothing. Watching him Piero felt a sudden,
deep embarrassment. This was a private place and he was intruding. He ought to announce his
presence. He opened his mouth to call out, then paused. Now he had already been lurking. He
hovered in the doorframe, frantically trying to think what to do.

Anton wiped his face with the back of one hand and picked a small jar from a row on a low table,
slipping off the stool and kneeling to inspect the rainbow hues that covered the floor. He scooped
some of the powder into the jar, looked up, and saw Piero.

"Um," said Piero. "G-good morning."

Anton only placed the jar back on the table. "Oh. You're up," he said. His voice was still charred
from the smoke, only able to outline sounds.

"What, um. H-happened?" asked Piero. The sight of the spilled colors made him wince. At least
three hundred coin worth of pigment had been thrown onto the ground, he judged, and some of them
colors that came from as far away as Galliarno.

Anton stood up and surveyed the wrecked studio, facing away. The room stretched off along the
outside of the building, the rest of it hidden by more cabinets. He sighed. "I suppose I shouldn't have
expected much else," he rasped. "I did disappear, after all." He wiped his face with the back of one
hand, leaving a streak of blue across his forehead. "What I can't comprehend," he went on, "is what
they were looking for in here. The canvasses, well, I can see taking those, even if they have a
dreadful eye for composition. But why the paints? Did they think I had coin stashed in a jar of
ochre?" When Piero said nothing he picked up another of the little jars, holding it up to the dim light
filtering through the glass roof. "I'll never be able to replace them. Not while the blockade's in place."
He regarded the colored dust with a sorrow almost childlike in its purity. Piero felt another deep
surge of embarrassment.

"I will be ready to leave in an hour," he said.

"An hour won't do," said Anton, replacing the little jar atop the table. "Get whatever you need, ten
minutes at the outside, if I can find the damn thing. I've already called a boat."

"Oh," said Piero. "Well. I will g-gather my notebooks, then."

"Don't bother," said Anton. "I'm sure they've paper at the Tower."

"D-d-dunwall Tower?" repeated Piero, nonplussed.

"I know, but Attano insists he can't spare anyone," said Anton. "We'll have to go over there."

"I-- Why are you proposing I go to the Tower?" said Piero.

"I'm not proposing anything," grumbled Anton, sounding much more like his usual self. "It's Corvo
who's being annoying about it. It was in the note," he added, miffed.

"What note?" said Piero, bewildered.

"I left it on the table in the foyer," said Anton.

"Why did you think I would know to read a note you left on the table in your foyer?" said Piero
before he could stop himself.
Anton opened his mouth to answer, paused, and said only, "Attano wants us both at the Tower as soon as we can. But there's no point in going till I find my ciphering book." He left the jars of salvaged colors lined up, his fingers trailing across their mouths, and started to right the crooked drawers.

Piero returned to the wallpaper-strip of luxury plastered over the base of the stairs. A round table stood at the center of the foyer, a ring of dust on its surface marking where a vase had been. A single sheet of thin bird-paper lay on the dark wood, curved in a crescent shape where it had been rolled into the message tube. On it a large, formal hand had penned:

We have located Burrows' personal records. Request at once your presence at the Tower for their deciphering. Anything you can find on the subject of the plague, be prepared to make known tomorrow morning to the Small Council.

- CA

P.Scr. If you know the whereabouts of Piero Joplin please let us know.

Piero returned to the door of the studio. Anton was still righting drawers, searching each one before he pushed it back in. "If he is hoping for information on the plague, I doubt Burrows would document such a thing," said Piero.

"Burrows wrote down everything," said Anton. "I broke his cipher off a list he made of the exact height of every mantelpiece in Dunwall Tower."

"Corvo did not request my presence," pointed out Piero.

"He wants to know where you are," said Anton.

"That is hardly the same thing."

"He wants to know where you are so he can have you dragged in too," expanded Anton. "I figured I'd give Curnow the day off."

"Still--"

"I doubt the guest list is Attano's priority at the moment," said Anton. He fitted a tray back into its rack and slid it home. "Unless you don't want to go."

"I do," said Piero, too quickly.

"Then stop wasting time and look for my ciphering book," said Anton. "I know it was-- ha!" He yanked a slim green book out from under a pile of wood scraps and waved it in the air. "Now we can go." He snatched his gold signet ring off the low table, tucked the book under one arm, and stepped carefully through the spills of paint and pigment till he reached the door. "They ought to be down at the dock by now."

Piero followed Anton down a staircase against the far south wall into a long cellar. Anton muttered darkly as they passed barrels that had been smashed open, their contents now dark, sticky stains on the floor. The smell of water grew strong, the mechanical pulse grew stronger. When Anton pushed open the door at the far end the noise rose into a loud, rhythmic thud. Where the warehouse met the river a huge waterwheel turned, creaking and groaning like a ship under full sail. Anton walked away along the outside of the building till he reached a small quay, where he stood, arms crossed.

"Ought to be here by now," he grumbled, pitching his voice loud over the noise of the waterwheel.
The Wrenhaven rippled beyond the quay's edge, leaden and empty. Above them the sky glowed grey, shot through with fractured silver. After a little while Anton gave up glaring at the space where the boat was meant to be and sat down on the stone steps, thumbing through the ciphering book. Piero stood next to him for a few minutes in silence, trying to come up with something to say.

"I am s-sorry about your studio," he said at last.

"Yes, well." Anton stared at the pages of the book. "I've got to clean up that floor, it looks like Copperspoon's been at it," he mumbled.

They lapsed back into silence. Anton kept turning pages until he muttered, "Hah," to himself and marked his place, then spread the book on his lap and began to study it intently. Piero wandered away from the quay back to the waterwheel. The ponderous motion of its paddles betrayed the power of the tons of oak and banded iron turning in the Wrenhaven's current. A linkage at one side bound it to a thick shaft that disappeared overhead into the building. As he approached the noise increased till he stood a meter from the moving weight and the thunder of it filled the world and drowned out all other sound, filled his mind and drowned out thought.

Piero had known his place in the world for so long, calculated the angles and the distances to all the fixed points of his existence and derived thereby his own location. And near the center of this cosmology, swinging short around the celestial pole, had been his hatred and resentment of Anton Sokolov. Now it all had changed, and like the fogbound mariner he was lost at sea. He had a great impulse just then to withdraw entire no matter what Corvo had requested, take his pack of clothing and books and what very little coin remained and run, run into the city, call it all a failed experiment and wait until everything returned to the form he was accustomed to.

It had all been much simpler when he was certain they would not live until nightfall.

He registered motion on the river and looked back to see a river skiff pulling up at the quay. He made it down the stone steps just as Anton climbed in, still buried in his notebook. Piero stepped over the side of the boat after him with great trepidation, holding on to the gunwale with one hand. The metal edge bucked in his grip, sloshing with every passing wave. The ripples that looked so serene in the distance became alarmingly violent when viewed up close. The boatman watched him with weary annoyance, opening the throttle as soon as he was settled on one of the thwarts.

"Here," said Anton abruptly, brandishing the green book from where he was seated in the stern. "Learn the substitution table before we get there. It'll save time."

Piero took the book and kept his eyes fastened to the pages, studiously ignoring the scenery that lurched past as the hired boat made its way to the Tower. The cipher table took up only a single page: a straightforward letter for letter replacement, not even polyalphabetic, with a few alternates thrown in and a handful of nonsense symbols just to confuse the analyst. Remarkably simple. He wanted to ask Anton about it, but the man had tucked himself into the stern, arms folded and chin resting on his chest, to all appearances asleep sitting up.

When Dunwall Tower's waterlock hove into view Piero looked up from the page, and then further up. A blue-coated figure stepped up to the railing of one of the boats. "Who goes there?" it shouted.
"Anton," said Piero more urgently. "There are guards."

"'Oo wants 'a know?" shouted back the boatman.

More blue-coated figures were standing. The Watchman in the lead boat drew his pistol. "By the authority of the Lord Protector and Her Grace the--"

"The Royal Physician, to see the Empress," called Piero, then coughed painfully as his throat objected. The Watchman paused. Piero could not think of what to say next, but the boatman flared the engine and drove the skiff in a tight circle that made his stomach lurch, giving the Watchmen the distinctive sight of Sokolov in the stern. The cordon parted and the wide black mouth of the Tower swallowed them up.

Piero watched the cascade of the Tower's hydraulics with utter fascination, imagining the tons of water moving through pumps and reservoirs, trying to trace their flow. He leaned over the side of the boat to look until the boatman grabbed his coat and yanked him back. When the river skiff reached the top the valves shut with a clang and an engineer left the controls and strolled over to the water's edge, maneuvering a gangplank.

"Anton, we're here," said Piero. No response. He reached over to shake the other man's knee and Anton jerked awake at the first touch, wide-eyed and tense for a moment before he came back to himself. He took in the waterlock, stood without a word, and jumped across to the quay and off into the Tower.

Piero cleared his throat to drag the engineer's attention away from Sokolov, and the man finally dropped the gangplank into place. Anton was waiting for him at the door to the waterlock, looking impatient. When Piero joined him he started off, striding across the bridge into the Tower courtyard. When the doors slammed shut behind them a scattering of crows took wing. They sailed out across the space, cawing in annoyance at being disturbed. Piero watched them go, and for a moment the world slews and inverts - the crows move in huge circles like planets in an orrery, swinging round the edge of some larger form - and then the moment passed and he was only staring round himself nervously.

"The guards are watching us," he said.

"Not marines," said Anton. "Interesting."

"Is it?" said Piero, his attention diverted.

"Havelock had friends," said Anton quietly.

Dunwall Tower presented a strange, lopsided visage. In the death throes of his reign Hiram Burrows had scrambled his hysteria across its face. Ancient stonework had been broken to make way for riveted metal, and the mortar between the hard granite blocks was already crumbling where machinery had been hastily bolted on. There were fresh gouges in the flagstones of the courtyard, stumps where greenery had been burnt away to clear sightlines. Even so, Piero had dreamed about coming here, being invited here, for so many years, and when the pair of stiff-backed guards in City Watch blue opened the doors for them he hovered on the threshold, wanting to take his time. But their unfriendly glances drove him in, hurrying after Anton as he strode out across the fitted marble of the foyer. Inside the Tower was cooler, smelling of rock dust over stale air and the tang of whale oil, grease, and human. High arches met in a distant, vaulted roof, and a grand staircase swept down into the foyer.

Corvo met them at the top of the stairs. Since Piero had last seen him he had washed off the filth of
the sewers and changed his sodden clothes for the Lord Protector's uniform, but his cheeks were hollow and black circles tared the skin beneath his eyes. When he finally noticed and greeted them, it was half with a sense of relief and half with a harried distraction. He did not seem at all surprised to see Piero.

"We crated up everything we could find. They're in there," said Corvo, gesturing behind himself towards the Tower's inner suites. "All eighteen of them. How long will it take you to deal with his codes?"

"Cipher," corrected Anton.

"I'm sorry?" said Corvo.

"Cipher, not code," rasped Anton.

Corvo stared at him blankly. "A code represents each word with a different symbol," filled in Piero helpfully. "A cipher replaces each letter. It is a key distinction."

Corvo took a deep breath and pressed his lips together. "Can you. Deal with. The cipher," he said.

"No trouble at all," said Anton. "Where is my--" Piero handed him the notebook. "Yes, here," he said, flipping to the marked page and brandishing the table of glyphs.

Corvo's expression lightened at once. "You've cracked it already?"

"Bah," scoffed Anton. "The hardest part was measuring all the mantelpieces."

Corvo's brow furrowed in confusion, but he said only, "I expect news soon, then."

"The Small Council?" said Anton.

"They'll be convening tomorrow morning," said Corvo. He passed a gloved hand across his brow. "What's left of them, anyway. Get a Watchman if you need something. They're all Geoff's men, they ought to be reliable."

Someone called from below. Corvo went to the railing and leaned over, shouting down. He turned back long enough to say, "Eight of the clock, tomorrow in the Council chamber," and strode down the stairs.

Eighteen massive wooden crates sat stacked in Burrows' old work chambers, each one stuffed with yellowing papers dumped in at random. Some of the pages were bound into notebooks and folders, others left loose. All were covered with dense, crabbled little glyphs. Piero and Anton eyed the pile, both gone silent as they measured the sheer volume of paper.

"Well," said Piero finally, seating himself cross-legged on the floor next to one crate. "I will take this end, you take the other."

The Watchman who had been sitting guard over the crates was thrilled to bring them paper and ink if it meant he could finally leave. Piero arranged his pens and his stack of foolscap to hand, propped up the ciphering table, then pulled out the first chunk of paper. The deciphering was slow going at first, but the symbols were simple enough; after a time he began to read the text without any conscious act of translation. He sliced and dissected the piles of paper, skimming their contents to sort them into relevant and irrelevant piles. On the other side of the wooden wall he could hear the scratch of Anton's pen.
The tower of irrelevance grew rapidly. Anton had not been exaggerating. Here were systematic
tallies of all the trade that went through Dunwall's port, the tonnage of spice and grain and metal and
clay, both legal and illegal. Lists of entries and exits to the Tower, the Abbey, the Watch
headquarters at the Ridgefort. Number of whales taken, and who by. Taxes owed by each noble
family, marked against taxes collected. But Burrows had detailed just as carefully all streets in the
city that started with 'L', the ratio of stray cats to dogs, the number of times sausage was served at the
Empress' table. This is wrong.

"Hnm?" said Anton.

"Yes?" said Piero.

"What's wrong?" said Anton.

"Oh," said Piero. He had not realized he was speaking aloud. "Just." He swept a hand over the
stacks. "These are the most well-kept records I have ever seen."

"A trait that recommended Burrows to the position, as I recall," said Anton. After a moment he
added grudgingly, "Hiram did know his trade. He proved as much in Morley."

"It seems he considered every possible angle," said Piero.

"More or less," agreed Anton.

"And yet his plan was to let plague rats loose in the sewers?" said Piero.

Anton was silent, and then Piero heard the scratch of his pen; but before he could say anything a
high voice shouted, "Doctor Anton!"

Piero turned. A little figure had appeared in the door to Burrows' chambers, dressed in white and
black. Emily - Empress Emilia, he reminded himself - had her hands on her hips and a cross look on
her face. Piero lurched hastily to his feet, knees protesting, his pen tumbling to the carpet. Anton was
doing the same on the other side of the crates.

"Hello, Your Grace," said Anton gruffly.

"I didn't know you were here!" Emily sounded upset. "I'm not sick," she added, suddenly worried.

"The Lord Protector asked us in to look at Burrows' affairs," Anton told her. Emily came inside the
room, looking over the edge of one of the crates.

"Why's his writing all funny?" she asked. "Is it a secret code? Oh, hello Mr. Joplin."

"Not a very secret one, fortunately," said Anton.

"Good morning, Miss-- Your G-grace," said Piero. He attempted a short bow, but a sudden pain in
his back made it an awkward affair.

"Are you here to help Doctor Anton with the code?" inquired Emily.

"Er," said Piero. "Yes?"

"That's good," said Emily. "Did you finish my crossbow yet?"

"Your what?" said Anton.
"Er," said Piero again.

"I told Mr. Joplin to make me a little crossbow too," Emily told Anton. She climbed up on one of the crates and sat with her legs dangling over the edge. "Like Corvo's."

Anton glared at him. Piero spread his hands helplessly. "She is the Empress," he said.

"And what does Corvo think of that?" said Anton to Emily.

"I haven't told him yet," said Emily. "It's going to be a surprise." She kicked her legs. "What happened to your voice?"

"An experiment," said Anton. "One with unforeseen consequences." He came around the pile to stand next to where Emily sat. "Are you well?" he asked her quietly, when he was near. "Have they treated you ill?"

"Of course not, I'm the Empress now," said Emily carelessly, but her expression turned inward. "Is Havelock really gone?" she said.

"Quite gone, Your Grace," said Anton.

"Because he's an admiral, so he must be good at swimming," said Emily. She chewed at her lip.

"A seventy-meter plunge into the sea will kill anyone," said Anton. "No matter how good they are at swimming."

"It wouldn't kill Corvo," asserted Emily.

"That...may be true," admitted Anton. "But Admiral Havelock is most certainly dead, Your Grace."

"Hmm," said Emily. Her fingers fluttered in her lap. "Tell me a story," she declared suddenly.

"Certainly," said Anton. "What about?"

"About monsters," said Emily. "No, wait. About...how to make a monster go away."

"All right," said Anton. He went back to his crate and resumed pulling papers from its depths. His cracked voice took on a ritual air. "Back in the long-ago, when the winter winds still walked the earth, my grandfather's grandfather heard this tale, and now I tell it to you," he recited. Emily settled, rapt. Piero sat back down as well. It all had the air of a scene that had been repeated many times before. "This is how a man can banish a monster."

"There is an infinity of spirits woven all through everything around us," Anton began. "They dwell in the reflections on the water, on the other side of the sky. They slip through the spaces of our world without a trace, and hard as they try, they cannot touch it. And because of this they are always hungry and always looking for a way in. Now humans are different from the beasts and the birds, for--" he touched his chest "--we have one part of us in this world, and one part of us--" he touched his temple "--in the other. So we can invite the spirits in, and when they are invited they come into this world hungry and bleeding and roaring for more. It takes a great strength to control them, and not all who open the way have such power - or wish them controlled. And that is when men call them monsters."

"Emily, what have I told you about running off?" interrupted a new voice, half scolding and half relieved.
"I'm bored of names," said Emily, drumming her heels against the crate. "They're all going to die anyway."

Callista Curnow stood in the doorway, arms folded. Emily ducked her head to avoid her governess' gaze. Piero froze behind the crates, hoping he was hidden by their bulk, but Callista was fixed on her charge.

"Emily, that's a terrible thing to say," she said. "Come now and leave Master Sokolov to his work."

"She's not bothering us," muttered Anton.

"I don't want to," protested Emily. "I'm the Empress now and I'm sick of lessons. I want to hear a story."

"An Empress has to know her court," said Callista, but her firm demeanour wavered as well. "You can finish your story," she said at last. "But then I want you to come back upstairs with me. Alright?"

"Alright," said Emily, gleeful.

"As I was saying," resumed Anton, trying to clear his throat. "Now. One man can let a spirit in, but once it is here it batters onto the substance of our world like a leech, sucking at the vein and growing fat, and then it takes a great strength to send it away. So a man who wishes to cast one out must send a—Piero missed the next word, could not puzzle it out, because it sounded as if Anton had said whaler— to beg the favor of the four great forces that drive the universe. When the four directions are appeased, they will turn the substance of the world against the spirit and drive it back howling into the nothing whence it came." Anton punctuated that last with a dramatic sweep of his arms, nearly overturning one of his stacks of paper. Emily looked delighted.

"Come on now," said Callista to Emily. The Empress hopped down from her perch and shuffled along the carpet. "Please don't run off like that," he heard Callista telling her as they left. "We have to be very careful right now, okay?"

Piero reached the bottom of his crate before he worked up the nerve to ask the question. "Was that all true?" he said as he tugged the lid off the next one. "About monsters."

He could hear the shrug in Anton's voice. "Tyvian folklore," he answered. "From before the Abbey moved in."

"How on earth does one appease a direction?" asked Piero. He settled back down with the new crate in front of him and began to tally its contents.

"Dead people," said Anton. "How else?"

"I cannot say I have ever understood that," said Piero. He opened the top folder. Records of bribes paid to smugglers out of the Blackglass Archipelago. Potentially relevant, if that was how Burrows had imported the rats. "I do not see what a force of creation wants with a corpse."

"It means you're serious, most like," said Anton. "There is a terrible imprecision about it, though." He settled into a lecturing tone, as if he were standing before the chalkboards of the Academy. "The southeastern regions of Tyvia prescribe a rite of sacrifice to the four realms of matter: one sacrifice to the waters, to earn the favor of the sea, one to the beasts of the land, to earn the favor of the earth, one burnt alive to earn the favor of the sun, and the last choked to death to earn the favor of the sky. Now that's all well and good for composing a rhyming couplet, but what does any of it mean? For instance, consider drowning. How is it differentiated from suffocation?"
"I autopsied a man once who had drowned in the Wrenhaven," offered Piero. "His mouth and nose were filled with water, but his throat had closed so tight that not a drop had seeped into his lungs."

"Here is the problem with our nomenclature," said Anton, thumping one stack of paper and causing it to slump over to the carpet. "In such a case, can we say that he has drowned? Have we made our sea sacrifice correctly? Now, further to the east, the same rite is prescribed, but with a heated knife plunged through the heart in place of immolation. Is this acceptable?"

"Mud," said Piero.

"Eh?"

"If one dies in mud, is that burial or drowning?" he elaborated.

"Precisely!" said Anton. "One could argue that's suffocation as well."

"Perhaps it counts twice?" said Piero, translating the first line of a lone page. Fluctuations in the price of Potterstead Blue riverware. Irrelevant, but he wanted to linger over that one. He set it aside for later. "Perhaps with practice one could save on subjects, and use only one for all four."

"Hah," said Anton. He set to the challenge with a will. "Drowned, that'll do sea, and in mud, that'll do earth..."

"Stabbed for sun," said Piero.

"Stabbed for sun, and then perhaps suffocation is valid as well, and that's all of them," said Anton. "No, let's see, this can be improved. Sometimes the sky sacrifice can be hurled from a cliffside, so drowned in mud and then fall off a cliff..."

"How does one drown in mud and fall off a cliff at the same time?" said Piero. "A mud puddle is not often found in midair."

"Mudslide," said Anton.

"Mudslide might work," allowed Piero.

"Volcanic mudslide," said Anton. "That'll take care of sun as well."

"Volcanic mudslide?" echoed Piero. "Now you are fashioning things from whole cloth."

"Nothing of the sort!" said Anton, sounding mildly offended. "There is a chain of volcanoes ringing north and west of Tyvia."

"I know the Tahotha Arc," snapped Piero.

"Well, then you should know that when the lavas flow, they can melt the high glaciers," said Anton. "Then the water mixes with the lava and the earth and rushes boiling down the slopes. There they call it jokullhlauf, but in the Blackglass Archipelago it's a lihar, but it's really the same thing, and quite a nasty thing besides."

"It sounds like," said Piero, awed despite himself and trying to picture this scene in his mind. "Still, though. It seems to me that if one is serious, one is serious, with or without corpses--"

He broke off, staring at the first page inside the folder he had just pulled from the stack, wedged between shipping routes through Karnaca and summaries of pirate attacks out of the Galliarno chain.
"It's the sacrificial aspect that's important," Anton went on. "Nothing comes for free. Now the Abbey rites are greatly simplified, and they do try not to kill people unless they absolutely must, which brings into question the efficacy of the whole affair..."

"This does n-n-not belong to B-burrows," Piero managed.

He could not find the right words to explain further, but he did not need to; Anton broke off his musings at the queer sound of his voice and picked his way through the crates until he could take the slim folder from Piero's hands and flip it open, its once-white cover now yellowed to the shade of old ivory. When he saw the narrow, spiky handwriting all the color drained at once from his face. One hand tried to clench into a fist, threatening to crush the pages.

"You're right," said Anton quietly. "This is mine."

After that it became a true chase, their quarry sighted, the hunt on. They tore through the rest of the crates and pushed through the pages until they spotted the companions of that single folder. Anton laid the papers out in a long line across the floor of the suite, arranging and rearranging, pacing around them and muttering to himself. One break became two, became four, the knot starting to unravel. Piero made his notes and pulled the pieces out, one by one, from the heap; pulling the gems from the mud, pulling the shrapnel from the wound. There were bowls stacked on Burrows' old desk. A guard must have come and brought them something to eat. Another must have come and inquired after their progress, because he remembered Anton shouting at him to get out. Piero's notes became more and more illegible, trailing off where he leaned back against the wall and his thoughts drifted into nonsense before he jerked back upright. Sometimes Anton was there, sometimes he was gone. The interludes lengthened. He sorted an endless avalanche of words only to snap awake and realize he had dreamed the work. The crows repeated their gliding flight, tracing over and over the boundaries of an unknown form. He was being shaken in the jaws of some great animal; and then he was only being shaken by his shoulder, and he heard a hoarse whisper saying, "Up, up, we're wanted in the Chamber."

Piero blinked and rubbed one eye with the back of his hand, batting at Anton with the other to stop the shaking. "I am hardly dressed for it," he mumbled, and Anton laughed soundlessly.

Morning had caught them unawares. They gathered up the relevant papers as best they could, Anton collapsing his timeline into a neat stack, Piero double-checking his own notations. As they stumbled up the stairs Anton said, "You don't have to talk if you don't want to." Piero only nodded.

The Council Chamber occupied the full width of one of Dunwall Tower's spires. Tall windows opened in each of the four walls, admitting a piecemeal panorama of the city sprawling to the east and west, the sweep of the harbor to the south and the green hills of Gristol to the north. The sun slanted in the eastern window and painted yellow squares along the blue carpet, touched the boots of the Watchmen standing against the walls with gold.

Emily sat already at the head of the rectangular table in the center of the chamber, in a high chair whose back had been carved into the spires of the Tower. Corvo waited at her right, Geoff Curnow sitting stiff-backed to the left. Next to Curnow a tall, fish-pale man sprawled in his chair with an air of intense boredom. Broken veins splattered across his nose and cheeks. Corvo's neighbor, by contrast, was standing to attention in a dress coat of Admiralty blue, still speaking as they entered. The two seats at the far end stood empty, the carven eye-and-hawk symbol of the Royal Spymaster's chair glaring across at the other's stylized pile of coin as if Hiram Burrows were still reproaching his vanished Lady of the Exchequer. At the foot of the table, facing Emily, the chair carved with the Abbey's crescent-and-trident sigil had been claimed by a woman with jet-black hair and skin the color of oversteeped tea. She was dressed in academic robes, but they had been dyed a deep indigo
instead of Academy black. Her attention was buried in the arc of papers spread before her. Only the Empress herself looked up as they entered, waving happily when she caught sight of them.

"--long as the penalties are not feared as much as the plague, I'm afraid the blockade running will continue," concluded the young man in Navy dress. He sat down, squaring the edges of his papers.

"Cowards," declared the fish-pale man. "And no true sons of Dunwall. I hope that those of us who have remained fast can make up for their absence."

Anton came to an abrupt halt just inside the doorway, breath hissing through his teeth. "Master Sokolov," said Corvo formally, standing from his position. The woman at the end of the table looked up sharply at his words. "I believe you are acquainted with Lord Ramsey." Anton's gaze had fixed on the pale man, and Piero could read the barely-contained fury in the set of his shoulders. But Anton only nodded.

"May I introduce Admiral Wentworth," Corvo went on, indicating the man who had been speaking, who blinked rapidly but gave no other sign of discomfort. The shoulders of his coat had been tailored for a larger man. "And I surmise you are already known to Miss Libby Bentham." He gestured to the woman at the far end, who was now watching Anton with narrowed eyes.

"Unfortunately," growled Anton at the same time Bentham said, "We've met."

Corvo pretended not to hear. "I asked Master Sokolov and Mr. Joplin to examine Burrows' effects," he informed the Council. "I invite you to make your report," he said to Anton.

Anton made no move to take a seat at the table, only dropping his stack of papers onto the surface and standing with his hands clasped behind his back. Piero followed suit, then instantly regretted letting go of the stack, as he now had no idea what to do with his hands. If he clasped them behind his back he would only look like Anton, but it felt too strange to simply let them dangle at his side. He had no pockets to put them in, and if he crossed them he might look as if he were angry. He settled at last on resting them near his hips, and only then realized Anton was halfway through his explanation already.

"--main challenge has been the tremendous volume of the records," Anton was saying. "We located--"

"Speak up, man," said Lord Ramsey. He seemed intensely occupied with his own fingernails. "One can hardly hear."

Anton swallowed and attempted to force more power behind his ruined throat. "We located what appears to be an important clue to his intentions." He opened the top folder and fanned out the pages with their dense writing and small, strange sketches.

"What are these?" said Ramsey, still sounding supremely bored. Wentworth picked up the nearest sheet, trying to make sense of it. Bentham leaned forward despite herself.

"My journal of the Pittman Expedition," said Anton. "My real journal. I documented a rat-borne illness common to the middle latitudes. Burrows made a copy without my knowledge. He sought out this plague specifically."

"It's a known disease, then?" said Curnow. "What can you tell us of it?"

"I know it has a cure," said Anton.

Everyone tried to talk at once, blending into an incomprehensible noise. Corvo thumped the table once, a blow that made all the wood shiver, and the din abated enough for him to ask, "How quickly
"We already have," said Anton. "Burrows didn't cause this."

The noise redoubled as every member of the Council tried to shout at once, even Corvo drawn into
the argument, until - "Be quiet!" shrieked the lady Emily. The sound cut off abruptly. Into the silence
Emily said, "Doctor Anton, you had best tell the story from the start."

"Hiram Burrows didn't put on his dressing gown without a plan," Anton told the Empress. "He
wouldn't let a disease loose in the city with no means of controlling its spread. He chose one that he
knew had a cure, and he put measures in place to curb it. To be specific, he worked through the
ladies Boyle and a pet doctor named Galvani."

"Ridiculous," burst out Lord Ramsey. "Burrows bringing in the plague and all, well, the man was
nothing but an upjumped merchant. But accusing one of Dunwall's oldest houses of complicity in the
affair--"

"The ladies Boyle just happened to come into possession of mines supplying the key ingredient in
the cure--" shot back Anton.

"A cure which we so far have only your word exists," sniffed Ramsey. "I've heard enough of your
insistences that the remedy is but a month away, Master Sokolov--" 

That was just too much for Piero. The information was all right there in the folder, and the man must
be capable of reading; there was no excuse for him not to know. "The original disease is curable via
a compound of plant extracts and tincture of the mineral nefathilene," he said. "Formulation takes
approximately four days and the recovery rate is near three-quarters if it can be administered within
two weeks of the appearance of symptoms." He slowed as he realized everyone was staring at him.
"Dropping to fifty percent, after. Um. A month."

"This is Piero Joplin, he's a natural philosopher," interjected Anton hastily. The stares did not abate.
Ramsey in particular had fixed his eye on him. Piero felt the blush beginning in his cheeks. He edged
a little closer to Anton.

"The largest c-concentration of nefathilene in the Isles is found on the l-l-land owned by the lady
Esma Boyle's late husband," he finished.

"You mean the boylium," said Ramsey.

"I mean nefathilene," said Anton. "I don't care what they decided to brand it with when they opened
their mines. It doesn't just repel the rats, it acts against the disease itself. Or at least, it should. Once
the rat plague did not yield to any of the cures in the Gristol pharmacoepeia, I naturally attempted the
Pandyssian remedies as well. None of them succeeded either."

"Who's this Galvani?" interrupted Curnow.

"He paid the bills as a private doctor to the wealthy," said Anton. "The Spymaster kept him on the
payroll as a source of gossip."

Curnow nodded and wrote a short note, then handed it to one of the Watchmen. The man saluted
and left the room at once. Piero suspected that Galvani might soon have visitors.

"Burrows used the Boyle ladies' mines to ensure no one who could afford the rat-lights would
become ill," Anton went on, when there were no further interruptions. "In the event that any of
the well-to-do still somehow contracted the disease, he used Galvani to supply the cure. He was an
"idiot," concluded Anton. "But he was an idiot with a plan."

"So Burrows did still release the disease," said Wentworth. He had the air of a man holding a compass and searching for north.

"He released a disease," said Anton. "He released it three years prior, where it festered in the slums and seemed to do exactly as he'd hoped. Until a year and a half ago."

"That's when it began to spread so quickly," said Curnow. He had a thoughtful look, paging through his own recollections. "The previous Month of Clans, that's when we started getting the Weepers."

"Where are you from, boy?" interrupted Ramsey, addressing Piero.

"Potterstead," answered Piero, caught off-guard. Again the stares. "As A-anton is saying. The Weepers are not a known stage of the d-disease in P-p-pandyssia." He crossed his arms over his chest, shrinking back a little. "Our p-plague has d-d-diverged from the original infection."

"As to how or why, we have yet to ascertain," said Anton, picking up the thread. "It's clear the nefathilene still has some beneficial effect, strong enough that it forms a component of my own elixir. But we must now turn our energies to discerning the new course the disease has taken." He cleared his throat, not that it did much good, and stood a little straighter. "To that end I humbly request from the Crown a grant of coin and renewed access to the prisoners at Coldridge, as well as an escort to the Flooded District to obtain Weeper subjects for further study. And it would be highly beneficial at this juncture for us to interview Burrows himself."

Curnow snorted at that last with an uncharacteristic mix of amusement and bitterness. Ramsey said, "We?"

"I'll be taking on Joplin as an assistant until the cure is accomplished," said Anton airily, as if the matter were long since settled. Piero stiffened and turned to Anton, but before he could interrupt Corvo said, "You won't be able to talk to Burrows."

"What?" said Anton in surprise at the same time Piero said, "Why not?"

The rest of the Council exchanged glances with the awkward air of a family trying to decide who will tell the children the fair is canceled. "I'm afraid General Tobias is highly unlikely to allow it," said Curnow at last.

"Hallem Tobias?" said Anton, even more surprised. "What does that scoundrel have to do with anything?"

"Watch Officer General Tobias holds the Ridgefort," said Wentworth stiffly. "Including the access to Coldridge Prison."

Anton took a deep breath and expelled it with some force; but all he said was, "Ah. In that case...the rest of the request stands. We shall need a grant of coin and access to subjects for further research."

"How much?" asked Corvo.

"Ten thousand would suffice," said Anton. Corvo nearly choked, startling Emily. Curnow's expression grew even more strained. Even Piero recoiled; the sum named was far larger than any he had ever possessed. Every eye went, conscious or not, to the chair of the Lady of Exchequer and the woman who was not sitting in it.

Ramsey really did laugh. "Ten thousand?" he repeated. "You would bleed us more than even the
"Watch."

"The Navy would not mind being paid, either," murmured Wentworth.

"My materials are not cheap," said Anton, unapologetic. "The blockade forces the price higher every week."

"The Crown will pay," announced Emily. Every head turned to her.

"The Crown cannot--" began Ramsey, but a single united glare from Corvo and Curnow silenced him at once. Wentworth looked even more nervous but stayed silent. Bentham at the foot of the table watched it all without a word, eyes flicking from one to the other like she was watching an unusual play in a sporting match.

"If the plague doesn't stop, it doesn't matter about the Watch or anything else," said Emily. "Once the sickness has a cure, then the blockade will stop. And then the ships can come into the harbor again, and that means lots of people will come to Dunwall, and pay the Crown taxes and tariffs. And so then we can make up for the money we spent before. So." She sat up straighter in her chair, already raised a few inches above the level of the others around the table, and said, "Ten thousand coin to be paid out to Master Sokolov to find the true source of the disease, and to find a remedy for it. And for Mr. Joplin to help him," she added.

"Thank you very much, Your Grace," said Anton. Emily gave him a little nod.

"If there is no other business, then the Council is dismissed," she said. "You may all return next week at the same time."

They all stacked their papers and prepared to leave, until Bentham rose abruptly at the other end of the table.

"Miss Bentham, the full Council does not need to hear--" began Corvo as she stood, but Bentham ignored him. She had a stilted way of moving her body, as though it were a puppet with a few strings misfastened. The strange cloth of her robes shimmered when it caught the light. She flourished a page with one hand, the other pointing to a thick line drawn across it. It trended sharply down.

"Gentlemen," she declared. Her voice had the same strange motion as her body, an odd and unpredictable inflection. "The situation remains the same as the month prior. The Dead Counters have only verified my predictions. This disease is not acting as it should. In short. Dunwall's population will soon drop to an unsustainable level."

Wentworth paused, half-risen from his chair. "Unsustainable?" he repeated. "What, uh, does that mean?"

"It means that if we cannot produce a cure by the Month of Ice, there will not be a Dunwall left to save." She announced this as flatly as if she were noting the time of high tide.

"You're certain of this?" said Curnow, surprised.

"Numbers do not lie," she answered. "The working population of the city is near collapse."

"I'll grant that the ravages of the plague have been severe," said Ramsey. "But the true core of Dunwall lives on."

"It takes a great deal of people to make a city, Lord Ramsey," said Bentham. "All sorts of people." Piero glanced at Anton, who was fixing Bentham with a suspicious glare, but he raised no objection.
"The city must begin institution of authoritative policies at once. First. Elixir rationing. Elixir must be freely distributed and rationed by the city government. To this end. Seizure of civil industry required to manufacture--"

"Miss Bentham, we will take your report after the Council has adjourned," said Corvo, more firmly this time. Bentham shut her mouth, her narrow gaze fastened now on Corvo.

The various Council members rose and made their bows in the Empress' direction. Emily herself stepped down from her chair and went to another exit in the other side of the wall. When she had disappeared through it the Council members began to file out. Piero collected up the papers they had scattered over the table. Anton joined him, reclaiming Burrows' copy of his own notes with some determination.

"Sokolov, a moment," called Corvo. "Piero, we'll join you downstairs."

Anton looked back in some surprise, caught Piero's eye, and turned back. "Yes, of course," he said, returning to the table where Corvo still stood. Piero lingered for a moment, words pressing at his lips; then he hastened out the door and pulled it shut behind him.

The heavy oak thudded into place with a certain finality. The other Council members had already disappeared down the stairs. The world went silent at last, and in the silence an intense and sudden feeling of loneliness overcame him. It had been nipping at his heels ever since he had woken up the day before, and now that he had at last stopped moving it gathered itself and pounced. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to process it, trying all at once to think and not to think about the terror of those stares, about the word "assistant," about the fact that in the end it was still Sokolov Corvo called over and not him.

"So you're Joplin."

He straightened up suddenly. Miss Bentham had tarried behind the others and now stood watching him with her black gaze, arms folded. Her dark hair had been braided into innumerable small braids tipped with colored beads, and they clacked and rattled together as she moved. In her indigo robes she looked on the verge of dissolving into the shadows of the landing, but there was nothing ethereal about the focus with which she regarded him, a kind of total, piercing clarity.

Piero clutched the papers to his chest. "Y-yes," he said.

"I've followed your publications," she said, still watching him. "The Remedy is an interesting piece of work."

"Oh," said Piero. "Well. I did labor a long time upon it."

"Chemicals admit so much error, though," she continued. "Hardly rigorous. Stirring together plant after plant, in the hopes that the result improves upon mere water. There is no higher theory. No system to it."

"It is an art born of long practice," answered Piero, stung.

Bentham did not seem to notice. "A matter of the wholly physical," she concluded, and then said abruptly, "And now you're working with Anton."

_I woke up in his kitchen and we haven't killed each other yet, though I daresay it's been close_, but the thought of delivering the full explanation made him weary. "Yes," he said.

"Give this to him. Maybe someone will listen." She pulled out the same page she had showed in the
chamber. The descending line cut a sharp black angle across the paper.

"You see this?" she said, tracing it with one fingertip, pushing up the wide-mouthed sleeves of her robe. Up close the odd shimmer resolved itself into a fine, intricate pattern woven into the cloth. "You tell Anton this is no flight of fancy."

"What did you mean, that this disease is not acting as it should?" asked Piero.

"Precisely as I said," answered Bentham. "I have charted its progress. No natural disease infects all the population. No natural disease kills all it infects. Attano is just as deaf as Burrows was. If the current rate of infection holds, if its spread is not halted, we will soon drop below a critical population threshold."

Piero took the paper from her, laying it atop his own and examining it more closely. Thick blots of ink along the dark line marked points of data where Bentham had noted date, time, and the number of the dead.

"A city is an entity like any other," Bentham went on. "It requires a certain number of persons to keep it running. As the disease progresses, those persons will either flee or be felled. Residences will be deserted. Nonessential industries will collapse. Then the civil services begin to lose control. Critical infrastructure suffers. Civil identity fractures. The city can no longer provide basic living needs to its inhabitants. They disperse into localized tribes and gangs. Some fraction of them might even survive, once the disease burns itself out, but. Dunwall itself will be gone."

Bentham tapped the line again, its downward descent.

"You tell Anton," she said. "The Month of Ice."

Piero stared at the paper, filled entire by its single chart, and when he looked back up at the woman who had given it to him the words died in his throat. When she moved all the beads in her braids set to swaying, and the colors that had seemed chosen at random now tangled into a terrible sort of sense, a pattern that he did not want to understand; and between them and the intricate weave of the cloth, infinitely varying yet somehow never repeating, he was suddenly quite desperate to get away from Libby Bentham.

He backed as far against the wall as he could, feeling the reassuring reality of its stone. After a moment Bentham nodded to herself, once, sharply, turned on her heel and disappeared down the stairs without another word. Piero traced each blot of ink, each point pegged on that dark line, looking for a pause in its inexorable descent. He found none.

_Eighty days_, he thought, and the chill in his blood wiped out all previous concerns. _We have eighty days._
Asymptotic Freedom

interference (n) (physics) The interaction of two waves of similar form but differing phase. Waves synchronized in phase will add; waves out of phase will cancel.

3rd of W.

I remain at Kaldwin's Bridge. Now the true work begins.

Empress Emily is as good as her word. Watchmen delivered first portion of the payment early this morning. I have read the accounting books for the supplies that compose Anton's elixir & the situation may be worse than feared. His report to the Council was no bluff. I had discerned already many rarer components in its mix (cf. in particular 27th Ha., 10 T., 13 C.) but the method of preparation demands still more exotic materials. In particular the mysterious reagent noted first on 7 So. is powdered nefathilene whose price is governed strictly by the House Boyle & it has of late become quite dear. A rudimentary calculation: raw material cost of a vial of elixir now no less than 9/10ths purchase price even w/out labor. With blockade in place it will only rise.

Mine own preparation is made with ingredients less costly and the substitution of my processes for Anton's should ameliorate the problem. Regretfully the small river krust colony I kept at HP now escaped into sewers & lost to me. Have begun comparison of the ingredient lists & have the greatest hopes that the beneficial qualities of the elixir can be easily integrated into my remedy.

"How can they have nothing in common?" repeated Anton.

"Water," pointed out Piero.

"Water doesn't count," said Anton. "Water we may assume."

Piero returned to the lists that covered the two adjoining slates in Anton's fourth floor laboratory, as if when he scanned them for the sixth time he would suddenly light on at least one component that appeared in both Anton's elixir and his own concoction.

"My work derived from my desire to find a potion that would help-- help me sleep," he said, stumbling over what he had intended to say. Anton caught his meaning anyway. "Yours from another angle entirely. It is not so surprising."

"And yet they both act against the same disease," argued Anton. "That's very surprising." His voice had finally returned, though still mottled with a harsh buzz. He returned his attention to the careful diagram Piero had drawn of his own manufacturing process. Half a bottle of wine was keeping him company; it had been full when they started. "Why haven't you tried the homeopathic solution? The high heat treatment will eliminate accidental infection."
"And where am I to find the subjects to bleed? I cannot recruit from the prisons as you do," replied Piero testily. "But it's forced me to work with another agent derived from--"

"The river krusts, yes, I'd guessed as much," interrupted Anton. He had seated himself cross-legged atop one of the lab workbenches, clearing away a clutter of dissection equipment to do so. Piero was discovering that Anton's allergy to stillness extended also to sitting properly in chairs. "Long overdue for proper study. If they can endure the sludge of the Wrenhaven I imagine there is no merely human disease to which they will succumb. But dosing oneself with their extract does not convey the same immunities as a preparation from human blood."

"We are fortunate enough already that the disease is one that will yield to the homeopathic remedy," said Piero. "But such a measure confers only defense. It will not help once the plague has taken hold."

"Yet how does it take hold in the first place?" said Anton. "I've dosed subjects to the gills with the elixir. A fraction will always take sick no matter how strong the protection."

"It accounts for its continued spread," agreed Piero. "I find my own remedy is its most effective once the sickness has already set in. Have you attempted--"

"Treatment after infection, of course," said Anton impatiently. "Several different regimens, many yielding improvement for a time. But the plague always returns."

They sat in the fourth floor laboratory, mercifully distant from the massive clock Piero had discovered occupied what passed for Anton's quarters on the third floor. Even so he imagined he could feel its heavy tick from here. The beginnings of a headache tightened around his brain. He closed his eyes and pressed with two fingers against the hollow of skin just above his jawbone, before his ear. Grease and dirt streaked his clothes. The clock had been striking one as they ascended the stairs, but he was already exhausted.

It had been the work of much of the morning to render Kaldwin's Bridge functional again. The waterwheel still turned, but its mechanism had slipped its gear train and lost the linkage to the pumps that pulled water and oil into the facility. Anton knew how it worked, of course, but knowing how a two-hundred-pound transmission axle was meant to engage differed greatly from forcing it to do so. To make matters worse the weather had at last made good on its promise to turn foul. The laboratory stood out in the middle of it, athwart the bridge and exposed to the full brunt of the wind that found every crack and rivet-hole in the walls. But at last the pumps turned and the oil flowed and the building glowed again with pale electrics, the iron furnace in the basement rekindled. Then they had begun to burn the bodies.

The messenger sparrows in their rooftop cote had fed themselves in the absence of humans, but the rabbits and chickens that served as test animals had either been stolen or simply died. Of the rats, only one was left, looking much plumper than it had before. They all went into the furnace, filling the air with the smell of roasting meat, the sizzle of fat and the char of bone. At least the looters had left the pile of plain cotton plague shrouds in the basement stockroom, so they had been able to wrap the woman properly before consigning her to the fire as well. The cloth stretched wrong on her; she had died slumped into a corner and so rigor mortis had frozen her that way, bent at the waist. Piero had pulled the crossbow bolt from her sunken chest before they burned her and examined it to be certain. It was as he had thought: one of Corvo's own, or rather one of Piero's own.

"I had her on a dosage regime with certain soporifics," said Anton, following his gaze. "Mixed with the coldwort in your sedative, it would have killed her in seconds."

"Corvo must have worried she would remember him," said Piero. He tossed the bolt in after the
The wind gusted again, chilling the air and coaxing a high whistle from the walls. Rain whipped the river from the harbor to the hills, lashed the glass of the roof and overflowed the cisterns. Despite the weather Piero would have rather moved up to the greenhouse, away from the tick and back into that wonderful space. He had not nearly had his fill of so much living greenery, all of it foreign, exotic, and little-understood. If he closed his eyes he could almost believe himself back on his family's farm, amid the scent of growing things, of water and of earth. But Corvo had taken Anton from the greenhouse, at least if the half-distilled preparation now spoiled on the lab bench was any indication, and Anton was disinclined to spend much time there at the moment.

Anton tapped a stick of chalk on the lab bench next to him, leaving a white mark that expanded as his frustration grew. "Oxrush, laudanum, and oil of cusperia bark can be integrated without trouble," he said. "So can sal vitae, though I don't see what good it'll do. But the extraction and concentration procedures act antagonistically. The heat required to activate the nefathilene, for instance, will destroy the oxrush entirely." He set down the chalk and uncorked the bottle of wine again. "I've a still upstairs, so as long as we have ingredients, elixir won't be a problem. How much of your potion can you requisition from your manufacturer?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Piero, confused.

"Whoever you licensed the formula to," clarified Anton. "You can't be compounding the volume sold all on your lonesome."

"Oh. Hanford and Sons Apothecaries," said Piero. "I do not know that they mix it anymore, though. It did not make much of a profit, so I expect they've stopped."

"You must be kidding," said Anton. "I know full well it's still for sale. How could it not turn a profit? Your costs are certainly below mine."

"I hardly recouped the price of making it palatable to others' tastes," said Piero. "Certainly the last time I will attempt to develop for the general market."

"What percentage of the profits do you get?" asked Anton.

"Fifty," said Piero.

Anton choked on his wine. "What does it say in your contract?" he managed.

"Contract?" said Piero.

"Bozemoi," sighed Anton, pinching the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "Tell me you signed a contract."

"I-- We made an agreement, but they said it would be too complicated to draw up the document, and I did not..." Piero's ears burned. He stared at the floor as he realized the magnitude of his error. "You must think me a fool," he mumbled.

"Well, yes," said Anton carelessly. "But most men are fools in matters of business. It's how the few who are not make their living."

Piero did not know what to say to that. He folded in on himself in his chair, full of a hot embarrassment. 'I'll be taking on Joplin as an assistant until the cure is accomplished, Anton had told the Council. The words still stuck in his craw. The night after the meeting he had passed the time waiting for sleep trying out arguments to have with Anton on the subject, searching for the perfect
turn of phrase. He had debated his imaginary opponent into the small hours of the night. But when he had found the man this morning and wound himself up to declare *We must clarify the nature of our professional relationship* he had found a significant gulf between speaking to Anton in his head and doing so in the flesh.

Anton did not seem to notice his silence, only rattled on, saying, "Odds are we can get the Crown's barrister involved, if we can say we need it as a state affair. It'll take a few days, though. Ah, well. I have to go to the Academy anyways."

"You're going to the Academy?" said Piero, momentarily surprised out of his fugue.

"I've been away long enough, and I'll need some of my equipment from there," said Anton. He took another drink from the wine bottle and muttered, "And I'm terribly curious who tried to move into my office when they thought I was dead."

"I suppose I will just...stay here, then," said Piero.

"Sure, fine," said Anton. "Why don't you take a look at adding some of the more delicate compounds into the elixir. Perhaps we can put them after the heating process."

"It will be easier simply to integrate the specific curative portions of the elixir into the remedy, I think," said Piero. "Although I suppose the nefathilene is key..." He frowned as he turned the problem over in his mind.

"Hold on now," said Anton. The chalk tapped. "It'll be faster if we just figure out what's working in the remedy. We could try several batches, add one new component to each, test them all at once - I'll need about twelve subjects to start with. Better make it fifteen, to be certain."

"The remedy is less costly to make," argued Piero. "That should be our starting point."

"It's less effective."

"How?" said Piero, stung. "As many take sick on the elixir. My remedy is just as good."

"Yes, but there's no reason it should be," said Anton. "Nothing in here is beneficial to the anatomy."

"It acts upon the vital essences," countered Piero. He turned in his own chair so that he could look Anton in the face. "It is meant to strengthen the higher operations of the self." *To fortify my own mind against these incursions.* "Nothing in your elixir addresses such concerns."

"The plague infects the meat, not the mind," said Anton. "Nursing some ill-defined 'psyche' is all very well, but the disease is in the blood."

"Cure the soul, and the blood will follow," declared Piero.

Anton glared thunderously from his benchtop perch, but Piero was not about to be told his business. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared back until Anton dropped his gaze and said, "Well, why don't we just...both work on a combination. Then we can test them, and see what has an effect."

Piero ought to have felt triumphant, but instead he found himself looking away as well. "Yes," he mumbled. "I suppose that will be best."

- - -

5th of W.
Remain at KB. Happy to note injuries sustained at HP now healed & I am functional once more. Finally matters are settling and I will be able to work properly. Estimate I can present a combination treatment to the Council in two weeks.

- - -

7th of W.

Anton has gone to the Academy. I am free to work in the 4th floor as I see fit. I have cleared an area for my own work-space. Have finished arranging my apparatus & at last I can make some real progress.

- - -

10th of W.

So many interactions between the components of our two palliatives. A stable combination may take slightly longer than expected. I am preparing several batches of the most promising recipes. High hopes especially for the fourth.

Anton still gone.

- - -

12th of W.

No solid results from the first preparations.

If I am to be here for the duration I should have some more permanent quarters. Study next to the library ought to serve. Anton is still gone so I have not consulted him on the subject & see no reason I should. He hardly uses most of this facility. It is a terrible waste. He cannot complain if I turn it to a better purpose.

Piero carried the last end-table out onto the walkway and laid it down on its top, its heavy wooden legs left flailing in the air like an upturned crab. He took a moment to breathe, bent with one hand clutching the balcony railing. More furniture littered the walkway around him. He did not know why one man needed so many end-tables. It seemed Anton had had little use for them either, given that they had all been crammed into the study long enough to gather a thick coating of dust.

He straightened up and returned to the old study, lit by a single long electric lamp fixed to the ceiling. This room had escaped the looters' rampage largely because, he suspected, it was too much trouble to get inside and find anything. With the furniture removed the remaining clutter consisted of heaped objects of no obvious purpose. Their bulk was daunting, but Piero had resolved that this was the last night he was going to spend in the kitchen. After so many hours spent trying potion after fruitless potion in the lab, he had to accomplish something today. They could all go in the dining room, he decided.

The time it took to clear a space in the rest of the room was easily double what he had spent to move the furniture. Every piece he moved aside revealed another item of such strangeness that he could not help but sit down and take a moment to examine it. Tumbled in with the out-of-date journals and canvasses gifted by admirers were the bones of curious animals, maps of the Isles drawn to show not just towns but minerals and forests and rivers, packs of divinatory cards painted in a dozen different styles, unfamiliar plants pressed between glass and even stranger things afloat in jars.
Piero paused a moment to catch his breath again, listening to his heart pound in his chest, and then he realized it was not his heart at all but an impatient thud coming from downstairs. He descended the staircase down to the foyer just as the invisible assailant returned to hammering at the entrance to the lab. He hauled open one door, blinking in the meager afternoon sunlight, and said. "Ah. Can I...help you?"

The man standing outside wore neat livery, and he looked Piero up and down with barely-concealed concern. "I am looking for a Master Joplin," he said in prim tones. "Can you inquire if he is at home?"

"Um, he is. T-that is. I am. That is m-me," stammered Piero.

The man looked him up and down again, but he said only, "With my lord's compliments," and held forth a small wooden box. After a moment he added, "Sir."

Piero took the box reflexively, and had a brief moment of panic over whether he was expected to tip the messenger; but the man only waited a moment more as if giving Piero one last chance to blurt out his true identity, then left without another word.

Piero carried the small box inside and set it down on the table in the foyer. An envelope had been fastened to the top; he cracked the seal on the back, red wax mixed freely with gold showing a whale encircled in coils of its own stylized blood. The cream-colored paper weighed heavy in his hands, with a smoother touch than the fabric of his clothing. Inside he found a sheet of paper not handwritten but typed - printed letter by letter by one of the new audiograph-sized machines that had begun to come from Karnaca. He examined the typeface carefully, inspecting the pattern of ink laid down and tipping it up to the light so he could see the impressions where the keys had struck the paper. Anton had a prototype half-dismantled in the workspace downstairs, and the fine gearing of it fascinated Piero.

Then it occurred to him that the letter also likely conveyed some message, and so he read:

Master Joplin,

It was my honor to make your acquaintance at our meeting this week past. You are just the new blood this city requires. Please accept this token of my esteem, as I believe you are one of the few men in Dunwall who may appreciate its true value.

Yr Most Hnr Srv, etc.,
John, 7th Lord Ramsey

Piero stared blankly at the words. It might as well have been written in Tyvian for all the sense it made. Piero had more comprehension of the machine that Ramsey had used to write it than of the mechanism that had compelled him to do so. He set the letter aside with its baffling message and unlatched the box's lid. Underneath he found a fold of velvet, and when he lifted it - a color he had not beheld in years.

He brushed his fingers along the smooth clay surface, half in wonder and half in disbelief, then picked it up. The weight of the shallow bowl nested in the velvet only bolstered the impossible conclusion. The outside had been tinted a pale twilight with white hills molded in bas-relief around the base; but the inside of the bowl glowed the true vibrant Potterstead Blue, pricked with the white dots of tiny stars forming a portrait of the night sky.

He had not seen that color for many years. Once the priceless glaze had been all he worked with from dawn to dusk, but in Dunwall the cost restricted genuine Glaiwes riverware to wealthy cabinets.
and drawing rooms. He turned the piece over and inspected the potter's marks set into the base: ACR, an inland north-riverbank studio, he remembered, and then the year, and then, where the series number ought to be, only an artist's mark. The bowl had been custom-made. He could not imagine the expense.

Was this his? Had a nobleman he had hardly exchanged words with chosen to send him a - a gift - an object worth more than he scraped together in a year? And his letter had made it clear that he knew Piero of all people would know the value of such a piece - Ramsey had taken the time to discover his history.

He could not fathom what was meant by any of it. But any misgivings he might have had were well and truly wiped out by the joy of seeing - owning - such an object. Piero carried the bowl reverently back up to the study, setting it on one of the high shelves and pushing it back from the edge. He stood and looked at it for a long time, then took it down again and ran his fingers over the fine surface of the dense stoneware. Not a single ripple or variation in color marred the deep blue. A remarkable piece. Much of the riverware that found its way to Dunwall was cheap stuff meant to fool the newly rich, but this was the work of a true craftsman.

At last Piero replaced the bowl and turned back to his labors, working his way through the rest of the pile with less and less enthusiasm. When he attempted to lift a long, low chest he found himself only tugging at the handles, and opening the lid revealed a heap of rocks of different shapes and colors. Enough, he decided, feeling the ache in his back. He left the chest, removed the cot from its niche in the kitchen and laid it down in the space he had cleared, then sat down on it.

The walls of the narrow study pressed in around him like a blanket wrapped across his shoulders. The low ceiling came as an immense relief from distant vaults and echoing spaces. Wind whistled through the building and deep below him the waterwheel thrummed; all else lay still. He lay back on the cot, resting from his labors, at last relaxing in his solitude.

But the silence of the lab fell flat and unwelcome, a curious sense of absence. Piero's breath caught in his throat and he sat up, straining to catch some distant sound; he might have said the waterwheel had faltered for a moment, or the wind changed its pitch, but he could not be certain. He stood and walked out of the study, leaning over the balcony railing and looking down, wondering what had disturbed him. The sun had slipped further down the horizon and deep shadows filled Kaldwin's Bridge. They rose and fell slowly as the arc lamps swung from their long cables, as if the entire building breathed in and out. The chill air carried a hint of damp to him, but nothing out of place.

He tapped restless fingers along the balcony rail in thought. Perhaps he should re-examine Ramsey's letter, in hopes of understanding why the man had sent such a handsome gift. He crossed the dining room with its new stacks of junk, tottering piles that loomed and leered at him in the myriad shadows cast by the lamps outside. The cold of the stone floor ate through his boots, the smell of damp rising as he descended the staircase, a touch of brine and rotting plant.

Ramsey's letter still lay on the table in the foyer next to the box. In the dim light Piero noticed the faint glow coming from under its lid. He lifted it again, curious if he had missed something else after the discovery of the bowl.

A globe of trans nestled into the hollow of the velvet where the bowl had been. The clear flask had been fashioned into something like a heart, with the stopper a silver dart plunged through it. It pulsed with the oil's pale blue light. The sight of it disturbed him greatly in a way he could not name: a sickening familiarity, and at the same time an incompleteness to its design. He did not want to touch it; he wished Ramsey had not sent it. He left it, grabbed the letter and the envelope and felt something warm and sticky coat his fingertips. He held one hand up to the light and saw the stain of...
melting red wax.

Red began to soak through the fine paper of the envelope, the letter, dripping from the corners onto the table. It spread in a dark pool, nearly black beneath the distant lamps. The smell of damp grew stronger, could not be anything now but the reek of the sea. Piero dropped the paper and backed away from the table. His footsteps sloshed in saltwater, cold as it rushed across the slimy stone. Something hot splashed onto his shoulder and he could not help but look up.

The immense carcass of a dying whale hung in the open space of Kaldwin's Bridge, pinned and thrashing, bleeding and bellowing under the chains of a dozen harpoons.

Piero woke with a jerk, a half-strangled shout escaping his lips before he could cover his mouth. He tumbled off the cot and struck his head on the back of the chest. His spectacles clattered to the floor. The pain yanked him back into his own skin. He scrambled back onto the cot, sitting up, and closed his eyes and concentrated on his breath, on taking deep, slow breaths to slow the fiery panic in his chest. He pressed the heels of his hands to his forehead and tried to focus. This is real, he repeated. Pain throbed in one temple. That was a dream, and this is real. He mouthed the words until he almost believed them, and if his eyes stung hotly and a few tears squeezed their way out, well, there was no one there to see.

After many breaths he managed to get to his feet and walk the short distance back to the kitchen, where he uncorked his tonic bottle with trembling fingers and took a long swallow. When he crossed the balcony he kept his head ducked down to one side, studiously avoiding looking out into that great empty space.

By the time he returned to the cot he could already feel the tonic dulling his senses, mercifully slowing his thoughts. He lay back and counted breaths, deep and even, until the leaden weight of the drug pulled down his fear; but even as he sunk into unconsciousness, he found no peace.

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13th of W

A. is back. I suspect he did not enjoy his visit.

Lost today's batch before it could be tested.

"Miasmas!" thundered Anton from the other side of the lab. "That's all he had to tell me. 'Miasmas!'"

Piero listened halfway, focusing instead on measuring out the grey precipitate he had spent the day rendering out of solution. Anton had run out of new complaints about an hour ago and was now onto his third iteration. It had taken a quarter of a bottle of wine just to calm his annoyance enough to manifest as full sentences. Piero had opened his mouth a half-dozen times to ask the man to give him some quiet, but each time found himself suddenly reluctant to invite that flat silence back in.

"'It's in the lungs, it must be something inhaled', oh, what shit," continued Anton. "Has he done a single stinking autopsy? Has he?! It's in the blood, the rotted fool. 'It's all down to bad air, that's why they've taken sick near the sewers,' yes I suppose it's got nothing to do with the rats, it's all just a marvelous coincidence. What absolute shit!"

A faint hiss behind him made Piero look over. At the far end of Anton's bench, behind Piero, a blue-gold oilflame burned beneath a large boiling flask. Anton had set it on and capped it when he had
started his rant, and now the vapor collecting inside had thickened to an opaque white that bubbled
and squeaked around the edges of the stopper.

"Oh, you'll want to know that Garvey's retired," said Anton, drawing his attention back. "Durham
finally managed to turn him out."

"Oh," was all Piero could think to say on the matter. "I don't remember Durham." With everything
else he had had to deal with in the last few weeks, he found his usually sharp memories of the
Academy had gone distant and blunted. He had not taken them out and polished up their painful
edge in some time.

"He was only a Scholar when you were about, but he's a dab hand at politics. I've half a mind to turn
him out," said Anton. "Talking to me like I'm some wild-eyed Fellow who just won his sleeves, I am
the Head of this damned Academy and it's time those louts remembered it..."

Anton trailed off as he moved along the bench, far down the length of the lab, stopping to tune the
arc generator along the way. It gave a snap of discharging current.

"Is that device truly necessary?" said Piero.

"It's part of the infusion process," said Anton. "The electrical impulse energizes the fluid, which in
turn conveys its beneficial properties to the patient."

"I am not certain that is how that works."

"Everything's better with electricity," asserted Anton with some satisfaction. Piero thought it more
likely Anton just didn't feel at home unless something was striking sparks in his immediate vicinity,
but he shrugged and returned to his work until yet another hiss broke his concentration. The flask still
percolated over its flame, the vapor filling it entire. Piero couldn't tell what he was doing, leaving it
over the heat for so long, but Anton must have a reason. He debated mentioning it, but surely Anton
knew it was there, and Piero didn't know what his plan was after all. Not his concern. Instead he
clenched his jaw, leveled out another teaspoon of the grey residue, and sprinkled it onto the pan of
the balance scale, watching the needle swing.

Anton thumped the bench again, hard enough to make it shake even in the corner where Piero had
laid out his apparatus. A trickle of grey powder slid down the mound Piero was building. "Please do
not do that," said Piero.

Anton ignored him, now muttering into his beard as he made notes on a piece of foolscap. "And to
think I felt bad I'd kept from checking in on their progress on a cure for this long," he burst out. "I
swear they'd run the course of natural philosophy backward if they could, Durham and his miasmas-
-"

The boiling flask exploded with a thunderous crack, spraying glass and superheated liquid in a wave
of splinters. Piero dropped to the ground without thinking, hiding his faces beneath his arms as hot
breath rolled over him and burning flashes stung and spattered across his skin. He swiped at them as
if fighting off a hornet swarm, singeing his fingertips. Glass rained down around him in sharp clacks
and clatters.

When the hiss of steam finally stopped, he uncurled from his protective crouch and raised his head,
sagging back against the side of the bench. His ears still rang with the sound. A few inches in front
of him splinters of glass the length of his finger had been driven into the wood of the lab bench.

Something shook his arm. "Piero!" shouted Anton, a dim thunder through the deafening ring in his
"You left the flask on too long," said Piero, dazed. He fumbled with one hand for the top of the bench, trying to pull himself up. Anton grabbed his other arm and hauled him roughly to his feet. Piero leaned against his shoulder for a moment, shaken, and brushed bright needles of glass off his coat. "Oh dear," he said, lurching to the edge of the bench as he saw to his horror that the balance scale had been blown on its side, spilling grey powder.

Anton was staring at him like he'd just stepped from his own coffin. "You're not hurt," he said.

Piero heard him as if he were speaking underwater. He found a dry rag and tried to scrape together as much of the powder as he could. "I am going to go deaf if this keeps happening," he said, half to himself. "There have been far too many detonations in my life since we met."

"You're not hurt," repeated Anton. "Sevrnyy vetr. You're not even splashed." His gaze searched Piero up and down, as if looking for the blood he knew had to be soaking through his clothes even now.

"My peace of mind is severely wounded, I assure you," snapped Piero. "You should not have left that flask on."

"You were a meter away," said Anton, incredulous.

Piero paused in his attempt to salvage the day's work, turning to regard the carnage. The burner stand still clutched the narrow neck of the flask, now ending in a fan of splinters. Burnt smears and splashes stained everything around it. A long spill of grey marked where Anton must have thrown the ash-bucket over the mess. Shards of glass crunched underfoot, jutted from the wood where they had been driven into the lab bench around where Piero had been working. "I was lucky," he mumbled, going back to the little pile.

But Anton was still staring at him with that by-now familiar focus. "I remember what the trans lab looked like after the fire," he said. "It took a half-ton of ash to put it out. The place was charcoal. And you must have been standing in the middle of it." Grey eyes narrowed. "But you didn't have a scratch at the hearing."

"I was lucky then, too," said Piero sourly. His hand began to tremble as the backlash caught up with him. The fine grey powder had already been contaminated by the dust and residue of the bench. Useless, now. He tossed the rag onto the bench in disgust. "To make up for my bad fortune in everything else, I suppose."

"That's not luck," said Anton.

Piero gave up on the salvage attempt and turned to face him fully. "I do not know," he said, spreading his hands wide. His voice shook with tension, late-arrived and coming in force to make up for it. "Once I mistook methanol for ethanol and filled half my quarters with a gas that should have killed me. All I suffered was a sore throat. I do not take sick, either, except for the - the f-fits. It has always been true. Alright?"

The words came out in a rush, but he regretted them instantly as Anton's expression went from inquisitive to sudden understanding: of course he would see the connection. It was another piece of that strange shadow that lay over him, another mark of its force bending the course of Piero's life in a thousand minute ways, and it scared him all at once to realize how much Anton knew about it, how much Anton could hurt him if he chose to. His memory caught on the shining point of the crossbow bolt leveled at his chest. Piero had kept the secret for so long, first in cringing childhood fear and then
in a much more rational, but no less frightening, terror of the Abbey, and now as Anton drew its parts from him he had the sense of giving ground, inch by inch, and no way to reclaim it.

"Mind your damned burners next time," muttered Piero, and turned away.

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15th of W

Postponement of Council demonstration may be necessary.

Next week I will have better progress to show anyhow.

- - -

16th of W.

Council meeting this morning.

Adm. Wentworth reports Jeremiah Pratchett attempted to run blockade in a converted whaling ship & a Morley vessel sank her and slew the survivors in the water. The Crown has seized his property so with any luck we will be able to take possession of his warehouse. It would be convenient to have such a space adjacent to KB. It will be a problem tho if blockade stops allowing whalers through the line; A. & I are stockpiling trans in case.

Dr. Galvani listed among those slain. Burrows is now the only living member of original conspiracy, but still no access.

WG Curnow denied A.'s request for staff & protective detachment. He seems unkindly disposed towards us at the moment which is most inconvenient but he is in any case preoccupied w/WG Tobias' continued defiance.

Our report was not received as we might have hoped.

We should have better to show by the next meeting.

- - -

19th of W.

Faulty crucible cracked on heating this afternoon.

A. is running out of infected blood to prepare homeopathic solutions.

No progress.

- - -

21st of W.

Testing is becoming difficult. Livestock in v. short supply & we still cannot access Coldridge. No positive results so far.

I think A. is not having much luck either.
Anton's rabbit was dead. Piero found it when he came into the lab just before dawn. It had curled up in the corner of its cage and died, rather messily. So that was it for Anton's latest batch.

The lab around him was silent, Anton still abed in his quarters on the third floor. Piero had woken as usual before sunrise, trained by years of saving candles to begin his work at first light. Even in the windowless study it seemed his body remembered its routine. He inspected the rabbit and wondered whether he ought to wake Anton and let him know or just leave it for the man to find. Eventually he settled on the latter. Anton tended to rise late and sleep later. The corpse would keep until he had had his rest.

A perfected serum would need to be tested on humans, of course; but humans were difficult to come by, and it was not always clear if they had died of the plague or of the attempted cure. It saved a great deal of time and mess to inject each batch into some suitable animal and wait a few days to see what happened. So they injected rabbits, and the rabbits died. They killed chickens too, until the chickens became too expensive; they killed dogs until they ran out of dogs; they would have killed cats, but the cats had died out months ago, defeated by the rats. They did not kill the rats. Nothing killed the rats.

They had killed plenty of rabbits, scores of them transformed into the heaps of grey-white bone ash in buckets next to the furnace, and now the rabbit cages in the basement were nearly empty and would not be refilled. The animals were becoming too dear as the quarantine tightened. Piero and Anton had had a lively debate only a few days past as to whether fish made a reasonable substitute; the ultimate conclusion was no. So now they were down to the birds. The crows were too clever to be tricked by their rooftop traps more than once or twice, but the fat gulls that sailed over the blockading ships and pecked at the whale guts floating in the river would fall for a baited line.

Piero climbed the stairs to the greenhouse and pushed open the steel door that led to the rooftop walkway. Wind hit him the instant he stepped outside, still carrying the chill of the night, slicing through his coat like an autopsy scalpel. He ducked into the lee of the greenhouse's raised roof and walked along it to the low structure sticking up from the horizon, silhouetted by the approaching dawn.

From the top of Kaldwin's Bridge he could look out over the fog where it lay on the river, stretching down to the harbor, the oilsmoke staining it dirty yellow. The rooftop shack was open on three sides, a single wooden wall closing off the fourth. The pole that stretched up from the far corner anchored one end of the signal-wire that came across the rooftops. A small room had been built against the wall and the bird cotes sheltered next to it. Piero heard the cheep and rattle of the kingsparrows as he approached, a few flickering in and out of the nestboxes. The gulls had to be caged next to the sparrows, and the two species shrieked at each other in a never-ending din.

Piero set his jaw and pulled open the door to the little room. Instantly his thoughts were assailed by a penetrating tick. On the back wall of the shack, above the splintery shelf where Anton kept his astronomy notebooks, hung the most accurate timepiece in the Isles. The elegant constellation of springs and gearing kept not only the time of the sun, but the time of the stars, predicting their rise and set with exquisite precision. Anton claimed that it drifted but fifty seconds in a year. Piero did not particularly care to test it out. He had to admit, though, that it was a lovely thing. It shared the same aesthetic as the clock in Anton's quarters, or rather the same lack of one; it bore no ornamentation, in fact was missing most of its case, exposing the mechanism. It reveled not in a skin of carven naiads but in its own unadorned bones, in the sleek lines of its own functionality.

As the clock ticked he fumbled through the clutter of telescopes and their accessories until he found a wire cage half-crushed by a mount. The gull was easily lured by a scraping of suet and did not notice when Piero shut the door behind it. The wind gusted as he carried it from the shack, bringing the
reek of the river and another scent. He paused, the gull squawking as the cage swung. The rising sun
glowed along the eastern horizon, but in the far west the curtain of light wore thin and a few stars still
peeked through. Their pale dots prickled across his skin like eyes, like whispers of the void beyond.
The wind gusted again. Wood-ash, he smelled; not the ink and salt tang of oilsmoke but the char of
burning timber. Strange.

Piero paused a moment in the warmth of the greenhouse, then descended and placed the gull's cage
next to the dead rabbit. He added food and water and affixed the label P - 47 to the wire, to let Anton
know it was his, and went to work.

He had lost track of the hour by the time Anton came in, but the light that made it through the
southern windows claimed it was mid-morning. The man made no sign that he noticed Piero and
Piero made no sign in reply, focused on his tinctures. He heard Anton moving about around the
edges of his awareness, and then a smash of glass nearly made him drop his vial.

His head jerked up in time to see the last shards of a beaker rattling to the floor at the base of one
wall. Anton stood a few feet away, his shoulders shaking in silent fury. Piero guessed he had found
the rabbit. Anton said nothing and Piero said nothing in reply. After a few moments he heard Anton
take a deep breath and gather himself, and then walk over to his bench.

Piero paused, setting the vial into a rack. Anton leaned his elbows on the surface, one fist propping
up his chin beneath his beard. At last he said, "I don't suppose you've had a dream you haven't told
me about."

Piero glanced away and down, staring at the floor and hugging an arm across his chest. "No," he
confessed, blushing hot. "Nothing."

Anton nodded slowly. Then he went and cleaned up the glass, and took the rabbit downstairs to be
burned.

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23rd of W.

Council.

We will have to switch entire to the krust extract. The prison population has dropped too low and we
cannot find the infected to bleed. WG Curnow reports most no longer attempting to find treatment.
A. has suggested patrols house to house. WG Curnow says there are too damned many houses and
not enough men & he does not have time for this.

L. Ramsey kind enough to volunteer the services of his slaughterhouse butchers for collection &
dissection of krusts. Adm. Wentworth says he will put his sailors to it as ships quarantined in harbor
have little else to do.

A fire took most of the Distillery District. Cv. & Em. E. worried about this. Attempted to explain this
is expected & a natural consequence of so many abandoned structures but I fear they did not take it
in the spirit meant. Anyway careful use of floodgates appears to have stopped its progress.

Cv. wants A. to testify at trial of Burrows regarding Pan. notes & nature of plague & autopsy of Em.
J. A. says happy to do so once Burrows actually put on trial. Requires having Burrows in our
custody tho & this apparently touchy subject w/WG Curnow.

I do not think A. actually happy to testify.
After a great deal of thought I believe these combinations the most promising:

batch 48 nefathilene, oxrush, juniper
batch 49 nefathilene, juniper
batch 50 oxrush, zinc sulphate
batch 51 savorin, accuminata

One of these must be it.

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25th of W.

Integration procedure likely to be completed by the end of this week. Beginning of Da. at outside. I cannot be far from the answer.

REMEMBER accuminata extract must be changed at 2 hrs past midnight.

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27th of W.

Have great hopes for accuminata preparation. This must be the pertinent component of the elixir. Extraction at last complete & new recipe brewing. I am so close.

The clouds above the greenhouse formed their own roof, a mosaic of frosted glass soldered together with silver. Piero eyed the line scored on the inside of the little cistern and poured a thread of water from the beaker. The level within rose a hair's breadth. Piero waited until the surface of it stilled, reflecting the patchwork sky, and marked the precise alignment with the etched line. Good enough.

He set the beaker down on the greenhouse's lab bench and turned the stopcock at the base of the cistern. The air filled with the gurgle and slosh of water as it flooded the pipes and seeped out into the vats of roots and soil.

"You don't have to be that careful about it," said a voice. Piero jumped and cursed; it was just as well he'd already set down the beaker. He searched the greenhouse, but Anton was nowhere to be found.

"Up here, hello," said Anton, and Piero's gaze darted upwards. Anton was lying propped up on one elbow, waving at him from atop one of the massive rafters that crossed beneath the greenhouse's glass roof. "You really are dead to the world when you're working."

"I do not generally check the ceiling, no," Piero said, waiting for his heart to slow again. "At least, not since I ceased working with Corvo." He peered up at Anton's perch. There were no ladders in the greenhouse, and no access from the roof. "How on earth did you--"

Something blared a harsh chord. He jumped again, his nerves already frayed. It quieted for a few moments, then rang again; he searched out the source.

"It's the door," said Anton helpfully from the ceiling. Piero glanced towards the door that led back down to the rest of the Bridge, puzzled. "No, the front door. It rings when someone presses the button down there."

"Oh," said Piero. He located at last the buzzer-box. It jangled again as he watched. "I suppose I had
"If they're selling something, you can tell them to piss off," said Anton, lying back down on his rafter and returning to his own notebook.

The boy was not selling anything, although he did loiter on the porch until Piero found a coin to pay him. Piero climbed the stairs back to the greenhouse as he examined the letter the messenger had brought. The outer envelope of cheap newsprint wrapped a proper letter within, heavy paper with the ivory cast of expensive stationery. His own name had been written on the front and **Kaldwin's Bridge Laboratory** beneath it. He checked the back. A thick seal pinned the flap in place, but instead of the crimson whale emblem he half-feared to see, he found indigo wax with a faint silver shimmer. The sigil itself had blurred in the pressing. He could make out some sort of bird, and something that might be a key.

"What was it?" Anton asked when he re-entered the greenhouse. "Hold on. Can you put that hemlock essence in the basket?"

Basket? Piero nearly said, but Anton had let down, yes, a small straw basket on the end of a length of string, presumably so that he would not have to abandon his lofty perch. Piero moved to the bench and put the jar into the basket, still puzzling over the seal. "Thanks," said Anton, reeling in the string.

"It's a letter," said Piero. "I am receiving a surprising amount of correspondence." He found a blunt knife on the bench and slid it beneath the wax, pulling out the paper contained within. "It's from Miss Bentham," he said, surprised.

"Of course," grumbled Anton. "She can't send a bird like a normal person." He rolled onto his stomach and uncapped the hemlock essence, pouring it into something invisible from the ground.

Piero's surprise only grew as he read the rest of the letter. "She has invited me to visit the college a week hence," he said.

"The Hall?" asked Anton.

" 'The Hall of Looms,' " read Piero. "I have never been to the Ladies' Technical College," he said to himself. "That will be interesting to see."

Anton capped the hemlock essence without another word, examining whatever concoction he was brewing. He muttered to himself and scratched in his notebook. His expression had gone as clouded as the sky beyond the glass.

"You do not think this is a good idea," guessed Piero.

"Go if you want," said Anton, waving a hand dismissively. "It's no business of mine."

"What is your concern with Miss Bentham?" said Piero.

"No business of yours," snapped Anton.

Piero put his hands on his hips, annoyed. "It is certainly business of mine, if she is polite and you are quite rude in return," he said. In truth he could not say Bentham had been entirely polite during their meeting; nor, honestly, could he say that the woman had not unsettled him enough in the few minutes he had spoken to her. But he had been still on edge from the hardships of their ordeal, and he was willing to chalk that up to his own mind's occasional incomprehensible misfires.

"Go to the damn Hall," growled Anton. "Then you'll know."
"I think I shall."

"Fine," said Anton.

"Fine," said Piero.

Anton scratched in his notebook, fixating pointedly on his experiment. Piero checked the water cistern again. A floor below him his latest samples bubbled through their columns. He had meant to stay in the greenhouse a while longer to clear his mind, but with Anton roosting in the rafters like an annoyed bat the peace of the place was entirely destroyed. He descended again and checked on the distillation process, then carried the letter over to the dissection table and held the indigo seal beneath its magnifying lens.

A bird, clutching in its talons - not a key, but a weaving shuttle, its thread wrapping around the outstretched wings. The Hall of Looms, Piero thought. He remembered again the dizzying figure woven into the cloth of her robes: a tangle of geometric shapes, regular in form and yet somehow never repeating. The hand that held the seal beneath the lens quivered, just a bit.

He folded the letter and stuffed it into a pocket of his coat. Just because Anton did not care for the woman did not mean he could not speak to her. He tore a sheet from his notebook and wrote I would be delighted to accept your invitation, then went to find a bird to send it.

---

1st of Da.

Running short on everything. The butchers & the Navy men have proven singularly incompetent at doing anything but blowing the precious krusts to pieces & I shall have to tutor them in dissection procedure. They must be handy with a knife; it is practically their reason for existing.

A tailor came today.

Piero braced one foot on the rock-hard shell and yanked on the leather strap holding the river krust closed, tightening it another notch. The krust hissed and clicked beneath his hands, half submerged in the metal tub, but the binding kept it from opening far enough to spit. He pushed a table closer to the tub and began to lay out his vivisection instruments beneath the bright lights of the workspace under the mezzanine.

"Joplin," shouted Anton down from the balcony. "How d'you feel about parties?"

Piero shivered reflexively. "Not my area of expertise," he answered, pitching his voice loud enough to carry up through the warehouse.

Anton disappeared as he descended the stairs. "That's a shame," he resumed when he reached Piero. He held a thick pearl-grey card between the first two fingers of one hand. "Because we've got one to go to."

" 'We'?" echoed Piero. He laid out scalpels, ordering them by size.

The krust gave a loud hiss and struggled against its binding, rocking from side to side. "Quiet, you," said Anton, aiming a kick at the tub. "Yes, 'we', you need to come," he told Piero. "You're a curiosity, people want to see you, right now we need all the favorable gossip we can sow. Especially with our hostesses," he added.
Piero felt a sinking suspicion, but he asked anyway, "Whose party?"

"The ladies Boyle," said Anton, flourishing the card with a flick of his wrist. Piero's shoulders slumped. They would have to go, then. The nefathilene. Always the damned nefathilene. He wiped one hand on his shirt and plucked the card from Anton's fingers, examining it. It had been typed, like Ramsey's letter.

"It's their first soirée since Esma vanished," Anton continued. "So of course everyone's going to turn up to ask them what happened, see if they can't get a juicy bit of scandal all to themselves."

"Corvo killed her," said Piero.

"Okay, well, don't say that at the party," said Anton.

"Noted." Piero debated writing this down. He would have to make a list before he went, he decided. This sounded like it would be an important event. He didn't want to mess it up.

"I rather think they only invited me out of habit," said Anton. He seemed entirely too gleeful at the prospect. "But they've got a surprise coming. I will go, and there's one spot more on the invitation, and we'll see who's laughing then."

"Not me," said Piero.

"I've got a tailor to come in and get us something to wear," said Anton. "This might even be fun, you know. I haven't done this in a while."

"I have the Navy men and Ramsey's butchers coming in an hour," protested Piero.

Anton stopped short. "Ramsey's men are coming here?" he barked.

"I am demonstrating the krust dissection procedure," said Piero. He held a pair of sawblades up to the light, trying to discern which was sharper.

"Move the pylon," ordered Anton sharply.

"What?" said Piero. "No. Why?"

"I'm not letting that snake get a look at it," said Anton, going to the corner where the arc pylon still stood, ringed by tables bearing its many parts like penitents holding aloft their offerings. He paced around it, measuring. "I'll take the resonant chamber upstairs," he said at last. "Don't let them go up there."

"I do not think Lord Ramsey plotted this all to get a look at our pylon," began Piero, but Anton was already pulling out the wheeled cart. He left the sawblades on the table in exasperation and went to help him lift the chamber.

"You'd be surprised what that jackass will do to get an edge," said Anton as they set the heavy globe down on the bed of the cart. "He and Bundry Rothwild could have taught Hiram a thing or two about dirty tricks. I ought to know, I was one of them." He added the brass barrel of the firing circuit and a few other complex components to the pile and began to push it across the open floor, towards the small lift platform that went up to the greenhouse.

"He seems committed to our enterprise," said Piero, going ahead to pull the lever that called the lift. "Why else would he loan us the time and skills of his slaughterhouse men?"
"Why else indeed," said Anton. "He's not exactly the soul of civic spirit."

"He hasn't run the blockade yet," pointed out Piero.

"Only because all his wealth is tied up in city real estate," said Anton. "It seems Jack Ramsey would rather die a lord than survive a pauper."

The lift ground to a halt behind the shutter. Piero hauled it up and Anton pushed the cart onto the platform.

"As long as he gets us the krust extract, he may play whatever games he likes," said Piero.

"You say that now," muttered Anton. He set the switches to send the lift back up. "Come up when you're done," he said over his shoulder, regaining a little of his former enthusiasm. "It's going to be an event, Joplin! One for the books!"

---

2nd of Da.

Did not bother w/Council meeting today. Nothing to show.

---

4th of Da.

Krust harvest proceeding well. Nefathilene supplies low.

Another fire has started in the Southcliff district. I can see its light from the rooftop.

No progress.

---

5th of Da.

Accuminata interaction w/sal vitae universally fatal. Zinc sulphate preparation heats violently on exposure to air. Scrap both. Scrap everything.

A new approach is required.

The Ridgefort loomed. That was its purpose. The sole mandate of its existence was to loom out of the mist, a cliffside of stone crowned by jagged metal, the arc lamps fastened about its perimeter throwing a harsh blue-white glare across its front. The City Watch shield-and-tower wept rain over the wide archway sheltering the double doors of oak and banded iron. Two men lounging in the patch of dry stone beneath it watched Piero mount the stairs half with glee and half with dread, glad enough for something to liven their shift but wary that his arrival might require them to stir themselves.

When he reached the door Piero hesitated. He was not certain if one knocked when one wished entrance. It was not an entrance that invited knocking. So instead he turned to the nearest man and announced, "I wish to speak to General Tobias."

The two men exchanged amused glances, as if deciding whether to laugh outright. "He ain't here,"
"I f-find that doubtful," said Piero.

"You f-find it doubtful," said the other man, mimicking the stammer in his words. Piero felt the blush rise hot in his skin and clutched his notebook to his chest like a shield. But he managed to say, "It is about the supply of plague elixir. I f-fear there may be a contamination."

That cut the levity like a knife. The two men exchanged brief glares, inscrutable to Piero, until one was somehow declared the loser and set to the task of hauling open the doors and going within. Piero stayed outside with the other, who now seemed mildly afraid he might start speaking. Piero had no intention of troubling him on that score.

The man re-emerged. "He says you kin come in."

The interior of the Ridgefort had been furnished to a more comfortable scale, but its oil-lamps guttered, only one in three still burning. Trash littered the floor and the stench of old food and unwashed bodies hung thick. When the man went to close the heavy door behind him it stuck, warped in the moist air. He cursed and kicked at it. Piero picked the best-lit hallway and walked down it. The doorman caught up with him halfway down it and ushered him none-too-politely into a large office near the heart of the building. Watch Officer General Hallem Tobias sat behind the desk within, a bottle of wine uncorked next to the remains of a roasted fowl. A lieutenant stood at his shoulder, waiting while the General examined a sheaf of papers.

Piero's stomach grumbled and reminded him how long it had been since he had eaten something other than pickled fish and whalemeat. He ignored it and said instead, "Good afternoon, General."

Tobias finished leafing through the stack of papers, handing them back to the lieutenant with a muttered, "See that he understands the situation, Marrow." Then he fixed Piero with a watery eye. "You're one of them natural philosophers," he said.

"Indeed," said Piero. He stepped forward. "As it is a-a sensitive matter, may we - ah - speak in private?" he said.

"Marrow, get out," Tobias ordered the lieutenant. "Close that damn door." Marrow looked as if he wished to object, but at Tobias' glare he withdrew and pulled the door shut behind himself. Piero allowed himself a moment to breathe. There was no turning back now.

But Tobias got there first. "There en't anything wrong with the elixir, is there," he said shrewdly. "You're here from Sokolov. I knew he'd cave."

Piero blinked, momentarily baffled, but kept to the plan. He stepped up to the edge of the desk and said, "I wish to lay a proposition before you."

Tobias said nothing. Piero attempted to measure whether the man's silence was an invitation to continue or simple annoyance. He came up with nothing, and pressed on anyway.

"You have held out this long, hoping to force concessions from the Crown," he said, fighting the urge to close his eyes to better recall his lines. "Your power rests on your control of Hiram Burrows. Therefore it rests also on your ability to command the loyalty of your men holding this fort and Coldridge. That loyalty is bought with coin and drug, with wealth and fear of the plague. I can tell you without hesitation that the latter will soon greatly outweigh the former. And your supplies of elixir are dwindling." They had to be. Piero had figured the numbers four times, based on the standard dose. Even with generous margins of error Tobias could not have more than a week left.
"Without it no amount of money will keep your men from going over to Curnow."

Tobias stayed silent. Piero's heart sank. He had hoped by this point to have some indication of the success or failure of his gambit, but - he took a deep breath and launched into the second portion of the speech he had memorized earlier.

"Natural philosophy is above the realm of politics," he said. "We can supply you with the elixir." Tobias started forward. Piero held up one hand. "In return we ask - we require - access to Hiram Burrows in order to gather information regarding the plague. Information which will benefit us all in the long run," he added.

Tobias did not seem to hear that last part; his gaze had turned inwards at the mention of a fresh source of elixir. Piero let the man's thoughts spin. It would be best if Tobias came to his own understanding of the sense in Piero's arguments. He did not think he could have laid them out any clearer, but when dealing with men who had little experience in natural philosophy he had found it was best to speak slowly and make certain to outline even the most obvious leaps of logic.

"That's it?" Tobias said at last.

"It will do."

"Do you plan to harm him?"

"Not if he will co-operate," said Piero.

Tobias ruminated further. Piero was put in mind of a cow digesting its cud. He seemed, thought Piero, like a man who needed a great deal of warm-up before any serious cogitation.

"Marrow!" Tobias shouted suddenly. The door swung open. "Sir?" said the unfortunate Marrow.

"Get on the line to Coldridge and tell them to go get Hiram," said Tobias. "We'll talk to him in my office?" His voice tilted upwards at the end of the order as he glanced towards Piero.

"That will suffice," said Piero coldly. Inside he felt a sudden glee. It was working! It was working!

"Sir," said Marrow, retreating.

"Now," said Tobias, leaning forward. "How do you propose we go about this exchange."

Piero had calculated Tobias' rate of supply before he arrived, but he had underestimated the man's greed; Tobias wanted at least twice it would take to protect his men from infection, and it was all Piero could do to convince him that no, there truly were limits on how much of the elixir could be produced in a day, no, there truly were no profits being made from it that he could haggle for a share of. Tobias kept him busy fending off such half-witted proposals until a knock sounded at the door and Tobias leaned back in his chair and called, "Come in, come in, Hiram, we have a guest."

Piero turned to face the door and tugged unconsciously at the lapels of his coat. But when the door opened it was only Marrow standing in the flickering light of the corridor. "Sir, it's... Burrows, sir," said the lieutenant. He looked about to vomit. "General, sir, he's...gone."

After that matters became quite loud, quite quickly. All Piero's careful preparations disintegrated in the face of the ensuing chaos, leaving him stranded in the midst of it. Tobias shouted at his men, who shouted in turn at others, and when he noticed Piero still in his office too frightened to make a sound he turned on him as well. He demanded to know what his involvement was in all this, insisting that it had all been a ruse, a distraction, and in the face of his fury Piero could feel himself crumpling like a
leaf over a candleflame, until he nearly bolted and one of the lieutenants had him by the collar and it all tumbled beyond his control and when he caught his breath it was sitting on a bench in one of the Ridgefort's holding cells, trying to figure out where it had gone so wrong. The guard slammed the barred door shut behind him, too busy to spare Piero so much as a backwards glance.

He sat on the wooden bench, then pulled his knees up and hugged them to his chest, sunk into misery. Time slipped away from him. He tried to think what to say when someone came for him. Cold crept through his jacket, numbed his skin. He began to doubt that anyone would come for him. That Tobias would even remember where he was. Tobias would forget. The guards would forget. They would forget to bring him food or water and he would die down here in this little cell, unremembered and unmourned...

He heard a clamor coming from a great distance: shouting, and the sound of running feet. He raised his head. Men argued somewhere past his cell door. Piero unfolded himself from the bench, wincing as joints protested, and went to the bars. At the far end of the corridor he could see shadows moving, first slowly, then quickly, then not at all.

A human form stood suddenly in the hallway. Piero jerked his head back and retreated inside his cell. He heard the man walking along the row, pausing at each barred door. When he reached Piero's he halted in evident surprise, turned back towards the way he'd come, and shouted, "Got one down 'ere."

"Uhm," said Piero, torn between retreating to the back of the cell and pressing forward against the bars. "Hello."

The guard crossed his arms and cocked his head to one side. He seemed more alert than the man who had dragged Piero down here, and his fingers did not tap near the hilt of his sword. "So what're you in for?" he asked cheerfully.

"Annoying General Tobias, I think," blurted out Piero, then winced.

But far from storming off in a huff, the guard cracked a smile and said, "Don't think 'e's in a particular good mood right now." He looked Piero up and down. "You sellin' something, then?"


"Yeah?" said the guard. Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and another man joined the first. "Tobias had 'imself a natural philosopher, sir," the guard told the new arrival.

"A-and entirely innocent i-in this affair," said Piero.

"That so?" said the man, a Watch officer by the insignia on his shoulders. He peered at Piero. "Suppose he might be," the officer allowed.

"Say somethin' natural philosophick, then," said the guard. The officer shot him a look, but did not object.

"Suppose he might be," the officer allowed.

"Say somethin' natural philosophick, then," said the guard. The officer shot him a look, but did not object.

Piero drew himself up, deeply annoyed. "Natural philosophy is not a game," he said, fixing the two men with a disdainful glare. "It is the subtle discernment, through wit and perseverance, of the very principles that undergird this world through which all men travel, no more aware of its true nature than a sleeper is of his surroundings. It is the means by which a man becomes awakened, enlightened, illuminated to higher truths than the brute animal fact before him. It, in short," he proclaimed scornfully, "does not perform on command."

The two men stood frozen, obviously transfixed by the power of his words; then to Piero's horror the
guard grinned and said, "'e sounds like one to me."

"Yeah, I reckon he's the real deal," said the officer with a sigh. He unlocked the cell door. "Sorry about the inconvenience, sir. We'll get this all sorted out, soon enough. If you'll just follow me."

Piero collected his notebook with a haughty air and walked behind the man as they climbed up through the fort. Many more people seemed to have arrived. Watchmen hurried past on mysterious errands, and a great deal of conversations were being held in corridors. The man led the way back to Tobias' office, but when he pushed open the door it was Geoff Curnow standing behind the broad desk, berating a pair of lieutenants.

"I want it all out, you understand me?" he snapped. "Throw it in the river if you have to. It's nothing the Watch ought to have, nothing at all. Kemp, what did you find?" That last was addressed to the Watch officer coming through the door with Piero on his heels.

"Tobias had him down in the cells, sir," said Kemp, steering Piero with a grip on his upper arm. "Says he didn't do anything."

"General Curnow," said Piero, surprised.

"Mr. Joplin," said Curnow, seeming equally astonished. "Let him go, Kemp, he's no threat." The officer released his grip and stepped back smartly.

Piero stared about the office, still trying to understand. "Where is General Tobias?"

"Ex-General Tobias," said Kemp from behind him, sounding satisfied.

"Yes, he was fast enough to roll over once he'd lost his best bargaining chip," said Curnow. "Without Hiram Burrows to trade for, he was happy to cut any deal that would save his own skin." He did not smile, but a certain quiet pride glowed in his expression. Then he refocused on Piero. "Dare I ask how you found yourself in the Ridgefort's basement?"

"The wrong place at the wrong t-time," muttered Piero, clutching one arm with the palm of the other. "I came to - to talk with Tobias."

"Oh?" said Curnow. His expression did not change, but his voice gained a new edge. "What about?"

"A matter of natural philosophy."

"Tobias didn't strike me as the intellectual type."

"It pertains to our research into the nature of the plague," said Piero. "N-nothing of the Watch's concern."

"Perhaps the Watch is concerned in any case," said Curnow. His face had set in a solid mask and Piero felt all of a sudden the presence of Kemp at his back, between him and the exit. "What exactly did Sokolov send you to discuss with General Tobias?"

"Why does everyone assume that I am running Anton's errands?" snapped Piero. "I am perfectly capable of having my own business with the man."

"I'm sure you are," said Curnow, staring him down, and Piero was all of a sudden far more frightened than he ever had been facing Tobias. "And I'm sure that business is quite interesting indeed. Why don't you have a seat, Master Joplin, and we can discuss it. I'd hate for you to have come all this way for nothing."
Voices erupted in the hallway outside the office, until one rose above the fray, declaring, "You have no authority to detain him, I promise you the Crown will hear about this--" Piero closed his eyes for a moment and hated, just a fraction, how relieved he was to hear it.

Anton banged the door open hard enough to slam against the opposite wall and barked, "What is the meaning of this?"

"Master Sokolov," said Curnow, all icy courtesy.

"General," said Anton, with the barest inclination of his head. "You all right?" he said to Piero, quieter.

"I am perfectly well," answered Piero. "Do not trouble yourself on my account."

"It's a bit late for that," said Anton. He raised his voice, addressing Curnow. "Have you recovered him yet? Or are your men too busy throwing my colleagues in jail?"

Curnow's expression drew down into an unhappy glare. "My officers cleared the mob as quickly as they could," he said stiffly. "But I'm afraid they'd already thrown him into the sewers. For the Weepers, you see. Poetic justice." A fleeting expression of disgust. "But the rats - the rats got there first."

"Ah," said Anton, taken aback. "Well."

Another lieutenant entered the office, nearly striking the pair of natural philosophers with the pile of rolled papers he clutched in both arms. "Sir, we've got the blockade maps," he said.

"At last," said Curnow. "Lay them out." The lieutenant dumped the pile on the desk. Curnow unrolled the first, glanced up, and said, "I'm certain you gentlemen have matters of your own to attend to."

"Gladly," hissed Anton, and Piero did not need his hand on his shoulder to know that it was time for them to make their retreat.

"What was--" he began once they were out in the corridor, but Anton shook his head and glanced around them. Instead Piero lowered his voice and said, "I heard the men speaking, in Tobias' office. The Coldridge guards said a blood-soaked Corvo walked through the walls and plucked Burrows right from his cell."

"A fine excuse for failure. Easy enough to claim."

"I will have a word for him if he has landed me in such trouble," complained Piero.

"It wasn't Corvo," said Anton darkly.

"I do believe Tobias is not lying," said Piero. "I doubt he has the capacity for such an elaborate deception. It seems likely that a man in red took Burrows out of the prison."

"I don't know about a man in red," said Anton finally. "But someone did abduct Burrows. And it wasn't Attano."

"Can you be certain? It would be of great benefit to Corvo to have him at last in his own custody," persisted Piero.

"Yes, I can be certain," said Anton. "Because Attano wants him on trial, not left hog-tied in the
middle of Broad Street Market with a sign round his neck."

"Oh," said Piero quietly. "Oh dear." Suddenly Curnow's words about the sewers and the Weepers made sense. "And the rats--"

"Got there first." That was the last Piero heard from him until they were both settled in the hired carriage, Piero updating his notebook and Anton sitting across from him, staring out the window.

"You could have said something," Anton said at last.

"I thought you might talk me out of it," said Piero.

"Well, yes," said Anton.

"It was working," complained Piero. He sighed. "It is just my usual luck that they should lose him at the wrong time."

"What were you selling Tobias?" asked Anton.

"Elixir," said Piero.

"We haven't enough of that as it is."

"If it meant we had access to Burrows, I would have called it cheap at twice the price," said Piero. "A cure is worth any amount."

"This plague's gone beyond Burrows' control," dismissed Anton. "He hasn't any more clue than we do. Much less, I'd imagine."

Anger welled up in Piero in a sudden stroke. "And what were you selling him?" he snapped.

"What?" said Anton, startled away from the window.

"Tobias thought I was there from you," said Piero. He levelled his pen at Anton like an accusatory finger. "Tobias thought I was making a deal for you. So did Curnow. Why was that?"

"I've no idea," blustered Anton, but Piero did not even know why he bothered when it was so clear he was lying. He crossed his arms and waited the man out with a disapproving glare.

"Alright, fine, if you really want to know," said Anton grudgingly. "Tobias and I used to have an arrangement. He supplied me with test subjects."


"Well, in theory, yes, but it was always so hard to get them from the prisons, and half those men are on their knees with the disease already," said Anton, waving a hand. "I paid off Tobias' people to bring me one or two from the criminals they rounded up every few weeks. Obviously not any more," he hastened to add.

"So that's why Curnow won't speak to you," said Piero.

"He wasn't thrilled when he found out," admitted Anton. He threw up his hands, annoyed. "Attano even had the nerve to take me to task for it. As if the man has any idea what it takes to achieve what I've been asked to do. He's stuck his knife in plenty of backs to secure his Empress' throne, but he balks at a few more corpses to save the city? What a fool."
"Then why did we wait so long to make a bargain?" said Piero. "We could have spoken with Burrows in the first week, and now instead that avenue is closed for good!"

"Absolutely not," said Anton, horrified. "You've caused enough trouble just coming down here, even worse that Curnow caught you at it."

"It is no one's business what I do with my own damn time--"

"You can't make a deal with Tobias," said Anton, as if spelling it out for a particularly slow student. His tone cut beneath Piero's skin like a scalpel. "Because the Academy - Kaldwin's Bridge - can't make a deal with the man who's opposing the Crown."

"You made a deal with him before," Piero pointed out.

"Before, Tobias was not actively defying the orders of the Empress and the Lord Protector," said Anton. "Before, he was not a criminal and a traitor. At least, not officially," he added.

"Kaldwin's Bridge was not doing anything," said Piero, his voice rising. "I am just--"

"You are Kaldwin's Bridge now," answered Anton. "You have responsibilities. You have to take into account the political implications of your actions."

"Natural philosophy is above the realm of politics," said Piero.

Anton burst into bitter laughter.

"At least I did something!" shouted Piero. Anton cut off mid-laugh, shocked into silence. "At least I tried something, something other than blending a drop of this and a drop of that and hoping for a miracle!" He felt the blood rising in his skin, flushing red all across his face. "Eighty days, that's what Bentham told me, while you were busy receiving your dressing-down from the Lord Protector. Eighty days and we have wasted nearly a third of them. We have nothing to show for it!"

"And what the hell should we do instead!?" roared Anton, flaring up as sudden as his arc generator. His fury filled the cramped carriage; even in the depths of his own rage Piero flinched back. "Is there some suggestion you have yet to put forward? Have you schemed up a solution in your book that you've been holding back for just the right moment? Because I would be delighted to hear it!"

"I doubt that," hissed Piero.

"What?"

"I said I doubt that," repeated Piero, louder. "I sincerely doubt that you would be delighted to hear my suggestion on the matter."

"I don't know what you're--"

"You go on as you always have," said Piero. "Mixing one of this and one of the other in the pattern you have decided will work. You concluded long ago that you had the answer right and it was the plague that stubbornly refused to conform. All that has changed is your ingredient list. You have not listened to me, you have not listened to Bentham, you have not listened to anyone."

"I'm--" Anton was briefly speechless, as stunned as if Piero had hit him. "The elixir works! There is some subtlety to the disease, yes, but there's - there must be some extra vector, something unaccounted for - at least I have a plan, damn you! At least I did it on purpose! At least I don't throw everything into the mix and hope, at least I have a theory behind my choices other than it seems the
"Your theory isn't working!"

"It's all we have!"

"What are we?" blurted out Piero, surprising himself. Anton looked as baffled as he felt. "What are we, now?" He couldn't keep the pain out of his words, no matter what he would have given for his voice not to shake as he said it. "You called me your assistant. To the Council. Is that all you think I am?"

Anton lurched forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, burying his face in his hands. His shoulders shook. He looked as he had when he'd smashed the beaker against the wall, as frustrated with his words as he ever had been testing cures.

"You're not my assistant," he said at last, without raising his head.

"I know that," said Piero, but the venom he had meant to put behind the words failed to materialize. He drew himself up on the carriage bench, pulling his knees in to his chest. We might as well still be apart, for all that our collaboration has functioned thus far.

It did not make any sort of sense. They had worked together, they had found some way to combine; they had cracked that ineffable reaction together, and produced something so much stronger than either - but if the pylon had not still stood in its corner of the lab Piero might have begun to believe it all another delusion of his tortured mind. He reached for that sense again in his mind of the thread that bound them together and found it slipping from his grasp, eluding any attempt to frame it in words, eluding any attempt to prove it had ever existed at all.

Anger leaked from him like the rain that drummed on the carriage roof, but he found only a hollow silence to replace it. They reached the Bridge without another word, and went their separate ways inside.
First incompleteness theorem (n) (mathematics) The proof that all complex mathematical systems must contain statements that are unprovable within the system, but nevertheless true.

8th of Da.

The city is bleeding. The infection grows by the day. The blockade tightens. Our potions turn to ash. And we are going to a party.

This far upstream the Wrenhaven narrowed into a true river that ran swift but tame between granite walls. The damp mist hovered over the water, lifting over distant hills. Here the city thinned out and the Ladies' Technical College sprawled across the flat lands, on the back-fill made by dumping gravel into old marshes and mud flats. Piero gave the carriage driver another coin and told him to come back in an hour. He had no idea how long the visit would take, but he would rather have to pay the man for the extra time than find himself waiting awkwardly on his host's doorstep after having concluded his business. The man simply nodded and drove off into the mist.

The ancient porter in his post at the side of the gates examined the seal on his letter with little more than mild curiosity before admitting him within the walls. He met Piero's request for directions to the Hall of Looms with a bare grunt and one pointed finger and Piero struck off in that direction, hoping he would know it when he saw it. Here there were no grassy quads, none of the winding paths and arcades of the Academy; only fitted granite in square and modern forms, clean arches and smooth metal bracing. Small electric lamps added to the façades carved out cones of brilliance in the fog. After many minutes of searching failed to turn up any convenient signs, he swallowed the lump in his throat and stepped into one of the granite buildings.

Inside it was much the same as outside: smooth, clean, and modern, without any of the ancient woodwork or peculiarities of architecture that he recalled from his Academy days. A long line of arc lamps ran down the center of the ceiling, but most were unlit. He walked for several minutes between scattered pools of light before he heard another set of footsteps at the end of a long corridor.

"Excuse me?" he called, and heard the footsteps stop, then begin again, more cautiously. A woman wearing a sky-blue robe came into view at the end of the hall, appearing under one of the lamps. "Excuse me," he repeated, coming nearer. "I am looking for the Looms. The - the Hall of Looms."

"By the shore," said the woman, pointing the way she had come. "Building 32. Follow the sound."

"Ah," said Piero, and walked in the direction she had indicated. Then he remembered and turned, a thank you on his lips; but the woman had already vanished back into the shadows.

He walked until the building ended, then pushed open the door and kept walking. The wind that blew across the river carried a hint of wood-smoke. The Southcliff fire had burnt itself out at last, but another must have started nearby in the outskirts of the city. When he stepped back onto the earth he felt a low pulse coming up through the soles of his boots. As he neared the water a long dark shape loomed out of the mist, perhaps half as tall as the Kaldwin's Bridge laboratory but easily twice as long.
Piero reached the riverbank, here a sheer drop on the other side of a granite wall, and walked along it towards one end of the building. The noise rose as he did, the steady pulse separating into higher and higher harmonics, complex counter-rhythms beating against it. Bank after bank of waterwheels turned in the swift current.

The tall double doors at the end of the building were flung open to the mist. Heat and noise radiated from the glowing space within. The strip-lights fixed to the eaves illuminated a round seal that Piero recognized from the envelope: a bird - a raven, here, a meter tall and glossy black - clutching a weaving shuttle whose threads splayed out, winding round and round. The ground trembled beneath his feet.

"Master Joplin," said a familiar, strident voice. His gaze darted back down to ground level. Libby Bentham stood framed in the exact center of the double doors, arms crossed over her chest. She wore the same indigo robes as she had at the Council a month ago, and her dark gaze fixed him with the same precise focus.

"Miss Bentham," said Piero, walking up to the threshold. "Thank you for having me as your guest."

"Don't thank me until you've had your visit," said Bentham. She stepped back and beckoned him over the threshold. Warmth washed over him inside, and the sleeves of Bentham's robes fluttered in the gusts of air that blew this way and that, stirred by the massive looms.

Ranks of windows serrated the roof, angled so as to best catch the daylight, but in the misty afternoon the electric lights turned them into flat mirrors. The looms below lay in long ranks, stretching down the core of the building almost further than the eye could discern. Their steel armatures reached up to beams that ran the length of the shed, shaking as rods drove along their length, carrying the power of the river. Each machine danced to its own complex rhythm as it added line after line to the glowing colors wound on its drum.

"You are familiar with the founding philosophy of the Technical College," said Bentham as she strode down the central hallway, the hem of her robes rippling with the motion. The strange pattern woven into the fabric flashed in the light.

It hadn't been entirely a question, but Piero answered it anyway. "To educate young women in the best conduct of the utilitarian arts," he said, staring around himself as he followed after her. He had not expected Bentham to receive him in a sitting room, exactly, but neither had he expected this.

"To educate young women in the performance of the tasks the Masters of natural philosophy have deemed beneath them," said Bentham. "That is, construction, engineering, crafts, and anything else of actual, immediate use." Piero looked back at her, startled at the harsh words, but Bentham's smooth expression remained unruffled.

Piero did not often feel compelled to defend the Academy, but he had some obligation to at least attempt to clarify their thinking. "The constitution of a woman's mind is best suited to tasks of practical application," he explained. "They are the ideal choice for those fields of study that operate best under direction, concerned with the turning of higher concepts to worldly purpose."

Bentham spared a brief laugh at that, the first emotion she let disturb her countenance. It set the beads in her hair to swaying. "Chapter and verse," she said, giving him an amused glance over her shoulder. "You know all your lines."

Piero did not know what to say to that. A blush stained his cheeks and he fiddled with his spectacles, feeling in some obscure way that he was being mocked. He cast his gaze around the looms that lined
the building. They had been walking for some time now, but had barely crossed a quarter of the space. Short pathways split off the central route in orderly ranks. Once his mind had adjusted to the scale of the machines he saw the women who moved among them, tending and adjusting. Nearly all wore a pale twilight blue, with a few more sky-blue robes salted through them.

The frames of the looms were a blur of color, thousands of brilliant threads flying in motion. The one constant between them all, he noted, was a dull roll bolted somewhere into the maze of parts. It varied in width from a handspan to a meter, fastened to the top or the center or the side. But every loom had one, unspooling a long flat sheet into its depths. As it scrolled past he caught glimpses of the patterns punched into each segment like orderly constellations. With every beat the hooks flew in and out of the holes, picking and dropping threads in accordance with the design.

"You have advanced the pattern-loom," he observed, guessing at the ancestry of the machines. Bentham gave him another glance over her shoulder, this one bearing a hint of surprise. "You know weaving," she said.

"Not well," answered Piero. "But they require maintenance, and I have been a mechanic, in my time."

"Hardly a dignified trade for a natural philosopher," said Bentham, her tone unreadable.

"Dignity means less when one must pay the rent," he said. "What are they making?"

Bentham scanned the ranks. She flicked two fingers to her left. "There, Tyvian funerary brocade," she said. Two fingers to the right. "There, Balisurat Red-Crest damask."

"Truly?" said Piero. The Blackglass island of Balisura lay nearly halfway along the route to Pandyssia. "I have never heard of Red-Crest made outside the archipelago."

"It's all made here," said Bentham. "We sell it wholesale to the merchants in Karnaca. Then our brokers 'import' it to the Isles." A sharp shake of her head. "Therein lies its value, you see. The fabric itself is worth perhaps a tenth of its cost. But there's no limit to what an aristocrat will pay for the air of the exotic." Scorn dripped from her voice. "They'll swallow any story so long as it confirms what they already believe."

Bright hooks flickered between threads of scarlet and gold and black. Piero measured the diameter of one drum by eye, gauging the speed of the machines she had indicated and tallying what he remembered from Hiram Burrows' charts, the long list of commodities and prices.

"How rich are you?" he said at last.

Bentham did laugh this time, full and well, in sharp edges of humor. "May as well ask how rich the College; they are the same." This, like all her other statements, was delivered without a hint of self-consciousness, without a drop of either ego or modesty. The looms grew more and more complex as they went, their workings blurring into enormous, indecipherable clouds. Dust and fragments of thread drifted through the air. "The quarantine hasn't hindered us as much as the other industries of the city, though our silk and cotton imports are nearly dead. Think of it as turning the coin of our less productive nobility to a more - utilitarian art."

They were approaching what had to be the center of the long building, marked by a wide aisle crossing the central path at a precise right angle. A cluster of figures stood there, robed in royal blue. "Not as wealthy as you may think, though," amended Bentham as they continued along. "Most of it goes into the maintenance of the College and our investments in the city. And into our other
research." She fell silent until they reached the crossing, and the clustered figures turned at her approach.

"What's this?" she said, raising her voice with practiced ease. The swerving angles of her voice carried over the rumble of the machines.

"Ma'am," said one of the women. She held a thin board with several papers fastened to it. Up close Piero could see a pattern figured into her robes as well, though it was far simpler than Bentham's. The woman glanced curiously at Piero, but when Bentham ignored his presence she did as well.

"Tension failures in several rows. Most of block 15."

Bentham frowned and took the board, scanning the papers. "Damn," she cursed softly.

"It's not unexpected," spoke up another of the women in royal blue. "We've been stressing the heads beyond their design tolerances for months now. Hysteresis is going to kill us."

"The blasted mills are all shut down," added her companion. "There's no steel."

Bentham let the papers fall back onto the board. "Shut down 15. Sixteen as well," she ordered. "It'll be the next to fail."

"Ma'am," began the woman who had approached her first. "We have the parts--"

"We do not have the parts," said Bentham, cutting her off. "The stockpile is to be reserved solely for the Adjustables. Solely," she repeated as several of the women - her lieutenants, guessed Piero, laying the color of their robes along the spectrum that seemed to denote the College hierarchy - opened their mouths to file some objection. She handed the board back. "My guest and I will be visiting the Mill. I'll deal with this on my return."

Her lieutenants repeated variations on "Yes, ma'am," with greater and lesser degrees of enthusiasm. At Bentham's gesture they scattered back into the rows of machinery, lost almost at once in the sea of moving metal.

"Are we going to visit the Mill?" said Piero, once they were alone again.

"Yes," said Bentham. She turned left down one arm of the short aisle crossing the center, heading for a door set into the riverward wall. She reached it before she realized Piero had stopped following her. He stood at the center of the crossing, arms folded. After a moment Bentham rolled her eyes and came back.

"What?" she asked.

"Why am I here?" said Piero.

"To visit the Mill," said Bentham. "Come and see." She went back to the door, and this time Piero came with.

The lock had no keyhole, only a thin slot. Bentham plucked a strip of filigreed metal on a long chain from beneath her robes and inserted one end of it. The door clunked; she pulled it open. Piero followed her into a narrow stairwell. Rust splotted the walls and the hot air that rushed up from below smelled of marshwater and ink. They had to be near the old floodplain, near where the tons of rock and earth had been shoveled in to prise this land from the river's grasp. The thunder of the waterwheels pounded away on the other side of the wall. He could hear the groan of the shafts as they turned, echoing the pulse of Kaldwin's Bridge.
"You know something of weaving," said Bentham. The stairs wound up above them, but Bentham turned and began to descend. "You know that a pattern-loom can read the holes in a card, each hook understanding pick up or leave, pass or stay."

"Yes," said Piero, following behind her. He clutched the railing in one hand, wary of the corroded stairs. It should be colder, this close to the water, but instead the heat grew more intense as he went down.

"But think: once one has the pattern, does one need the loom?" said Bentham. "Once the design is punched into the cards, it's already been made. We may encode it later into fabric, but the real work has been done. Think, too, of an audiograph card. The work is done not in the playing back, but in the speaking. The information has been created. This is my true research."

Piero tried to make sense of this statement, pausing on the stairs as his brain temporarily put all other business on hold. How did one draw the line from holes on a loom-card to calculations? "Anton said you were a mathematician."

"I am," declared Bentham. Her words had a solid, unstoppable quality to them, like an advancing storm-front. "I am the finest this city has ever seen, though it won't realize it for decades. A woman's constitution is ill-suited to geometry's Abbey-ordained perfection, built on its steady foundation of harmonic ratios, yes? It's best if we turned our minds instead to the parlor game of abstract mathematics. Well, I have. And oh, what I have found." She came to a second door, unlocked again with a slip of metal, and stepped inside. "Welcome to the Mill."

Piero froze on the threshold, breath catching in his throat. A curtain of heat billowed from the opened door. Something vast and shining moved in the darkness beyond. A lurching vertigo swamped his mind. For a moment the square of shadow became an abyss, and he was standing on the lip of it, in danger of tumbling - tumbling very far down indeed.

"Water power won't do it for the Adjustables," said Bentham, ignorant of his distress. She closed the circuit to light the space. Arc-lamps flickered on along the ceiling. "Has to be trans."

The looms on the floor above him were far more complicated than those he had mended in his time, but they still tangled thread and wound cloth; they were still recognizable. The machinery that composed the Mill bore the same resemblance to those looms that an arc-lamp did to a candle. The complexity of gears and springs,cams and winding shafts - everything gleamed in brass and iron, lit by oilflame, here and there sparking with electric arcs. Parts spun and crawled and leaped like living things in a rattling percussion, throwing off heat as they went. This room was far smaller than the Hall above, perhaps the size of the workspace in Kaldwin's Bridge, but his mind kept insisting the device was much too big to be contained within it. It - they - he could not tell if it was one or many, or both, or all - was still threaded, in a way. But the threads gleamed copper and gold in the light, no accent to brocade but real wire, and they flew together in patterns far more intricate than any tapestry's design, meshing and intersecting and - he had to tear his gaze away from the motion, feeling as if the hooks plucked some answering string in his mind.

"What have you done?" he said, terrified and still uncertain why.

"I've built a mill," said Bentham. She knelt and reached into one of the machines, unhooking a spool similar to the ones that drove the looms upstairs. She drew a long strip from it, paper far thinner than the heavy cardstock that stopped the hooks of the pattern looms, showing him the pattern of punches. "A mill that grinds neither corn nor flour, but calculations. Only the information itself need be operated on."

"Infor - you cannot operate on information," protested Piero. His mind raced. "It is not - it's not
"But it is," said Bentham, straightening up. Standing in the maelstrom that was the Mill she acquired a sudden, fluid grace. The beads in her braids swirled with her motion. "Let us represent each symbol of the mathematical language with a number, as a cipher does. Then let us compose these symbolic numbers all together, so that they may be stored - in a pattern of threads, perhaps. Cross over, cross under; that's all the loom needs to read and write. Then we may dictate and the Mill shall be happy to perform - to calculate, to compose, to remember - to do anything we please."

"You cannot put a calculation in a number," said Piero, nearly dizzy and still lost. "They are two separate things."

"Everything is a number," declared Bentham. "Everything is a symbol, and the symbols can be made to dance, if you're skilled enough." She looked amused at his reluctance to cross the threshold. "It won't hurt you."

Piero wasn't certain of that. The sheer alien aspect of the object crouched before him made him want to bolt back up the stairs and forget he'd ever come here. But - he could not deny it had a pull just as strong, a shallow warping of the world around it.

Curiosity worked its subtle seduction. He took a single step into the room, and then another, and then he was among the pillars and armatures of the Mill, clicking and chattering around him. The sound of it swallowed him whole. He felt it as a pressure against his mind, not the dark waters that chilled his bones but a sharp brass glimmer, a shade of gears and oilflame.

"Come and see," repeated Bentham, and led the way. Frames and transmission axles interlocked above his head, enclosing him in a glittering forest. The smothering air was blood-warm. Bentham threaded her way through the tangle easy as a fish in water. As she passed through she touched the machine, here trailing a caress along the metal, there patting a projecting frame like the head of a faithful hound. This is where the fortune has gone, thought Piero as he tried to trace the intricate brass machinery. Or perhaps this is why the fortune was acquired. The endless click of it stoked the ember of some memory he could not pull to mind. Shadows nested in its workings despite the brilliant ceiling lights, and he could not pin down any exact part of it. Each time he tried to gauge the size of the device the number he came up with was always less than what he would swear was present.

One lone frame still held cloth rather than metal. It stood on its end in the center of the great machine, the warp running vertical, the weft composed about halfway up and rolled onto another drum. As they approached a flurry rippled through the Mill and the frame blurred into action, adding several colored lines onto the end of the fabric. Then it returned to stillness.

Bentham ran one hand along the frame, examining the fresh weft. The pattern the Mill had produced had no discernible design, the entire cloth a scrawl of a thousand different colors. A slight frown creased her face. "A witch of flame and a witch of water," she said quietly. "A highly improbable combination. And yet..."

Then she seemed to recall that Piero was in the room, and said without turning, "For the past three months the Mill has been imagining Dunwall. You are about to tell me a machine can't imagine anything; let's set that aside for now, since I do not have time to correct you. I've asked it to consider the plague, and to tell me what it foresees will happen."

"Eighty days," said Piero. The Mill hummed around him. The cacophony of its parts made a maddening kind of sense, a taste of patterns that hovered just on the edge of comprehension. The dizziness had not abated, and the hot breath of the machine made sweat break out along his arms and
"Forty-six, now," said Bentham. "The Mill made that prediction, after I asked it to."

"Why am I here?" said Piero.

"Yes, that's the question," said Bentham, turning to face him, questioning him as sharply as she had her lieutenants. "Why are you, here?"

Piero crossed his arms, thoroughly unsettled and growing angry because of it. His throat had gone dry, the heat like a heavy blanket draped over him. "I am a natural philosopher of some repute--"

"There are one hundred seventy-three natural philosophers still living in the city of Dunwall," said Bentham. "And as of a month ago not one other than Sokolov himself had set foot in the Kaldwin's Bridge laboratory. Of the twenty-one alleged prophylactics for the plague being sold, only two of them actually work. The arc pylon design has not changed since Sokolov introduced it nearly three years ago, and yet now I hear of a new model with ten times the reach and ferocity."

She brushed the cloth again. Its chaotic pattern meant nothing to Piero, and yet he knew that it did mean something, like a letter written in a foreign language. He wiped sweat from his face; his vision blurred around the edges. In the dreaming heart of the Mill the world felt thinned, as if one wrong step might tear through reality by accident.

"Things are happening, Master Joplin," she said. "You are causing them to happen. You're part of the weave now, like it or not."

"You still have not answered my question."

"Fine," said Bentham. "I wanted to see you. See what caused such a change. I'd given up any hope Sokolov would be able to stop this disease. But now? Now I see the future grow far less certain. That's your doing."

A spasm ran through Piero's body as if he'd grabbed a live wire. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressing a hand to one temple. Around him the Mill curled vast and implacable, a nightmare in copper thread. He wondered which of them had wanted to see him. We have nothing, he wanted to tell her. You're better off taking your coin and your acolytes and fleeing this city. In fact I wonder why you haven't.

But - of course. The floor shook beneath his boots with every beat of the machines. Coin could be transferred, humans concealed, but the Mill could not be moved nor remade. The fabrication of its parts alone must have taken a decade. He doubted Bentham gave a damn for Dunwall, but she would gladly go down with her mechanical monster. Air rasped hard in his lungs, too hot, burning him from the inside out. The thought of it dissolved into a children's rhyme, melding with the mad chatter, beating an inane rhythm in his head. I strung the loom to weave the cloth to buy the brass to build the mill upon the hill, the Mill that Lady Bentham built--

A sharp breath. One fist squeezed tight enough to dig his nails into his palm; a jolt of pain. "This thing can imagine the disease?" he said. "Fine, then. Tell it to imagine a cure."

"Beyond its present capacity, I'm afraid," said Bentham. "I wouldn't rely on Sokolov unless I had to."

"Then tell me what it does know," said Piero. "Tell me anything that will help us."

"I've already said what I can," said Bentham. She touched the weave again. "I told Kaldwin, I told Burrows, I told Attano. It's not natural. I've charted other diseases on the Mill, cholera and influenza
and yellow sickness. Each weaves its own design. Some favor the old, some the young. Some kill only one in ten. Some, one in three. This plague follows none of those patterns. It infects everyone, and everyone infected dies. There's no escape. It's as if we're being hunted, surely as a whale."

"It changed," said Piero. "A year and a half past."

"It did," agreed Bentham.

"Why?"

Bentham shrugged.

"It cannot tell that."

"It can unravel any pattern," said Bentham. "But every mill needs grist, and I don't have the data I need."

Piero clenched his fist again, feeling the nails dig into his palm, biting down hard on the panic swelling in his throat. "None of us have what we need," he snapped.

"I've done what I can," said Bentham, unperturbed. "Matters of the flesh are not my domain. This is all the help I can give you, for the moment. I don't enjoy leaving matters so unresolved." She fixed him again with her dark gaze, bright as the raven on her seal, and Piero felt more than one pair of eyes on his skin. "It is - concerning to me - when the Mill doesn't know what's going to happen."

"It's just a machine," erupted Piero. The walls of the room seemed to have drawn very far away, the ceiling distant and thin as mist. Only the thorn-brake of metal was real, and him caught neat in the center. "It cannot know anything. It counts, it ticks, it - it's no more than a glorified accountant, shuffling numbers--"

"Everything is a number," insisted Bentham, and in her words he heard again the advancing storm, the coming of an implacable force. "Everything is a symbol, a grand cipher. It is a language describing reality itself. And I will learn to speak it."

"You're mad," said Piero. "You and your machine."

"That's as may be," allowed Bentham. "But I'm not wrong."

Gravity slewed sideways for a moment. He reached out on instinct to steady himself, caught a projecting frame, then yanked his hand away; the metal felt forge-hot. Bentham watched his distress as if he were the needle on a dial, swaying to and fro. The woman and the machine swam before his eyes, heat crushing the breath from his lungs. He could not get enough air. The world tipped up and he lost a moment to blackness.

Then he was lying on the smooth stone floor looking up at the ceiling lights - another blink. The stairwell now, half-upright, being held - he tried to get his legs underneath him, but - another blink, and he was in the Hall, and then he was swimming up towards consciousness, stretched out on something soft.

A brown blur above him. He blinked, rubbing his eyes, and fumbled for his spectacles. They had been set next to him, and when he replaced them the blur resolved itself into a low wooden ceiling.

"Yoo-hoo, you still in there?" said a pleasant voice somewhere far above him.

Piero tried to push himself up on one elbow and halted at once. His brain sloshed like a bucket of
water close to overflowing. He waited for the roaring in his ears to retreat, then carefully rolled over onto his side. A cold cloth fell off his forehead as he moved. A woman sat on a stool by the cot, yes, he was on a cot. She rested her elbows on her knees as she leaned forward, the hood of her royal-blue robe thrown back. Curls of dirty blonde hair escaped a green band pushed up high on her head. "That's better," she said, a pleased expression illuminating her broad face. "How're we feeling now, m'boy?"

Piero had not been anyone's boy for some twenty years at least, but he managed a rough, "Where?"

"Back in the Hall, of course," said the woman. She stood up. Piero's gaze followed her. His cot had been set against the back wall of a small square room, paneled in wood and closed on three sides. The fourth had a door and a large window that looked back out onto the Hall. The woman went to a counter beneath the window, busying herself with something there. "I'm Henrietta, y'can call me Etta, and we thought we'd just tuck you here in one of our little nooks till you were feeling a mite steadier on yer feet," she said as she worked.

"'Steadier,'" repeated Piero quietly to himself. He braced his palms against the cot - the cloth of it far smoother than any bed he'd known - and carefully raised himself to a sitting position. Etta turned around in time to see him and set down what she had been holding to brace a hand against his back. Piero nearly jumped at the touch, but she helped him with all the clinical thoroughness of a nurse.

"I saw the Mill," mumbled Piero.

"Course ye did," said Etta. She left him sitting and retrieved the item she'd been holding: a mug of thick, dark tea. She pressed it into Piero's hands. He took it automatically, the sides of the cup cool against his skin. The liquid within was lukewarm, but after the dragon's breath of the Mill he didn't mind. Even the Hall seemed cold now. Sweat chilled on his skin.

"It was - not--" He groped for words. "Like - anything else," he muttered finally, frustrated.

Etta nodded knowingly. "Takes some folk like that," she said. Her brisk efficiency reminded him of Samuel. "Drink yer tea, now. You'll feel right as rain."

Piero sipped as ordered. Then he choked, and swallowed only because it would have taken more strength to spit it back out. The bitter liquid wasn't the strongest thing he'd ever tasted, but only because he'd had King Street Brandy. It made a fine effort to strip the lining from his throat as it went down, then went to work on his stomach.

"Nothing to put the spring back in yer step like a proper cuppa weaver's tea," said Etta approvingly. "The gels brew it up fer working late."

"No wonder you turn out so much cloth," sputtered Piero, coughing and trying to clear the acrid burn in his throat.

"They do work hard, the gels," said Etta. "Feeling a bit better now?"

Piero sipped again, despite his better judgement, and discovered to his surprise that he did. Somewhere in the process he had lost his coat - he could see it laid out on the counter where Etta had poured the tea - and on his bare arms the ugly red blooms of hot blood running close to the surface begin to fade.

"Where is Miss Bentham?" he asked.

"Th' Lady's gone back downstairs," said Etta. "Took a punch-tape writer, too, so I 'spect we won't be getting her back for a few hours at best. She looked to have a lot on her mind, she did."
"Ah," said Piero. The guest-etiquette he had carefully researched before embarking on his visit had made it clear he was to thank his host profusely and in person before he departed. But said etiquette had not covered passing out in his host's terrifying computational apparatus and being later revived by tea fit to etch steel. He supposed he might be permitted to improvise. "Please - ah - give her my regards."

He set the mug aside and swung his legs over the edge of the cot. The thudding pressure within his head was beginning to disperse, and after a few deep breaths he lurched to his feet. Vertigo threatened to return him to the floor, but Etta steadied him until he felt himself able to stand.

Etta stepped away, concern apparent on her face. "It might be best fer you to give it a few more minutes, now," she said.

"I can't," said Piero. He draped his coat over one arm and sighed. "I have to go to a party."

He spent the ride back to Kaldwin's Bridge with his head propped near the window, inhaling the cold air and trying to prevent the nausea churning his stomach from becoming anything more serious. But as they crossed the bridge itself a deeper, more pervasive sickness began to spread, beginning in his gut and leeching out through his limbs: the leaden weight of dread.

The carriage left him at the ground floor entrance. He let himself in with the key he had made on the grinding mill a few weeks ago. The distant pulse of the waterwheel, the chill air, the smell of dust and ink and chemicals all welcomed him back, but did nothing to quell his unease. Piero climbed the foyer steps and retreated to his study, shutting the door and letting himself slump onto his cot. For a few more minutes he lay sprawled out on top of the blankets. Heat still radiated from the palms of his hands, the soles of his feet.

A folding rack in one corner held the formal dress the tailor had delivered that morning. He had ignored the garments at the time. Now he stood and pulled them off the rack one by one, laying them out on his cot neatly as a dissection. There were few pieces of clothing Piero knew the name of, and even fewer of the sort suitable for a party like this. The pale green shirt was just a shirt to him, and he would hazard a guess that the short vest-like piece was a waistcoat. The pants were pants, although undoubtedly some highly-tailored variant that a gentleman would recognize. The big coat had to be a dress-coat, since it was too large to be worn under anything else. Any further subtleties passed him by entire. Fortunately he had found a book in the library that gave an overview of the process, and after all, he was a highly intelligent man. Surely he would be able to sort it out.

He bathed, shaved, and began the long process of changing, consulting the pages of the book and checking his appearance in the small mirror he had propped up next to the washstand. The tailor had chosen to outfit him in watery blues and greens, no doubt working under some complex fashion-logic he was not privy to. The smooth feel of the fabric, unremarkable to him a day ago, now caused a faint pang of anxiety. Piero wondered if it had turned on a drum in the Hall once, beating to the rhythm of the looms.

Piero got the shirt, pants, and waistcoat settled to his satisfaction, noting with dismay that the pants had no pockets. Where was he supposed to keep his notes? He shook out the dress-coat, examining it. The deep teal fabric had been worked all over in silver metallic thread. Alchemical symbols twined through the patterns. Piero followed them with one finger, frowning. Then he settled the coat across his shoulders. The tailor had fit it to his measure, yet still it seemed to hang wrong. He tried to straighten up, throwing his shoulders back. His spine protested. The silk lining whispered distractingly as he moved.

He tied the cravat carefully - this necessitated much looking in the book, and much backing up and repeating of steps - and looked into the mirror again. He had the vague idea that now he was meant
to do something with cosmetics and perfumes, but he had none and would not have known what to do with them if he did. Instead he ran a brush through his hair and settled his spectacles more firmly on his nose. This was, he guessed, the best it was going to get.

Still he lingered a moment before heading up to the third floor. He walked the length of the study, trying to calm his nerves, and discovered to his tremendous relief a pocket on the inside of the dress-coat where his notes could be concealed. He took down the stoneware bowl Lord Ramsey had sent him, running his fingers along the glaze and letting the deep blue calm him. But the starry sky painted on the inside of the bowl was not as comforting as it had once been. It reminded him too much of a true night sky, of that real and perilous abyss he felt hanging over him each time he was forced to go out under the stars. He had had his peace of mind perturbed enough for one day. He put it back on the shelf.

The tailor had done his business in Anton's quarters on the third floor, and that was where Piero expected to find the man. He wasn't wrong, but fortunately Anton was in the outer room, not the spartan loft that passed for his own quarters, so the wall blunted the sound of the clock that ticked near his bed. Anton had laid out his preparations for the occasion as thoroughly as any lab apparatus, and he stood surrounded by them halfway down the room peering into a mirror propped up on a table. He had already changed, and two impressions struck Piero the moment he crossed the threshold: first, that Anton had gotten the alcoholic portion of the evening started early, and second, that he looked absurd. Golden brocade covered his crimson waistcoat and more gold thread glinted from the dress coat tossed over the back of a chair, an oxblood-red only a few shades up from black. Piero's garments had been cut more or less in the usual fashion, but Anton's were styled to the point of parody. He looked, in fact, like the sinister wizard from an Abbey morality play. Piero half-expected him to vanish in a puff of smoke.

"You're back," said Anton, still examining his reflection. "How do I look?"

"Ridiculous," said Piero.

"Excellent," said Anton, continuing to fuss with his cravat. "I should have hired a valet for this, dammit, it's been too long."

Piero didn't move. "The point is to look ridiculous?" he said.

"The point is to look like I can summon demons to eat your head," insisted Anton. "If I am going to be stared at, muttered about, and generally made a fuss of, then by the Void I am going to look the part." He went hunting in the mess before the mirror for a long moment, finally coming up with a jar of soot-black eye paint.

"This coat has a recipe on it," said Piero.

Anton glanced up from his own preparations. Piero turned to show him the back of the coat. "So it does," he said.

"This coat says to combine three parts sal vitae with one part aqua regia, let brew for half a month, then filter through mercury," said Piero, turning back.

"Mm-hmm."

"That makes no sense."

"I doubt they checked your embroidery for alchemical accuracy, no," said Anton.

"I can't wear this," said Piero.
"No one at the party is going to know," said Anton. He ran a hand over his hair. He had done something to it that left it swept back smooth and gleaming, and Piero thought he might have even trimmed the ragged edges of his beard.

"I will know," said Piero.

"Well, keep it to yourself," said Anton. He looked into the mirror one last time, then turned his attention to his cuffs, tugging on the left. "Bozjemoi, I tell them every time - grab that pin for me, will you?"

Piero found the indicated pin under another jar and watched as Anton tried to straighten the sleeve. The tailor had cut the left one too long; Anton pinched a fold in one hand to shorten it and fixed it in place with the pin, performing the gesture with the ease of long practice. He held out both hands straight before him, evaluating, and Piero blinked. No, the tailor hadn't made a mistake after all. Anton's left arm was shorter than his right by a full inch.

"Well enough," said Anton finally. He shrugged into his own coat. His heavy gold signet ring flashed on the third finger of his right hand where another might wear a wedding band. Piero spotted archaic symbols in his golden embroidery as well, mostly of the ancient forms used for celestial objects. Anton rumbled until he found a silver flask, topped it up from the open liquor-bottle, and tucked it into his dress-coat. "Come on, we've got to leave soon to be the right amount of late."

The sun had fled behind the tall rows of buildings while they had been occupied with their complicated clothing. The air as they waited on the street outside the Bridge blew icy sharp. Piero shivered beneath the layers of wool and silk and wondered if it were healthy to go so quickly from hot to cold. Anton squared his shoulders, took a sip from the flask and huffed his breath out in a thick white cloud. "Time to sing for our bloody supper," Piero heard him mutter.

"This was your idea," Piero reminded him. He made no effort to keep the irritation out of his tone.

"Of course it was," said Anton, louder. "Most of the real votes in Parliament will be there. Not to mention that we still need the Boyles."

"I understand," said Piero, sharper than he meant to. "I am not wholly ignorant of political matters."

Anton muttered something that might have been Could've fooled me. A retort assembled at the tip of his tongue, but Piero found himself suddenly reluctant to argue. The visit to the Technical College had exhausted him more than he had thought. He had no desire to press the brittle truce that had grown like a thin rime of ice since the row at the Ridgefort, composed mostly of pretending nothing had happened. It would not, he thought, bear much weight. Instead he swallowed the words and waited for the carriage, freezing quietly, and thought again of how much time they were wasting on this nonsense.

The carriage drew up with a clatter of hooves. Anton berated the hired driver for his tardiness while Piero simply climbed in. They began to move as soon as Anton was settled within on the opposite bench. A sharp smell of brandy clotted the close air.

"So you went out to see the College," said Anton after they had been moving for a few minutes.

Piero glanced up from poring over his packet of notes and said only, "So I did."

"Well?" said Anton, sitting forward.

Piero looked away. The Hall - the Mill - had frightened him down to his bones, frightened and intrigued him at the same time, and the weight of it pressed at his lips. But he did not feel like giving
Anton the satisfaction of letting him know all his dramatics regarding Bentham were justified, many
times over.

Instead he shrugged, keeping his face carefully blank. Anton narrowed his eyes, but held his silence.

Piero returned to his notes, studying them far more intently than he ever had any Academy text. A
viscount came before a baron, but after an earl, but it was permissible to address them both as "lord."
The bow was meant to be made from the neck. Formal address should be placed at the end of the
sentence, not the beginning.

Piero had no formal address, of course, nor any honor to his name. None of the ladies and gentlemen
of quality at this affair would be required to address him any more kindly than they would the
serving staff. Sokolov had at least the protection of the title of Royal Physician, but for all that the
Council had gotten into the habit of addressing him as "Master Joplin," Piero did not bear so much as
the ring he would have won upon completing his studies at the Academy. The only way he would
get through this, he thought, would be to give them no cause to fault him; that, and to let his own
clearly demonstrated intellect convince them of the distinction nature, rather than man, had chosen to
bestow upon him, crowning him not with a lordly title but with his evident surfeit of genius.

"I had a letter from Karnaca this morning," said Anton.

"Oh?" said Piero, interested despite himself. There was always something intriguing going on in
Karnaca.

"From Ricci," clarified Anton.

"Truly?" said Piero, abandoning all pretense of still following his notes. "Who did the sea serpent
dissection last year?"

"Indeed," said Anton. "He's been studying animal mating rituals, looking for universal traits, that sort
of thing."

"The Fundamentalist theories again," said Piero.

"Life has a single origin, right," said Anton, nodding. "He's got a theory that the easiest universal
traits to spot will be in reproductive behavior."

"He's seen correlations?" said Piero.

"Oh yes," said Anton. "The prevalence of color signals and dance or song displays is well-known,
but the specifics also correlate quite well across the species. Even humans, he says. He wrote me
about a study he's done on the choice of clothing in some of the Karnaccan brothels. He claims that
human females are apt to show plumage in the same way as certain birds - the human female, like the
bird, advertises to mates by displaying coloring equivalent to where she is in her fertile cycle. Red
indicates she is at her most fertile, while drab colors indicate the onset of menstruation."

"Huh," said Piero. He sat back, considering. Ricci's work was very good. Piero had compiled a
volume on his own studies of the river krusts that he meant to send the man once it was done - it was
very nearly done, it simply needed another pass of revision to make it perfect - and he had often
thought about finding a way to take ship down to Serkonos to visit the man. After, of course, he was
settled back at the Academy, and - his mind jolted from that train of thought. He had fallen back into
the old rut of a well-worn daydream and had nearly ended at his usual conclusion - after I am settled
back at the Academy, in the position of Royal Physician, as is my right. Never mind that the actual
Royal Physician sprawled across from him in a corner of the carriage, staring thoughtfully into midair
as if lost in some internal debate. Probably about birds.

"What've you got there?" said Anton, interrupting his thoughts. He pointed at Piero's notes.

"I-- nothing." He clutched the papers to his chest.

"Are those notes?" said Anton. "Did you bring notes?"

"No," said Piero.

Anton sighed. "Look, it's going to be fine," he said with an expansive wave. "I know whose arms I can still twist in Parliament, I'll do all the shilling for votes. You just drink your drink and smile and don't correct anyone even when they say something moronic. Don't make any trouble."

"If I am just going to be trouble, one wonders why you bothered dragging me to this nonsense," said Piero coldly.

"You have to go out in public sometime," said Anton. "I'd rather it be somewhere I can keep an eye on you."

"I do not need keeping an eye on," hissed Piero.

"You brought notes," said Anton.

"I have thoroughly studied the problem," said Piero. "I am a perfectly intelligent man, and I expect I will rise to the occasion."

"Okay," said Anton, throwing up his hands. "Good luck with that." The carriage lurched to a stop. "Speaking of."

They dismounted into a wide street before a tall iron gate. The half-abandoned neighborhood around them seemed no better off than the rest of Dunwall, although the ornate facades of its buildings spoke of a wealthy past, but the house that rose before them glowed like a lighthouse beacon. Its warm finery lay caged within a double row of sharp spiked fences. Boyle Manor was not quite the size of the Tower, but not for lack of trying. Electric lamps in dozens of colors had been strung above the lawn in graceful curves, all leading up to its columned entrance.

The carriage began to move again behind them, clattering off to wherever it was carriages waited. A liveried guard raised a lantern to inspect them before he admitted them through the first gate. Piero halted at the edge of the grass. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Anton do the same.

"That is a very large house," said Piero, for total lack of anything else to say.

"It's going to be fine," Anton repeated. He helped himself to another sip from his flask.

In truth, though, Piero was surprised to find himself not as fearful as he might have been. All his life he had heard that parties were joyous occasions. To know expressly at the outset that it would be a grueling ordeal was, in an odd way, quite comforting. If - when - he did not enjoy himself, it would not be his fault. He had armed himself as well as possible with the information available, and now it was time to confront the task before him.

Anton pulled the pearl-grey invitation card from his inner pocket as they approached the door, flourishing it at the liveried guard. The man stared at him as he took it.

"Master Sokolov?" he said, sounding astonished.
"Yes, obviously," growled Anton.


Anton took the card back and swept past the man with a haughty air. Piero followed in his wake and tried to affect the same demeanor. He maintained it for all of three meters into the arched foyer and stopped dead in his tracks.

Here was all the splendor and opulence he had expected at the Tower: gilded carvings, graceful chandeliers, an elaborate tricolor marble floor. In accordance with the Month of Darkness the manor had been decorated with glass icicles hanging from lintels and huge swags of deep-colored cloth backing brilliant lamps scattered like stars. The vaulted roof sprang up two stories above them, reminding him of the Kaldwin's Bridge skylights. But instead of the laboratory's rectangular windows the manor roof was a trelliswork of iron, thousands of sharp panes laced together into a single glittering canopy hung with lights. Five huge colored orbs swayed among them, painted with the alchemical symbols of the known planets. Beyond the glass the overcast evening sky swelled to a mottled bruise-purple. Piero could not stop staring at it. It billowed and heaved like a restless sea hung beyond the glass.

Then a shiver seized him as if he'd been doused in cold water, and the pillars of the Boyle manor wavered like smoke as another place breached up through their image like a leviathan beneath a ship. He saw the place he was, and he saw another: a high stone pavilion blotched with lichen, silent and cold as nothing drifts through its exquisitely fluted vaults. A mosaic pattern twists beneath his feet.

Piero shivered again like a patient convulsing in the grip of a fever, squeezing his eyes shut. When he opened them again he saw only the Boyle manor, same as before. But now its grandeur rang hollow, its gilt seemed tawdry, all its splendor only a desperate plea for attention.

A hand gripped his shoulder. "Hey," said a sudden voice in his ear, quiet and intense. "Don't collapse on me now."

"I'm fine," he said quietly. "It's not - that."

"Nerves," diagnosed Anton. "As the Royal Physician, I prescribe a drink."

The banquet room gave him another shock. A staggering amount of food had been heaped on a round central table in stepped ranks. The top of the pyramid held a deep bowl filled with chunks of fresh-baked, crusty bread. Piero tried to calculate the price of the flour alone and gave up; the blockade had fallen hardest on the grain imports. Guests picked at the hunks of bread, dipping them into savory sauces laid out around the bowl. Stepping down from it lay fish and preserved meats, more common sights if of a better quality than he was used to. Piero took the largest chunk of bread he thought he could get away with and ate it plain, relishing the taste.

Anton had disappeared while he'd been staring at the bread and now reappeared with cups of cider. Piero could smell the alcohol beneath the apples.

"Drink up and listen," said Anton quietly. "Two women through the door, see them?"

Piero did. Two women stood at the far end of the hall, framed at this angle by the doorway. They stood shoulder to shoulder, standing too close for strangers but too far apart for true intimates, both wearing a pearl-grey that exactly matched the color of the invitation card. One had her ash-blond hair up in a carefully twisted bun, the other had brushed it out to hang about her shoulders. Traces of kinship showed in their high cheekbones and small, full lips, but the real giveaway was their identical
sharp gazes, sweeping the assembled guests like farmers surveying the crop.

"Waverly's on the right, Lydia's on the left," continued Anton, indicating first the one with her hair up, then the one with her hair down. "Whatever else you do tonight, do not fuck that up. Understood?"

"Understood," replied Piero automatically, still watching the Boyle sisters.

"Good." Anton clapped him on the shoulder all of a sudden, nearly spilling his drink. "I'll deal with them. You go and mingle."

"What-- but--" began Piero, but Anton was already off and moving towards the distant figures.

Piero drank the rest of his cider, ate his bread and stared around himself, now utterly at a loss. The sounds of the party filtered in through his vague panic at last, a mix of distant music and subdued, refined conversation. He estimated the number of guests at somewhere between thirty and fifty, each one of them dressed just as fine or finer than him, each one of them sailing through the world with the proud lift and straight-ahead stare of the born aristocrat; with the stare of men and women who have never needed to look left nor right, who have never needed to make allowances for their surroundings. They circulated through several rooms, forming little clumps and clots of conversation seemingly at random. He considered approaching one of these clusters with the same trepidation he might feel about sailing to Pandyssia.


"H-hello," stammered Piero. He straightened up slightly and concentrated on his words. "I must thank you properly for the generous gift you sent--"

"Not at all, not at all," said Ramsey, waving one hand. He wore a pale blue-grey dress coat with a silvery sheen that put Piero in mind of fish scales. "A small token, very small, a miniscule expression of my gratitude for your dedication to our fair city. Now, if I can prevail upon you for a moment of your time, if you'll allow me to..."

"Oh. Ah. Now? But--" He glanced again down the open hallway.

"...Let me introduce you to a few of my friends," finished Ramsey smoothly. "They'll be delighted to meet you, ever so."

Piero didn't think he would be delighted to meet them, but Ramsey gave him no chance to resist, steering him smoothly through the crowd. A small circle had formed in front of one of the roaring fireplaces that dotted the rooms. More glass icicles hung from the border of a large mirror above the mantelpiece. Drapes of snowy blue-white cloth swayed slightly in the draft of the fire.

"You know Serkonans, once the blood gets up, there's no reasoning with them," one of the men was saying as they approached. "I can't say I cared much for Burrows, but at least the man was rational. A gentleman, no, but you could respect him. Jack, you've brought us a visitor."

"You'll never guess whom I found lingering near the cider, Byron," said Ramsey. The circle parted obligingly and he brought Piero into the open spot neatly as a ship coming in to dock. "Master Joplin is one of the city's finest natural philosophers," he told the others. "He's been reporting directly to those of us on the Empress' Small Council on the status of the plague research, which we anticipate will soon bear fruit." Ramsey broke off, looking at Piero expectantly.
"I bid you good evening, ladies," he said, nodding towards them first. "Gentlemen. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Murmurs ran around the circle as its various members professed themselves equally charmed. The man who had been speaking when they arrived introduced himself as Byron Alderdice; through much exchange of flattery, pleasantry, and innuendo Piero was fairly certain he only half-discerned, he learned that he was sharing the fireplace with Theodosia Cromwell, Horatio DeCell, Barnabus Mann, and Maude Clay. The men all wore some variant on the same three-piece ensemble, no doubt speaking volumes in the nuances of their coats. The women's fitted jackets and high collars only reminded him of Empress Jessamine.

"This must be your first time at one of these affairs," said Maude. "I know I'd have remembered you otherwise."

"Yes," said Piero. He checked his store of small talk. "I must confess I was unprepared for such a lovely event."

"It's horrid how the Boyles' hospitality has gone downhill," said Barnabus. "Ever since Esma vanished the fun's just gone out of these affairs."

"Your definition of the 'fun' certainly involved Esma, as I recall," said Theodosia.

"So you've been sitting on those dreadful Council meetings as well, Master Joplin?" said Horatio. "Jack tells us all about them, they sound quite dreary."

"The office of the Speaker carries certain responsibilities, I'm afraid," said Ramsey.

"Any time you'd like to be freed of those responsibilities, you just let me know," said Byron, and the circle emitted laughter just a shade too high-pitched for Piero to believe it.

"We do truly value the Council's input in Parliament's deliberations," Theodosia reassured Piero.

"You're at the Academy, then?" said Horatio. "You fellows lay a fine table, I don't mind saying."

"Er. Not at the...moment," said Piero.

"Master Joplin's been working on the plague research exclusively," said Ramsey, cutting in. "Out at the Kaldwin's Bridge laboratory."

"I know that place," said Maude. "Right by Jeremiah's old townhouse, isn't it? I swear I had first claim on the place once poor Pratchett got himself sunk, but that dreadful Adelle White snaked it out from under me somehow."

"You're better off without it," sniffed Barnabus. "The ceilings are far too cramped. I don't know what his architect was thinking. And the neighborhood is positively reprehensible. Sokolov has a warehouse down there and the noise is abhorrent. And the stench! I don't know what the man brews in there, but it can't be healthy."

"That is...my laboratory, as a matter of fact," said Piero.

"Oh!" said Maude, clapping one hand over her mouth.

"Don't tell me you've got to put up with that fool Sokolov, then," said Byron cheerfully. "How on
earth can you get anything done with such a madman banging around?"

For a moment Piero only gaped at him as he searched for a response. He could not figure out a place to go from that statement.

"In this time of need, I'm sure every citizen of Dunwall has their part to play," cut in Ramsey again. "Even Sokolov."

"Well, if you say so," shrugged Byron. "In my experience all the man was good for was guzzling expensive vintages and charging an unreasonable sum for those portraits of his."

"He's awful about it," echoed Barnabus. "You won't believe how rude he was to Lady Blair when she sent for him. I hear she won't have his name spoken in her household."

"I think they're quite fine," said Horatio. "He truly captures the essence of his subjects. And so what if the man's a bit boorish? You can't expect an artist to behave like a gentleman."

"He's not going to paint you if you keep flattering him, Horatio," said Theodosia. "He's not even here to be flattered."

"Actually, he is," said Piero.

The circle stared at him in silence for a moment.

"We came on the same invitation," added Piero. He glanced around himself. "I believe he's gone to speak with the Ladies Boyle."

Theodosia broke the silence first with a high laugh. "I don't believe it!" she said. "I daresay he hasn't been seen in polite society in years. What a time to turn up."

"Perhaps he was just afraid of Esma," put in Barnabus.

"I must find him, then," said Theodosia. "I've never met the man in person. I must know if all the rumors are true."

Ramsey looked as if his glass of cider had gone off. "I hardly think he's a suitable person for a young woman to be--"

"Oh, enough of that," said Theodosia. She lowered her voice. "I want to know if it's true he's got a Mark." Maude giggled, putting a hand to her mouth.

"Come now, Jack's right. That's hardly a fit topic of conversation," blustered Byron.

"Where did you hear that?" asked Horatio.

"The brothel girls," confided Theodosia, and Maude's scandalized expression redoubled. Barnabus scoffed, but leaned closer to hear. "They say he's marked from whatever demon pact he made. To learn how to call the lightning from the oil."

"That is hardly necessary," interjected Piero. "It does not take any sort of demonic pact to learn the methods of deriving electrical potential from fired trans. Many natural philosophers have experience in this area." Though none of them can make a spark dance like he can. "In any case it was Esmond Roseburrow who developed the extraction process, not Anton."

"Oh, that poor man," said Horatio sadly. "He used to host the finest luncheons."
"I used to have stock in his company," muttered Barnabus.

"A true son of Dunwall," proclaimed Ramsey.

"And taken from us all too unfairly," added Byron, and after that there was nothing for it but that the entire circle raise their glasses to Esmond Roseburrow's memory.

"Are you speaking from experience, Master Joplin?" said Byron, when everyone had drunk.

"I have often worked with trans, yes," said Piero. "It is unequalled as a transformative agent and motive fluid."

"Really," said Byron, drawing the word out.

"Master Joplin created an upgrade to the arc pylon," said Ramsey, and Piero nearly dropped his glass. How on earth had the man found out? "From what I hear, it's a tremendous improvement."

"It - ah, w-well--" Piero tried to stall for time, but now the entire circle was looking at him eagerly. "It is - yes, Anton and I collaborated on a newer v-version, but - it was under - rather s-s-specific circumstances." He cleared his throat and took a sip of cider. The alcohol left a pleasant buzz in the front of his brain. "Not yet ready for any sort of large-scale development."

"How exciting, though," said Theodosia, and she did indeed sound excited.

"What sort of improvement are we talking about here?" asked Byron, half to Piero and half to Ramsey.

"Oh, well," said Piero, grateful for familiar ground at last. "Increased efficiency in the amplification cascade, far more degrees of freedom in the tuning of the higher harmonics - we're not phase-locked anymore, it allows for a much more sophisticated waveform - and, most interestingly, we've separated the emitter from the generation apparatus itself, which--"

"Twice the power and ten times the range," said Ramsey. "And I hear it can strike multiple targets at once."

"Ah - well, we have not exactly - tested any of those numbers," mumbled Piero. But Byron was looking at him like he'd just announced he had the cure to the plague in hand.

"You're a total genius, you know that?" said Byron.

"I - um," said Piero. He realized he was blushing. It only compounded his embarrassment.

"Yes, most certainly!" echoed Maude.

"All I know is, I don't know any of those words you just used," chimed in Horatio. He gave a big, enthusiastic laugh. "It must be some top-shelf stuff!"

Piero ducked his head, warmed immensely by the compliment and yet somehow uncomfortable with the turn of conversation. He wanted to hear more, oh yes; but their eyes were fastened on him now and he shrank away, afraid of what lay behind them.

"It's about time someone improved on Sokolov's inventions," added Maude. "They're years old by now. Frankly it's time for a new perspective."

"It is - well - I have largely improved on what exists, already," Piero mumbled.
"Come now, don't be modest," said Ramsey, a strange glee under his usual bored tones. "You've plenty of accomplishments to be proud of, Master Joplin."

"I-- " He drank again to give himself a moment to think. "I thank you for your kind words."

"It's us who ought to be thanking you," said Theodosia. "The ships, the pylons, the walls of light - Dunwall would have fallen apart ages ago without them, I know it." Her eyes were bright, her cheeks red with drink and enthusiasm. "Oh, it must be so exciting to work with machines like that! Thunder and lightning, sparks flying everywhere, awakening the dark power of the oils..."

The fireplace crackled. A drip of red into blue, a hiss - a flash that blinks, a wall of heat, and then the tidal wave of pressure grips his chest and slams him into the wall. Piero squeezed his eyes shut, wincing as he fought off the memory of that first disastrous accident. He felt again that flare washing over his skin, except this time it left not a scorch mark but a shiver. In the dark behind his eyelids he saw that stone pavilion, silent and abandoned.

He opened his eyes back onto the party and felt his stomach turn.

"It is a tremendous privilege we are afforded to do our work in this fine city," he told Theodosia. He had written that line down with especial care. "We are happy to be of service."

Ramsey's slight grin twitched into a real smile for a moment at that, so fast Piero almost doubted he had seen it, and then Byron said "Hear hear" and raised his glass and then they all had to drink again. The combination of heat and alcohol and exhaustion had already set Piero's head swimming.

"Well, I for one feel a lot better knowing we've got you working on that plague business," said Byron. "'Spect you'll have it sorted in no time, eh?"

"I know I've seen far fewer of those beastly weepers about," said Maude. "I heard Waverly talking earlier about how one of the dreadful things ran out in front of her carriage - right out from an alley, like a rat! What a ghastly mess it made."

"Glad to hear something's being done, yes. I'm fed up to here with the smell of those rat-lights. This has gone on long enough, I say!" declared Horatio. He sounded as if he were seriously considering complaining to the manager.

"I'm certain we won't have to endure it much longer," said Ramsey, with a smile in Piero's direction that frightened him down to his bones. "It's almost ready, yes?"

Piero stood rooted to the spot, too terrified to speak, feeling his throat closed shut, feeling the walls of the room collapsing in on him.

"Yes," he squeaked out. "Almost r-ready."

A commotion sounded from one of the neighboring rooms. The conversation around them dropped as everyone tried to eavesdrop at once. Somewhere in the melee Piero caught Anton's brusque voice, raised as if he were arguing.

"Oh, he really is here!" said Theodosia, pleased beyond measure. "Maude, come, we must at least see what that's all about. I take my leave of you with reluctance, Master Joplin," she added. "Do pay a call sometime, won't you?" She departed the circle in a flash of yellow silk and white lace, dragging the giggling Maude along by one hand. Barnabus hmphed again at their departure, but he too cocked a head to listen.

Piero wrapped his hands tighter around his glass, breathing out and debating whether to follow the
two women. Part of him desperately wanted to know what Anton was getting up to in the other room, but another clutched the terrified thought that if he went in there now, Anton might drag him into it. Plus, he could not very well offend Lord Ramsey by taking his leave so quickly, could he? That had been in the protocol, he thought.

"Women," said Byron easily after they had left. "Devilishly distractable, what a positive nuisance. Too bad they make up for it in other ways, eh?" He grinned a loose grin.

"Hear hear," said Horatio. The two men shared a look dripping with good-natured conspiracy.

"Jack, how are affairs at the slaughterhouse going?" said Barnabus abruptly. "With Bundry gone, that is."

"Quite well," said Ramsey with a satisfied half-smile. He reminded Piero of a cat he'd once seen take a pigeon from a rooftop. "Quite well indeed. We've permission to sail through the blockade, as you know, and without Rothwild's incompetents frightening away the catch I daresay we're bringing in much higher volumes of oil than before. And, of course, the whalemeat on which so much of the city must currently sustain itself for lack of an alternative," he added. Piero half-expected to see pigeon feathers on his coat.

"I'll be happy to the end of my days if I never have to eat the dreadful stuff again," said Horatio, jabbing his chunk of bread in the air for emphasis.

"I haven't tried it yet myself," said Barnabus curtly. "Bundry's captains were Tyvian, yes?"

"Traditionalist sorts," confirmed Ramsey. Piero glanced between the two of them while keeping what he hoped was a mildly interested smile plastered on his face. His heart beat faster. He had the sudden sense of playing a game no one had told him the rules of. "Top-notch sailors, of course, but Bundry let them have quite a bit of leash. I don't expect they'll be any trouble, though. It may have taken Sokolov to talk them out of their primitive superstitions at first, but by now they understand the superiority of the Dunwall method."

"So you'll be taking over Bundry's operation, then," said Barnabus.

"Critical industries must operate in this time of crisis," said Ramsey, straightening his spine as if under military review. "I don't know what possessed Bundry to abandon the city so precipitously, but rest assured I will not be found a coward when it is my turn to come to Dunwall's aid."

"Indeed," said Barnabus, looking into his drink. Not a hint of levity showed in his face, but Piero had the distinct impression he was smiling nevertheless. For some reason his gaze flickered up to Piero, then back down to his cider. "Indeed you won't. Byron, perhaps it's no affair of mine, but I've a suggestion. I've a business venture I've been meaning to--"

"Jack!" called a voice from beyond the circle. Ramsey's head jerked up, an annoyed expression cracking his smooth veneer. The owner of the voice emerged a moment later from the thin crowd: an older woman in a mahogany ensemble, smile bright as she cut a straight line across the floor towards their circle. "Oh, is that Jack Ramsey?" she said as she neared them. "I didn't know you would be here!"

"How kind of you to join us, my lady," said Ramsey to the new arrival as she deftly inserted herself into the ring of guests. "It's so good to see you." Piero didn't think Ramsey looked happy to see her at all. In fact he seemed a little put-out, if anything.

"Well, I just saw you there, all you fellows clumped together without a single lady to keep you
honest, and I thought 'someone ought to even up those numbers!' " she replied, smiling round the circle. Byron and Barnabus gave her perfunctory smiles in return, while Horatio broke into a wide grin.

Her gaze swept round to Piero. "Oh, this fellow I don't think I've met," she said. "Come, Jack, don't be rude! Introduce me!"

Ramsey cleared his throat. "Master Joplin, allow me to introduce the Lady Margaret Bentham, of Hallgarth," he said.

"Bentham," repeated Piero, surprised. The woman so introduced made the requisite nod and smile, professing herself pleased to make his acquaintance. He heard none of it, instead fixated on trying to find something of the mathematician in her apparent relation's face. Margaret's fair skin and dark blonde hair made her look as much a Gristol native as the other did not. But - yes, there was something there - something about the eyes.

"Master Joplin is a natural philosopher," added Ramsey. "He's been working with Master Sokolov on a plague remedy."

"Has he now? What a clever thought. High time someone looked in to that," said Margaret brightly. Ramsey's expression twitched.

"Lady Margaret, wonderful to see you," said Horatio. "I expect Hallgarth's doing well? Tell me you haven't been letting that marvelous polo field go to the weeds during all this nonsense."

"Oh, you scoundrel," said Margaret. "Is that all you've got on your brain, ponies and picnics?"

"Is there anything more worth my contemplation?" responded Horatio. "I've half a mind to dare the blockade just to make it back to your lovely green."

"Don't you dare say a thing like that," scolded Margaret. "You young men are all the same, rushing off and getting yourself into trouble. You know what happened to Brisby, don't you?"

"What happened to Brisby?" blurted out Piero. The others looked mildly affronted at such obvious curiosity. "My apologies, I am afraid I am...unacquainted with the gentleman in question."

"Oh, well, he ran the blockade two months past," said Byron. "Old news, really."

"Old news, hardly," scoffed Margaret. "That young scamp's finally reaped the rewards of his recklessness."

Byron's head came up, and Barnabus gave up pretending to be bored. Even Ramsey tilted his head forward and said, "Oh?"

"What's it earned him, then?" asked Horatio dutifully.

"Only the just recompense of such foolishness, rightfully due," said Margaret.

"Oh come on, Maggie, just tell us," wheedled Byron.

"Pirates," she proclaimed, looking pleased at the horrified looks that ran around the gathering. "Yes! At that villa of his on the Serkonan coast, if you can believe their wretched boldness. It was awful, truly awful, Ella has all the details - Timothy stabbed to death in his bed and the house burnt down around him, reduced to ashes, I heard, and all his coin stolen in the bargain. The demons took his yacht and lit out for Blackglass, and of course they were long gone before our Navy caught up with
them. What *are* they doing with all those taxes we pay, I don't know," finished Margaret in a huff.

As she spoke Piero shifted uncomfortably. He could swear Margaret was looking at him more often than she properly had call to, and underneath the puffery and mock outrage he caught a flash of that steel-tipped focus the other Bentham had brought to bear.

"Serkonan pirates, I shouldn't wonder," muttered Barnabus. "Who can be surprised at their boldness when one of their own's practically sitting on the throne?"

"Havelock wouldn't have let such a thing happen," agreed Byron.

Piero froze.

"Byron!" said Margaret. "You shouldn't talk like that about a man who did such awful things to our poor young Empress."

"Did he, Maggie?" said Byron. "Did he really?"

"He was a criminal and a traitor," declared Margaret.

"And whose word do we have for that?" said Byron. "An admiral and a war hero, a Gristol man of proven courage, against a skulking foreign assassin who kills without honor? How convenient that Havelock's not around to tell his side of the story."

"Havelock threw himself into the sea in shame for what he'd done," retorted Margaret. A jolt of pain shot through Piero's hand where it gripped his cup. He tried to force the joints to relax, distantly worried the glass might shatter. He could hear his own breath rasping through his chest, his own blood roaring in his ears.

"Or so Attano claims," said Ramsey smoothly. "Do be realistic, Maggie."

"Attano's just the one who was faster on the draw," tacked on Byron. "And then Burrows disappears from Coldridge and turns up dead? Cold-hearted bastard probably did for all of them out of fear they'd come between him and the Empress. Obsessed with her, he is. And I've heard things from the Abbey. They've concerns of their own. The black-magic touch? It doesn't come to a good man."

Piero stood rooted to the spot. That cold wind swept over him again, as if the fire in the fireplace had turned to ice. One leg twitched, torn between fleeing or fainting. He could not drag his eyes away from Byron, from the man's knowing, superior look and idle tone. Havelock's voice still echoed in his head and the slow menace of it sunk cold hooks into his bones.

*I'm sorry it has to be this way, Piero. No one's coming to help you. It's just a matter of time, my boy. Just a matter of time.*

Margaret turned her face from Byron, crossing her arms with a petulant expression and - yes, darting another glance at Piero in the process. Worry showed for an instant. Then she leaned back and said in pleasant surprise, "Jack, is that Balisurat Red-Crest?"

"Oh, yes, isn't it wonderful?" said Ramsey, touching the sleeve of his dress coat as if he'd just noticed it himself. The dark mood of the circle blew away like smoke.

"Fair dashing you do look in it," offered Horatio. "You must give me the name of your tailor. I've a mind to get myself a proper new riding suit done, for when all this clears up at last."

"Do be careful, it's *frightfully* expensive," Ramsey warned him. "Comes from terribly far away. But
worth every copper in my opinion. I'll grant those savages know a thing or two about cloth."

"Yes," said Piero faintly. He shook himself slightly, half-expecting ice to crack off his skin. "So I've heard."

"Master Joplin, do remind me to introduce you to my daughter sometime," said Margaret, apropos of nothing. Delightfully scandalized expressions broke out around the ring.

"Maggie, you're impossible with all this matchmaking," said Byron. "A man can hardly think with you arranging everyone's affairs."

_Daughter. That must be it._ 

"We have been acquainted, actually," guessed Piero. The scandalized looks doubled in intensity. Bentham's smile didn't waver. "I paid a call on her at the Technical College._ But you already knew that, didn't you._

"My apologies for her manners, then," said Margaret, and sighed. "She takes after her father in that regard."

"Is he a natural philosopher?" asked Piero. "I should like to meet him."

"So would she, I imagine," muttered Barnabus. Margaret's grin tightened briefly, and in that one twitch Piero read the entire history of the scorn her daughter had heaped upon the nobility; read and felt a sudden, vicious sympathy for.

"He was a mad poet on an isle of Blackglass, I was an adventurous fool - well, when you're young, the heart wants what the heart wants," Margaret said instead, light as if she were describing an afternoon jaunt to the seaside. "He was all wrong for me, but I got Libby out of the bargain, so I can't say I regret it. But she's altogether too fond of her father. I tell her, Lillabet, if you ever knew him you'd know what a scoundrel he was. Children, eh?"

"Um," said Piero. "Yes?"

"Maggie, isn't it a bit past your bedtime?" said Ramsey.

"The impertinence!" said Margaret. "Jack Ramsey, I knew you when you were knee-high."

"That's his point, I think," said Horatio.

"Oh, you terrible creatures!" said Margaret. "I've had quite enough of such impudent company for one night. I'm off to find some proper refreshment, and some proper company." She inclined her head towards Piero. "Lovely to meet you, Master Joplin. I look forward to hearing so much about you. Jack, Byron, Barnabus, Horatio, watch that you don't drag the poor man into your degenerate company. I shudder to think it."

The men nodded and murmured their own pleasantries as Margaret left the little gathering. As she brushed past Piero she staggered, one of her knees giving way. Piero caught her arm reflexively, nearly following her down as he took her weight.

"Oh, that devil Barnabus is right," said Margaret with a silly laugh. "I'm too old for this nonsense. Thank you, Master Joplin."

"Of course," answered Piero automatically. Very fine cloth, he noted, as he helped her straighten up. Her jacket had been cut from a rich brown fabric with a pale pattern woven through it, complex and yet never repeating. She stood with some effort, keeping an iron grip on Piero's arm. When she was upright he tried to pull away, but she had him locked in her grasp.
"Steer clear of Jack Ramsey's crew," she hissed in his ear, deadly serious.

Piero yanked his hand away as if he'd been burned. She disappeared into the next room without so much as a backward glance, back straight, head held high. And for a moment the manor and the party and all its guests hazed into blue silence, sound fading into the slow pulse of the depths, gilt marble replaced with lichen-coated stone.

Piero drained the rest of his glass in one swallow.

"I'm afraid I ought to take my leave as well," he told the assembled guests. "I must confess to having been terribly remiss in my duties: I have yet to pay a call on our lovely hostesses."

"Oh no, do stay," began Byron.

"No, it's true," said Ramsey. "Waverly and Lydia can be so unreasonable when they feel they're being slighted. Do go and speak with them or I'm sure we'll never hear the end of it."

"Right, yes, you'd better," said Byron.

"I can only hope they will be so forgiving," said Piero. With a great effort of will he summoned up another pre-composed line. "You have certainly made my first such event a delightful occasion."

"Wonderful to meet you, wonderful all 'round," said Horatio.

"We will see you again, I expect," said Barnabus.

"I am certain of it," said Piero. I truly hope not. "Lord Ramsey, I shall see you at Council?"

"Count on it," said Ramsey. His eyes gleamed.

"Til tomorrow, then," said Piero, and ducked away with barely-concealed haste. He nearly ran down a maid with a serving tray in his flight from the room. She stepped back and dropped a tiny curtsey, lowering her eyes and murmuring an apology. He hardly heard her, but he did spot the bobbing tray, and took the chance to swap out his empty glass for a full one. He put two rooms between himself and Ramsey's group before he stopped to try to gather his wits. As he began to emerge from his panic, with the aid of another gulp of cider, he noticed the high walls of books that surrounded him. He leaned against them as if he could absorb the clear-cut solace of the written word.

By day this room must be a study. For the party it had been transformed into a winter wood. Sculptures of wire and paper fashioned into bare, snowy trees stretched their branches across the shelves, decked with tiny lamps. Drifts of white cloth had been piled here and there at the edge of the carpet. Piero stood back and pretended to peruse the book titles while he caught his breath, keeping a watch out of the corner of his eye for any of the people he had been conversing with. He thought he might simply burst into embarrassed flames if he had to negotiate the etiquette of running into someone to whom he had already bid good evening. But as he browsed he saw no one he recognized, nor any of the flashes of blue that had hounded him. The knot of fear loosened, helped along by the warm alcoholic haze beginning to permeate his thoughts.

They did have some interesting books here. In fact - he stopped as he spotted a copy of The Metaphysika Mysterium. That volume was most certainly banned outside the Abbey archives. And yet here it sat in plain view, on a shelf anyone could reach! He glanced around himself furtively. Was it a false cover over another volume? Perhaps he could just take a quick look--

"You're Piero Joplin, yes?" said a voice at his elbow.
Piero nearly yelped in surprise, jumping back and clutching at his drink. He turned to find a short woman in viridian green regarding him with open curiosity.

"In-indeed," he said. This night might go faster if I simply affixed a sign to my lapel. "I am afraid you have the advantage of me, ma'am...?"

"Adelle White," said the woman.

"Charmed," said Piero reflexively.

"Likewise, I'm certain," said White. "You're a new sight in these parts."

"This is my first such occasion," said Piero. "I must confess I was unprepared for such a lovely event."

"Yes, well, very nice," said White dismissively. "Listen, I've a wager on with Lord Camberley that I was hoping you would settle."

"I will be of whatever assistance I can," Piero promised.

"Sokolov," said White.

Piero sighed internally. "Yes?"

"You came here with him?"

Well, they had come in the same carriage, and it was on Anton's invitation. "Yes," he said.

"Camberley's sure you're fucking him," said White.

Piero choked on his drink.

"I'll take that as a no, not that the fool will pay up," said White. She paused as if allowing Piero the chance to speak up, but he was too busy trying to inhale to make any reply. "I knew it couldn't be that simple," she went on. "Getting into Sokolov's bed is hardly a challenge. Getting into his head, well, that's a far more complicated seduction. Oh my, are you feeling well? You've gone quite purple."

"I n-need a d-d-drink," stammered Piero, forgetting he was holding one, and fled into the next room in the chain.

It turned out to be the banquet room. He had somehow ended up back where he had started. His thoughts buzzed in a confused tangle; so much noise, so much data, possibly too much to drink. His head felt full to bursting, overwhelmed, drowning in sensation. He returned to the well-laden table in search of something to absorb the alcohol. The bread bowl atop its pyramid was half-empty now, and when Piero edged close enough to read the mantel clock he was surprised to discover more than an hour and a half had passed. He took another piece of bread from the bowl and did not quite hide in a corner, eating in a nervous silence and glancing around himself every few seconds lest someone new sneak up on him.

Around him the dance of the party continued in rustles of silk and lace, half-lowered glances and small smiles, firm handshakes, whispered words. In this oasis of warmth he could believe that nothing lay outside the manor's walls but more wealth and security, that all the world was only a larger party, full of laughter and drink and frivolous conversation. The alcohol wrapped a thick cushion between him and the constricting panic that tightened in his brain and twisted his stomach.
He could almost forget for these brief, precious minutes, that the plague was slaughtering the city and he didn't know what to do.

But as he turned his head he caught flashes out of the corner of his eye of that pavilion, alien and yet sickeningly familiar. At the edge of his vision the lamps spluttered over decaying wood, rust and tarnish, blotched lichen crawling over all. The weight of those abandoned townhouses leaned in against the lit sanctuary of Boyle manor like half-dead Weepers clawing at someone they once knew. And above it all the sky like the sea that waited beyond, thick and dark and eternally patient.

Fortunately it was difficult to miss when Anton entered a room, particularly when he didn't want anyone to miss it. The conversation dropped slightly as he came in, then redoubled. He ignored it and went straight for the cider fountain. Anton had begun to change as they stepped past the threshold into Boyle manor and the transformation was now in full effect. Gone was the waver in his voice, any hesitation in his glance; gone too was any humor or goodwill. What was left was a thunderous spectre whose outlandish dress no longer seemed so overly dramatic. He tossed his head back and drained his first glass in one go, then refilled it. When he looked up he spotted Piero and headed over.

"How are the Ladies Boyle?" said Piero as he approached.

Anton rolled his eyes, stepping into the corner and out of the flow of the crowd. "Made the appropriate noises," he said. "You're still alive."

Piero wanted to take offense at his patronizing tone, but he found he had no energy left over to fight with. " Barely," he said. His shoulders slumped.

"You all right?" said Anton, peering at him.

Piero took another drink to moisten his throat. "I nearly suffocated," he said. "Sh-she thought we were..."

"She, who's 'she'?" said Anton, glancing over his shoulder.

"A-adria?" hazarded Piero. "Ada?"

"Adelle?" guessed Anton. "Adelle White?" Piero managed to nod. Understanding dawned. Anton made a sour face. "Right. Good old Adelle. Hold this." Piero took his glass while he extracted his flask, unscrewed the cap, and tipped a generous helping of liquor into the cider. "She thinks everyone's fucking everyone. Then again she's right half the time, so who am I to judge?"

"She - just said..." He trembled slightly as the anxiety caught up with him again.

Anton held out the flask. Piero took a wary sniff of the contents, having learned his lesson about Anton's idea of refreshment. But he smelled only the sweet burn of unadulterated brandy. He dared a small sip and handed it back.

"She gets off on pushing people's buttons," said Anton. "Don't take it personally."

"I have never been so embarrassed," muttered Piero.

"Go around the room again," said Anton, taking back his newly-spiked drink. "I'm sure you'll top it."

"These people are horrid," said Piero fervently.

"Welcome to high society," said Anton. He tipped his glass in a mock salute and drained a third of it
in one go. "Learn anything good?" he asked.

"Timothy Brisby was killed by pirates," said Piero.

"Good for the pirates," said Anton. "Prick."

"You knew him?"

"Tried to buy a 'love potion' off me once," said Anton.

"I loathe whoever started that myth," complained Piero. "No one listens when you explain such things don't exist."

"Explain, why would I explain anything," said Anton. "I took his coin and gave him sugarwater. My apologies to whoever's drink he ruined with it." He finished off his glass. The smell of brandy overwhelmed whatever cologne Anton had put on for the occasion. His bearing was straight, his words clear, but the flush high on his cheeks and the shimmer in his eyes betrayed him.

"How much have you had to drink?" asked Piero.

"Not as much as I'm going to," said Anton. "Not as much as I need to deal with the Ladies Boyle."

He leaned forward as if to whisper, and Piero followed suit. "Bloody Waverly blames me, if you can believe it," he muttered.

"For Esma?" said Piero quietly.

"If I hadn't told Attano who Burrows' mistress was', and on and so forth," confirmed Anton. "What a pile of shit. She's just trying to get to me. I didn't even tell Attano it was Esma when I damn well could have. He sorted that bit out on his own. Hells, I wasn't the one sleeping with bloody Hiram bloody Burrows in the first place, why should I get the blame for this? As long as we're talking poor life decisions. She took a risk and it didn't pay off. That's politics. That's hardly my fault, yes?"

He sighed heavily. "The worst part is they're entirely convinced Esma's coming back. They treat it like she's just run off on one of her sailing jaunts. 'Our wayward sister'. I expect they've got her damn room still kept just as it was."

"Grief makes people strange," said Piero.

"They were strange enough to begin with," grumbled Anton. "Well, as long as they keep the mines open." He leaned back as if he wanted to slump against the wall. "Waverly dropped the price," he said, his voice so low even Piero could not be certain he'd heard it. "The Ladies Boyle. They're worried, Piero."

He stayed like that for another moment, then, "Anything else?"

"I..." Piero debated whether to relate the conversation with Ramsey and his friends. He was supposed to be keeping his ear out for useful political gossip. Anton couldn't be much interested in chatter about polo and townhouses. Still he couldn't shake the feeling that he had only been able to hear half the real discussion being conducted. "Met some people. No one useful."

"Can't say any of them are particularly useful. Right." Anton regarded the crowd with a baleful eye. "I'd better get back out there."

"There's a woman named Theodosia who seems to have her eye on you," offered Piero.
Anton jerked upright. "Theodosia Cromwell?"

"Yes?" said Piero. "Should I know her?"

"No, why should you, she's only got the third largest voting bloc in Parliament right now," snapped Anton. "She's picked up every Pendleton voter that arse Ramsey didn't manage to buy. Where is she?"

"Last I saw her, she was talking with Lord Ramsey," said Piero.

Anton went pale. "Oh boy," he said, and Piero couldn't tell whether he meant to find the woman or avoid her at all costs.

Anton stepped back into the crowd before Piero could query him further, striking off in a random direction. He hadn't gotten far before someone stopped him and a little knot of conversation formed almost at once. Piero finished his own drink out of habit, then regretted it when another wave of dizziness washed over him. The brandy heated his stomach and a cozy fog cushioned his thoughts. You've had enough, he told himself, setting the glass aside. The last thing you need to do is pass out for the second time today.

Piero took another piece of bread and looked out over the swirling crowd, again at a loss. For a total lack of any other destination he headed back towards the study. He kept a wary eye out for Miss White, but the viridian jacket did not reappear. The wire-and-paper trees stretched up in the gaps between shelves, spreading their branches across and up. They twined together at the apex of the ceiling to support a pearl globe painted with the alchemical sigil of the moon. Guests drank and chatted beneath the tiny lamps hung from the wire. A few, Piero noted with glee, had taken down volumes, so handling the books was permitted. The readers leaned ostentatiously against the walls, making certain all passers-by could read the no doubt sophisticated titles they had selected.

Piero took down The Metaphysika Mysterium with careful hands and leafed immediately to the title page. His heart soared. It truly was the occult tome, not some space-filler that had been bound under false cover to look dramatic. He skimmed through it, too excited to settle on any one page, reading bits and pieces.

The Abbey has correctly identified the importance of the restriction of mathematics to only those studies founded upon pure harmonic ratios, as being safe against outside influence, he read. However the mathematical nature of older ritual is often underappreciated. For instance Tyvian superstition, with its basis in the cardinal directions, focuses largely on the number 4, that being twice 2 and 2 being regarded as the primal number. This gives rise to the association of the Outsider with the number 5 as it represents the 4 elements of the universe plus the one standing outside of it. Five is also the sum of 2 and 3, both being irreducible numbers that have no smaller factors. Some more refined versions split up the 5 into 2 and 3, the 2 being the realms knowable to man (land and sea) and the 3 being the "unknowable" (sun, sky, and Void).

Some have tried to relate this to the geometric problem of angle division, that is, that with a compass, straight-edge, and knowledge of geometry one may construct the bisection of an angle (division by 2) but as proven by Markham it is impossible ever to construct the trisection (division by 3), 3 therefore being the unknowable number. This is given by Gainsford as the reasoning behind the trifold character of the bone charm. However this ignores the fact that 3 is of great significance in geometry, being the number of the triangle. Further investigation has been conducted largely under the purview of the Oracular Order, but their discoveries remain confined to that circle.

Gristolean superstition, both pre- and post-Abbey, focuses on the number 7 and the number 8 is therefore sometimes associated with the Outsider, being the 7 plus 1 more, similar to the association
of 4 and 5. Here we find an interesting and unexpected connection in that 8 is 2 by 2 by 2, or 2 multiplied 3 times. The combination of 8 and 5 yields 13 which is therefore a strongly superstitious and unlucky number in all the Isles...

"What are you reading?" inquired a smooth, lilting voice.

Piero tilted his book so that his visitor could read the title. He turned a page.

"Ooh, that does look fascinating," said the voice. "Are you a student of the occult?"

Piero looked up from the pages, annoyed at having his reading disturbed, then stopped short before he could utter any dismissal. A beautiful woman in a long, sweeping red jacket stood holding a glass in one hand and smiling at him.

"Um," said Piero.

"It's so compelling, isn't it?" said the woman, leaning closer and speaking with a confidential air. Dark brown hair spilled over one shoulder. "The dark mysteries of the world beyond. How romantic." She gave a delighted shiver. "I love that sort of thing."

Piero only stared at her, mouth agape. "I - do, as well," he stammered. "Oh hells, he cursed to himself. Well done, she certainly doesn't think you're a drooling idiot now. I-in fact..." He closed the book and managed to stand up a little straighter. "I a-am a student of, uh, natural philosophy."

The woman gave a delighted laugh. "Really?" she said, drawing the word out. "Tell me something about natural philosophy, then."

"Uh..." Piero's mind had gone a perfect blank. Every scrap of knowledge he had ever possessed fled his mind. He groped for something, anything to say. The woman smiled in her beautiful red jacket. His memory alighted on the conversation he and Anton had had in the carriage over. "Based on the bright color of your attire, I can surmise that you are most likely in your fertile cycle," he said.

Her smile dropped instantly. "What?"

"There has been some fascinating work done on the subject by Ricci of Karnaca," continued Piero, in order to assure her he was not simply inventing theories out of whole cloth. "He finds a distinct connection between the plumage of the females of various species, particularly concerning the color red, and the onset of heat and the mating season--"

He had no time to react before the contents of the woman's glass hit him full in the face. Piero sputtered and scrambled to hide the book, frightened the liquid might have damaged its pages. Once it was safely set on a side table he turned back to see the woman already disappearing into the crowd.

"Oh dear," he said quietly to himself. "Why did you say that? he berated himself. He had just - the words had appeared in his mind, and his mouth had run off and--"

Stupid, stupid, he cursed himself. He wiped his spectacles dry on a corner of his coat, then found a maid and via her instructions found a privy, where a handtowel stiff with embroidery sufficed to mop the worst of the cider from his face and shoulders. This is why we don't go to parties. The deep teal of the coat was splattered a darker shade where the liquid had soaked in, but it had shielded the waistcoat and the dress shirt beneath from the worst of it. He washed his face. This is why we stay in our workshop where no one asks us questions we cannot answer, and no one throws drinks at us when we make a mistake. The cold water stung his skin and for a moment he swore he tasted salt; then it was only the reek of damp, diluted cider. Oh dear, he thought as he rested his elbows on either side of the sink. Anton is never going to let me forget this.
When he re-emerged he determined to find the woman and at least make some attempt at 
apologizing. Perhaps he could smooth over whatever political incident he had no doubt just spawned 
before Anton heard of it. In her bright red ensemble he thought he could pick her out through the 
crowd.

Maneuvering through the party had now become a complex task of juggling targets to pursue and 
targets to avoid, all the while dodging maidservants and the expansive gestures of unaware guests. 
By now nearly all of them had taken full advantage of the Boyles’ generous liquor supply and he had 
to step quickly more than once to avoid some aristocrat's stagger. It took him several minutes to spot 
the woman in the next room over. Piero positioned himself at the end of a mantelpiece, half-hidden 
by the fireplace, where he could just glimpse her in between the shoulders of the crowd. She was 
speaking quickly to someone else. Someone jostled him from behind. He pulled in on himself 
instinctively, murmuring an apology, and turned to see the absolute last person he could have wished 
to.

"Callista," he said, in the voice of a sailor looking at the wave about to capsize him.

She whipped around as if stung. "Piero?" said Callista Curnow, sounding thunderstruck. "What on 
earth are you doing here?"

"I have an i-i-invitation," he said quickly. Thought once again departed his brain. Please do not let 
me say something terrible. "Well - Anton h-has an invitation, he's - somewhere--" Stop talking, Piero 
screamed at himself. STOP TALKING. "Would you, um. Can you s-stand here." He stepped to one 
side and gestured to the space between him and his target.

Callista assessed him for a moment, moving slowly into the spot he had indicated and watching him 
as if expecting a trap to be sprung. She wore a bright blue edged in gold - Kaldwin blue, he realized, 
and Kaldwin gold. When she moved he spotted the red woman between the shoulders of the crowd. 
She had grabbed the arm of a gentleman in similar attire and was - Piero's heart sank - hissing 
furiously in his ear, scowling all the while.

Callista glanced over her shoulder, then back at him. "Are you trying to spy on someone?" she said, 
her voice gone low and edged in menace. "What are you looking at?"

"I suspect I am about to be challenged to a duel," murmured Piero as he attempted to ascertain who 
the woman was talking to. "I would rather not be."

That was not the answer Callista had expected. "Why are you going to be challenged to a duel?"

"I might have - said - offended the honor of--" He could not figure out how to explain it, but Callista 
only sighed and said, "I shouldn't even be surprised."

"I have not dueled in some time," said Piero. He had not written down dueling etiquette in his notes. 
Why had he made such a foolish oversight? He glanced back at Callista as a thought struck him. "Is 
there any chance you are acquainted with the formalities?"

"Have you dueled ever?" said Callista.

"Of course," said Piero.

"You," said Callista flatly. "You fought a duel."

"Yes." The woman whispered furiously into the gentleman's ear. His expression of amiable 
drunkenness wavered.
"Over what?" said Callista, incredulous.

"A point of scholarly dispute regarding the preservation of human tissue," said Piero. "I am afraid the specifics are far beyond your knowledge of anatomical chemistry."

"You challenged someone to a duel over natural philosophy?"

"Well of course I did not challenge him," said Piero, distracted. "I am no gentleman, and besides it was obvious that I was correct. But Ashby Trimble was of noble birth and his honor demanded certain forms."

"So he challenged you to a duel," said Callista.

"It was the only proper way to settle it.

"And you accepted."

"He was wrong," said Piero.

"And you killed this man. Over a point of scholarly dispute."

"No one killed anyone," said Piero. "The Head Master interrupted the affair." Piero frowned at the memory. "Anton was rather cross with us, actually."

"I can't fathom why," said Callista.

"Likely because Ashby broke his window," said Piero. The gentleman leaned back, looking down at the lady in the red jacket, and Piero felt as if he watched a coin tumbling through the air to land heads or tails - and then the man began to laugh, rubbery and drunk. The woman fumed.

Piero heaved a sigh of relief. "Oh, well, it seems I shall not have to fight one after all. That is heartening. What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" repeated Callista, aghast. "I was invited. Even a governess is fit for polite society, when she's the governess to the Crown."

"Oh," said Piero. "How is Miss Emily?"

"Fine," snapped Callista. Piero leaned back before the force she put into that word. He spread his hands helplessly.

"I - I only m-m-m-meant..."

"Did you say something incredibly stupid to Lady Belwick?" boomed a new voice.

"Is she wearing a red jacket?" asked Piero miserably.

"Master Sokolov," said Callista, taken aback.

"Oh, hello Miss Curnow, didn't see you there. Joplin, explain," said Anton, shouldering his way into their conversation. The scent of brandy shadowed him in an eye-stinging cloud. He staggered slightly, nearly knocking his shoulder against the mantelpiece.

"Did he truly fight a duel?" said Callista, pointing at Piero.

Anton frowned at him. "Did you?"
"In my first year, with Ashby Trimble," said Piero, grateful for the distraction.

"That affair in the quad?" said Anton, astonished.

"Do not pretend you do not remember," said Piero. "You were quite furious with the both of us."

"Because you shot out my window at dawn!" exclaimed Anton.

"That was Ashby," said Piero.

"Do you know what these idiots were doing?" said Anton to Callista. "They shot out my fucking window."

"Anton!" said Piero, offended. "There are ladies present."

"She knows the fucking words," retorted Anton. "Come, I want you to imagine this," he told Callista. "I'd been up till four making astronomical observations. I hadn't slept more than an hour when I hear this tremendous bang--" he threw his arms out, nearly spilling his current drink in the process "--smashes the glass in my bedroom, glass everywhere. I run down to the quad half in my robes and half in my night-dress - you understand I'm thinking an oil line blew, the campus might be aflame by now--"

Piero remembered that part quite vividly. The Head of the Academy descending in early-morning wrath, red-eyed and furious and surrounded by billowing black robes, was not a sight easily forgotten. He had not, at the time, noticed the night-dress.

"--And I find a pair of idiot first-years waving guns at each other! Surrounded by a crowd, I might add, you're lucky the only casualty was my bloody window. I yell at them to stop and they look at me like I'm the crazy one." Callista could not help a smile. "Meanwhile they're both yelling at me about how to pickle a liver or something of the like, as if I give a shit at five in the morning."

"Proper preservation technique of human spleens," said Piero.

"And I still don't give much of a shit now. I told them to flip a coin and go the fuck back to sleep," finished Anton. "I don't recall who won."

"Ashby lost," said Piero.

"Well, there you go, Ashby lost," said Anton. "Here's to Ashby." He raised his glass and took a long drink.

"By the terms, that meant he had to leave the Academy," continued Piero.

"He what?" said Anton. His voice spiked erratically. His eyes were bright, too bright. "You made him leave the Academy? As if nearly being shot were insufficient?"

"Those were the terms," shrugged Piero.

"Insane," said Anton, shaking his head. "Staking your life on such rot." He fixed on Piero. "Try and stay out of any more stupid fucking pistol fights, will you?"

"Happily," murmured Piero, deciding not to mention what had prompted Callista's inquiry.

"You can hardly extract such a promise," said Callista. "Sometimes a duel is the only way to solve something."
"Speaking from experience, killing people rarely solves anything," said Anton.

"It was a matter of honor," said Callista.

"Shit on your honor," declared Anton. Callista drew back. "I will never understand why the men of this isle are so mad for killing one another. The world wants us dead as it is, there's no need to help it along." The guests nearby turned their heads, conversation dropping as Anton's voice rose from their little corner.

"There is no need to speak so loudly when we are right here," said Piero, lowering his own voice in the hopes that Anton would take the hint.

"I'll speak as I like," said Anton, pitching his voice even louder. The edges of his words slurred. "Scraping in the street like a pair of curs, are you dogs or men? The whole concept is ridiculous. What does your fucking honor matter when you're bones in the ground? We're all going to die, rich and poor and criminals and priests alike. Sooner rather than later, given how the damned plague is going."

Now there were definite stares in his direction. "Be quiet," hissed Piero, abandoning all pretense at politeness.

"I will not," barked Anton, and too late Piero registered the bright red flush of his skin, the heavy way he leaned on the side of the mantel. Callista looked horrified. Guests murmured amongst themselves. "You're the one going on about how we haven't got a clue about a cure. And it's true! We've made fuck-all progress! We don't even know what the damned thing is, and the last person who might have had the answer got himself eaten alive. We might as well all just find a pistol and--"

Piero's blood froze. He grabbed Anton's arm before he could let himself think and pulled the man through into the next room, barreling headless through the forest of Dunwall's quality. Anton sputtered but did not put up much resistance; in fact he swayed so much that Piero feared he might fall. He got the man to the entrance to the privy he had ducked into earlier and looked around helplessly for any of the servants that circulated through the crowd. It had seemed impossible not to run into them earlier in the night, but now that he sought them there were none to be found.

"It's true," said Anton. His eyes were closed and he leaned back against the doorframe, head lolling. "We've got nothing."

"Not here," said Piero. "You cannot say that here."

"Why not?" slurred Anton. "They'll figure it out soon enough. The quarantine's never going to be lifted. They've walled us in here to die. It's more than these prancing jackasses deserve, really, me letting them know in advance."

"Be quiet," hissed Piero again. He started out from the doorway, torn between the need to chase down a maid and his unwillingness to leave Anton, then turned back. Panic snarled his thoughts, left him flapping useless as a torn sail.

"There's a back way out," said Callista quietly behind him. "I've asked the servants."

She stood before the door, conveniently screening Anton from view. "Good," said Piero fervently. He looked back at Anton. "How do we get him out?"

"I'll handle it," said Callista. She motioned Piero out of the doorway. Anton still slumped back against the wood, eyes closed; but he started up when Callista slipped her arm underneath his and pulled him neatly upright.
"I would like to see the stars, actually," she told Anton. "You know so much about them, it's amazing."

"Eh?" grunted Anton. He seemed only half-conscious. Callista gave a silly laugh and plastered a vacant grin on her face. She steered him neatly through the crowd, smiling pleasantly all the while and seeming to exert no pressure. Piero stumbled after them. She reminded him of a street magician producing trinkets from children's ears, hiding and revealing without apparent motion.

Fear stretched the distance to miles, but it could not have been more than a few minutes before they made it to a small, plain white door set in the back of one room. A maid hovered nearby. She dipped a curtsey to Callista, who returned it with a nod, and opened the door for them. Piero trailed after.

The dusty floor beyond creaked underfoot and whitewash flaked from old plaster walls. The electric lamps disappeared in favor of candles. The instant the door closed behind them Callista dropped Anton's arm. He swayed and planted a hand against the plaster, but remained upright.

"We'll get out into the backyard and then get the carriage brought round," muttered Callista. She took down a candle set on a ledge next to the door and moved further down the hall, casting a flickering shadow. "It's this way," she said.

"Anton," said Piero, shaking the man's left shoulder. Anton flinched away from the touch, muttering in Tyvian. "Anton, come on." When he failed to respond Piero simply grabbed his wrist and pulled him along.

They staggered through the corridors until they came to a set of narrow, descending stairs. Callista went ahead while he coaxed Anton down them. By now the world had picked up a slow, dizzying spin and he deeply regretted that last glass of cider.

"Thank you for your help," said Piero when he caught up to Callista at the base of the stairs. "It was not - expected."

"Uncle would kill me, otherwise," said Callista, raising the candle to look down one branch of the intersection ahead. Darkness leapt and pooled beyond the flame's range. He shrank back unconsciously. "Not exactly in the interests of law and order to have the Royal Physician declaring we can't cure the plague."

"Still," said Piero.

"I'll take an hour looking after a drunken child over another minute spent in there," spat Callista. She came to a decision and beckoned them down the rightmost hallway. "They just keep asking," she said. "They don't even try to hide it, either, as if they honestly believe I'm too stupid to notice. I had someone give me an actual letter. If it weren't for Emily they'd die before they sent me an invitation to a party like this. I'm just a way to get to her."

"They were talking about Havelock," said Piero abruptly, surprising himself. He wasn't certain how he'd made the leap, but in the fuzz of alcohol he didn't care, either. "As if he were a-a-a hero." He hugged his free arm to his chest as if chilled. He smelled cider and wool and sweat and a haunting tang of salt and wished desperately not to be here anymore.

"Emily still has nightmares about him," said Callista. A pepper-crackle of gunfire from the ruined tower, a sharp splatter like hard rain against a window. "I tell her he's dead, but..."

"Monsters," said Piero.

"Exactly," said Callista. She turned a corner and waved them on. There were no windows in these
hallways, but the chill in the air told Piero they must be approaching the outside.

"I did have a question for you, as a matter of fact," said Callista. "The paints you used to give her? We've run out, and I can't find more."

"Oh," said Piero. He straightened slightly. "Yes. Water-paints are - they are - a Serkonan thing," he mumbled. "Not often for sale in Gristol. Perhaps you should ask Corvo. That or - I will make her some new ones. If Her Grace wishes."

"I think she would like that, yes." Callista stopped at the next intersection, appraising the three options. "We're almost there," she said finally. "Just to the right."

They turned the corner and Piero's heart leapt to see the thick door set at the other end. When they reached it he shifted his grip to throw one arm over Anton's shoulders. Anton felt hot under the cloth, too hot, feverish. Callista set the candle down to fumble with the lock in the dim light. When it finally clicked Callista hauled the heavy door open, admitting a blast of icy air. High above a bright moon peered down at Dunwall like the circle of light at the mouth of a well. Piero flinched away from the chill, but Anton sighed and leaned forward.

They had come out of a small recess set into the back of the Boyle manor. It opened into a tunnel of greenery formed by arching branches, now black and sharp against the winter sky. Beyond the concealing hedges a small square of greenery lay gardened to within an inch of its life. Pale blue moonlight clashed with the warmth bleeding from the manor windows, splattering color across ironwork trellises, low geometric hedges and beds of flowers gone brown with the advance of winter. A few stars glittered through the haze of city light and oilsmoke.

"Alright, let's get him out," said Callista. She blew the candle out and left it inside the door. The moon and the secondhand light provided more than enough illumination even under the canopy of branches. "The maids say there's another gate in the fence at the end of this path. I expect the Boyles have snuck their fair share of people in and out." She took up station on the other side of Anton, looking down at her burden with a rueful air. "This isn't how I imagined meeting him," she said.

"I did not exactly meet him the way I thought I would, either," confessed Piero.

Callista sighed. "So much for asking him about the Tyvian whalers, then. One, two, three." They lurched into motion. The tunnel twisted so that they could not see the end, but white seashells gleamed among the grass of the path, glinting in the moonlight to show the way.

"If it is information on whales you are looking for, I have made an extensive study of them," began Piero. "I can recommend a few volumes on the subject that would be suitable for Miss Emily."

"Whalers," snapped Callista. "Whalers, not whales. And who said anything about Emily? Mayhap I want to study them myself."

"I just - did not think they formed part of a governess' lessons," said Piero.

"They don't!" retorted Callista. "I'm not allowed to like something on my own?"

"I..." Honestly Piero had never thought about what Callista might do on her own time.

"And I bet you don't even know anything about the whalers," continued Callista, riding the momentum of her own anger. "It's just about the leviathans for you, isn't it? You don't care anything for the humans involved. I bet it's never even occurred to you to wonder about them. You don't know anything about the Tahotha Mutiny or the rites of the Lady's Tithe. Hmm?"
A sharp retort flashed unthinkingly to Piero's lips; he was not accustomed to being lectured by his intellectual inferiors. But before he could say anything a thick voice rasped, "Idiots."

"Welcome back to the conversation," said Callista.

"Idiots," growled Anton. He twisted suddenly, leaving Piero holding his dress coat while he stumbled out from between them in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves. "The fucking Tithe. We knew about the oil! We knew what it could..." Callista caught him as he lurched forward again, with a neat maneuver that slung him back in the crook of her arm.

"Ah, the lovely Miss Curnow," said Anton, leering up at her face. "You're a lot prettier than your uncle."

"I like you about as much as my uncle does," retorted Callista.

"Ha!" said Anton, triumphant as if he'd scored a touch in fencing. "Explains his pursuit of me, poor lovesick fool. Tell the General his efforts are in vain; I'm taken, these days." He lurched sideways, breaking her hold with an expansive gesture, and stumbled into the shrubbery. "Taken by the plague."

"Taken home is what you are going to be," muttered Piero, throwing Anton's dress coat over a nearby bench. "You've made enough of a fool of yourself for one night."

"Least I'm not wearing a recipe," said Anton, without a hint of shame. His voice floated out of the darkness as he crunched through one of the low hedges. "'Scuse me, I'm going to throw up."

Which he did, noisily, and with vigor. Piero put a hand to his forehead, feeling the headache like a wire cinching ever tighter. He squeezed his eyes shut against the rage that flared again within. Callista was watching Anton with a resigned expression.

"I apologize," Piero told her. "This is no place for a lady."

"Bugger that," said Callista with a sudden venom. "I'm just a governess, and I've seen worse." She sighed. "Corral him if you can. I'll go call the carriage."

She disappeared down the tunnel of greenery before Piero could protest. Behind him Anton ran out of vomit, or perhaps energy to expel it. Twigs snapped as he blundered through the landscaping and re-emerged onto the path.

"We knew," he said, pointing a finger at Piero. The night air had taken the slur out of his words, though his face still blazed red beneath his beard. Despite the thin cloth of his dress shirt he seemed unfazed by the cold. "We knew about the damn oil all along! It could have been Tyvia, not Gristol. It could have been a falcon banner flying over the Isles instead of a swan. But we did nothing! Because it was sacred. We threw it all away on gods who never gave a damn for us."

"Shut up," hissed Piero. "Do you want to get arrested?"

"What'll they arrest me for, telling the truth?" drawled Anton. He climbed up on a low marble bench, wobbling slightly and cursing in a meaningless stream. The nonsense sent a stab of fear through Piero; too close to a memory of that manic gleam, a demand, a crossbow leveled at his chest. "You stupid assholes!" Anton shouted towards the manor. "We're all going to die!"

"You damned fool, get down from there," snapped Piero, his patience entirely exhausted. He had been roundly, unfairly admonished for causing a hint of political conflict, and now Anton had nearly incited a riot and seemed unaware he'd done anything wrong. "You've caused enough trouble."
"Fuck off," said Anton. "You can't tell me what to do. Nobody gets to tell me what to do."

"Get down from there before you hurt yourself," said Piero, grabbing for Anton's wrist and missing. Anton dodged back and blundered into the reaching branches of the trees that formed the tunnel. "Damn you--"

He got a grip on Anton's arm at the same time the tree did and pulled. Anton tumbled forward with a surprised cry and rip of cloth. The tree snagged and tore off the entire left sleeve of his fine dress shirt, leaving his shoulder and arm bare as the dark branches. Piero heard someone make a distant, muffled sound, and realized it must have been him.

It had to be old, had to be a scar, but the flesh of the wound was still raw and pink as a new burn. Skin caved in over the bone where the muscle had been gouged out of Anton's shoulder. The long and ugly gash looked like the work of some large talon, but little trails wiggled and twisted out from the edges like worms burrowing beneath the skin. The tree branch had scored a new red line across it and Anton staggered and went to his knees in the grass, clutching the elbow with his right hand and biting his lip in pain.

The pale moonlight thickened to a choking blue fog, hazing into another place that fought up through this one. Black, blocky towers pierced up through his sight, gleaming onyx spires silhouetted against a setting sun bulging red and bloated above a jungle canopy. The twisted spires hummed in the light, vibrating at some indescribable frequency, piping a high and mindless tune that drew the mind inexorably closer...

Piero stumbled and went down on one knee, crying out as something scored a bright line of pain across his skin. He blinked as the vision dissipated like evaporating dew, gave way once again to grass and trees and the winter night arcing high above. His knee had fallen on one of the seashells that lined the path and his weight had shattered the little white curve like a dropped plate. When he pushed himself up he saw a line of his blood left along one sharp, fresh edge.

Anton had not moved from his hunched pose. Grey eyes stared out into the darkness, muted and unfocused. Piero retrieved the dress coat from the bench and draped it around Anton's shoulders as carefully as he could. He could not bring himself to touch the man; in the moonlight all the skin around the wound had a greenish pallor as though it had been touched by some loathsome mold. Anton tugged the coat closed with his right hand, still clutching his left to his chest.

It always hurts, doesn't it, thought Piero. It always aches, and you never forget.

He knelt in the grass next to Anton, mindful of the fresh cut. "Come on," he said quietly. "It's time to go home."

Anton nodded slowly, and with great effort. He leaned against Piero as he got shakily to his feet. All the fight had gone out of him now, and somehow that worried Piero even more. They stumbled along the path in a black silence.

"I've ruined it," Anton muttered as they went. "I've let it all go wrong."

"We will find something," said Piero. "We will."

"Esmond wouldn't have let this happen," mumbled Anton.

And there it was, pulling hard at his chest, that link, that bond; Piero did not know how he had ever believed it broken. It had never gone away, could never go away, and for a terrible moment he wished it would; he wished it would not hurt so much. He wanted to hate Anton. It would be so
much easier. A part of himself lay in someone else's hands now, a part of him had gone beyond his own control, and for that brief moment he wished like hell to have it back. He could not bear the weight of someone else's sadness.

"Esmond is dead," he said quietly. "You are alive."

The tunnel twisted one last time and straightened out, showing a fine-barred iron gate at the end. Through the concealing rose vines that twined around it Piero could make out the silhouette of the carriage. At their approach Callista opened the gate, beckoning them through. Piero feared Anton might balk at this last stage, but he climbed up into the carriage and dropped across a bench without a sound, curling up on his right side. He kept the dress coat clutched tightly across the sight of the wound. The driver at his post stared fixedly ahead.

Piero made to climb up into the carriage after him, but much to his surprise Callista waved him back from her place at the gate. He spared a glance for Anton, who had already lapsed back into unconsciousness, and returned to the edge of the garden. Callista stepped just inside the gate and motioned for him to follow.

She walked a slight distance back through the tunnel before she turned again and said, "Keep your voice down."

"What?" said Piero. "Why?"

"So the driver doesn't hear," said Callista, exasperated as if he were a slow pupil. "I'm sure most of your staff is in someone else's pay."

"Oh," said Piero. He had not considered that.

"What Sokolov said," began Callista. She looked pale as a drowned thing in the moonlight. Her gaze could not rest on him, kept skipping away into the crisscross shadows of the trees. "About the plague. That - that you - can't cure it. Is it true?"

And that focused it, brought it all to a murderous point and broke him like the single stone that chips a sheet of glass and sends all the cracks rippling out. The terror of the Mill and the frustration and the pain, the sadness he could not stand to share and the helpless, mute rage; Anton had the right of it. They were all going to die. Cold stabbed down through him sharp as lightning. He felt as though someone had scooped out his guts and nearly doubled over, clenching around the emptiness opening inside him. Someone laughed thin and cold; he thought it might be him. The empty space pushed and pulled at his mind, struggling out of his own body till he felt himself a shell, a skim of foam over dark waters that now heaved themselves up.

"Anton is right, you know," he said. "He is terribly rude." Piero heard his own voice as if it were coming from a great distance away. It was not wholly his will shaping the words on his lips.

The ground beneath his feet fizzled and grew clear, the night peeling back overhead like a dead thing pinned open for dissection. The tree branches spread fractures through the world. He saw Callista before him, and he saw at the same time and in the same place a congeries of polyhedral bubbles that jostled and reflected shades he had no name for. Distance dissolved into nonsense; he could see the other end of the earth, the other side of the sky.

"You know the rites of the Tithe, Miss Curnow," his own voice said again. "A debt is owed, and a debt will be collected."

That stone pavilion phased in again and now he knew it was not a separate place at all but another
side of this one, like the back of a coin now tumbling through the air, twisting and turning - through Dunwall and that lichen-crusted pavilion and the onyx city that split the jungle sky, through the crowns of high hills where stone shouldered up through the grass and the low roofs spilling down along the river's mouth - through time and space and all the same thing, all different angles and projections folded together and falling after itself into infinite space, infinite depths.

The cold wave crested within him and slammed him down into a violent spasm. The back of his head struck the iron bars of the fence. Light strobed through his brain; he bit his tongue, tasted blood. Then he felt it washing away, draining back out to sea. Piero laughed again, bitter and wrung out, and this time it was only him. The inside of his mind felt disgusting, wretched, used and discarded.

Callista had backed so far away that the twigs of the hedges opposite caught at her jacket. Her eyes were wide, muscles tense, prepared to bolt. When he had slumped back and said nothing for a few moments she took a cautious step forward, watching him warily with something between worry and genuine fright.

"Are you...well?" she said at last.

Piero sagged against the fence like a puppet whose strings had been severed. Warmth dripped down his face. He daubed beneath his nose with the cuff of his dress coat. It came away bloody, black in the moonlight. He looked back up at her with a dark and sour exhaustion.

"Thank you for your assistance, Miss Curnow," he said. "But I am afraid you cannot help me further."

He left her standing in the garden under the spreading trees. That was the last he remembered of that night.
The waves swayed and cracked like knuckles rapping against the hull. Piero gripped the metal gunwales of the river-skiff hard enough to press their cold imprints into his palms as he retched into the murk of the Wrenhaven.

"That's alright, there," soothed a man's voice behind him. "Happens to the best of us."

Piero gave one last, sour heave, his throat attempting to turn itself inside out, before his body gave up the fight. He spat, took the offered rag and wiped it across his mouth, dropping it into the turbid water along with his contribution to the Wrenhaven's filth. Then he sagged back and reached out a hand. A dark blob deposited a small object in his outstretched palm. Piero pressed his spectacles back onto his nose and squinted blearily as the morning came into focus from where he lay slumped along the side of Samuel's boat.

"Feeling a bit better?" asked the grizzled sailor from his place at the helm of the skiff. Piero nodded a fraction.

They bobbed in the shadow of an outthrust pier that had long ago fallen into disrepair. The weather had of course chosen this day to turn fine, and shafts of sunlight bored through every crack in the rotting planks above and ate into Piero's skull. Samuel had steered them expertly between the upthrust pillars of the old dock and into the lee beneath when Piero finally lost the struggle with his own stomach halfway to the Tower.

Samuel restarted the skiff's engine. It came to life with a quiet purr that still sawed at Piero's brain. He had hoped a dose of tonic would take the edge off the hangover, but it had only transmuted the rolling, stabbing turmoil into a thick ache. A monstrous hand had spanned his forehead with finger and thumb and was now trying to pinch them together.

"I apologize," he murmured again, staring upwards. The sky above shifted as Samuel navigated his way back to the main watercourse. Buildings cropped the view down to a narrow strip. The wind howled fierce and chill despite the bright sunlight. "I do not often..." He trailed off, embarrassed and miserable.

"'Spect Corvo would rather ye turn up well and late than sick and on time," suggested Samuel.

"I hope you are correct," said Piero.

A slop and rush of faster water announced their reunion with with the Wrenhaven proper. The river widened and the buildings disappeared off to the edges of his sight. Piero gave up all pretense of dignity at the roar of the Tower waterlock and simply buried his head in his coat in a vain attempt to stop his ears. Samuel helped him out at the dock when he wobbled for a dangerous moment.
"Thank you for the trip," Piero told him once he was clinging to the rail of the gangplank. "I am happy to see you are well."

"Tell Miss Emily I said hello," answered Samuel amiably.

Piero made his way to the Tower in a slow shuffle, wincing at the sun in the courtyard and hurrying into the shadows of its vault. His feet knew the way to the Council chamber of their own accord by now and he bullied stiff tendons and aching muscles up the stairs. When he reached the right hallway the Watchman stationed next to the Council chamber's door gave him an unexpected look of sympathy and opened the door as quietly as possible. Piero gave him a grateful nod.

Corvo's head had come up the second the door opened. Now he stood from his seat at Emily's right and said, "Samuel was able to find you."

Piero only nodded and approached the table. Emily waved hello from her chair at the head. Lord Ramsey sprawled in Parliament's seat with his usual boredom verging on contempt. He greeted Piero with a slight nod, but the courtesy only stoked Piero's annoyance to see how little he had suffered from his own indulgence at the Boyle party. One of Geoff Curnow's men waited behind the Watch Officer General's chair with a large flat rectangle wrapped in burlap sacking in his arms. Curnow himself had traces of soot smudged across his face. In the First Admiral's chair Wentworth sat straight as one of his ships' masts, but for some reason he, too, had soot streaks along his throat and forehead. The smell of charcoal rose off their clothes.

Piero searched for a vacant chair and was surprised to find only two places left empty today. A lean man with an owlish look, amplified by a pair of thick spectacles, had perched in the Abbey's official seat. Piero wondered who else they had brought in to consult until he noticed the embroidered crescent-and-trident sigil at the collar of the man's curious black coat. His breath caught for a moment, but luckily the hangover dulled his start of reflexive fear.

Piero stepped carefully around the Abbey's man at the end of the table and hovered behind the chair left empty by the Lady of the Exchequer, waiting for Corvo's nod to sit. Instead the Lord Protector said, "Where is your colleague?"

Piero held back the irritated frown that threatened his mouth. Ramsey was smirking. Piero had no doubt he'd heard the whole story after they had left. "I am afraid Master Sokolov is too ill to attend this morning. He - sends his regrets."

"Or he would, if he were conscious."

"Ill?" said Emily, sitting up straight in her high-backed chair. Her voice squeaked in sudden fear. "He's not - he's got the--"

"No - n-n-no, Your Grace," said Piero, horrified at the image his words must have conjured for her. "It's not the p-p-plague. No, he only - took a bad dose of some medicine, and is feeling poorly."

"Like a hangover," said Emily, and Geoff Curnow of all people smothered a laugh. Even Corvo glanced at him in surprise.

"Exactly so, Your Grace," said Piero carefully.

Corvo heaved an exasperated sigh. "Well, we'll just have to stagger on without him. Piero, to shortcut the discussion you've missed, we need a natural philosopher's opinion."

Piero's mouth went even drier. This is it, he thought. This is the moment when they ask about the cure, and you must say...

"We need advice on how to deal with the fires," finished Corvo.
Piero blinked. "Excuse me?" he said in surprise. "The fires in the city? I - I am a chemist. I can - hazard a few ideas, but--"

"But you work with whale oil," cut in Geoff Curnow.

"Indeed," said Piero. "B-but I fail to see how that relates."

"Someone's been setting the fires," said Curnow. "And they're using whale oil to do it."

Piero's mouth dropped open. "Oh," he said. He pulled out the chair and slumped into it without asking anyone's leave. "Oh dear. That is--" He shook his head. "That is not good."

"So I've noticed," said Corvo drily.

Piero spread his hands flat on the table before him as if mapping something for dissection. "Raw oil, fuel oil, or trans?" he asked, staring fixedly at the wood.

"They haven't said," said Curnow.

"Fuel oil," said Wentworth. Piero looked up at him. Despite the soot smudges on his skin and the equally dark smears of fatigue beneath his eyes the admiral still sat ramrod-straight. His chair did not appear to need a back.

"Are you certain?" said Piero.

"I've seen enough ships go down to know what oil looks like when it burns on water," said Wentworth. "Trans would have leveled the district. Raw oil would have flamed out before it reached Southgate."

"We can't know that for certain," Curnow said to him. "My men still haven't found the site where it was dumped into the canals. We don't know how long it was drifting for."

"The Admiral is correct," said Piero. He held out his hands as if resting them on an imaginary globe. The dull thunder in his head, the pain in his limbs, all receded like a distant shoreline as he turned his concentration inwards. "The key is in the drifting. Raw oil will sink beneath freshwater. Fuel oil is a trans distillate mixed with stabilizing compounds - the exact recipe, of course, is a close secret of the refineries. They act as..." He moved one hand as if passing it over a lamp. "...As the wax in a candle, slowing the rate of burn. Trans dumped into water would not drift at all. It would spread, ignite--" he jerked his hands apart "--and detonate."

"It's oil, then," said Corvo. "More importantly. How do we put it out? Perhaps some kind of pump, something to spray the burning oil..."

Piero leaned back in the chair, pressing his hands together as he tried to think of the best way to explain the problem. "An oilfire is not... Trans does not burn like an ordinary substance. Water will not extinguish it, nor any amount of cold. Instead it must be smothered. Sand, earth, charcoal, or pulverized stone will all do--"

"Ships carry ash," said Wentworth.

Piero inclined his head towards him, annoyed at the interruption. "Indeed," he said. "Ash is by far preferred. Any sort may be used, but the most effective is bone ash."

"Bone ash," said Curnow.
"Burnt animal matter," confirmed Piero. "In particular the charred bones of animals and humans."

Curnow looked faintly disgusted. "Why?"

"Well," said Piero. "Ricci of Karnaca has claimed that the calcium component in the rendered bones reacts preferentially with--"

"Nobody knows," summarized Corvo.

"We have some theories," said Piero. "But, ah. No. Not as such. The larger question, however, is--"

"We'll need a few tons of ash, then," said Corvo. "Lord Ramsey, does your slaughterhouse have any firefighting reserves?"

"What about whalebone?" Curnow wanted to know.

Piero dismissed the idea with a shake of his head. "Whalebone does not burn. The larger question is..." he repeated, but no one was listening.

"I will have to check with the foremen to be certain what can be spared," said Ramsey.

"What can be 'spared'?" echoed Curnow. "These fires will take the city if we're not careful."

"So far they have remained confined to outlying districts," said Ramsey. "Largely abandoned in any case. Perhaps it's best if we reserve our resources for protecting the core of Dunwall."

"Lord Ramsey, please get me an amount," said Corvo with icy politeness. "Piero, can you calculate about how much we'll need to dump on it?"

"No," said Piero.

"No?" echoed Curnow, surprised.

"If I could be allowed to finish," snapped Piero, bringing a palm down flat on the table and regretting the sound at once. The headache flared and he tasted something bitter at the back of his mouth. A startled silence dropped over the meeting. "The larger question is. How can the fire be approached at all? I assume that you are speaking of a mass of oil that has been poured into a canal, then set ablaze. Yes?" He looked around the table. No one disagreed. "Any attempt to simply fling a cartload of ash over such a thing will end in disaster."

"Now, hang on," said Wentworth, with a hint of an indulgent smile. "We've already extinguished the Rudgate fire. Mayhap natural philosophers are leery of getting near a blaze, but I'll wager my marines--"

"Will be both burnt and electrocuted before they have come within shooting distance of the oil itself," declared Piero. He had no patience left for courtesy. They had asked his professional opinion and then refused to listen to it. They would not be talking over Anton in this way. "The amount of motive power contained in an ounce of oil is equal to pounds of coal, to liters of other distillates. It burns at extraordinary temperatures." He held his palms out flat and parallel to each other like the plates of a capacitor. "And when its energies are released, it generates an electrical potential. Even Anton's theory of voltaic action cannot explain the fundamental mechanism of this. The mixture of electricity, high temperature, hot gases - it has destructive effects that are wholly unpredictable."

"Some sort of remote system," persisted Corvo.
"Steel will melt," said Piero. "Stone will crack. Any mechanism close enough to the blaze to dump a load of ash will be destroyed. There is a reason the safety shields in oil labs are meant only to contain the fire." But that sparked a train of thought. He rested his chin in one hand. "Perhaps a tank designed to be destroyed," he mused. "Placed with advance warning, such that the heat of the oil released the ash..."

"Think it over," urged Corvo. "In the meantime. Geoff, Admiral. We need to discover who's setting them. We were lucky with Southcliff and Rudgate. The next one won't exhaust itself so quickly."

"On that subject," said Curnow. "Lord Ramsey, they must be getting that quantity of oil from somewhere. Any large shipments gone missing recently?"

Ramsey shrugged. "My men deal with the oil only in its raw form. Once it's been piped to the refineries, we no longer track it."

"Who would, then?" asked Curnow patiently.

"The two refineries still operating belong to Talisman Electrics," said Ramsey. "The corporation has been recently sold, though. Lady Maude Clay is the new proprietor. I'm certain you'll find her most helpful."

"Clay," repeated Curnow. He made a note. "Yes. I'm sure I will. Lord Protector, there's one last piece of business." He crooked a finger. The Watchman behind his chair stepped forward and laid his burden down on the table, fumbling with the string that wrapped it. "Ambrose's marines found this near where we believe the fire might have been started," he said, with a nod towards the Admiral. "I'm glad Monitor Farbright has chosen to join us today. Perhaps he might tell us what it means."

The Watchman got the string unknotted and removed the burlap cover. Beneath was a chunk of board with an official poster pasted to it announcing Corvo's return to the position of Lord Protector. An Abbey crescent-and-trident had been burnt into the wood and three huge scorchmarks drawn across the printed face like the slashes of an enormous paw, joined at one end by a perpendicular line. Corvo's eyes went wide at the sight.

The lean man at the end of the table stood without urgency, strolling around the table to peer at the poster through his thick spectacles. "The Heretic's Brand," he pronounced. "It appears someone objects to your leadership, Lord Protector."

Corvo glared at him. "Is this the work of Overseers, then?" he snapped. "I've not heard of any decision yet from the Feast of Painted Kettles."

"Debate is ongoing," said Monitor Farbright, unperturbed. "The Abbey would not give the order to commit crimes such as this. But a lone Overseer?" He folded his hands behind his back. "Authority has gone astray, under the recent High Overseers. Laxness has been permitted. Perhaps there are those acting on their own initiative to defend their Empress."

"By burning down her city?" barked Geoff Curnow, half-rising from his chair.

"Heresy must be rooted out wherever it hides," said Farbright. He brushed his fingers along the marks burnt into the wood over the image of Corvo's face, then raised his eyes to the Lord Protector. Corvo stared back, chin lifted, nothing but cool defiance in his dark gaze. "No matter how painful the cost. Only then will we be free of the corruption of plague."

Piero opened his mouth to object, searching for words sharp enough to convey his opinion of that;
but the lean man and his careless ease sent a cold shiver across his skin. *You mustn't tell anyone,* his mother holding him tight by the shoulders, *you must never tell anyone about the dreams.* He fought the urge to hunch down in his chair. He was not Anton. He could not thumb his nose at the High Overseer and go unpunished.

"That's silly," declared Emily.

"Your Grace--" began Corvo, breaking off the stare.

"I don't need protecting from my own city. If there's anyone corrupt around here, it's the Abbey," said Emily firmly. "And they have no right to start burning people's houses down. You tell the Overseers' Conclave that if any of them are doing it, they are to stop right now."

Farbright blinked rapidly behind his thick spectacles. His mouth dropped open a fraction. "I will - I am certain the matter will be thoroughly investigated," he said.

"See that it is," said Emily. "You can sit down now."

Farbright stood for a moment longer as if waiting for orders before returning to his seat, still blinking. Geoff’s man took the defaced poster away. Corvo looked to Emily, who called for any other business. When no one answered, she declared the meeting adjourned. As they rose from their seats Corvo said, "Piero, a moment."

Piero smothered a sigh. Just that much longer to wait before he could drink a liter of water and return to his bed. "Of course," he said. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back until the others had filed out of the chamber. Emily, much to his surprise, stayed behind, swinging her legs over the edge of her tall chair. Corvo left his own seat and went to the southern window, leaning back against the stone just to one side. The sun blazed full into the chamber, but even so the Lord Protector's outline blurred into the shadow.

"Sokolov's fine?" he asked.

Piero's expression went sour. "Miss Emily has the right of it," he said, glancing at her. "He is only hungover. Quite badly so," he added, picking out the words precisely. Emily flashed a smile, but quickly returned her expression to imperial solemnity.

"Callista told me about the party," said Corvo.

"Anton did not have the chance to say much."

"He said enough. I don't dare ask your progress in front of the Council. I have panicky nobles flopping like landed squid. I have riots in the streets, not that that's new. It's only a matter of time before the blockade hears about it too. Tell me you're closer to a cure. Tell me something."

Piero stared at the floor, hiding from the Lord Protector's gaze. The city through the window, the harbor, the distant blockade all loomed like a wave about to break. His eyes darted to Emily. He could lie to the young girl sitting in the high-backed chair and hanging on his words; but he could not lie to the Empress.

"We have n-n-nothing," he said quietly. He leaned a hand on the table for support. "I am s-sorry. We..."

"What do you need?" asked Emily. "I'm the Empress now. I can get it for you, whatever it is."

"You have access to Coldridge, now that Tobias is gone," added Corvo. He strangled a reflexive
expression of disgust. "You have your - test subjects. What do you need?"

"An idea," said Piero. "We have nothing to test." He covered his face with one hand to try and hide the tears of frustration prickling at the corner of his eyes. "We do not understand it," he burst out. "It behaves as a disease, and yet not-- we have tried everything that should work, and there is no change--"

"You're the smartest person I know," said Emily. "And Doctor Anton is a genius. Now that you're together, I know you'll find it."

Piero pressed his lips together, holding back the words that he had not dared say for the last month.

"I will let you know the m-moment there is any p-progress made," he promised the girl - his Empress - instead.

Corvo regarded him for another moment before nodding in dismissal. "Give Master Sokolov our regards." Emily looked solemn, staring down at her hands now folded in her lap.

"It will not happen again," said Piero. More promises I cannot keep. He collected his notebook and paused. The mention of Coldridge had pulled something else to mind with it.

"Who took Hiram Burrows out of prison?" he asked.

Corvo's face drew down at once into a fierce scowl, looking past Piero. "Someone who thinks he's helping. I'll handle it."

Piero nodded. "Let me know if my services are needed." Corvo's glance returned to him, perplexed. "If your equipment requires maintenance."

Corvo's scowl half-vanished into surprise. "I'm not planning to..."

Piero shrugged. "Only let me know," he said, and made to leave the chamber.

"There is a cure," declared Corvo, stopping him at the door. "He wouldn't have given us the chance to put Emily on the throne if the plague would kill us all no matter what. There has to be a way out of this. Otherwise it wouldn't be interesting."

An echo crossed Corvo's words as he spoke them, another voice swimming up from a distant corner of his mind. I am interested to see if you can solve it, spoke a recollection Piero did not remember acquiring. I am so curious to see if you can.

"If there is a way, I do not know it," Piero told both voices.

"Find out," ordered Corvo.

What could he do but nod? Piero did, and shut the door behind him, and leaned against it for a moment to catch his breath. The headache jostled like thick cloth stuffed inside his skull. He coughed once, painfully. Only another boatride between him and home, he told himself.

But when he left the Tower's cavernous foyer and struck out towards the waterlock, a familiar figure waited near the center of the courtyard. Piero spotted him too late to dodge away when the man moved neatly into his path. "Master Joplin, a moment of your time," said Lord Ramsey, in an unconscious echo of Corvo.

Piero pulled up short and mustered all the courtesy he had left. In the clarity of misery one thought
came to him at last: he did not like Lord Ramsey. It was that simple. He could not justify it to himself in the slightest - the man had been unfailingly courteous to him, had sent him gifts and spoken of him with high praise - and so he had tried to ignore it. Yet it remained: Piero did not like him.

But Ramsey was still the Speaker of Parliament. Piero would hear it from Anton if he antagonized the man. So instead he dredged up his scripted lines and said, "Lord Ramsey. It was good to speak with you at the event last night. How fare your friends?"

"Excellent," said Ramsey. "They were quite taken with you. Talked of nothing else for the rest of the night. I daresay you've made a fine societal debut." His nose wrinkled as though he had caught a whiff of something rotten. "It's a shame your first such occasion had to be marred by - an unfortunate ending."

Piero could not suppress the annoyance in his voice. "I hope my colleague did not cause too much of a disturbance."

"Oh, I'm afraid the sad truth is we're all too used to Sokolov's outbursts by now." The twist of Ramsey's mouth spoke of rueful sorrow, but his eyes glittered. "His manners leave much to be desired. The rest of the quality may endure him out of some superstitious fear or lingering regard for his patron, but I say that this is more properly ascribed to their lack of a solid foundation in natural philosophy. You won't find me so unlearned."

"You are a student of natural philosophy, then?" said Piero, eying the welcoming shadow of the waterlock beyond Ramsey's shoulder. Far too many of the aristocracy were convinced that spending their leisure time pinning bugs made them learned scholars.

"I have a doctor's honors, in fact," said Ramsey. "A professional requirement. My slaughterhouse is the pre-eminent supplier of raw whale oil to Dunwall's refineries - the only one, now that that thug Rothwild has fled the city." He smiled a smile that could have been commissioned from a jeweler. "I am only proud to play my small part in Dunwall's golden age. When this fair city can be restored to its proper footing, it shall be a beacon for the rest of the Empire."

_If it doesn't burn to the ground first. _"It is good to know that our work is appreciated."

Ramsey's smile widened. "Ah, but it is not your work that is appreciated, is it?"

Piero felt a jolt as if the ground had shifted beneath his feet.

"There's no need for politeness," continued Ramsey. "I'm familiar with your publications, Master Joplin. You bear Sokolov no more affection than I do. He's a drunk and a degenerate, and he's only lasted this long because everyone thinks he's irreplaceable. But you and I know that's not true, don't we?"

Piero blinked, gaping at him. He scrambled after any semblance of a rational thought. "I-- I am...not certain what to s-s-say," he stammered.

"I know professional courtesy keeps you from voicing your true opinion during this time of crisis," said Ramsey. His smile shifted into a conspiratorial smirk. "But you needn't worry. I think you will find that despite his fearsome reputation, Sokolov has long since worn out his welcome. The Academy doesn't want him anymore; all he does is draw a salary and loot the labs for equipment. And his behavior of late has been--" He sniffed. "Well, unconscionable, really. Withholding his inventions from the Empire - acting as if it is the Crown that ought to heed him, and not the other way round! It was well enough when he was under Roseburrow's guidance, but when that fine man was taken from us..."
Ramsey's voice dropped and he made a show of glancing over his shoulder, as if he feared Anton might be lurking in a shadow. "And who knows the real truth of how Roseburrow died?" he murmured. "Perhaps it's well you have yet to be accorded your proper place. It might have put you in the way of a terrible danger. Murdering your betters is practically a rite of passage in Tyvia. A drop of some foul chemical in the poor man's tea, and suddenly Anton Sokolov is the most important natural philosopher in the city..."

Piero's blood ran cold. His eyes narrowed a fraction. He remembered Anton stumbling against his shoulder, exhausted and still grieving. Esmond wouldn't have let this happen. Adrenaline washed away the pain in a sudden bright chill.

Ramsey was still smiling, still unaware. "But a man who's a proper Gristol lad, who doesn't hold with all this posturing and stubborn willfulness, who hews to the Abbey and to the Crown - well, what could such a man do? When this crisis passes, I will provide Dunwall's primary source of oil. My allies control the refineries, the investors, the Parliamentary backing. You need no longer fear resistance to your innovations. The rest of the gentry may stay mired in the past, but we look to the future. And the future is bright with electricity. The man who has his hand on that tiller, steers the Empire. With your genius and my resources - yes, I think we could be very useful to one another."

Ramsey cocked his head to one side, a faint lift to his brows, an inviting, sly grin, and at last - far too late - all his actions snapped into focus. Those coy discussions, those allusions and insinuations, those unexpected gifts; how clear now it became. Rage poured through Piero's blood and lit up his nerves. His thoughts floated above it in a skim of foam. The depth of it shocked him, and yet a part of him reveled in the raw emotion. I have a doctor's honors, Ramsey had said, and Piero did not doubt it.

I know exactly who you are, he thought. He wondered that he had not seen it from the start. You were one of the rich boys at the Academy who considered it his duty to remind the charity students of their 'place'. And how dare Anton Sokolov be anything more than the foreign boy who filled the lamps. Another smug bully who thought he could use and discard old Piero Joplin. How simple to play on his bitterness, to buy him with flattery and a promise never meant to be kept. Havelock had at least done him the courtesy of pretending to aim at a larger goal. Piero had never in his life felt a desire to do physical violence to another man. He felt it now. A sudden, astonishing freedom buoyed him up as though the rage had loosed fetters he had ceased to notice. All the brakes slipped free, the governor on the mechanism disengaged. It would be so easy to simply let it out, he realized. To just do what he wanted. Is this how Anton feels all the time?

Piero straightened up to look Ramsey in the eye and opened his mouth to speak.

"Piero? You planning on leaving soon, or shall I come back later?"

Samuel had come into the courtyard from the entrance to the waterlock, where he must have been waiting alongside the skiff. Ramsey turned in evident displeasure as the boatman approached, favoring him with a withering glare. "This is a private conversation," he warned.

Samuel halted, raising his hands in supplication. "Beg your pardon, good sir. Don't mean to intrude. Only the Lord Protector asked me to take Mr. Joplin here back home in time to do his work, and they need me out of the waterlock." He looked to Piero.

In the space of the interruption Piero's reason cut sharp through the thick hide of rage and reckless abandon. Ramsey was a lord, it said, and the Speaker of Parliament, and the owner of Dunwall's last producing slaughterhouse. Piero was a natural philosopher of no birth, no income, and no patronage. No one would profit if he told Lord Ramsey exactly what he could do with himself, least of all him.
But oh, how much he wanted to.

Instead Piero made a show of sudden worry. "Oh dear, what time is it?"

When Ramsey read him the number off the face of his pocket watch, he twisted his face into apology. "Oh no, it's far later than I thought. Lord Ramsey, I have a chemical distillation proceeding at the laboratory that must be changed within the hour. I can hardly devote the time to our conversation that it deserves. Rest assured I will give it - ample thought." He smiled what he hoped was a pleasant smile. "I look forward to discussing it."

Ramsey smiled back, equally pleasant and, thought Piero, equally false. He stepped out of Piero's way and bade him farewell as Piero hurried off after Samuel. The man's gaze fell like ice on the nape of his neck.

Piero lay back on the seat as Samuel guided the skiff out of the waterlock and swung its prow back towards the Bridge. The engine raised its voice as it pushed upstream against the current, but he hardly heard it. This time as he stared up at the cold and cloudless sky it was his mind and not his gut that he wrestled back under control. The rage flowed out from him in curls as he exhaled, like a cold fog. Fear began to report its extensive catalogue of the possible outcomes, all of them bad.

He had the crawling suspicion that a man who had already bent the slaughterhouses, the refineries, and Parliament to his design was not about to be balked by a single natural philosopher.

"You have a fair sense of timing," he said to Samuel.

"Corvo just asked me to see you back, that's all," said Samuel. "Glad you're all right."

_I might not have been, had you come a minute later._ "I am sorry I could not rouse Anton this morning."

"Shame," agreed Samuel. "Should have liked to meet the man. While he was conscious, I mean." He banked the skiff in a long arc between the muck of the shore and an outcropping of wave-rounded granite, heading up the constricting throat of the Wrenhaven. "Never thought I'd be back to Sokolov's warehouse, though. I know it's no business of mine, but I always thought ye didn't much care for the man."

Piero lifted his head a difficult inch and stared at him, but Samuel was only watching their course. He let his head drop back.

"Samuel," he said eventually. "Have you ever been wrong?"

Samuel gave a rueful chuckle. "Many times before and many times to come, I suspect," he said. One hand absently patted the flank of the skiff.

"I am not often wrong. What does one do?"

"Guess you go about fixing it, if you can."

"But how do you say it? If - if people know you were wrong, then they will not believe you anymore. They will know that you have failed. How can they trust you again?"

"Well, I expect most times people know you're wrong whether you tell them or not," said Samuel. "You'll only make it worse to pretend. But if you don't admit it, then you can't ever do something about it."
"Oh," said Piero. He watched the sky through a few more gentle curves in their course. The thick blue seemed to vibrate, rippling in some unknown breeze like a vast cerulean flag.

"I was wrong about Anton Sokolov," he said at last. "You are correct; I did not care for him. I blamed him for a number of things that had - gone wrong with my life. Before. And now I-- it is different," he mumbled.

"Huh," said Samuel. Nothing but a vague curiosity lurked in his voice. "If you don't mind my asking, what changed?"

"I met him."

"Well, that'll help."

"And now I do not know what to say," exclaimed Piero.

"To him?"

"No, of course not," said Piero. "To everyone else. How can I explain this? When they ask again what happened to all my complaints and allegations?"

"Guess you'll have to cross that bridge when you come to it," said Samuel. "These days I wouldn't spend much time worrying about people thinking you're right or wrong."

"It is so embarrassing, though. After I made such a show of it."

"Sounds to me like you'd rather have a friend than a grudge. Nothing to be embarrassed of."

"I--" He wanted to say that it was not that simple. But it was that simple, wasn't it? He would rather have--

He would rather have a friend.

Now there was a frightening word.

Piero heard the thunder of the Kaldwin's Bridge waterwheel long before they reached the building. He picked out its rhythm against the longer strokes of the Pratchett warehouse wheels, their paddles still turning even though the structure had been abandoned in the wake of its owner's death. Pratchett had gone to the trouble of chaining and padlocking the great doors shut before his departure, but Piero had no illusions regarding how long it would take the looters to get inside the building once they realized it was unguarded. As Samuel steered them in the sound grew into a pressure against his aching skull that became so absurdly loud as to somehow render itself unnoticeable.

The skiff glided up next to the quay without so much as a scrape. Samuel made the boat fast and gave Piero a hand out.

"Thank you again for the ride," said Piero.

Samuel cast off again, but didn't yet pull away. Instead he leaned forward with a hand on one knee. "Listen, Piero, I been drinking that remedy of yours every day. I take Sokolov's elixir too, when I can get it. And far be it from me to add to your troubles. But..." The other hand tightened on the tiller of the skiff. "It's getting awful bad out there. There's riots, and they're not calming down. There isn't enough medicine to go around, and pretty soon there won't be enough food, either. Now I've lived my life and I suspect that if it's my time, it's my time; but the city's another thing, and it's terrible to watch what's happening to it."
Piero only nodded, his throat pulled too tight to speak. His embarrassment seemed now a terribly trivial thing. Samuel stoked the engine to life and pulled the skiff away, disappearing back down the river.

Piero climbed the stone steps up from the quay with his heart sunk like lead in his chest and walked the length of the long cellar. Liquid sloshed through the wide ducts overhead as the pumps turned the wheel's motion into flowing oil and water. The air swirled with the smell of ink and electricity, stale food and wet metal, hay and animal droppings. The fat black iron lab furnace bulged against one wall, seams glimmering with blue-gold fire. Thick conduits rose from the generator machinery at its back that skimmed the electrical power from the oilflame, branching up and out like a spinal column to illuminate a thousand nerve endings. Its cover was, as usual, stripped off, with a few parts left on a bench next to it where Anton had been tinkering. The buckets of bone ash set against the iron flanks overflowed into glass-blowing crucibles emptied of cullet and pressed into service. The white powder within wafted into the air at his passage, catching in the draft of heat rising from the skin of the furnace, swirling up and up.

When he reached the ground level he paused in the center of the floor. Kaldwin's Bridge reared its vast roof above him. Water dripped in some distant corner. Dust floated high in the beams of sunlight leaking through the glass. Piero weighed his options, staring up into the high space, remembering his dream of that trussed and thrashing whale. He ran his hands over and over each other as if trying to wash out a stain, starting towards the stairs and halting mid-step, turning back. At last he gathered himself and trudged up the dusty red carpet.

All right, he thought as he climbed. A sad way to describe the state Samuel had found him in this morning, knocking at the open door of the study. He must have been able to see Piero sprawled half-across the cot from the hallway. The sound had roused him abruptly from a deep, total blackness, waking with a gasp of surprise and then a sudden groan of distress. Consciousness seeped back in, persistent as an uninvited guest, tagging along on the pain's invitation. It had taken Piero two minutes to find where he had discarded his spectacles, and that more than anything else told him exactly how far gone he'd been. His mouth tasted like it had been mummified. The memories of last night blurred into a mass of pain both physical and mental. He had searched his recollections as he dressed again in his work clothing, but - he had left the manor, he had brought Anton to the carriage, Callista had asked for a word, and then - nothing.

However bad a shape he was in, though, Anton must be worse. Piero had hammered at his door on the third floor as loud as the ache in his skull would allow and received no response. He had left with Samuel, biting his lip and glaring over his shoulder at the closed door.

When he emerged into the fourth floor laboratory he paused for a moment at the sudden gloom. The shutters had been slammed closed, all the lamps extinguished. Only a few scraps of secondhand illumination crept in to throw dim highlights across the landscape of glassware and brass. As his eyes adjusted he picked out the huddled form down at the other end.

Piero approached slowly, uncertain whether he meant to be quiet or whether he did not want to arrive. Anton sat cross-legged on a lab bench with a blanket still wrapped across his shoulders. He sat still as the architectures of glass, facing two large blackboards that he had pulled together, their contents washed away in a haze of chalk. Piero could have believed him still unconscious save that he could see a glitter of grey eyes in the gloom.

Piero pushed himself up onto the bench and sat without a word. Anton had a wine bottle sitting in front of him on the bench's surface, both hands wrapped around it. When Piero settled next to him he dropped his gaze from the blackboards, staring instead at the grimy floor of the laboratory.
A thousand angry words ran through Piero's head and arranged themselves into neat and cutting phrases. "You missed the meeting," he said at last. "I could not wake you."

"I'm not surprised," rasped Anton. His voice had gone again, broken as it had been after the fire in the workshop. One hand left the bottle and fumbled for a mug. He wet his throat, then passed it to Piero.

Piero took it and sniffed, unable to see the contents in the shadows. The blunt, sour smell of Anton's elixir wound its way to his nose. He had never heard of it being effective on a hangover, but Anton would know best, after all. He downed the contents in one gulp and studied the bottom of the mug.

"That cannot happen again," he said quietly.

Anton's head dropped. "I know."

Silence settled cold as the thin rime of ice that had formed the truce between them. Piero removed his spectacles and set them down on the bench, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. The darkness of the lab relieved some of the stabbing pressure behind his eyes.

"How is your shoulder?" asked Piero.

Anton's eyes went wide, a flash of white in the darkness. "What did I--" he rasped, startled. "Who saw--"

"Just me," soothed Piero. Anton drew a slow breath. "Is it any better?"

For a moment he thought Anton would refuse to answer; then the man mumbled, "As good as it gets." He stretched the wounded shoulder, rolling it in his habitual unconscious gesture. The fingers of his left hand flexed open and closed. "I have an ointment to numb the skin. It helps, sometimes."

They lapsed again into silence. Then Anton's shoulders drew together and he inhaled sharply, as though he had come to some decision. He picked up the wine bottle that sat before him and handed it to Piero. At first Piero thought he meant to offer him another drink, and took it even as his brow furrowed and he began to tell Anton off; but he nearly dropped the bottle when he felt its weight. It was full. The cork had not even been pulled.

"That cannot happen again," murmured Anton. His hand lingered for a moment above the bottle, as if it already missed the touch. Then he clenched it into a fist and pulled both arms beneath the blanket, hunching forward as though chilled.

Piero set the bottle down on the other side of him. It felt heavier than it should. He groped for something to fill the silence. "Corvo asked me for our progress at the meeting. Oh. And General Curnow says the fires in the city are deliberate."

In the shadows he saw the gleam of Anton's eyes turn to him. "Someone's burning down the city?" said Anton, incredulous.

"They are trying. Pouring oil into the canals and setting it ablaze."

"Damn," rasped Anton, sounding impressed despite himself. "That'll do it."

The memory of the Council meeting dragged another to the fore with a sharp jab. Piero sat up straight, pressing his lips together in an echo of rage.

"Jack Ramsey is going to try to kill you," he said.
"Eventually," agreed Anton.

Piero was aghast. "You knew?"

"He's been trying to get rid of me for years," said Anton, idly swirling an elixir vial. Then he blinked in delayed surprise. "How'd you find out?" he asked, and then answered his own question. "Blast. He said something to you."

"He all but offered to set me up as your replacement."

"Agh," growled Anton. He dropped the vial back in its stand and cupped his hands over his mouth, exhaling in frustration. "Sevrnyy vetr, I'm grown old. I should have seen that coming."

"The things he said," spat Piero. He chose to ignore that a fair part had been quoted from his own words. "I should like to black his eye."

Anton raised an eyebrow. "I should like to see that."

"I ought to have known," snarled Piero. Anger suffused him in a warm tide, blushing hot across his skin. "Why else would he be courteous, except that he wanted something from me? Why else would he lower himself to talk with me at the party."

"He talked to you at the party? You didn't mention that."

"At the time I did not realize what it meant. I did not realize he was trying to - to sell me to his damned friends, like a prize catch in the fish market. He lowered the corners of his eyes; he rubbed them away with angry swipes. "I am a fool. He is as bad as Havelock---" His throat clenched and he swallowed against a sudden lump. It's a waste to get rid of them both. Teague Martin's footsteps as he paced the hound cage, a casual violence that paused to listen while they waited and trembled and hid...

A hand gripped his shoulder, startling him out of the memory, forcing him to look over. "Hey," said Anton. His eyes were bloodshot, sunk in deep circles of fatigue, but his gaze still held Piero steady. "Hey. Havelock is dead."

"I would have walked into the bullet," blurted out Piero. "Like Wallace, like L-lydia. I would be dead in the yard. Like C-callista if they had caught her. I was saved from the men I thought my allies by the man I thought my enemy. And only w-w-weeks later I am almost taken in by one just as b-bad." He buried his face in his hands again and gave up on stopping the tears that leaked between his fingers. "I am too easy to deceive, it seems. I wondered how you knew so quickly that the Loyalists had turned. You were c-clever enough to see."

"Too often betrayed is no virtue," muttered Anton. "Listen, Havelock was a brute, and that viper Martin - well. It was a close thing there, a few times; a very close thing. But it is over, you understand? They lost and we won."

"I don't want to win. I don't want any of this," declared Piero. "I just want to be left alone to do my work. Why must it be so ugly?" But even as he said it Ramsey's words rang again in his ear. The man with his hand on that tiller, steers the Empire.

"The way of things," said Anton flatly. "You wanted what was due you? This is the other side of that."

Piero wiped the tears from his cheeks, trying to regather his thoughts. "What are we, now?" he blurted out into the gloom.
Anton hunched in further beneath his blanket. Piero sat there and regretted having said anything. Now he had broken it, he knew for certain. All at once he wanted to run. Better to have said nothing, and just pretended. It would be too painful to salvage what was left between them. He had ruined it beyond repair; better to let it fall apart. And yet - and yet - and yet he would not leave.

"This place..." Anton's voice emerged rough and wavering. "It was meant to be a real laboratory, once upon a time. Full of students and scholars. Not this - half-abandoned shambles. But it's been a long time since there was anyone... I... Hells, I'm terrible at this," he said, breaking off. Then he swallowed and tried again.

"You're not my assistant," said Anton. He placed each word as if making the last connections deep within some vital circuit. "If I gave you that idea, I was wrong. You don't have to stay here. But I would ask you to. Not out of obligation, or even for the sake of the city. I want you to."

Piero flinched away as if from a blow. The sentence *It is not as if I have anywhere else to go* danced treacherously close to speech. It was he who had asked in the first place, yet at the same time he wanted desperately to brush the words off with some insincere remark, pull the conversation away from the raw emotion it had exposed. He saw the words like the wavering streamers that flickered out from one point of an electrode, the blue-white fingers that quested, tentatively, for the other side.

Then all at once the arc snapped home. A knot unraveled in his chest, his shoulders falling back, his ribcage expanding. What was he afraid of? He breathed in once and felt the air wash down through his lungs and reach chill fingers through his blood. It swept through abandoned corners, clearing out the dust and shadows.

"I want to stay," he said quietly. "I want that very much."

Anton exhaled in a long breath as though purging something from himself. "Good. That's...good." He picked up the half-empty vial of elixir set on a burner stand and took a sip. "Because I think we may not have much longer to get our shit together."

Piero played with the empty mug, turning it over and over in his hands, rolling it along its bottom edge. The words he had not dared speak to Corvo welled up in his throat like the sour roll of vomit.

"What if there is no cure?" he said at last. He regretted it at once, as if by naming it he had made the possibility real.

Anton shifted, wrapping the blanket tighter across his shoulders. Under its faded orange folds he still wore the dress pants from the party, now creased and soiled. "A month ago I would have said that every disease has some remedy. Now..."

"Now I do not know what more to try," admitted Piero, the words hardly above a whisper.

"Nor I." Outside the wind whistled and beat against the walls of the warehouse, making itself heard in the silence, a brutal reminder of the waiting cold.

"Still," said Anton slowly. "Until the Outsider himself turns up and tells me it can't be done, I'm going to try."

"What does he know about it, anyway," blurted out Piero. Anton looked astonished. "I mean. What exactly are his credentials?"

Anton stared at him for a moment more before his surprise melted into a slow amusement. "Hardly a practicing physician," he noted.
"Entirely hearsay. Never graduated."

"Damn, man, you haven't even published!" laughed Anton, and Piero laughed with him. How incredibly dangerous, to sit here and laugh in the Outsider's face! And yet he found again that he did not care. Perhaps the relief was only temporary, perhaps he paid for this sudden liberation with the free-fall trajectory of their impending doom. He did not care. They were forty-five days from death and he did not know what to do. He did not have room to be frightened of anything else.

Anton's mirth caught on a wince as he jarred some pain loose in his head. He coughed and drank again from the elixir vial. "Listen, you were right," he said, all in a rush as though he feared he might change his mind. "About the cure. I thought I had the right idea, it had to be the answer, if I repeated it enough it would... But it's not working. We need something else."

"I know," said Piero. "But I..." All his own potions were useless dust. "I do not know what that is either."

"Then we'll start from the beginning," declared Anton. "Not from what we think. What do we know?"

What did they know? Piero resettled his spectacles on his nose and pushed himself off the edge of the bench, wincing when his stiff joints were forced to bend. He picked up a broken stub of chalk beneath the left blackboard and wrote Nefathilene on the slate. "We know its history. Begin with the original cure." And they began.

The rats had carried the plague into Dunwall, that much was clear. It spread best from rat to human, but could jump between humans as well. Between humans, blood best spread the disease, although lymph, pus, and tears could all transmit it; for some reason neither urine nor feces carried the contagion. The first signs were those of an influenza: sore throat, aches, fatigue, mucus discharge, a fever that waxed and waned but did not break. On the fourth or fifth day the symptoms often receded, producing a treacherous hope. Then the vessels beneath the skin became engorged and a spotty rash spread across the body. The victim bruised easily and had trouble keeping down food.

Piero fetched his research notebooks and spread them across the lab bench, reading from his old entries. Anton was disinclined to leave the bench - Piero suspected it had taken all of what little energy he possessed to get himself up to the fourth floor from the third - and so when he insisted he had gotten contradictory results Piero fetched the audiograph player and the boxes of cards Anton had used to record his own observations. Anton shuffled the ivory decks like divinatory cards, dealing out the grim fortunes of dozens of test subjects.

After ten days the victim knew they did not have the flu. The spotty rash became patterns of small, starlike hemorrhages that bled and bled. Blisters rose at the slightest touch and burst to form oozing sores. Some developed uncontrollable hiccups, others went suddenly blind. All vomited black torrents of blood like clotted soil. The patient's abdomen swelled as every organ leaked, fluid squeezing out of membranes like water through cheesecloth. Blood coated the edges of the eyelids and welled up, at last, in the tearducts, drooling from the eyes in long black strings.

This, said Anton, was the final stage of the disease in its Pandysssian form. Once the victim had begun to bleed from the eyes all hope was gone. In the next day the fever would reach fatal heights and the victim cry for water even as fluid ran from every orifice, until they lapsed into coma followed by a merciful death.

What had taken Anton weeks to test had taken Piero months, for lack of resources. What Piero had improvised approached the problem in ways Anton had never considered. But as they sliced and dissected their individual courses of research it became clear that on their own they had spent months
duplicating entire branches of investigation. Piero flipped through the pages of his old notebooks, reading back through meandering courses of thought, attempting to recall memories that hazed and blurred. Anton tipped out a crate of old journals with dogeared pages and they argued over the meaning of sentences. Exasperation at last kicked Anton off his perch; he found his own chalk stub and illustrated his point in grand swipes.

Both the disease and the cure had long been known among the peoples inhabiting the mid-latitudes of Pandyssia. From time to time some mysterious current roiling in the interior would drive the carrier rats out of the wilderness and into the civilized coast. At the first sign of excessive bruising the infected would be treated with the nefathilene preparation and the same formula spread into the water to slay the rats.

But not in Dunwall.

In Dunwall once the victims began to weep, there was no merciful release. The fever broke and the disease slackened in its physical ravages, as if it wished to preserve its host. Instead it began to chew through the nervous system. Victims became half-paralyzed, lost the ability to feel pain, lost the ability to control their rage or grief. Their reason decayed into delirium and fever-dreams. They staggered through the streets leaving trails of dark, infected blood, clawing at vaguely familiar sights, lost in a nightmare from which they would never wake. And at the same time the nefathilene that killed the rats in Pandyssia only sent them skittering away in Dunwall. No poison yet devised could kill them.

The chalk squeaked on the slate and made them both flinch. They mapped out every dosage that either of them had tried. Piero pushed and Anton pushed back, fanning audiograph cards like a street magician, picking out the recordings of individual specimens with an unerring memory. Some preparations treated the symptoms. A few delayed the onset of the third stage. Many more accelerated it. Anton's elixir kept perhaps eight out of ten from taking ill even after a direct exposure. Piero's remedy had about the same odds. But some still took ill, and despite dozens of test subjects burned in the iron furnace downstairs the reason why was never clear. After infection, continued dosage could delay the symptoms; a mix of the two palliatives might even produce a brief near-remission of the disease. Yet whether it took days or weeks, the plague always killed in the end.

"Why?" said Anton. "I still can't understand it. Why does your remedy work?"

"The fact is that it does," said Piero, exasperated. He was sitting on the lab floor now, gesturing at the boards. "Must we harp so long on the why? Why does yours work either?"

"Yes, we must. There's something there, I know it. There's a clue in that, there's--" Anton cut off with a choked sound of frustration, pressing his palms to his forehead. "Void, why can't I see it!?"

Piero leaned back against the bench in sudden exhaustion, feeling wrung out. But the inside of his skull buzzed and sparked with a new vigor entirely in opposition to the weight of the hangover. In the course of eliminating what they had tried they had constructed an elaborate tree of the options they had yet to attempt, sprawling across the pair of blackboards. Appraised with new eyes the scope of the problem became clear. So many questions laid bare, and his mind already racing to formulate a way to answer them. His fingers twitched. He wanted to get back to work.

"We killed those blackboards," grated out Anton, regarding the slates. Every corner had been filled with crisscrossing notation in either Anton's heavy stroke or Piero's fine lines.

"We did," said Piero. Some of the pain had unwound in his head. The elixir did work on hangovers, he realized in some surprise. In the wake of such relief he stared at the slates with a dazed lightness. "One might say they're... chalk full."
A moment of shocked silence, and then Anton broke into incredulous laughter. A smile spread across Piero's face. "That was egregious," managed Anton.

"It looks like we have a full slate of options," said Piero.

Anton's laughter broke into a painful cough. "That was the dumbest joke I have ever heard," he wheezed.

"I suspect it won't be so easy to erase--"

"Stop it, stop it," sputtered Anton. "I can't handle any more."

"Oh, fine."

Anton lay back and regarded the blackboards again with a thoughtful air. It may have been Piero's imagination, but he thought the color was already coming back into his face. He leaned back. "Time for something to eat, I think."

Piero winced at the idea. "You are welcome to your own lunch," he said, placing one hand flat over his grumbling gut. "I cannot imagine how you can stomach food at the moment."

"Ah, well," said Anton with a hint of a grin. "You can chalk it up to experience."

Piero groaned and threw his stub of chalk. It bounced off the blanket while Anton cackled, gleeful.

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10th of Da.

**Our contingent is increased.**

Piero slept long the next day, waking far later than his accustomed hour. Most of the aches and pains of the previous day had dissipated, although a stiff chill sat in his joints. He massaged his head with one palm, trying to chase away the strangeness of sleep, and checked the level in his tonic bottle. Still a few centimeters of green left. Another time he would have had to refill it by now, but two weeks ago he'd halved his usual dose. He told himself it was down to the present difficulty in obtaining materials, and would have told Anton the same, had he asked.

*But that is not why, is it?* he heard himself think, still stranded in the dim clarity of waking. *You are hoping for a dream. You are hoping for a revelation.*

Enough. He washed and dressed and exited his bedroom in the study, meandering towards the kitchen. As he pushed open the door he attempted to remember what remained in the larder.

"Oh! You're awake."

Piero stared at the apparition before him. He should not have halved the dosage after all. He was hallucinating again.

Cecelia stood a little straighter, concern creeping into her voice. "Are you well?" she asked, dusting flour off her shirt front.

"You are in my kitchen," said Piero, sounding stupid even to himself. *Most certainly a hallucination,* he concluded.
"Oh!" One hand went to Cecelia's mouth. "Sorry, I thought Corvo had - um, hello." She dipped, absurdly, a fraction of a curtsey. She still wore the same battered pageboy cap over her red hair. Her shirt front was newly covered in flour where she seemed to have been preparing a dough on one of the kitchen tables. "I've been, um, assigned. To come work with you and Master Sokolov. Corvo asked me to. He said you needed a..." A moment to search for the word. "Quartermaster," she said finally.

"Corvo assigned you," repeated Piero.

"To be the quartermaster," said Cecelia. Her earlier concern had not departed. "For you and Master Sokolov. To find what you need, for the cure."

Piero squinted at her. "Are you a figment of my imagination?"

"Um," said Cecelia; but she was mercifully saved from replying by a voice bellowing, "Why're you standing in the doorway, did something catch fire?" Anton swept in past Piero and halted abruptly. "Who the hell are you," he snapped, a sudden cold in his voice.

"Oh good," sighed Piero. "You can see her too."

"Course I--" Anton glanced at Piero in puzzlement, then returned a suspicious glare to Cecelia. "Answer the question, girl."

"Cecelia," she said, straightening again, this time in nervous defiance. "And the Lord Protector's sent me, to be your quartermaster." She searched in her pockets for a moment, raising a light dust of flour, and pulled out an envelope. Anton took it from her without looking, only breaking his gaze to glance down at the seal; Kaldwin blue and gold, the swan pressed into the wax. He cracked it with a sweep of his finger and looked long at the letter inside.

"Well," he said, lowering it. "You can tell the Lord Protector that I have no need of a babysitter."

"That - that's not why--" protested Cecelia, but Anton overrode her. "Nor that damned Callista Curnow, do you hear? Watchmen and their get are all the same. I don't need some Kaldwin spy looking over my shoulder and reporting my every move--"

"She is a fair quartermaster," interrupted Piero. Anton started slightly, as if he had forgotten Piero's presence.

"She's a rotted Tower spy," he barked.

"Be that as it may, she found me what I needed for many months, and on little coin besides. Corvo is not attempting to sabotage us in our work."

"I'll not have a nursemaid--"

"Neither of us is fit to scrounge up what we require, and we cannot rely on the sailors to do more than bleed the krusts," retorted Piero. "Unless you wish to go pick flowers yourself, I will vouch for her."

Anton only stared at him with narrowed eyes for a moment, then turned the full force of his glare on Cecelia. She quailed for a moment, then found some reserve of cool patience.

"Time, sir," she told him. "Time is what you need right now. Time is what I can give you."

"Fine, then," snapped Anton at last, and handed her back the letter. "I'll have a list of what we need
in a few hours. You'll wait on me to dispense the funds, don't expect a key of your own. And get something to eat around here," he tossed over his shoulder as he left.

"Thank you," Cecelia told Piero in the sudden quiet.

"I would not have said anything if I did not think you could help us," said Piero, blushing. "Do not mind Anton, he sounds far worse than he is." He glanced at what she had been preparing. "And neither of us would mind if you did get something in to eat around here." It came out more wistful than he had meant it to.

Cecelia gave him a small smile. "Give me a list, and I'll see what I can do."

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12th of Da.

The baselines must be established. This day has been occupied preparing doses to be taken to Coldridge to examine their effects on those already taken ill, and I expect the next day will be as well. It means diverting our attention from the main course of research, but with a solid foundation we will be better poised to make real progress.

I must admit that turning my eyes from the most immediate route to our goal, particularly under our current constraints, goes against not simply my intellectual judgement but my instincts as well. To force my thoughts to turn back and retrace basic work when all is riding on our ability to produce a breakthrough is difficult in the extreme. But I cling to the thought that A. is right in this. A pause, a systematic establishment of the nature of the disease, will give us the data we need to move forward. We can no longer gamble on hitting the right combination through intuition and luck. Pressure cannot be allowed to force us into haste, or all will unravel. This must be done methodically or it will not be done at all.

Cc. has succeeded in searching out many of the components the Crown has failed to provide. In two days we will be ready to visit Coldridge.

He dreamed.

He drifted in the formless waters of the in-between. Up and down disappeared, land and sea, air and water. Blackness dissolved his thoughts, moving wide and slow with the waves. Until he sensed a disturbance from a great distance, a call from one side of those waters, on the other side of a shore he knew. He rose up, recollecting, as the ocean of sleep drained away back into an awareness of the world - and then it left him, frozen, stranded along the shore.

Piero knew himself awake, and yet he remained locked in place, as if he had resettled wrong into his own body. His limbs lay still in repose, limp and relaxed, no matter how he strained and screamed at them to move. The soft sounds of the Bridge filtered in, unconcerned, unaware of his desperate pleas for help. The mechanism of his own body, so long beneath any conscious apprehension, now failed him completely. He beat on the walls of his mind but he could not so much as twitch a finger. Panic consumed him whole, he was going to die here like this, in the next moment his heart would stop or his lungs cease to draw air, the blanket would fall across his face and he would suffocate unthreatened on dry land.

His ears registered a distant banging, a shout that might have been a human voice.

And then there was a crash, and someone grabbed his shoulder, and the touch broke the paralysis as
sudden as the bursting of a soap bubble. Its clinging film tore away and he bolted upright, heaving in deep breaths, tensing all his muscles as if to wring the last of the torpor from them. He brought a hand to his brow, flexing the fingers, still uncertain of every motion.

When he lowered it he saw Anton sitting by the side of the bed. He looked away.

"Are you awake?" said Anton at last. The study was dark and Anton's face was outlined only by candlelight.

"I will be - I will be fine," Piero said, in between breaths.

Anton took one of his wrists into his own hand without so much as a by-your-leave, taking the pulse. When Piero yanked it away Anton caught his chin in one hand instead, inspecting his eyes.

"Enough," said Piero, but Anton ignored him and checked the temperature of his forehead, then the back of his neck, with a physician's concern.

"Enough," repeated Piero, jerking away from the touch. "I do not need physicking." In that moment he wanted most of all for Anton to be far away, for Anton to have never seen him like this: weak and cursed, marked by an affliction that had no cure.

Anton sat back. "Bad dream," he said. It was not a question.

"I will be fine," Piero repeated, muttering into his hands.

"There are steps that can be taken."

"Beyond what I already have?" asked Piero curtly.

"Well," said Anton, and then, "The Abbey has rites." But honesty compelled him to add, "Of somewhat questionable efficacy."

"Nothing in their books will help. Secret or otherwise," said Piero with the weight of long certainty. He looked up, at last registering the strangeness of the situation. The candle in its safety lantern was only half-burnt. Anton was still in his work clothing, still wearing one of the heavy leather protective aprons for work with dangerous reactants. "Why are you here? What is happening?"

For a moment it seemed Anton would press the matter, but instead he only stood. "Up and ready. We have a midnight visitor."

Piero frowned. "Corvo?" he guessed. "Another fire."

"Not quite," said Anton. "Dress warm and get your kit. Meet you downstairs."

Anton pulled the door closed behind him. Piero scrambled for his spectacles at the side of the bed, settling them on his nose, and threw back the blankets. The night air had grown colder and colder as the season waned towards winter's nadir. Piero went to the washbasin and splashed water on his face, trying to bring some hint of color back into his skin. But the touch of it only woke some dark half-memory, and he clutched the edge of the basin and breathed again, forcing away the shadow.

You must never tell anyone about the dreams, he heard his mother say. He felt again that sense of slipping, that sense of giving away ground he could not retake.

The door leaned open a little where Anton had left it, and he felt a mild annoyance with himself for forgetting to lock it last night. He was growing too comfortable in this place. When the ground felt steady again beneath his feet he straightened the lapels of his thickest coat, tucked his notebook
under his arm, and opened the door. The hinges squallled as he did and when he tried to close it behind himself it would not go. He pushed it open again and then he saw the long crack that ran up the doorframe, the wood freshly split at the recess for the bolt. Piero swung the door back and examined its outer side. The paint near the lock had dented under a single precise blow.

Damn, he thought. Now it will not latch properly.

The Bridge was quiet and still dark, its electric arcs left unlit. Anton must have taken care not to wake Cecelia from where she had made up her bed in the kitchen. Anton himself waited below in the shadowed foyer in a pool of buzzing blue-white arclight cast from a hand-lantern. With him was not Corvo but a uniformed Watchman, and when Piero descended the stairs he recognized the officer who had found him in Tobias' cells. Anton had settled a bulging leather satchel over his right shoulder and his pockets were stuffed with bits and bobs. He had removed the apron and put on some absurd Tyvian hat made of thick fur that came down around his ears. It hardly fit over the sides of his beard.


The Watch cutter that waited for them at the riverside was nearly too large to fit the quayside, and they had to leap to make it across. In the darkness it made a blacker silhouette against the waves, limned by the green and red running-lights. None of the Watchmen manning it had much to say to the two natural philosophers, and at a bark from Kemp they were off at speed. Piero glanced up when they cleared the Bridge and wished he had not, coming face to face with a vast and empty night. A half-moon lingered near the horizon and scraps of cloud made strange, scudding grey shapes. He stole enough glances at the stars to confirm that it could not be more than two hours past midnight, then kept his gaze fixed to the river. The chill wind whistled unceasing down the Wrenhaven's throat, foaming the waves and frosting every dock and bank with ice.

"I do not smell smoke," Piero told Anton where they hunkered down in the lee of the boat's superstructure. After a few minutes of the knifelike cold he already envied Anton's hat.

"Kemp says they didn't manage to light it," said Anton. He spoke at a normal volume, the growl of the cutter's engine masking their words. "Someone drove them off."

Piero recoiled. "What has happened to the oil, then?"

"I imagine that's why they called for us."

They were heading upriver and the pilot soon swung the cutter eastwards into a fat tributary of the main river. The wide riverbanks closed in and sprouted high floodwalls of dressed stone. Electric street lights thinned out and disappeared, leaving the night to stray lamplight and the relic moon. The buildings themselves began to sag and disintegrate, as if they were watching an illustrated sequence of decomposition, the fat and hale façades dissolving into grinning skeletons of rotted timber and rubble.

Anton's head came up as they slowed on approach, and Piero did not need to ask why. He could smell it on the wind now: the prickle of trans, bitter ink and electricity. They disembarked at a set of moss-slicked steps beneath a canal bridge. Kemp took the arc-lamp and led them further along on foot. More Watchmen fell in as they wound their way through streets of abandoned houses, crumpled awnings and smashed furniture spilling out into the street. With them came a sprinkling of grey naval uniforms. The marines each carried their sidearms at the ready, the new long-rifles over their shoulders, eyes sweeping from side to side as they searched the night. Electricity tingled in the air. The hair on the back of Piero's neck began to rise. Anton stood straighter and looked, to Piero's
mind, disgustingly awake and bright.

The district seemed deserted. No lights peeked from beneath boarded windows and no sounds disturbed the night save the scuff of their feet and the omnipresent scurry of the rats. Furtive shapes darted from pile to pile of trash and skittered across the path in front of them. When the shadows gathered the little procession halted and the marines took aim, Kemp advancing with the arc-lamp until the rats at last broke and fled. And yet Piero could not shake the feeling of being watched. The moon lurked between the jagged points of the collapsing roofs and as he glanced over he caught flickers of motion against the ridgeline, black shapes against the stars, black wavelets lapping at the back of his mind. He shook his head as if to rid it of visions like swarming gnats. Once a Weeper howled in the night like a dying dog, but though they froze and listened, they heard no more.

They saw the blue glow spilling across the end of the street before they reached it. Piero could scarcely credit the amount of oil it would take to produce such a light, but when they turned the corner and came into the little clearing formed by the sunken bones of some felled structure, he stopped in his tracks at the sight.

Barrels, tubs, vats, broken sinks, even discarded bottles and jars had been heaped to twice a man's height, and from every one milky oil dripped, oozed, trickled out in sickly blue rivulets. "Bozjemoi," cursed Anton next to him. Watchmen and marines stood casually in a loose ring around it, one or two chatting in low voices, all keeping an eye on the night. The glow of the pile behind them threw strange and glimmering shadows at their feet.

"Master Sokolov?" said Kemp, confused at their stillness. "If you'll follow me, General Curnow and the Admiral are this way."

"Okay," said Anton, breathing out slowly. Piero could not keep from his horrified calculations. If even a third of that volume were filled with oil... "Okay. Lieutenant, I need you to fetch the General. To me, here. And tell all those men to back away from that pile. To at least..." He scuffed a foot in the rubble, dislodging fallen brickwork with a flat clack. "At least to here."

In the glare of the arc-lamp Kemp's features contorted into puzzlement. "Now," barked Anton, drawing himself up.

"I hardly think--" began Kemp, but Anton snapped, "No, you don't. Get along and do as I tell you."

Kemp scowled, but under Anton's haughty glare he broke away and moved around the pile, calling to the Watchmen as he did. They strolled out, widening the ring; with, to Piero's mind, agonizing slowness.

"Perhaps two thousand liters," whispered Piero in utter horror. "Perhaps more." The reek of ink soaked the night air.

"Fucking fools. They should have sent for us hours ago."

"Even diluted. Even so. Such a quantity is..."

"Enough to start a big fuck-off blaze, is what it is." The arc-lamp was bobbing back towards them.

"More than I would imagine remains in any stockpile in the city," finished Piero.

Anton cocked his head to one side, absorbing this thought; but before he could reply Kemp returned with General Curnow held in the arc-lamp's circle. Piero was surprised to see Admiral Wentworth as well, then checked himself; after all, he had seen the man's marines on the way in. Then a third figure moved into the light and he caught his breath. Monitor Farbright was with them. In his black coat he
all but disappeared into the night. The harsh glow of the lantern made all look bleached and scarred, throwing all the highlights of their faces into sharp relief.

"Sokolov, what's the meaning of--" began Curnow, but Anton cut him off as sharply as he had Kemp. He hardly spared Farbright a glance, but Piero saw him tense. "You are looking at enough oil to set this entire district ablaze, General," he barked. "Kindly do me the favor of refraining from igniting it through your carelessness until I have cleared the area."

"All the men chosen for this detail are well-trained in safe handling procedures," retorted Wentworth. The blue glow did strange things to the silver trim of his coat.

"Safe handling procedures," scoffed Anton. "Your men are trained in slotting cartridges and replacing tanks with no more understanding of their tasks than a performing hound." Wentworth's face twisted, ugly in the lamplight. "Do you smell that, Admiral?" said Anton, jabbing a finger into the air. "That sharpness on the wind? That is raw trans oxidizing in air. The slightest spark, even a too-heavy blow, and they'll be picking up our guts in Whitecliff." He folded his arms and set his face into a heavy scowl. "Now clear the area and leave us to our work."

Without waiting for a reply Anton turned and strode across the rubble towards the pile. Piero nearly tripped over himself to follow, his fright of the pile outweighed by his desire to get away from any reply the men might make. When he cast a glance over his shoulder he saw the arc-lamp moving away.

Anton slowed once he had gone a few more paces, letting Piero catch up. "Well," he muttered when Piero reached him. "Now we're well and truly fucked."

"How on earth could someone accumulate so much oil?" said Piero. They picked their way carefully through the rubble. The heap loomed against the sky. The old supports of the wrecked building still poked up through the broken masonry like standing stones. Up close he could pick out proper glass and metal tanks, but they were few, chipped and corroded. Anything and everything that could hold liquid had been pressed into service; even, Piero would swear, a gutted river krust shell. The blue glow that slopped over its edges was wavering and faint. "How could they even transport it here in secret?"

"I suspect we'd know the how if we figured out the who," said Anton. "And, as a followup, who frightened them off." The light of the oil turned his grey eyes to blue, wide and bright. Electricity buzzed in the air. Goosebumps rose on Piero's skin, his nerves prickling in response.

They arrived at the nearest container, a rusted, half-filled bathtub. Anton lowered his satchel to the ground and found a wide-mouthed beaker. With great care he scooped up a measure of the thick liquid and studied it.

"It's contaminated," he said, passing it at last to Piero. And indeed the glow of the oil was faint and off-color, clotted, tinged with green.

Piero swirled the liquid, then sniffed it, watching the way it sloshed. "Water," he decided at last. "Organic matter. More than the container should account for."

"Riverwater," guessed Anton. "Brackish."

Piero set down the beaker and rummaged in Anton's satchel for a moment, squinting to read the labels of the stoppered vials in the half-light. At last he extracted one, broke the seal, and poured a few drops into the glowing liquid. It hissed and foamed up at once, giving off a spitting green light. When it died down it left a sticky grey foam on the glass. A stench like charcoal rolled up.
"Incomplete extraction," judged Anton. "Mistake in the Roseburrow process." He crouched on his haunches, staring down into the beaker. "Carbon residue like that, something went wrong in the second fractional distillation."

Piero frowned. "This oil was never fully refined. It will burn, but not much more."

A light flared on the other side of the ring, making both of them duck down and shield their eyes. The sound of raised voices carried across the ruins. "Damn, what now," said Anton as he stood, squinting out into the darkness.

"I suppose we had better go see what they want," sighed Piero. Anton closed up his kit.

As they made their way back the sound of argument grew more pronounced. More lights had popped out in the darkness, and they wavered yellow - not arc-lamps but torches. A sudden fear twinged in Piero's gut at the sight.

"-- knew youse were hoarding it!" yelled a man as they came within earshot of the ring of Watchmen. "You're nothin' but thieves and bullies in uniforms!"

"Sir, I assure you nothing could be further from the truth," said Curnow calmly. Now Piero could see him in the pool of light cast by the lantern. A tall man in rough clothing had come up close to the General. Wentworth stood a few paces back, watching the man coldly. Piero hesitated, uncertain why, but Anton froze with him, still back in the shadows.

"Thieves!" repeated the man in a low growl. He loomed over Curnow, who stared up at him impassively. A queer tension stretched out in the air. "First you take the food, then you take the 'lixir, then you take the oil - leave us to freeze to death and fight off rats while you sit inside by the fire. I got kids at home and I ain't listenin' to them cry another night!"

"Sir, I must warn you that approaching that pile would be extremely dangerous, not to mention a breach of the law," tried Curnow, but it was the wrong thing to say. The man howled with laughter, laughter that was picked up all around them from those wavering yellow patches of light. More faces emerged from the shadows around the spokesman. "There ain't no law but what you bullies make!" he bellowed. "This ain't the Tower, and this ain't your law no more!" At that shout there came a great cry from the darkness. The bobbing torches burst to life and there were so many, too many, surrounding them.

"Take what's ours!" shouted the man, and a sound of meaty impact, and then the horrible crack of a pistol shot. The arc-lamp vanished and a raucous cry rose up around them. The torches lurched forward in a yellow flood and limned in their light Piero glimpsed hard faces, dirty and starved, fixed and determined.

"Come on!" barked a voice in his ear, and before he could do anything more a rough hand grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him along, stumbling through the rubble. "Back!" he heard a stern voice shout off to one side. "Back to the river!"

And then he was running, running in Anton's wake, catching glimpses of the man in the scattered light of the moon and the oil and the pistol-shots that snapped through the air. He ducked once or twice out of nothing more than terror, waiting for a bullet between the shoulder-blades. Ahead of them more arc-lamps kindled and flashed away and he heard that stern voice again shouting, "In good order, if you please!" The source of the voice turned to fire his own gun and in the spray of light Piero saw Admiral Wentworth, Curnow leaning heavy on his other arm. Farbright was gone.

A volley of gunfire lit the night behind them. The marines fired their rifles in coordinated bursts as
they retreated in stages. Angry shouts pursued them. Thrown bricks and stones shattered against the cobbles. The memory of Burrows' fate rose sickening to mind. They threw him into the sewers for the Weepers. But the rats got there first. Piero hoped desperately that Wentworth knew where he was headed, because his own sense of order and place had been left in the dirt. *I never woke up,* he decided. *This is only more of my dream, this black nightmare, and in a moment I will wake--*

He almost ran down Anton when the man stopped dead at the water's edge, pulling up short when the road ran out beneath their feet. The moon cast a faint bar of light down the canal and in it he spotted the silver trim of Wentworth's coat flaring as he descended the steps to where the cutter lay. Watchmen swarmed it already as the engine roared to life.

Anton rushed down the steps so fast that he nearly slipped. Piero followed close on his heels, glancing every moment over his shoulder. Cracks of pistol-fire flared in the dark street. The narrow deck of the cutter had disappeared beneath the mass of people, but Anton barreled into them without pause and Piero tumbled in next to him. "What are we waiting for!?" barked Anton, seizing the coat of the nearest shape. "Get us out of here!"

"General!" shouted Kemp from somewhere in the darkness.

"I'm here, Lieutenant," said Curnow, from the stern, and though Piero knew Wentworth must have been carrying him no trace of strain showed in his voice.

"Cast off," Kemp ordered, and the cutter's engine flared to life. Frantic hands shoved them away from the dock. Cries echoed up the street behind them as the sound of the engine reached those following behind. The press of bodies packed them in tight and the contact brought back to Piero a sharp memory of the hound crate, that terrible moment when it had all come apart, lying against Anton in the dark as all principle and argument disappeared in the animal snare of fear.

"Belay that!" ordered Curnow. "Our men are still out there!"

"Belay that," ordered Wentworth.

"Sorry, sir," said Kemp. "But we can't risk you." The cutter picked up speed.

Curnow struggled against something. "Lieutenant! That is a *direct order*--" Then there came a soft thump and Curnow's voice trailed off in a little cry.

"Don't fucking stop," ordered Wentworth. The cutter's engine swelled to a fever pitch. Shouts and screams followed them down the canal, curses, pleas, rifle shots and torchlight spreading through the district as they fled. The cutter rode low in the water and waves slopped over the gunwales, wallowing and pitching dangerously at every curve. If they went under, thought Piero in miserable terror, would he even have a chance? Or would the living, squirming mass of humanity drag itself down like the rats he had seen clawing at each other in the flooding sewers?

The Watchmen made for the Ridgefort, bolting on instinct. Their flight slowed when the cutter reached the confluence of the Wrenhaven and the riverbanks pulled away from them, leaving them to the moderate safety of open water. Wentworth went through the refugees on the deck, counting, and when he found Anton and Piero he nodded to himself in some relief.

"Admiral," began Anton icily, but Wentworth turned a dark glare on him. "Curnow's hurt," he snapped. "Come and see to him, Physician." He started back towards the stern without another word.

Together they forced their way through the press, Anton shoving his satchel in front of them to clear the way, until they reached where the now-unconscious Curnow had been propped up against the
gunwale. Even in the packed cutter a small space had cleared around him.

"Light," snapped Anton, and a Watchman obliged. Piero went through the satchel as Anton examined Curnow's wound. They had not packed for a medical emergency, but fortunately Anton was of the sort who threw everything into a bag and never removed it. Piero found gauze and bandages and alcohol after a few moments' search, passing Anton rags from the side pockets. Anton had ripped away the sleeve of Curnow's uniform and mopped up the worst of the blood when Piero finished assembling the supplies. The harsh arclight turned Curnow's blood black, his skin a corpse-white. Piero winced inwardly when he saw the site of the injury. Curnow had taken a cluster of deep punctures on the breast where his shoulder met his collarbone. It was not the worst injury a fighting man had brought Piero in the middle of the night, but it was not the best, either.

Anton prodded the wound carefully, frowning. "What hit him?" he asked.

"That festering whoreson had a chunk of wood," answered Wentworth, standing just beyond the lantern's light. "Must have had a few nails driven in it."

Anton frowned, then sloshed some of the alcohol over one hand and carefully inserted a finger into the deepest of the punctures. "Missed the artery," he said at last. "He'll live." He poured more alcohol over his skin to wash away the blood. Piero finished making up a swab of soaked gauze and began to wipe the wound clean.

"Stitch him up," ordered Wentworth.

"On a pitching deck? You're mad," barked Anton.

"Hold this," Piero told him, and Anton held the gauze pad as Piero began to wrap the bandage tight around it.

"He'll hold until we reach the fort," Anton told the Admiral. "Get one of his prison quacks to sew it shut. Keep the dressings clean and it might not mortify."

"And for this they made you Royal Physician," said Wentworth.

"Fuck that, and fuck you," spat Anton. He stood, taking back his satchel. He was breathing hard, like a laboring engine. Piero finished wrapping the bandage and pulled it tight as he could to staunch the bleeding. "I've been shot at quite enough today. You and Curnow have no one to blame for this but yourselves."

Piero sat back on his heels to examine his work. The artery might be intact, but red had already soaked through the bandages. He could not say he liked Curnow much after the incident at the Ridgefort; but neither, he decided, did he want the man to die. Yet now he might, for no more important reason than an angry man and a piece of wood. He saw in the arclight that his hands were trembling and, though he clenched them into fists, he could not will them to stop.

It took another hour at the Ridgefort before they could find transport back to Kaldwin's Bridge. In the end Piero stitched Curnow's wounds, more to take his mind from the waiting than anything else. By then the heat of flight that had burnt through Piero's chest had given way to a deep and utter chill. Anton's gaze had gone distant, his motions sharp and his eyes scanning without pause, and although Piero did not know precisely what memory the skirmish had stirred up he could easily guess its content; Anton was thinking of Pandysia, Anton was back in Pandysia, and his fingers twitched near his belt as though he missed the weight of a weapon. When Piero found him, wiping the blood from his hands, he caught Anton pacing in nervous circles. He worked his left shoulder in a taut, painful motion, and Piero caught his arm and forced the man to look at him.
"It is over," he said quietly. Anton's eyes skipped away from his, pupils wide. "They lost, and we won."

"Nobody won," said Anton. "We shot a passel of starving men trying to keep their families warm before they all die of plague."

Piero let him go. Forty-two days, he thought. One hand clenched into a fist, squeezing tight. Forty-two days.

- - -

14th of Da.

The doses are ready to be taken to Coldridge. But I fear our trip may have to be postponed.

Piero held a chipped beaker beneath the spigot on the side of the elixir still in the greenhouse and turned the stopcock, grumbling in annoyance as the thick reddish liquid slopped into the beaker. He had risen early today in preparation for the trip to Coldridge, but when he had come into the laboratory to pack the sample doses his attention was at once arrested by the chalkboard pulled into the middle of the room and marked in Anton's heavy hand, "ACADEMY BACK NOON MAYBE PROGRESS 354." Piero considered various ways to punctuate this and eventually concluded that Anton had been summoned to the Academy, might be back by noon, and had had some luck with test batch 354, likely after Piero had gone to bed.

The level of elixir reached the last hashmark on the beaker's side. Piero closed the tap, took a deep breath, and drained it all in one go. The taste of elixir had ceased to be anything but cloying; the stuff was only to be choked down as fast as possible. He swallowed a small measure of his own remedy to round out the prophylactic measures. Anton had not taken his dose today, he noted. The call must have come in the small hours of the morning. Both of them took both draughts at least once a day. It did not do to be careless.

He left the empty beaker in the greenhouse and went to find the distillation setup Anton must have been using last night. He might as well try and get something done while he waited for Anton to come back so they could go to the prison. Leery as he would have been of admitting it aloud, he did not cherish the idea of visiting Coldridge alone. Anton had at least been there before and had presumably worked out some way of conducting his business without undue risk. Corvo had never spoken much about his time at Coldridge, but what he did have to say - and what the other Loyalists had carefully avoided saying - had not inspired any great desire on Piero's part to see it himself.

No sound troubled the air as he worked, save the near-subconscious pulse of the Bridge. Cecelia had vanished yesterday with Anton's most recent list and had not yet returned, although a meat pie cooling in the oven made a fair substitute. Piero decided not to ask where the meat had come from. He was free to ramble about as he pleased and conduct his studies in quiet, broken only by his own voice as he posed questions of himself, preparing rack after rack of test doses.

Noon rang across the city in a scattershot of chiming bells. Anton did not return. Piero consulted the angle of the sun and huffed to himself in annoyance. At this rate they would either have to risk the prison after dark or else postpone till tomorrow. Afternoon had slipped into evening when the buzzer-box jangled to alert him to a presence at the front door. He flinched at the sound and managed to keep his current beaker from spilling. But when he hauled open the door with a sharp, "At last, what have you been--", he was greeted by a pale-faced boy in Academy black.
"Uh," said the boy. "Are you - Master Joplin?"

Piero blinked at him. "Who a-are you?" he stammered.

"Lucas Mablethorpe, sir, third-year," said the apparent student, and indeed his robe had the scalloped border to its sleeves that marked an upperclassman. "I guess I'm the first one here. Sorry, sir." Lucas shifted the leather pack slung over one shoulder and tried to peer past Piero into the depths of the building. "I just grabbed what I had when they told us to go." His expression of earnest helpfulness wavered for a moment. "Only, my family's all in Wynnedown, so..."

"I--" Piero's brain had gone entirely blank. He wondered briefly if he might have woken up by accident in some other Piero's life. "Who t-t-told you to come here?"

"Specifically?" Mablethorpe searched his recollection. His blond hair swept up in an unruly cowlick in front; he flattened it compulsively as he thought. "Mrs. Wickes just shouted the names off a list, I suppose, I don't know who assigned everyone. We all just had to leave the Academy right away, there wasn't much time for questions."

"You left the Academy?" Piero seized on that fact, put his finger on it and tried to unravel the knot.

"Sir?" Mablethorpe's expression wavered in confusion, as if he couldn't tell whether he should be stating the obvious. "You must have heard the bells, sir. The Academy's been dismissed. Head Master Sokolov announced it at noontime."

"Dismissed?" echoed Piero. "Why would Anton dismiss the Academy?"

"It's the plague, sir," said Mablethorpe. "It's in the dorms."
"Well, what else was I supposed to do with them?" said Anton.

"Not send them here," complained Piero.

"I'm not turning forty-odd students loose on the streets of Dunwall in the middle of a plague," said Anton. "Half of them aren't from here, and that's not even considering the charity students. Some haven't got any family left, not anymore."

"And we can hardly keep forty-odd students in the basement."

Anton fixed him with a clear gaze. "Are you angry that they're here, or that I didn't ask you first?"

"You could have warned me," fumed Piero.

"Nobody bothered to warn me," said Anton. "I had a signal in the middle of the night, and that was it." In his black Head Master's robes he looked as pale as if he'd been bled, and it at last occurred to Piero to wonder if he'd slept at all since yesterday. "I daresay they wouldn't have even bothered to fetch me if they didn't need the Head Master's seal on the proceedings."

Piero himself had had no chance for idleness since Mablethorpe's arrival early that evening; the boy had outpaced his colleagues by only an hour. Just as he had seriously contemplated locking himself in his own room and abandoning the place to them a Mrs. McKibben had appeared, and after that Piero's presence became no more than a mild annoyance. She circled the confused refugees like a sheep-dog guarding its flock. Under her guidance the ground floor of the Kaldwin's Bridge lab sprouted folding cots and intricate mazes of trunks. Piero had a moment to be grateful that they had left the components of the arc pylon upstairs, and then the tumult grew to such a pitch that the fever building in his brain forced him up to the fourth floor. Just after midnight Anton had found him peering warily over the balcony railing outside the kitchen, regarding the sea of strangers as if he were staring into the Void itself.

"Anyway, the Masters aren't coming till the day after next," continued Anton, and Piero's headache wound a notch tighter. "The quarantine has to be finalized. Don't worry, don't worry," he added hastily, catching sight of Piero's stricken expression. "It's just Durham and Sallybank and their people, and they're not coming here." Anton rested his elbows on the railing and sighed. Dark circles shrouded his bloodshot eyes and a tremor had come into his fingers. "They wouldn't dare, anyway. Working in someone else's lab, they'd hardly lower themselves to it."

"Then where are they going to go?"

"I don't know, alright?" burst out Anton. "I don't--" He swallowed the next words with a visible

\[\text{degeneracy pressure (physics)}\] Force arising from the inability of certain particles to occupy the same state.
effort. "Never mind." He watched the forming ranks of cots and supplies laid out below as order emerged from chaos like rocks at low tide. The heavy golden signet ring glimmered on his right hand.

"That's right," Anton said after a moment, looking back to Piero. "You'll want to know. Garvey's dead."

"Dead?" squeaked Piero.

"Didn't even weep. Complications. The old go fastest."

Piero stared down at his hands where they clasped the railing. "A-and the rest?"

Anton shrugged. "Crakehill's going to. Rawling's disappeared, probably ran the blockade. Wells started coughing blood and drank enough laudanum to drown a whale. Hawthorne was well last I knew. Durham's alright, I said that. Sallybank's alright. Everyone eating together, sleeping in the dorms - it spread so fast. I don't know about the rest. I didn't see them there. I can't keep track of all the Fellows. Hells, I can't keep track of all the Masters, anymore. I should-- I don't know." He lapsed again into silence as they watched the milling crowd. Voices filtered up into the high spaces, blended together into meaningless noise.

Piero looked up into the vault of the ceiling and tried to imagine the corpse of Master Archibald Garvey. He had seen enough of the plague dead to fill in the detail: Garvey's clever, careful fingers, once so smooth as they decanted the precise amount of some reagent, now gnarled and bitten down to the bone; harsh blue eyes sunk in ruddy whites; the mouth that had lectured, scolded, and sometimes even praised, gone slack and rimed with red-black blood. The great fat man gnawed away by the plague, leaving only a shrunken bundle to be wrapped in a shroud and dumped in some anonymous pit. It ought to stir something in you. Instead all he could think of was his dream of that trussed and thrashing whale hung to die here long ago. So many times he had taken a sweet and vicious delight in imagining some awful stroke of fate befalling the man who had ruined the great opportunity of Piero Joplin's life. But in the face of fact he found nothing more than a hollow disbelief.

"A pity," he said at last. "We could have used another chemist."

Anton grunted in reply, staring into the distance as he performed some mental arithmetic of practicality. "I need a bloody drink," he muttered.

Piero glanced over. "You do not."

"I need to think."

"You do not need a drink to do that," said Piero, more firmly.

"I need something to calm down, alright, I just need to think!" Suddenly Anton delivered a swift kick to the bars of the railing, striking a loud clang and sending Piero jumping backwards in surprise. The steel beneath his boots vibrated with the force of the blow. Curious heads looked up from below and Anton turned away from them quite deliberately, leaning against the railing and pressing a hand to his brow. His face snarled into a mix of fury and exhaustion. The crystal in his ring flashed colors as it trembled beneath the lights, now green, now purple, now red.

"The Hound Pits," said Piero.

"Hm?"
"Back at the Hound Pits, when we needed space, we simply - took it," said Piero, speaking as the idea formed in his mind. "The district was abandoned. We used whatever buildings were still sound."

"It's not just a matter of putting a roof over their heads," argued Anton wearily. "We need equipment, power, no one in the neighborhood has the facilities..." His voice trailed off. "Ah ha," he said, looking up with new focus. "Now there's an idea. We'll need a pair of boltcutters."

"I believe I can do better than that," said Piero.

* * *

The heavy iron links of the chain securing the streetside doors of the Pratchett warehouse were more than a finger's breadth in thickness, solid testament to just how much trouble Jeremiah Pratchett had gone through to ensure his operation would be waiting for him when he returned from his ill-fated blockade run. Piero squinted in the predawn gloom at the blued-steel padlock that secured it, weighing it in one hand, tapping the metal and listening to the sound.

Then he poured a measure of grey-brown powder into a metal cap and added a few clear drops. Anton was unwinding several meters of waxy green cord along the roadway up to the door, and when he reached Piero he proffered the spool. "Well enough," judged Piero, and snipped off the measured length. Anton wound the remainder back onto the spool as Piero twisted one end of the cord into a point and stuck it under the back of the little cap, then slipped the whole affair within the padlock's keyhole.

"Get back," Anton ordered the students. The tops of curious heads that had poked up as they worked now disappeared back behind the blued-steel barricade they had scavenged from an abandoned Watch post. Anton went behind the barricade himself, chivvying the students to one side. Piero adjusted the rest of the thick tubing he had wrapped around the chain, making sure it lay against the padlock, then checked the level of the water in the tub standing to one side.

He handed the end of the cord to Anton when he came around the barricade. Anton leaned round the corner, flicked a pocket lighter, and touched the flame to it. The cord flared to life, the spark skittering away. Anton laid it quickly back onto the stone and turned away.

"Don't turn 'round," ordered Anton as the fuse burnt down, and any student tempted was quickly convinced otherwise by the brilliant flare that erupted on the other side of the barricade, throwing sharp and shivering shadows across the cobbles. Metal shrieked in protest. Hissing sparks fountained into the air and spilled across the ground, pale in the approaching dawn.

At last the leaping shadows shuddered and died away, the hiss sinking to a mutter. Anton looked over the edge, and a moment later Piero did as well. The padlock had been slagged into a molten mass still glowing at the base of the doors, the severed ends of the chain hanging red-hot.

"Hook," said Anton. A student passed him the boathook on its long pole. He finagled one end under the chain and managed to toss it into the waiting water-tub. It seethed and threw up a great cloud of steam. Another student sloshed a bucket of water from several feet away onto the white-hot mass at the base of the door, raising another violent hiss and cloud of steam. Piero crossed to the door and inspected the slagged padlock thoughtfully. He might have used a few grams less of incendiary paste, he judged at last.

"Give me a hand, will you?" said Anton, interrupting his thoughts.

"Oh. Right," said Piero. He straightened and braced his shoulder against one of the great doors.
Anton had the other. Together they pushed. The massive doors squealed on cold-shrunk hinges, but at last gave way.

A gust of stale, reeking air billowed over them. Light flooded into the darkened space beyond to trace out stout pillars and tangles of piping. From the outside the Pratchett warehouse could have been the laboratory's twin. In fact they might have been built at the same time, to the same plan. But where the laboratory's core stretched up a full four stories, for better handling of the immense whale carcasses, Pratchett had had to deal with nothing more troublesome than belligerent hagfish. So the center of the place reached up only two stories, not four, and the mezzanine ran all the way around. One short end faced the road, where they had broken in; the other ran right out over the water, hanging above the pier where the boats would pull up to offload their catch. The ground floor housed the heavy stills and vats where the fish was jellied, salted, pickled and preserved. Huge steel pillars broke up the area to bear the weight of the troughs and tables on the upper floor where the catch was broken down. Doors around the mezzanine led off to stockrooms and storage, but the real offices of the place were in the low building that ran along the outside, as far from the stink of raw fish as possible.

Anton dusted off his hands and planted them on his hips, ignoring the stench. "Right," he declared. "Let's get this place in order. Danforth, go upstairs and see about the cleaning tables. Osmotherley, Mablethorpe, stay down here and check the stills to see if they're clean, drain and flush them if they're not. Holling, Finnegan, same for the brining vats. Miss Parthemoore, get the lights back on, if you please," he added, addressing the lone woman among them in her sky-blue robe. Parthemoore was the only one of the Academy's retainer of Technical College staffers - the "Techers," as the students called them - who had come out to the Bridge. The others, she explained, had either left the city or returned to the main campus upriver near Candlemire. "And keep an eye out for corpses," finished Anton. "Hopefully that smell is just fish. Now go!" he snapped.

The students he had named scattered into the warehouse. Anton turned and bellowed, "Cucciarelli!" at the one remaining. Cucciarelli, who had been staring at the immense brining vats, jumped as if he'd been shocked. "Go back to the lab and tell the rest of you layabouts to wake up and make themselves useful."

Cucciarelli nodded and took off out the open doors. Piero leafed to a new page in his notebook. "I mean to evaluate the chemical stocks," he told Anton. "It may be that Pratchett has something useful in his cupboards."

"Tell me if you find anything good," said Anton without looking over. He was already pushing up the sleeves of his black robes and eying the stills, measuring their capacity and complexity.

The first two rooms Piero tried held nothing more interesting than filing cabinets and a dumping ground for broken gutting gear. He chalked the contents on their respective doors and left them. But the third held shelves and shelves of half-filled jars, boxes and barrels stacked against the back wall. Piero could not help a long sigh of relief. Here at last was a task whose scope he knew, whose steps he understood and was perfectly equipped to accomplish. Pratchett's operation was unlikely to stock the rare reagents they needed, and much of it might be spoiled; but by now even a little fortune went a long way.

Piero flicked a switch and saw a bare bulb light up at the peak of the ceiling - Parthemoore worked fast - and shut the door. But when it clicked closed behind him and he was left at last in solitude, an unaccountable weakness swamped him. He sagged back against the door, suddenly exhausted. He had forced Anton to steal a few scraps of sleep by dint of all but locking him into his quarters, but the time taken to compound the chemical to breach the warehouse had left him with no time to rest himself. His vision blurred, dry and unfocused. He pressed at his eyes with the heel of one hand,
trying to force them into wakefulness. He slid down the door and came to sit at the base of it, clutching his knees to his chest for a moment as a wave of misery washed over him.

When had Kaldwin's Bridge become home? He could not put a finger on any precise date; but home it had become. And like all the spaces he had made his temporary, transient life within, it had been invaded now by others. He felt the presence of each stranger like a needle in the back of his mind, another iron staple bolted through the headache now cinched tight round his temples. Panic squeezed his chest in a massive, shuddering grip. The students wandering lost through the halls of the Bridge. Anton's fury, his exhaustion. The plague is in the dorms. Garvey is dead. The others are dying. He crouched folded up into himself, burying his head in his arms and clutching tight, listening to nothing but his own breath seeping through his chest, the distant thud of his heart as it stirred the salt sea of his veins.

Then he inhaled deeply and began to push. He shoved the din in his mind away inch by inch, pushing out the noise, pushing away the invisible pressure of so many others nearby. Away, he thought, away from my space, away from my mind, away from my self. The image of the greenhouse floated before his closed eyes, afternoon sun slanting in through the glass panes, the plants gleaming thick and healthy. Anton lying in his strange perch atop the rafters and turning quiet pages. The soft trickle of water, the lazy swirl of humid air. Peace.

When he opened his eyes and stood, it was with no new energy; but a strange sort of calm had bloomed within him. He felt it like a pencil balanced on its point. Somewhere deep inside him was a sort of pivot, and for the moment he had aligned himself atop it. He took up his notebook, opened the door behind him a crack, and began to catalogue.

Piero worked by sight and smell where the jar labels had faded, reciting the name of each substance as he identified it, focused only on the simple mystery of it. Time melted away, as it always did when he worked, but he was halfway through the fifth shelf of jars when a horrified voice behind him said, "Oh no, sir, I can do that."

Piero whirled in surprise, knocking one of the jars against its fellows with a loud clatter, then whirled again in a desperate attempt to catch whatever he had knocked over. His notebook flopped to the floor as he grabbed for the wobbling glass, missed, and then a second pair of hands clasped the jars and steadied them.

Piero retrieved his notebook and took several deep breaths, backing away from the intruder and trying to recollect himself. His surprise visitor was a tall, rail-thin student - no, a Scholar, Piero corrected as he parsed the colorful banding on the man's sleeves - with swept-back ginger hair and a sleek, well-fed look. Telltale blotches of ink and chemicals stained his calloused fingers, and he straightened the jars with a practiced ease.

"There we are, then," said the Scholar. He spoke in the refined lilt of the true gentle-born. "My apologies, Master Joplin. I shouldn't have troubled you whilst you were at work."

"W-w-who in the b-b-blazes are you?" stammered Piero, clutching his notebook to his chest like a shield. All his calm had deserted him. He was nineteen years old in the corridor again, his cleaning supplies overturned around him, wincing at the anticipated scolding for obstructing a Scholar's way.

"Sebastian Camberley, sir," said the Scholar, and habit prompted a slight, unconscious bow. "I've been assigned as your assistant."

Piero gaped at him, utterly nonplussed. "I d-d-don't have a-an a-a-assistant," he squeaked out.

"Yes, of course, that's why I've been assigned," continued Camberley smoothly. "I can take care of
"I I-like to do the inventory," said Piero defiantly, then winced at the petulant tone of it. *You are not an underclassman anymore,* he scolded himself. "I don't n-need an a-assistant."

"I'm sure you have more important demands on your time," said Camberley. "And, well, Master Sokolov said I ought to assist you..." he added, with the air of someone laying down the trump card.

Piero's brow furrowed. Now at last he was on familiar ground. "That d-does not sound like something Anton would say."

"What--" began Camberley, entirely thrown, but Piero had already gone to the door and called out into the room beyond, "Anton!"

"Eh?" came a voice. "Whuh ih ih?"

Anton was kneeling in front of one still, halfway through dismantling some circuitry of the machine when Piero reached him. One of the students - Piero recognized the hapless Mablethorpe by his unruly cowlick - crouched next to him, watching intently. Anton had wires tangled over both arms and a screwdriver held between his teeth and had already managed to get a smear of oil on his face. "Did you assign me an assistant?" asked Piero.

"Ceh--" Anton took the screwdriver out of his mouth. "Certainly not. Did you want one?"

"This man--" by now Camberley had arrived in Piero's wake, still looking utterly overrun, "--claims you directed him to me."

Anton extricated himself from the machine's guts, stood, and frowned at the Scholar. Despite the sallow cast to his skin and the dark bags fatigue had left, his grey eyes still blazed sharp and cold. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Sebastian Camberley sir," the man said all in one breath, giving again that unconscious bow. "Scholar, chemist, trained under Master Garvey and Master Durham. Independent, at the moment. Sir."

Anton did not reply, only eyed the Scholar with a practiced, assessing gaze. Piero recognized it from the first time they had truly spoken, a few moments before Anton had read off his life's story.

Then Anton thrust the screwdriver and the bundles of wire at Camberley. "Hold this," he ordered. Camberley took them and stood helplessly, draped in insulated copper. "Don't move. Mablethorpe, finish this lot, and if I hear one more bleat about women's work I'll throw you into the Wrenhaven for the hagfish. Joplin, a moment." He headed off around the curve of a tall brining vat. Piero followed, still clutching his notebook. The noise level inside the warehouse had risen. More of the students must have come down from the Bridge at Cucciarelli's summons.

"I knew he must be lying," said Piero, once he thought they were out of earshot.

"'Course he's lying," said Anton. "But I should have thought of it. Consider him your assistant, if you like."

"What - no!" Piero scrabbled for words. "He approached me under false pretenses! Why on earth would he tell such a tale? What does he want from me?"

"He must have heard of you," said Anton.
"How?"


"You did not know who I was."

A hint of color stained Anton's skin. "Well, I hadn't exactly been - keeping up with the literature, as it were."

Piero frowned, glaring into the middle distance. "I still do not understand what he could possibly want from me."

"To learn from you!" said Anton, exasperated. "That is the point of all this nonsense, after all."

"Yes, but why?"

"He thinks you're a good chemist!"

"I am an excellent chemist," said Piero, affronted.

"There you are, then," said Anton. "He sounds perfect. You'll get on great."

"Oh no - no, he is a Scholar--"

"And he thinks you're a Master," finished Anton. "That's what Scholars do, shit-work for Masters."

"I am n-no Master," hissed Piero. His voice cracked and he felt a hot blush color his cheeks. He clutched his notebook tighter. "He is a Scholar looking to make his name and I am certain he does n-not wish to learn from someone who was - e-ejected from the Academy."

"Kicking you out of the Academy was a crime against natural philosophy itself," said Anton. "It's about time we rectified it."

Piero could make no reply to that. At his silence Anton shifted his weight and looked anywhere but at him.

"I can fix at least one mistake I've made," he finally muttered. He was going red beneath the wiry black curls of his beard. His gaze at last caught on something over Piero's shoulder. "No, you idiots!" he shouted suddenly. "Break that seal and the whole thing is--- Parthemoore!" He strode off across the floor to where three of the students had nearly succeeded in removing a large metal cylinder from one of the stills. Parthemoore's sky-blue robe fluttered out of the shadows as she hurried to his side. Piero stayed where he had been, rooted to the spot. An unaccustomed warmth welled up within him, not the heat of embarrassment, but a golden, bright sensation that flooded up through his chest.

"Sir?" a voice interrupted his thoughts. "Have you and Master Sokolov finished?" Camberley was standing a respectful distance away, Anton's screwdriver now stowed in one of his many pockets.

"Yes," said Piero. He cleared his throat and swallowed a few times, blinking. "Well. Erm. The inventory. Yes. Let us see i-if Pratchett has left us a-anything worthwhile, shall we..."

* * *

16th of Da.

The noise is indescribable. I cannot concentrate in the midst of such utter chaos. My sensitive
temperament is ill-suited to this barrage and I have resolved to stay on the 4th floor till KB is evacuted. The Academy personnel have labored all day to turn the Pratchett warehouse to our ends. Durham & Sallybank may take the upper floor and the storerooms can be used to house the displaced so with luck they will leave KB shortly. It will not be quick enough for my taste. My nerves are fraying terribly under this assault.

Tasked Camberley w/basic exercises to take the measure of his knowledge. They have occupied him all day & he has only completed half but he does seem reasonably well-prepared. Still wary tho of taking on an assistant whom I must educate continually. A. says an assistant at least makes a useful sounding-board but if I wish for conversation I would rather talk to A. who does not need matters explained to him every half-minute. But it seems I can rely on Cam. to do the misc. chores that otherwise absorb my time. A few students have come and Durham and Sallybank will bring their Scholars & Fellows but most who have come to KB are underclassmen who have not even completed their 2nd year exams or blown their glass equipment. They cannot be relied upon for more than rote work & washing mortars.

Supplies will be a problem. Oil will be the most difficult to obtain. The Crown's Order of National Requisition compels the Talisman refinery to supply us but that was a quantity fit for 2. For 40 or 50 or maybe more I do not know--

I cannot manage any of it. This is not my place.

"Oh," said Cecelia. She nudged one of the small craft with her boathook. It clunked against its fellows where they all lay lodged like a drift of flotsam in front of the laboratory's quay.

"Indeed," said Piero from the shore.

"The whole Academy?"

"Hardly," said Piero. "Some number of students - then some Scholars, a handful of Fellows, and two of the Masters."

"Please don't tell me I'm supposed to feed them all," said Cecelia.

"I assume Mrs. McKibben and the other house matrons will do for such things," said Piero mournfully. In truth he knew nothing of what arrangements were being made. Surely no one could be expecting him to handle that. The sheer magnitude of the last two days' events left him dizzy. All he could do was place a desperate trust in someone, somewhere, knowing what was going on.

He knelt and pushed helplessly at the nearest hull. It rolled and he tottered forward alarmingly, flailing his way back onto solid stone before he ended up in the river.

"I see," said Cecelia. She prodded again at the clutter of boats tied up at the quayside. "I hate to bother you when you and Master Sokolov are so busy, but..." She cast another glance out from under the laboratory, looking for the thin sliver of crescent moon sinking into the remains of the sunset. "It's almost time, and there must be somewhere I can dock..."

Piero sighed and returned to the chaos that had by now spilled out into the deserted street in front of the lab. Night had fallen and temporary arc-lamps had been strung between Kaldwin's Bridge and the Pratchett warehouse. Dozens of people in Academy robes moved along the lighted path on mysterious errands, shivering as they darted between buildings. After their nightmare flight from the aborted oil fire Piero wasn't certain how he felt about advertising so boldly that this area was still
inhabited. Most of his life he had avoided trouble through keeping his head down, turning a blind eye, and mostly having nothing worth stealing. Now it seemed he would be a target whether he wished it or not.

After several fruitless minutes searching for someone who could tell him whether he could move the craft moored beneath the lab, and more importantly, how he might go about it, Piero gave up and directed Cecelia round to the pier beneath the warehouse. The wood and stone dock beneath the building reached deep into the Wrenhaven, looking ridiculously oversized without any of Pratchett's fishing fleet tied up to unload its catch. The electric lifts rattled chains in the wind above their heads, stuck now halfway up to the great doors in the warehouse where they once carried their loads of fish.

Cecelia moored her skiff at one of the huge posts and handed up a bundle from the prow to Piero. The height of the dock forced him to lie down on the slick wood and reach both arms over the edge to grab it. He felt hard angles beneath the cloth. Cecelia scrambled up after. She leaned out over the edge of the dock and craned her neck to check first down, then up the river.

"I suppose this'll do," she said at last. "Don't worry, I can manage the rest."

Piero meanwhile had unwrapped the cloth. Enough spare light spread from the street behind him to make out a boxy metal shape. "What is this?" he said, turning it curiously. He sniffed and a smell of some active compound met his nose. He tapped. The sound that came back was metallic and hollow.

"Oh, please don't--" said Cecelia, reaching for it, but Piero turned away and held it in the air. He found a small lever on one side; when he moved it, louvers opened on the top. He tilted it to look in the opened vent.

"It's a lantern," he said, in surprise and some satisfaction. "How curious." Cecelia sighed and dropped her hands to her side. "But it's far too light to contain an oil tank," murmured Piero to himself. "I wonder how the light is made?"

"Please don't break it?" said Cecelia.

Piero dropped to sit cross-legged on the dock, holding the box in his lap as he searched for a latch. Cecelia only sighed again and sat next to him, craning her neck again to look down the river to where the last slice of moon was dropping quickly towards the horizon.

"How are you - faring, then?" she asked Piero.

He looked up from his prize and considered the query. "I have an assistant," he said at last.

"You do? That sounds good," said Cecelia. "Do you, um, like him?"

Piero's fingers at last found a small catch on the side of the box. He squinted and tried to slip it, but the cold metal stuck. He worked it back and forth, trying to loosen the mechanism.

"I do not know yet," he said, remembering that he had been asked a question. "I suppose I am meant to teach him. His name is Sebastian Camberley. He was Anton's idea, really. Everyone seems in charge of my life except me." He gave the catch a frustrated jerk. Metal squealed and the side of the box popped off.

"Camberley?" repeated Cecelia. "As in, the Atherbrooke Camberleys?"

"Hm?" said Piero, his exploration of the newly-revealed interior temporarily stilled. "The what?"

"Atherbrooke, it's an estate," said Cecelia. "I knew a girl who worked out there once. There's a
family called Camberley that has a great estate in the north, near the Morley coast. I think the head is an earl or...he's a noble something, at least."

Piero's memory at last fulfilled its duties, and he remembered Adelle White at that disastrous party. *Listen, I've a wager on with Lord Camberley that I was hoping you would settle.*

"Oh dear," he muttered to himself, cringing as much in remembered embarrassment as anything else. "Surely it must be a different family, though."

"No, you know, I do remember something else," said Cecelia, clicking her fingers. "Molly said there was a fifth son or something of the like and he was always in the kitchen making a mess. He had a room and none of the maids were to clean it, because he did his experiments there. She said she looked in once and it was all like an apothecary and there was dead things everywhere."

"Oh," said Piero, crumpling in on himself a little bit further. That did sound like the apartments of a natural philosopher. Not only a graduated Scholar, but the son of some lord - he thrust his hands into the lantern to distract himself, searching out the ampoules of whatever chemicals must drive it.

Cecelia sat up straighter. "The moon's down," she hissed. "Quick, the lantern."

"Wait - but I--" Piero protested as she yanked the box from his hands, grasped something inside it and pulled down sharply. He heard a smash of breaking glass and a pale green witchlight kindled within. Cecelia dropped the lantern onto the dock with its louvered end facing down the river, her hand poised on the lever at the side. Piero got down on his hands and knees and peered in.

"Piero!" protested Cecelia. "Please don't block the light!"

"White phosphorus in an evacuated vial, then exposed to air," said Piero, sitting back on his haunches with a satisfied nod.

"Shh," hissed Cecelia. She had gone quite still and was now utterly focused on the view down the river. With the moon down the water had gone an inky black that Piero did not like to look at for too long. He lifted his eyes to the banks instead. The Wrenhaven should have been lined with light from the arc-lamps along the streets of the city; but now, Piero noted with a sudden chill, much of it had gone wholly dark. The quarantined dead zones were eating through the city like scabrous tumors, a spreading dark gangrene that resisted all attempts at amputation.

A pale green flare broke the blackness for a second, so quick and gone that Piero thought at first it must be some lapping wave. Then it came again, and again; a pattern of three short, then one long, then two short.

Cecelia exhaled. She worked the louvers of the lantern, close, open, close, open, signaling back. The flashes came again, and then Piero heard at last a faint splashing above the rush of the river.

"This aint where youse to be," hissed a voice in the dark. Piero nearly jumped out of his skin. A shadow slid up to the dock with barely a sound.

"Here's good as any," replied Cecelia. "How's the load?"

"All 'ere," said the hissing, spitting voice, and the source of it moved closer to the lantern-light. Piero recoiled. A slim, crabbed little figure swarmed over the wide raft it had poled up silently to the dockside. It had to be either a wizened child or a stunted adult, and its gender was impossible to read under the tattered assortment of scavenged clothing and nautical tackle that draped it. In the witchlight its eyes glimmered a spectral green, its skin pasty and drowned.
Cecelia laid a small bag before the lantern, pulling down the cloth to reveal a cluster of stoppered vials. Thick liquid sloshed inside. The kid spat into the Wrenhaven. "Extra tariff," it leered. "Special handlin'."

"You gets the price we agreed on and not a drop more," declared Cecelia.

"You can't say nuffin," argued the kid. "We got the cargo. If you don't wants it we find someone what does."

Cecelia laughed. "Stride's gone proper barking if she thinks anyone else will swap good elixir for a load of rocks and flowers. She ain't the only blockade runner in Dunwall an' she could stand to remember that. You don't want your pay, take your scrawny arse back there and tell her."

"You don't wants to be talkin that way to Lizzy Stride," warned the kid.

"And she don't want to make an enemy of the Royal Physician," retorted Cecelia. "He'll witch her up good an' proper. Take what you're owed or get and don't come back."

The kid spat again. "Where's my ride?" Cecelia pointed to where the small skiff was moored. "Feh." The kid tossed the mooring rope of the raft to Cecelia and scooped up the bottles in the same motion, adding the bag to its drape of patchwork clothing. Before Cecelia had the raft fastened it had leapt neatly to the other skiff and unmoored it.

"Wait," said Piero, as the kid turned the boat into the current. The kid paused. Piero sat crouched at the edge of the dock. "If I wanted to get whale oil in the city, where would I go?" he asked.

The kid barked another laugh. "How much more elixir you got, guv?"

"As much as I need."

The kid chewed over the idea. "Word is some folk knocked over a fat hoard the bluebottles were sittin' on up in Smelter's Bend few nights back 'n all us got a piece of it. You could prolly swap for some of that lot."

"Bluebottles?" said Piero out of the side of his mouth.

"City Watch," supplied Cecelia.

"Smelter's Bend was the attempted arson they called Anton and I to attend to," said Piero. "Other than that?" he asked the kid.

The kid shrugged, circling the skiff at the limit of the pale circle cast by the lantern. "Rob the Tower, mate? Used to be you could skim some glow off th' sewers outta the refineries, but theyse no-go now."

"Why can't you go in the sewers?"

"Weepers, mate. Trill, guv, you don't get out much, yeh? Sewers is full o' Weepers, even them Bottle Street Boys legged it. Theyse all gone down there now, 'n good riddance. Aint right, them."

"The Weepers are going down into the sewers? Why?"

"The fuck I know? I wish 'd go faster, is all."

"But you can't think of another place."
The kid shrugged again. "Matchstick says Jenny Dreck says them sleevey gits at the 'cademy done a runner, but they got them big walls and aint nobody gone round there yet. Word on the water is there's a posse up in Dabney what's looking t'deel with some o' them toffs in Candlemire, like as not they'll take some glow offa that lot. Drop me a bit more dosh and I'll grab yeh a jar, guv."

"Not necessary," said Piero. The kid circled back to the dock, eyes gleaming expectantly. "Oh. Um." Piero patted his many pockets absently. Perhaps the kid took payment in scrap wire and mildly interesting rocks. "I do not - uh--" Cecelia flipped a small coin to the kid, who snatched it out of the air. "Thank you."

The coin vanished into the kid's many pockets, but the skiff came to a halt in front of the lantern and the pale eyes stayed fixed on Piero. "Hey, I do ken yeh!" the kid burst out, leaning on the pole. "Youse that mad speccy doctor what lived in Pearl Street 'n paid fer river krusts! Bucktooth said he got a big one off the breaker what was glowin' n' shit an' you gave him half a coin fer it!"

"Er," said Piero.

"An' Jenny Dreck says when Popeye Dick got the side of his head stove in the Eels took 'im round to your place 'n you popped his eye back in neat as rain!" rambled the kid gleefully. "An' one time Yellowband and them Hatters got this big safe an' they didn't know awt to do for it, so theyse went round and you sold 'em this green piss that ripped it up fair! But then Yellowband spilled some an' Jenny says it melted his hand right off! Cor!"

Cecelia was staring at him now. Piero felt her gaze hot on his skin. He cringed back into the shadows. "Um. Well. I am g-glad it was, er, effective."

"Fuck me," said the kid, still leaning on the pole. "Matchstick was sure youse was dead."

"N-n-not yet."

The kid nodded as if he had imparted some great wisdom. "Too right, yeh? Aint we all." It cogitated deeply for a moment. "Oy, guv, will yeh do up my teeth like Boss Lizzy? Like, up in points? Cor, that'd be wicked! Jenny would spit!"

"M-maybe l-later," said Piero, voice barely above a whisper.

"Yeh, awright," said the kid, sounding disappointed. The skiff slipped again into motion. Cecelia closed the louvers of the lantern and the river kid vanished into the dark.

"Well, at least that's sorted," said Cecelia, stowing the lantern. She stood and planted her hands on her hips with evident relief and no small measure of satisfaction.

"Please do not tell Anton about that," burst out Piero. Eyes on his skin, watching, measuring. Even in the darkness he felt too exposed.

"About what?"

"About that - about - recognizing me, and..." Piero trailed off miserably. "All those things I did - it is not...appropriate. For a natural philosopher."

"You did live in Pearl Street though, didn't you?" asked Cecelia. "I remember Lydia talking when--" She cut off suddenly.

"Just - please."
"I won't, I won't," said Cecelia, surprised at his vehemence. The raft of alchemical supplies clunked invisibly against the dock and she checked the mooring knot. "I guess I have to find those house-matrons now," she said to herself. She seemed to take in her surroundings for the first time. "Um - do you mind showing me the way back?"

"Oh," said Piero. He swept an arm to indicate the black oblong that rose above them, the building's blunt end hanging over the water. "This is the Pratchett warehouse, by the way. I suppose it is ours, now." He retraced his steps back up to the street, Cecelia following with him. As the flush of immediate embarrassment faded, something else the kid had said began to nag at him.

" 'Them toffs in Candlemire,' " he repeated. "Cecelia, are there any of the gentry in that area?"

"They aren't so poor there, but they aren't rich," said Cecelia. "It's just some houses and some shops and then the weavers down by the river. I don't know any high families or rich folks who live there."

"I do," said Piero. "Please find me a bird. I have a message for the Ladies' Technical College."

* * *

17th of Da.

Pt. warehouse nearly ready. The students have begun to move. Cam. completed his assigned tasks w/a modicum of competence. I meant next to set him to inventory Cc.'s supplies & the warehouse but a complication has arisen. In all the madness of the Academy's displacement we delayed in administering our experimental doses at Coldridge. It would be much easier to work after some of this chaos has dispersed but there are certain timelines that cannot be disregarded: it takes a fixed number of days for the specimen to respond to any treatment & we cannot afford further delay. I do not know how much faith to place in B.'s maths but the arithmetic is simple enough. Of her 80 days only 37 remain.

Fortunately the dosing of subjects is a routine matter, it is the followup examinations & autopsies which require a skilled mind. A. & I have agreed to dispatch Cam. + students to Coldridge tomorrow. I am sure they will not like to go but we must all do things we do not like and anyway there will be guards there and all they must do is get the specimens to take their draughts.

I have conceived of a plan to avoid this in future & I mean to express it to A. when next I have a chance; but I do not know how he will respond. I wish I could be certain he will see the reason in it. But I have always prided myself on my ability to detach personal sentiment from the problem at hand, a trait sadly uncommon in the general population, and while A. shares this virtue on the whole I am afraid that at times his emotions run stronger than mine.

Piero caught Anton on the ground floor of the warehouse near midday, shouting at a crew of underclassmen. Anton had asked his opinion yesterday on a sketch to transform a jellied-eel still to brew elixir and from the sheet-metal Parthemooore was teaching the hapless boys to weld Piero guessed he was implementing it. Sparks poured across the concrete floor and the blinding white of an arc-welder threw the tangles of piping and valves into stark relief. Anton had been moving nonstop since the Academy's dismissal, hardly pausing to sleep or eat, and beneath the haughty demeanor of the Head Master Piero read exhaustion to an ever-mounting degree.

Piero wormed his way through the spiral of activity to Anton's side, touched him lightly on the arm and murmured, "Can we speak?"
Anton inclined his head for a moment and said, "Upstairs."

No one was working on the upper level for the moment, but the doors at the end of the building had been thrown open in a rather optimistic attempt to air out the reek of fish. An electric cargo-lift still hung frozen beyond them. Once tons of fresh and flopping eel, hagfish, spikefin, whitehead, and whatever else Pratchett's fleet had scraped off the seafloor had come sliding through those huge doors, spilling into the gutting-tables and catch-basins where dozens of men labored with knife and hook to break it down; the meat flowing one way and the offal the other, dumped down troughs into the vats below or out into the river again to feed another crop of fish. Now it all stood dead and silent, framed in winter sunlight pouring through the tall arched windows.

"Having second thoughts about sending the boys to Coldridge?" said Anton. "It's only dosing, even underclassmen should be able to manage that."

"You said the Masters had been delayed by complications with the infected at the Academy," began Piero, reciting the words he had prepared. "The plague entered the dorms and some number of students and faculty took sick."

"Yes?" Anton's brows drew together in a concerned frown. "If it's transmission you're worried about, anyone who might have been infected is still there--"

"No, that is precisely what I mean," interrupted Piero. "I think we should bring them here."

"What?" The frown became total perplexity. "You were opposed to the first batch coming here at all, now you want more?"

"The infected. We should bring the infected here."

"Why?"

Piero took a deep breath. "Because it is easier than Coldridge."

Anton stiffened, standing up straight from where he had been leaning against a table. The confusion melted into a strange, narrow-eyed uncertainty. "You're talking about experimenting on them," he said at last.

"All the students will have had basic anatomy courses," listed Piero patiently. "They will be much better equipped to report on the advancement of their own illnesses. They will take their draughts without complaint. They are young and newly-infected, and should live longer than prisoners on their last legs--"

"They aren't criminals," said Anton. "They've done nothing wrong. They're just boys and you're saying we should use them as lab rats."

"I am saying they are going to die anyway," said Piero. "They might as well do so for a purpose."

"Cold."

"Accurate."

Anton paced out between the aisles of gutting tables still slick from their last load. The winter wind gusted through the open doors, making Piero shiver. Overhead the carcass hooks swayed and clinked together. "You're right," said Anton finally. "Void preserve us, but you're right." He sighed. "To be honest, I'd been..." He spread his hands helplessly. "And surely it's better than turning them out on the street or letting the Watch dump them in some 'quarantine' pit."
"The auxiliary offices outside the warehouse will suit as a hospital," offered Piero. "I have been examining them and they can be easily fitted with secure partitions."

"That doesn't mean it's going to be an easy sell," warned Anton. "Or salable at all. It's one thing to dose thugs and smugglers. It's another for the son of a gentleman to see his colleague on the slab."

"We will all be on the slab if we do not get over these kinds of qualms."

"Do me a favor. Don't say that out loud."

* * *

18th of Da.

A. is not feeling well altho he will not admit it. He is distracting himself w. Ac. matters but he has not had a drink in 10 days now and it is telling on him. Have told Cc. not to fetch him anything even if he requests it however I suspect A. could obtain alcohol in short order w/out any of us knowing if he so chose. If he were my patient I would prescribe temporary confinement in a sanitarium but he would certainly refuse to go even if we were not in the midst of a crisis. I have seen enough drunkards and habber-weed chewers to know it is not an easy task to do what he is set on doing even in the best of situations. But A. is A. and I have some hope he will manage out of sheer obstinacy.

Durham & Sallybank delayed by quarantine and now coming on the 20th. Combined they are bringing 4 Fellows 9 Scholars 1 student (Durham claims he is gifted) + 2 Technical College staff 1 house-matron & 1 librarian. A. is a little pleased to see "old 'Rare Air' " as he calls Sallybank. We are both less happy w/the idea of Durham but I suppose he is a Master and a physician (even if he is mostly wrong) and he will not be in KB anyway. I have read some of Durham's publications and he did not impress; he is much invested in the hydraulic view that reduces medicine to a matter of plumbing and fails entirely to consider the nervous or sensitive element.

The students have begun preparing the auxiliary building for use as a hospital. They do not yet know its true purpose.

Another Master has already arrived. It seems my warning came too late.

They had to keep the cargo barges waiting out on the Wrenhaven for an hour while the clutter of smaller craft moored beneath the Kaldwin's Bridge laboratory were cleared, and even then only one at a time could dock at the quay. The wide, shallow-bottomed barges rode low in the water under their burden of machinery even after they had disgorged their passengers. In the end three of the boats had to be redirected to the Pratchett dock so that the cargo hoists could be used to move their contents.

"Typical," muttered Anton under his breath as he watched the floating convoy from the roof, still clutching the paper the messenger-sparrow had brought only a few hours before. "Everyone else has to drop what they're doing when she shows up."

The object of Anton's annoyance was just distinguishable as an indigo spot near the square prow of the last and most heavily-laden barge. Even after the rest had been redirected the women manning that craft insisted they tie up at the laboratory and the laboratory only.

Anton may have been grumbling to himself, but both he and Piero were waiting in the foyer of the Kaldwin's Bridge laboratory when Bentham ascended the stairs from the dock. After Bentham came
a small procession of women carrying crates and chests that must have been unloaded from the barge. They stacked their burdens against one wall and waited there, talking quietly amongst themselves while Bentham headed straight to where Anton and Piero waited. She stood rail-straight and tension amplified her usual odd, arrhythmic motion.

"We will not prevail upon your hospitality for our own housing," she said by way of greeting.

That Piero believed. He had recognized the lieutenant Henrietta-called-Etta in her royal-blue robes alighting from the first barge to dock. She had found both Cecelia and Mrs. McKibben shortly thereafter and a team had fanned out into the abandoned buildings in the area. He suspected that before nightfall the shutters would have been prised off at least one and the interior made roughly habitable.

"Did they get much?" asked Anton.

Bentham's dark gaze hardened, looking past them. "Scaled the walls in the night. Tried to set fire to most of the campus," she answered. "We had already secured the personnel and the books, and the buildings are stone. But we lost food and oil stocks and a great deal of other supplies. Repairs will need to be made." She tugged briefly at the end of one of her beaded braids. "The Hall has been damaged," she said, quieter. "But not compromised." The Mill is intact, she meant. The looters had not broken through into its underground citadel.

"Well. Fine," said Anton. "We shan't mind more Technical staff in the warehouse."

"I will need accommodation in this laboratory," said Bentham.

"Absolutely not," said Anton in surprise. "We're full to capacity. You can manage your own people."

"They will manage themselves. I require secure access to an oil line to continue my research."

"Oh no," breathed Anton. "You did not bring that, here."

"I have brought such of the Half-Size Adjustable Looms and the ancillary equipment as I could," said Bentham flatly. "I will need assistance transporting them."

"You do not expect me to house that thing," said Anton. His expression had gone thunderous and he glared at the stack of crates as if he could sense the presence of Bentham's machines.

"It is necessary for my work."

"Your work!?!?" exploded Anton. "Do you honestly believe this is the time to continue your damned games!??"

"Not all efforts against the plague are waged with scalpel and vial," hissed Bentham, dropping her voice and glancing round at the others circulating through the lab. "I require an oil line, and a sturdy floor, and a room that can be secured."

"And I require a bottle of King Street Brandy and a night at the Cat with Esma Boyle. Neither of which are going to happen."

"Small," snapped Bentham loudly, and Piero was trying to puzzle out what sort of insult that was when one of the women waiting with the cargo answered, "Yes, ma'am."

"Bring chest 17."
"Yes, ma'am." The woman selected one of the heavy chests and brought it over to where they stood. She lowered it to the dusty red rug in front of Bentham and retreated back to the pile.

Bentham knelt beside the chest and Piero followed suit, a trifle nervous. Anton scowled at her until curiosity at last won out and he knelt as well. Bentham unlocked the padlock with another of her curious punched-metal strips and cracked the lid. Inside Piero saw roll after roll of cream-colored paper tape, wrapped in tight spools and speckled with holes. Against one wall a stack of loose paper had been wedged in. A familiar cipher covered the pages.

"Those are Burrows' papers," said Piero, shocked.

Bentham nodded. "That, and the records of the Watch, and all the records of the Dead Counters. After your report on the change in the disease, Corvo Attano asked me to turn my resources to uncovering the source of it." She dropped the lid of the chest. "But now I am severed from my Mill, and I require..." She swallowed hard. "Assistance."

"A fool's errand. You can't calculate a cure," scoffed Anton. But he kept glancing back at the trunk as if he could see through the lid to the cryptic tapes.

"You have your charge from the Lord Protector and I have mine," said Bentham coolly.

"Can you use the workspace here?" said Piero, gesturing towards the work area beneath the mezzanine where Anton's projects sprawled half-built. A few students still had their cots strewn across the floor and stray luggage and equipment were stacked in corners. Anton opened his mouth to voice some objection, but before he could say anything Bentham replied, "No. The area must be secured."

"Oh." Piero rocked back into a sitting position on the floor, considering. Kaldwin's Bridge was built to an open plan. There were not many rooms that could be closed off, let alone locked. His bedroom, perhaps, or Anton's quarters - but neither had an oil line; the fourth floor laboratory - no, they required that; the greenhouse - no, the floor was too weak; the only other locking room was--

"Fine," spat Anton. "You can use my studio."

Bentham's eyes widened. Anton glared at her as if daring her to make some harsh remark. "Thank you," she said, taken aback.

Anton scowled. "But not until I clear everything out of it, you hear? And - if anything is broken, I'll - well, it had better not be."

"Nothing will be broken," promised Bentham quietly.

"As long as it's only a few of them," continued Anton. "And you're just working with the records. If Attano told you to."

Bentham gave a single sharp nod and stood. Piero and Anton followed suit. The mathematician seemed to have run out of things to say; instead, after a brief, awkward moment of silence, she gave them another nod and walked past them back towards the pile of her equipment. Her assistants stood as she returned, and one of them came over and gave Piero and Anton an apologetic glance as she retrieved the chest. Another hurried out the front door of Kaldwin's Bridge, no doubt heading towards the Pratchett dock where the other machines - the Half-Size Adjustable Looms - had been brought ashore.

"Waste of bloody time," muttered Anton. "Now I'll have to move my canvases. Go get the lift and the cart, will you?"
Piero opened his mouth to reply; then took in the assistants still waiting with Bentham's gear and simply went to call the lift. When he came back pushing the cart Anton had already unlocked the studio door and disappeared within. Piero stood in the doorframe for a moment before Anton caught sight of him and waved him and the cart inside. "And close that door," Anton told him.

Piero did, and stood for a moment with his back against it. He had not been back to Anton's studio since that first day in Kaldwin's Bridge. Anton had been in and out over the past two months, but his visits were brief and inevitably put him in a bad mood. The long room was only a few meters wide but ran nearly the entire length of the building, its ceiling and outer wall broken up by large panes of iron-banded glass, and from its contents Anton had used it as much as a second laboratory as he did a place to paint. Beyond the windows the Wrenhaven wound away upstream. The meager winter sunlight lit up the brilliant colors strewn across the floor where the looters had smashed open jars of pigment. Canvases still lay ripped in corners, stacks of old sketches toppled in snowfalls of paper. But thrown in with the ruined artist's materials were plant specimens, interesting rocks, old books, broken pottery, and even stranger devices.

Anton had moved about halfway down the room and begun retrieving sketchbooks and stacks of paper stored in apparently random locations. "Bentham can clean up if she likes," he said as he worked. "I don't have time to check the oil line, either. She can deal with that." He collected an armful of paper, picked his way back to where Piero stood next to the door, and dumped it onto the cart.

"I cannot believe you did that," blurted out Piero.

"Better than having her run loose," said Anton as he went to get the next stack. "Are you going to help or not?"

"I thought you hated her." Piero pushed the cart a few more hesitant steps inside. A stick of charcoal crunched underfoot.

"I don't hate her." Anton extracted a small but intact canvas from under a cabinet and passed it to Piero. "We simply fail to see eye to eye on certain matters." He sighed and for a moment his face sagged into exhaustion. "But - if she can help..."

Piero stole a moment to hold the canvas up in the sunlight. A rocky mountain slope, and beyond it, only blue sky. "What sort of matters?"

Anton threw him a skeptical glare that all but said Come now. "I know you saw the Mill. Don't pretend you're comfortable having those machines in here."

"I - well. It is..."

"It's disturbing as hell. She's playing with forces none of us understand. Everything about that damn thing is reckless and lethal and worst of all she doesn't care." He braced his shoulder against one cabinet that slumped against a second and shoved. Wooden joints squealed. The cabinet wobbled dangerously for a moment, but thumped back down onto its own four legs.

"It is hardly fair for you to condemn her for heresy."

"That's as may be," allowed Anton. "But if you ever wake and find the world in flames, it'll be Lillabet Bentham holding the match."

"She is only a mathematician," argued Piero as Anton passed him the notebook that had been pinched in between the two cabinets. "What damage can be done with numbers? And the Mill is - I
will grant you it is unsettling, and uncanny, and powerful in - its own way. But it is still only a
machine."

"Hah. As much as you're only a chemist."

Piero shrugged. "Well, I am."

Anton froze in his archaeology as if he had heard a shot, tense enough that Piero darted a glance over
his shoulder. He saw nothing, heard nothing, and his brow furrowed into even deeper confusion
when he looked back and saw the alarm on the man's face.

Anton set down the stack of papers he had been rifling through. "Piero," he said with a deceptive
gentleness. "You do know that you're dangerous. Don't you?"

Piero blinked. "I am not certain what you mean," he said, bewildered by the sudden shift in
conversation.

Anton stood up from his half-crouch. "Why on earth do you think Ramsey was after you?"

"To set me up as a-a-a rival to you, I suppose." Piero nearly flinched away from that cold focus. He
had forgotten what it felt like to be the target of Anton's full attention. "To expand his commercial
enterprises."

Anton shook his head, torn between the same alarm and a kind of bafflement. "You can't be serious.
Piero. You can't be serious." A hint of incredulous laughter ran beneath his words. "You think he
was just after money? I spent three years keeping the design of the arc pylon secret and you built one
out of junk. Do you even understand what that kind of power means?"

"It is not a-a-any sort of p-p-power, it is only--" Piero had to catch his breath and swallow his
stammer. All at once Anton's face seemed a stranger's. "W-well, I am highly gifted in natural
intelligence, of course. But that is hardly the same thing."

"What's the first thing Havelock had you make for him? Hm? What was the first thing," demanded
Anton.

"A sword for Corvo. But that's not--"

"The second?"

"The crossbows. And - the mask. But..." Piero nearly laughed. "Why are we discussing this? I am a
natural philosopher, not a soldier or a killer like Corvo. Not a threat to anyone," he added, a bitter
twist to his mouth. People who were threats weren't pushed about like pawns in someone else's
game.

Anton had crossed all the way back to where Piero waited with the cart. The alarm in him had only
strengthened, and a deliberate intensity crackled around him, grey eyes sharp as the glint off a
scalpel's edge. "You are a weapon sure as that pylon," he declared, "and there are men out there
happy to do whatever it takes to control such a thing."

"Anton, you're acting strange," protested Piero. The memory of him raising the crossbow flashed all
too vividly across Piero's mind.

"Because it's important that you understand this!" barked Anton. "You have to think about your
actions! You're not some crackpot living in a Pearl Street garrett anymore--"
"I cannot believe you are lecturing me on this again!" snapped Piero, stung. The blood rose in his cheeks, the hot flush of anger racing through his veins. "You are a fine one to talk of considering your actions!"

"Because you never seem to listen!"

Piero planted his hands on his hips, fury rising to meet the condescension in Anton's voice. "I have heard enough! Yes, I have built weapons! Does that make me a criminal? I have done what I needed to do to survive. Not all of us have the luxury of a royal salary!"

"You are a part of this world whether you want to be or not," said Anton, like a judge handing down a sentence. "You can't treat it as a lantern-show from which you may come and go as you please."

"And? What does that entail?" sneered Piero. "Would you have me cease all my research lest any of it be dangerous? Keep it all a secret so that none of it may ever be of use? Or perhaps you would like me to submit it all to your judgement to see if it is fit--"

"You have a responsibility!" shouted Anton.

"To what!? Must I police every use someone makes of my creations? Shall I ensure that it is only the deserving who drink my remedy? I never agreed to any such thing!" Piero's voice rose to a desperate, fever pitch. "No element of natural philosophy is itself malicious. If humans twist it after the fact - how is that my fault?"

"You know full well the use to which it will be put--"

"I will not live too paralyzed by the evil of others to dare any new creation! So what would you have me do!?"

The echoes rang down the long glass room. Anton should have shouted back. Anton should have been angry. Piero understood that part of him. But instead his face crumbled into a hollow, terrible sadness, and Piero's heart plummeted with it.

"I would have you understand that the things you do have consequences," Anton said into the sudden quiet. "Good or bad, you can't pretend they don't exist. And no matter how hard you try or how far you run, they'll come back around. An awful lot of people had to die before I figured that out. I'd rather you not do the same."

Piero groped for words and found none. Inexplicable heat burned at the corners of his eyes. A lump wedged in his throat; he cleared it and mumbled, "I h-h-have to g-go back to the l-lab."

Anton watched him for another moment. Then he turned away and returned to his slow salvage. Piero cleared his throat again and ducked out of the room. Bentham's assistants were still sitting on their trunks and crates, but when he emerged they quieted suddenly and looked in his direction. He avoided their gazes and hurried up the stairs.

He did not go back to the lab. Instead he went to his bedroom on the second floor and pulled the door shut and flung himself down onto his cot, trying to quell the maelstrom roaring in his head and heart. It is not fair! he screamed inside his mind, biting his lip lest any sound escape. I am not something dangerous to be contained! Ramsey's eyes glittered in his memory, the knowing gleam, the hint of smirk. Even now it turned his stomach to recall it; and part of his sickness came, he knew, from the idea that only a handful of months ago he would have leapt at Ramsey's offer. All of them had only wanted what he could make. He pressed the corner of the blanket hard against his eyes, trying to force back the salt tears that welled up. Havelock bartering with Teague Martin. It's a waste
to get rid of them both. Even Corvo regarded him with an appraising eye, measuring what use he might be.

I am beyond your games! he wanted to yell at all of them. I don't want anything to do with your world! Why should he be constrained by the petty politics of lesser minds? Why should his high and lonely quest to plumb the secrets of the universe be crippled by these pointless, mundane concerns? Human society was violent and messy and thoroughly unwelcoming, and he owed it nothing. He did not want to craft the tools of an assassin. He wanted to mix his chemicals without wondering if a city hung in the balance. He wanted to play with his Door to Nowhere and tend the plants in the greenhouse and finally finish his monograph on the river krusts. He wanted to tinker with the new signal boxes and perform a whale vivisection and--

and be left in peace.

The man who has his hand on that tiller, steers the Empire.

Once upon a time it had been so simple. He hated Anton Sokolov; he lived to make his name; the world conspired against him, and one day he would have his revenge. Now some desperate part of him wished he could reclaim that blissful ignorance. His gut rolled as if it wanted to vomit up the turmoil within him. Sweat broke out along his skin and the fever grew hot at the base of his skull, blurring the edges of his sight. He shivered all over and drew up his knees against his chest. Reality crushed him inwards as though he had sunk to the abyssal floor. If he looked up perhaps he would see the weight of the ocean where it bore down on him. He huddled up as small as he could, folding in on himself. He wished it might swallow him up and wash all this away.

And a tiny corner of his mind cried I don't want you to look at me that way. I don't want to make you sound so sad.

* * *

19th of Da.

Cam. and the students left for Coldridge early this morning w/a Watch escort. W/luck they will not foul up the task too badly. In the meantime A. and I have been crafting the 2nd batch of baseline compounds which should be the last. Will need to travel to Coldridge ourselves to observe the results of the 1st testing group in 5 days. With luck we will not have to go to Coldridge again. A. is talking to Ac. personnel. Most of them I do not know & they do not speak to me. I think most of them still do not know who I am. But I know they are speaking of bringing the infected here.

A.'s plans for the transformation of the Pratchett machinery into serviceable stills for brewing elixir and remedy are being implemented and they are I must confess remarkable in their brilliance. I have made a few suggestions based on possible efficiencies I observed in the remedy compounding procedure and the Technical staff are all abuzz.

A. has arranged the studio to his satisfaction & B. is now ensconced within. B.'s personnel managed to load 5 machines + accessories into the barges and altho it has taken most of the day all 5 have finally been moved into A.'s studio. In transit she insisted the Adjustables be wrapped in canvas & she has also blacked out the glass of the studio to hide them from the river.

A.'s health remains poor. Sometimes I wonder if I ought to fetch him the drink he keeps himself from taking. It would breach both of our convictions but as the days count down I wonder... A. in his right mind today might be more needed than his well-being tomorrow.
Piero yawned as he finished the day's final entry in his logbook and slotted the last vial of the second batch of test compounds into its rack. He stood and stretched from his cramped position. His shoulders protested as they unbent. The fourth floor laboratory had gone dark around him save for the small arc-lamp he had lit on his bench. Stray light from outside drifted in through the slatted windows to cast intermittent shadows. A second arc-lamp burned where Anton had been working, but his familiar silhouette was absent. Piero frowned and queried his memory. Now that he thought on it, at some point his idle speculations had ceased to draw a response. Anton must have gone to tend to something.

Piero shrugged and began to cap and store all the reagents he had pulled out for the day's work, only to curse a few minutes later and search for the recording book. Anton's insistence on labeling every single vial and noting its completion both on the blackboards and in the recording book vexed Piero daily, but he could not deny that it made everything easier to find. Piero noted down the compound's name, number, and dosage and pasted the little square onto the glass, then finished returning the powders and liquids to their assigned cabinets. He checked that nothing had spilled and no burners or oil lines had been left open, then extinguished his arc-lamp. Now he was done.

He smothered another great yawn, trying to catch his breath as his fatigue made itself increasingly known, and wandered over to Anton's bench with the recording book. He drew a slash along the bottom of the list and wrote "BASELINES COMPLETED" in a large hand so that Anton could not miss it, then left the book on the bench open to that page. Full night had fallen outside but he was certain Anton would be back in the lab before long. The last few days Anton had been pushing himself with an almost frantic urgency, trying to prepare three or four delicate compounds at once, dashing off ideas as though he feared he would forget them in the next instant. He had even taken to reeling off the steps of whatever he was working on aloud to Piero as though walking him through the procedure. It could not possibly be healthy, but Piero was willing to tolerate whatever distracted him. At least it meant a great deal of work got done.

Piero left the lab and headed for the kitchen, still wrapped in his own thoughts. The strangeness that had descended upon Anton yesterday had dissipated by the next morning. He had made no mention of their argument in the studio and Piero was in no hurry to revive the discussion. They had returned to their work without missing a beat. But Anton's words still scratched at Piero's mind. Worse than the words, though, was the flat, hollow-eyed conviction with which he had delivered them. Piero had heard him take that tone only once before: when the man had spoken of Pandyssia. He had hoped to never hear it again. So many shadows hung over Anton Sokolov, and it chilled Piero to realize he still did not know what lengths they might drive him to. Every time he thought he had mapped out all the variations, Anton jumped in a direction he hadn't expected, jolted him with the reminder that he remained a separate being whose mind Piero could never truly know. How could he trust something he did not understand?

When he reached the second floor mezzanine he paused for a moment to enjoy the blissful silence. The Academy refugees had at last settled like roosting crows in the abandoned rooms of the Pratchett warehouse and the Bridge was quiet again. At dusk Camberley had returned from Coldridge with the students, exhausted and silent but otherwise intact, and though he had stopped before Piero on the quay as though he wished to speak, ultimately he had held his peace. Cecelia made no sound even when she was present, and now all that came to his ears was the creak and buzz of the lamps and the waterwheel's slow pulse. And a new sound winding between it: the shake and tremble of the Adjustables. The railing quivered minutely beneath his hands. After the Adjustables had been emplaced Bentham had vanished into the studio and not emerged since. The beat of the machines had begun shortly thereafter, and now all of the laboratory shuddered to it.

_Reckless and lethal and worst of all she doesn't care._
He pushed away the creeping unease, raided the kitchen pantry, and retreated to his bedchamber with the spoils. When he finished his small supper and made ready for bed, his gaze fell upon the Potterstead riverware bowl that Lord Ramsey had given him all those distant weeks ago. Part of, he now realized, the man's campaign to seduce Piero to his service; his campaign to use him for his own ends, for--

He snatched up the bowl in both hands, some fiery, primal impulse animating his limbs, some furious desire to smash it against the wall. Bright anger surged in his blood. But before he could dash it to pieces his sight caught in the deep glow of the Blue within, and his hands wavered. Instead he turned the smooth pottery over and over in his hands, watching the azure glaze catch the light. Memory rose unbidden: dawn over the low roofs that spilled down along the river; the sharp acid smell of the glazing workshops; the luxurious texture of wet clay; the blaze of the kiln. In his mind's eye he saw the potter laboring over the wheel to throw the bowl's shape, the artists who had laid down its white mountain bas-reliefs and picked out its delicate starry sky with hair-fine brushes.

He set the great blue bowl back down on the shelf and picked up his bottle of nerve tonic. The green liquid pooled around the bottom. He needed to compound more. Every morning he noted the necessity, but every day seemed to run through his fingers with no chance to do it.

He pulled the stopper and took a sip. Today had been long. Tomorrow would be longer. Tomorrow the Masters were coming. The numbing touch of the drug laced calm through his veins. He lay back against the pillow. As he sank into unconsciousness Anton's strangeness, the shadows that clustered thick around him, boiled up again to the surface of his mind.

*I am hardly one to talk of shadows,* he thought ruefully, and slipped under.

- - -

The sun sinks slowly behind the west bank of the Glaiwes. Reeds rustle in the cool wind of dusk. The riverwater makes soft sloshing sounds as it tugs at their roots, swirling thick mud, washing over frogs and salamanders and little fish biting at the last mayflies. And from the grassy banks as they slope away, the high and distant piping of childish voices, a blind and idiot sound.

Where's he gone?

*Run home to his mama again.*

Closer now, in among the shadowed green forest of the reeds, in among their woody stalks and threading roots, in beneath their nodding heads. In along the edges of the river, not quite land and not quite water, in to the secret world of dragonflies and herons and thin red snakes. In to where a boy curls in a huddled lump of misery, where hot tears splash into the river and startle the little fish.

The voices call to each other across fields where the scent of tilled earth hangs rich and heavy. *You see he had a fit when Bradley chucked his stupid book in the water?*

*I saw, swear he was foamin' at the mouth, like a mad dog or summat. One day he's gonna bite you.*

*Yeah, yeah, you'll catch bein' a weirdo too...*

Dusk stretches long fingers across the fields. The last sliver of red sun slides beneath a distant treeline. On the other bank the blue dies into indigo, into violet, and an ivory moon creeps up full and round. The wind blows with a slip of cold like a hidden knife.

*I'm tellin' you, he's run home. I'm bored.*
It's getting dark anyway. We can tell Overseer Falchion tomorrow.

I guess. Let's get out of here.

Alfie says his mom's putting on apple pie tonight too.

Yeh? Brilliant.

The wind stills. The world goes black against a glowing sky. The river calms to a deep blue mirror framed in the shadows of the reeds.

This - I remember-- what's your--

"What's your name?"

Piero!

"Piero?" whispered a voice in the darkness.

Piero sat bolt upright, clutching the blankets to himself. Blurry shadow pressed in around him. One hand groped desperately for his spectacles.

"W-who's th-there?" he stammered. A form detached itself from the deeper blackness. Icy fear welled up in his gut.

"Piero? Are you awake?" whispered a familiar voice.

"Corvo?" Piero fumbled for a match and lit the small candle on his nightstand. The Lord Protector blinked and shied away from the sudden brightness, his dark eyes wide. "Warn a man, will you!?"

"Sorry to wake you," murmured Corvo.

Piero breathed deeply, trying to calm his racing heart. He pressed the heel of one hand against his forehead. "I was dreaming of..." What was I dreaming of? "...What on earth are you doing in my bedchamber?"

"I had to see you quietly," said Corvo. "You and Sokolov."

Piero blinked. His thoughts still ran sodden with sleep. "It could not wait for morning?" he said stupidly.

"I'm afraid it can't," said Corvo. His expression turned grim. "We need the arc pylon."

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr user stillupsetoverlegacy drew me my first piece of fanart: a portrait of Miss Libby Bentham! It's super cool and I love her hair and I'm so happy that people care enough about this fic to draw art for it. YOU GUYS ARE THE BEST.
Hello friends! I apologize for the...five-month gap in updates, yikes. I had quite a bit on my plate for a while there, and then my primary computer suffered a bad hardware glitch and has been only intermittently available (the poor dear). But I'm back, and please enjoy the gift of some 37k words to make up for my absence. I actually completed this chapter a while ago, but had to hang on to it until I finished the next one, since they comprise a single long action sequence. So that means that Chapter 12 is also DONE and will be posted Monday morning.

Enjoy!

Sagittarius A-star (astronomy) The supermassive black hole that dwells at the heart of the Milky Way.

Piero fetched Anton himself. Corvo had been ready to do it, but Piero made the point none too delicately that after his abduction, Anton was unlikely to react well to a rude awakening from the Lord Protector.

"Eh? Chto?" mumbled Anton when he finally staggered to the door and opened it a crack. His eyes were bloodshot and his hair stuck up in a wild black fringe.

"Corvo is here," whispered Piero, and at that he saw Anton's eyes widen. "Meet me in the greenhouse."

By the time he went back to his room, found his warm clothing, and made his own way up there, Anton had gotten himself dressed and up the stairs. A perfectly serviceable chair sat next to the small elixir still, but Anton perched on the edge of a planter instead, stroking his beard and staring up through the glass. The moon was new and the winter night arced beyond the roof in a black canopy dusted with innumerable gleaming stars. Piero shivered at the sight and cast his gaze downwards, but the greenhouse at night was scarcely more reassuring. Without light either natural or artificial, the only illumination came from the distant arclights atop Kaldwin's Bridge proper, and the aisles of plants made thick and heavy shadows.

Piero closed the door behind him with a deliberate click. Anton looked down from his perusal of the cosmos. "Dunwall had better be on fire again," he said when he recognized Piero. "I just went to bed."

"Have you seen Corvo?" asked Piero, crossing between the rows of plants.

"I've been waiting," said Corvo behind him. Piero yelped and ducked sideways. Behind him Anton spat something vicious in Tyvian.

"For fuck's sake, Attano!" hissed Anton. "Can you not use a stinking door!?"

"I had enough trouble eluding your new houseguests," said Corvo as he stood from where he had
dropped down. "Is there something I ought to know?"

"Academy business," said Anton shortly. "You'd better have a good reason for this, Attano." Piero braced himself on the planter's edge and tried to catch his breath. Well, I am certainly awake now.

"We need the arc pylon," repeated Corvo.

Anton's eyes narrowed. "For what?"

"Does it matter what?" said Corvo. "Time's short. A skiff will dock at your quay shortly. Make whatever preparations you need in the meantime."

"It does matter, actually," snapped Anton. "It matters very much."

"Geoff will brief you when you arrive. Till then, consider it an order."

Anton's face drew down into the thunderous vanguard of an outburst. "Corvo, please," interjected Piero. "We must know what equipment to bring. What is this about?"

Corvo still frowned as if he were contemplating leaving as quickly as he'd come, but he said, "Geoff and Admiral Wentworth have been trying to track the source of the arsons. In the process they discovered something unnerving. The Weepers have nearly disappeared from the city."

"Oh, they are moving into the sewers," said Piero. Both of them looked at him in surprise. "I made inquiries of my own," Piero told them.

"I...see," said Corvo. "Piero is correct. The Watch discovered large numbers of them have congregated in the sewers throughout the city. And as of dusk tonight, Geoff reports that they have decided to move."

"Together?" said Piero, shocked.

"Impossible," said Anton.

"Nevertheless."

"Curnow is mistaken," dismissed Anton. "Weepers are incapable of higher-level planning--"

"Not to mention collective action--" added Piero.

"--so to suppose they are *migrating* in a deliberate manner is absurd," finished Anton.

"Nevertheless," repeated Corvo more forcefully. "Absurd or not, it's happening. They're moving, and they're moving fast. Towards the Flooded District. If they stick to the sewers, they'll emerge from what's left of Fairweather Square. They'll reach it by dawn. We have to be there before them."

"Impossible," murmured Piero.

"Fascinating," said Anton, his gaze turned inwards.

"I've seen what the new arc pylon can do," said Corvo. "Set it up in Fairweather Square tonight. Geoff will meet you there. And when the Weepers arrive, help him stop them."

"Why are they coming to the Flooded District?" wondered Piero.

"How in the Void should I know?" Corvo's jittering tension increased by the second. "But if they
should move to a populated area, it would be disastrous. We'll never seal all the sewers in time." In the shadows his eyes were black, his expression simple and severe. "We can't lose any more of the healthy population. Cut them off. Whatever it takes. Is that enough for you?" he added with a sarcastic twist.

"Where did we put the resonant chamber?" Anton asked Piero.

"On the fourth floor, I thought. We should bring the river gear," mused Piero. "It will be messy in the Flooded District."

"Be ready before dawn," ordered Corvo. "Whatever it takes."

"We will be," promised Piero.

Corvo dissolved into the shadows before he had taken two steps. The greenhouse's outer door opened and shut silently, and that was all.

"Well," said Anton. He sighed. "I need a bloody drink."

It took near an hour to assemble the various pieces they had stashed upstairs. Despite Corvo's urgency Piero found himself moving with a strange deliberation as he wrapped and stacked the components. They linked arms to carry the resonant chamber to the cargo lift and Anton left to fetch the firing circuit. Piero brushed his fingertips across the glass as he waited, lingering over the distorted shapes of the submerged antennas. The oil within rolled in a slow and ceaseless motion. A faint glimmer of electricity raised the hair on his arms, like the approach of a distant storm.

A breath of wind, but the surface of the river does not stir. The still water reflects the blue of evening. And then another blue...

When Anton did not return after a few minutes Piero threw the lever to send the lift to the basement and went to find him. The door between the fourth floor lab and Anton's third floor quarters leaned open a crack, letting out a slim thread of light. Piero pushed the door open with a tentative hand. Anton looked up from where he stood in front of his safe, but made no other move. Piero descended the steel staircase carefully, trying to ignore the tick of the massive clock that towered against the wall.

He could hardly distinguish Anton's bedchamber from a storage room. The heavy dresser that stood against one wall was the only piece of fine furniture there. Piero wondered if Anton had bought it wholesale in the same lot as the dining room. Nightstands piled high with books flanked the narrow bed and a dusty carpet made a soft patch on the cold wood. The clock ticked away in its niche, bare as its astronomical counterpart in the rooftop observatory. Fugitive canvases from the studio leaned against brick walls in a riot of color and form. A huge oil painting claimed the space over the dresser, unframed, showing an astonishing seascape. The steel knife of a new-style whaler sliced through storm-black waves to dance a deadly pas de deux with a harpooned leviathan trailing luminescent blood. The combatants pivoted in their wicked circle, linked by spear and chain; each fighting for its life, each fighting to drag the other down. Piero blinked. For a moment he had tasted the rain and the salt spray, heard the whale's bellowing rage.

When he approached, Anton handed him the delicate brass barrel of the firing circuit without looking away from the safe. Over his shoulder Piero saw a few books, a pile of papers, and other things: a gleam of gold, a handful of strange, intricate devices of no obvious purpose, small vials of curious fluids, chunks of carved bone. And in a worn leather holster, the object of Anton's attention: an old-fashioned naval service pistol.
"I took this off Captain Pabodie when he died," said Anton. He spoke as if he were reading a book aloud. His fingers moved over the gun in practiced movements as he talked, checking barrel and trigger. "Truth be told I took it off him a good deal before that. The venom of the beast that stung him drove him mad long before it killed him. I was afraid he'd shoot someone in his insanity. I was afraid he'd shoot me. He might have. Screaming to the men that I had dragged them to Pandyssia to die. Well, he was right. I had." His hands opened the breech, examined within, tested the smooth motion. "I should have put him out of his misery. But I'd never shot a man before. Back then. Despite all the rumors to the contrary." He snapped the breech closed and held the gun at arm's length, sighting down the barrel. "It's a good model, this pistol. Well, of course I think so. I designed it."

The intricate relays of the firing circuit pressed cold against Piero's hands. "Hopefully it will not come to that," he said.

Anton threaded the gunbelt around his waist and dropped a handful of cartridges into an inside pocket.

"Hopefully not," he said.

Down in the basement they unloaded the critical components onto the cart and wheeled them to the outside door. True to Corvo's words a cargo skiff already rocked at the quayside beneath the building. A figure rose from its seat at the tiller. "Hello, Piero," came a calm voice. "Wish we were talking under better circumstances."

"Who's this?" said Anton behind him, pushing the cart.

"Samuel Beechworth. He provided our transport at the Hound Pits," said Piero.

Samuel nodded to the Royal Physician. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

"He aided me quite a bit in my work with the river krusts," said Piero. "He knows the Wrenhaven better than any other man."

"That's a bit too high praise, I'm afraid," said Samuel. "But I do what I can. Corvo said you were bringing some sort of device?"

"The most delicate load is here," said Anton, drawing the cart up to the edge of the quay. "Watch the heaviest piece, will you. It's glass."

"Not a crack," Samuel assured him.

"One jog out of alignment and this whole affair is through," warned Anton.

Piero climbed back up the stairs as Anton and Samuel lashed down the first load. But when he reached the ground floor again Cecelia was waiting by the lift, her clothing in disarray and curls of red hair loose around her shoulders.

"I heard voices," she said by way of explanation. "What's going on? Did something happen?"

"Yes," began Piero, and then, "No. Perhaps. It remains to be seen."

"Is it about the plague?"

"No. It is the arc pylon. The Crown requires it. We are taking it to - where it is needed."
"Is it going to be dangerous?"

"I hope not." Piero thought of the pistol slung at Anton's hip and sighed. "But I expect so."

"Then - why can't someone else do it?" burst out Cecelia.

Piero blinked. "There is no one else."

Cecelia pressed her lips together in a thin pink line. "We should be back after dawn," said Piero as he headed to where the skeleton of the pylon stood. Over his shoulder he added, "Please let Camberley know where I have gone, if he is looking for me."

The skiff rode low in the water by the time they had loaded the whole pylon, the oil tanks, and the rest of their gear. Piero looked nervously at the lapping waves before stepping inside. The boat rocked with his motion and Anton tugged him down to sit on the boards. Samuel sat across from them with one hand on the tiller. The boatman knotted his thick white scarf more securely around his neck before asking them, "All settled, then? Let's be off."

The purr of the engine saw them out. No one spoke until they had left the Bridge and sailed out into the middle of the Wrenhaven's black desert. Piero huddled down in the boat as the land dropped away on either side and the vast vault of stars lifted overhead. He hoped the other two would mistake his cringing posture for simple cold, and it was not entirely a lie, although the heavy waxed cotton and leather of the waterproofed river gear cut most of the chill. His thoughts swirled thick and distant. Awake or not, the tonic still wrapped thick fingers around his brain. He was a little surprised Corvo had been able to wake him at all.

Out on the river the air freshened and took on a new scent. The breeze that plucked at the cargo ropes swung round to a strange quarter and a smell of salt cut through the muck and oilsmoke of the city. The winds had switched direction, as they sometimes did, and the sea air had flowed over Dunwall. It left a prickle across Piero's skin, a wary animal sense that larger creatures were abroad this night.

Samuel lifted two fingers into the air and sniffed. "Might be some chop. The Outsider's gone walking," he concluded.

_I certainly hope not,_ thought Piero miserably. _We have enough trouble as it is._

"Glad to finally have a chance to speak to you in person, sir," Samuel said to Anton. "Wanted to do it back at the Hound Pits, but I didn't think it was my place to interfere with the Admiral's guests."

"'Guests,'" scoffed Anton. "You might as well have. Not much to do in that wretched cage."

"Hope your time with us there wasn't too terrible. Except for the end, of course." Piero heard genuine sorrow in Samuel's voice. "It's a real shame how it all turned out. Sorry you had to get stuck in the middle."

"Yes, well. Wasn't a complete calamity in the end." Anton sounded oddly chagrined. "How'd you get mixed up with that lot?"

"Oh, knew a friend who knew a friend, and so on. Said they needed an old sailor to help out, and of course once I found out it was for Miss Emily, I couldn't say no. I'm no lord and not much of a fighting man, but I've spent a lot of time on this river and I reckon I know her pretty well."

"You're a Dunwall man, then."
"Don't really think of myself as being from anywhere, anymore. The sea does that to you."

"So it does," said Anton. "But you weren't always a boatman."

"No, I wasn't. Mind if I ask how you knew that?"

"The knots you used to tie down the cargo are done military-fashion," said Anton. "The rivermen use one sort. You used another. Gristol Navy, unless my memory betrays me."

"Dead on the mark," said Samuel. "Amazing, sir."

"I've been aboard my share of ships."

"I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. It is your job to think about things."

"Not to think too hard, though. How long?"

"Long enough. Part of what I wanted to say to you, as a matter of fact. While back I sailed in Morley. That was a brutal fight, well, I don't need to tell you. And all this natural philosophy business is a little beyond me. But when the shells were falling I tell you nothing put the spine in the boys like knowing we were behind a Sokolov hull. Couple inches of plate steel does wonders for morale."

"What ship?"

"HMS Surprise, mostly. She flew like a bird on the wing when we opened that engine of yours. Nothing like it in a tight spot. There's a lot of good men alive because of you."

"Lot of them dead, too." Anton's voice was nearly lost in the sound of the engine.

"Oh, now, that's hardly your fault. You aren't the one what makes that sort of decision."

"Perhaps without those ships there wouldn't have been a war at all."

"Well, might-have-beens, only the Outsider knows."

"Yes he does," brooded Anton. "And he does not share."

The skiff cruised along in silence. The open space swallowed the rumble of the engine. Piero noticed a faint trail reflected along the surface of the water and glanced up. Dunwall had darkened enough that the misty glow of the Silver River traced its arc across the sky. The tide of memory tugged at him again. Another river, calm and still beneath a dusky moon. Tears in the reeds, blue water, a cold wind; and then...

What's your name?

Why are you crying?

"Sailed under Admiral Havelock, as a matter of fact," said Samuel. "Funny how things work out sometimes, isn't it? But man plans and the Lady in White laughs."

Anton's turn for surprise. "You're not Tyvian."

"Out on the open water I reckon you take what gods you can get."

"The Abbey thinks they're the same. The Outsider and the Lady, I mean."
"Do they? Well, they might be right, at that. Knew enough Tyvians who kept his charms under their shirts."

"Ever know any that worked?"

"That's a tricky case to make. I'm a faithful man and all, but I've seen enough strange things out there. Seen enough strange things round here, too."

"Really," drawled Anton. "One day we'll need to have a conversation, Mr. Beechworth."

"Maybe so." Piero felt the weight shift as the skiff slewed in a long arc.

"Bozjemoi," spat Anton suddenly, jerking forward and elbowing Piero sharply in the process. "What is that?"

Piero lifted his head. "Oh dear," he murmured. The rotted hulks of the Flooded District melted into a uniform blackness that bulged along the shore like an abscess. But the gutted mouth of a thoroughfare nearby drooled long strings of blue, clotted swirls of faint glow soaking into the water like a suppurating wound.

"Oh, that's Greaves," remarked Samuel. "Means we're almost there. I'll get you as close to Fairweather as I can. Trouble is most of the side passages are choked off with the krusts, so we'll have to poke around a bit and see what's open."

"Is that oil?" said Anton, aghast. "Tell me that is not fuel oil leaking into the Wrenhaven."

"I don't know about what sort of oil it is," said Samuel, surprised. He slowed and worked the controls more carefully, steering wide of the sickly blue delta to angle for a stretch of shore downstream. The bow pivoted till the darkness of the abandoned district filled their view. "It comes out of the old refinery. Place's been abandoned for, oh, years now, ever since the water rose." The wall of shadow ahead of them shifted minutely and the darkness acquired a slight texture. Samuel killed the engine. "Quiet, now," he murmured. "Here we go." The skiff slipped silently up to an old alley now flooded up to the second story. Samuel let the boat drift to a halt and pulled a long pole from under his seat.

"How long--" began Anton, but Samuel spun around and clamped a hand over his mouth. Anton's outraged bellow came out as a muffled squawk.

"Shhh," hissed Samuel. Then, in a low whisper: "Beg pardon, your Physicianship, but the krusts can hear you talking. If they're above us right now they'll finish us off right quick."

Piero leaned over to whisper into Anton's ear. "He is right. They can sense vibration in the air."

Anton glowered at Samuel, but swallowed his protests. Samuel sat back and flipped a switch near the engine. A small arc-lamp kindled in the bow to cast a faint red line of light before them. It threw the rotted timber into stark relief, glimmering off slimy brick and rusted steel. The tops of ornate window arches jutted into the water, grotesque in the dim glow. The air grew heavy with the briny reek of decay.

"This passage is our best shot," whispered Samuel. "The rag-divers use it to get into the ruins. We'll have to back off fast if the krusts are growing, though. Sit tight and don't make any sudden moves."

Samuel braced one end of the pole on a drowned windowsill and propelled the skiff forward with a smooth, careful push. The narrow cone of red light provided just enough vision to navigate around fallen timbers and old steel. The wind dropped away in the lee of the building, but now currents
tugged at the skiff as they rushed in and out of old doors, swirling through the wreck of offices and trading floors and suites. Three pairs of eyes scanned the darkness ahead, watched the thin band of visible sky, looking for the telltale ovoid bulges of the river krusts. The utter black played tricks on Piero's vision, bulging and squirming at the corner of his eye, darting across the rooftops in blots of shadow.

The bow struck something solid. Samuel pushed them back quick as lightning and jogged to one side. Three sets of lungs held their breath. But there came no hissing rattle, no acid spittle flying through the air.

Samuel nudged them forward around the unexpected obstacle. They came alongside it and Piero sat up straight when he recognized a krust shell. He gestured for Samuel to halt and peered at it. Dead, he saw at once, noting the slackness and the fractures. He poked it with one finger. It rolled in the water, flopping oddly. Piero frowned and drew it forward. The petals of shell and muscle sagged open like a drowned flower. Not simply dead, he thought. Killed. Ripped from the wall and pulled apart.

Samuel worked the pole and they glided forward once more, but only moments later the keel crunched against a second shell. This one, too, floated dead in the water, split nearly in twain. Soon the krusts filled the alley and they poled their way through a sea of unhinged shells and lolling guts like loose tongues. The stench of river muck and rotting flesh rose where they broke through the acrid scum, black under the red light. Under a few shells pearls still gleamed within. Not looters, then, noted Piero. And not the sailors hunting extract. Wentworth's men had been promised the pearls from every krust they killed in the service of providing the natural philosophers' ingredients.

The alley took another turn and a high wall came into view at the other end. The roadway had risen to meet the water as it climbed up Rud Hill. Samuel brought the skiff right up to the crumbling masonry. As they neared it the red light picked out the bars of a sewer grate set beneath the old road. Samuel nudged it open and poled them within.

The sewer must have been cavernous once, but it had flooded now nearly to the top and their cargo scraped along just beneath its roof. Every drip and splash of the pole echoed weirdly. The black mouths of innumerable other tunnels opened into theirs, some dropping away beneath the water, some sloping upwards to drier land. Samuel took the first left, then the second right. Piero huddled down and tried not to think what would happen if the water were to suddenly rise, if they were to encounter a live krust this far in. Next to him he could hear Anton's breathing quicken. Pressed as he was against the other man it was impossible not to notice that Anton had begun to shake. The fingers of his left hand opened and closed, clenching involuntarily into a fist. His eyes were wide and staring and he quivered violently all over as though he were barely restraining himself from leaping out of the boat. It was not hard to guess what he was thinking of - what he must be remembering - even if Piero did not know the details; and so, with the thought of his own nightmares hovering heavy about him, Piero leaned closer in to the other man and whispered, "This is real; you are awake."

Anton's head whipped around like a startled deer, and for a brief moment the gaze he fixed on Piero bore a terrifying lack of recognition. But then it relaxed into simple fear, panic, the madness of the caged animal, and he leaned in closer to his companion, who repeated, "You are awake; we are in Dunwall; this is real."

Then Samuel swung them into a side passage and the jagged mouth of it opened into blissful sky. The skiff coasted silently into a small, sunken pool formed where the tunnel roof had fallen in. Around it broken masonry slumped downwards from the destroyed street above, and beyond, only the endless depths of stars. Piero closed his eyes for a moment in silent relief.
"Here we are," said Samuel, planting the pole. "Fairweather Square, end of the line." He pitched his voice just above a whisper. "Still best to stay quiet. There's more krusts, and Weepers about."

Anton jumped from the boat to the shore, nearly staggering in his haste. Muck splattered his tall rubber wading boots. He scaled the sloping crater wall with ease and kindled a small hand-lamp, sweeping its narrow beam around.

"No Curnow," he announced.

"He and the Admiral are hiking in from the last stop on the old rail-line," answered Samuel. "They had to take the long way round. Corvo asked me to get your device here as fast as possible."

Anton disappeared over the rim. Piero stepped gingerly from the boat, steadying himself with an outstretched hand. His fingers came away covered in sand and dirt. He slogged up the slope of the little crater and climbed into Fairweather Square.

They had emerged near the northern boundary and the square opened up before him. Piero had been to Fairweather Square exactly once before the flood, consulting with a barrister who had refused his case as not worth prosecuting, and had left as quickly as he could. A stroll around the beating heart of the lush financial district was reserved for those of great wealth and exquisite taste, and he possessed neither. But no amount of familiarity would have helped, since there was nothing left to be familiar with. Drifts of mud dropped by the flooding Wrenhaven had buried the beautiful fitted flagstones. A mephitic reek rose from every surface, thick enough to make Piero sneeze. Stinking moss and river-wrack hung from the skeletons of drowned trees and the stately townhouses now leaned like rotten teeth.

Piero shone the dim beam of his handlamp around the square, trying to find the other side. Directly across from their emergence point the broken hull of a barge had wedged between two buildings and blocked off one avenue entirely. An elevated rail line that had traversed the northern side of the square had finally given way and the tracks lay in a twisted heap half-buried in the muck, one final rail-car tumbled on its side. And in the center, where a pleasant garden had once surrounded a statue of Emperor Obadiah the Trader, a huge crater now gaped. Fairweather Square sat near the top of Rud Hill's gentle slope and the sewers of the district gathered beneath it before their final plunge into the Wrenhaven. Under the weight of the storm-whipped floodwaters the square had collapsed into the sewer vault below to form a great sunken pit. The ugly ragged circle it cut made Piero think of a ruptured blister.

Anton had walked out across the square, pausing every so often to listen and, once or twice, to jump up and down. A few rats squeaked and fled at his approach, but there were no signs of larger swarms. Piero did not notice Samuel had come to stand next to him till the man said, "What's he doing that for?"

Anton moved to the lee of the old rail-line and jumped again. He stood in thought for a moment, then ground a foot into the muck. "Trying to find a place that will bear the pylon's weight," explained Piero.

"He's not doing some sort of...ritual, right?" asked Samuel.

"It is a common technical procedure," said Piero, mildly offended. Anton stomped on the same spot a third time and nodded to himself. "Good enough," translated Piero. "Time to unload."

They unstrapped the cargo and began to haul it out of the little hole to the setup point. Carrying the many crates and components of the pylon up the slope dragged quickly on Piero. He began to sweat beneath his heavy clothing. The thick mud resisted his every step and when the wind gusted it chilled
him all over. The odd, bulky shapes strained his shoulders and banged against his legs as he walked. Anton grumbled but made no overt complaint. Samuel simply ferried parcels in a continual stream.

As his eyes adjusted to the dark Piero could not help but notice the dim glow infecting the water that ran through the old sewer and stood in frost-rimmed puddles around the square. Even the sodden muck had a gleam to it. The stagnant pool that had gathered in the great pit shimmered like the Silver River overhead. The shattered white flagstones amplified the faint light. Beneath the overpowering reek of the river Piero's nose picked up a familiar crackle, bitter ink and electricity.

"Tell me about this refinery," demanded Anton as they worked.

"Well, I'm sure you know more about Greaves than I do," demurred Samuel. "Greaves Lightning Oil."

"I remember," said Anton. "I came here when they opened it."

"There you are, then," said Samuel. "Like I said, it was abandoned when the levees broke. Guess someone forgot to cap a pipe before they left. Used to be you'd see the glowskimmers out on the river sieving it out of the water, but then the krusts moved in and the City Watch started dumping corpses and now mostly everyone steers clear."

"It's been leaking like that for years?" said Anton. "Right into the river?"

"Ever since the flood," confirmed Samuel. "Is that a problem?"

"Only if you consider accidentally poisoning half of Dunwall a 'problem'," growled Anton. "Fuel oil is toxic when ingested by humans. There's an excellent reason the refineries are charged to dump their waste at sea."

"It's not much, is it?" said Samuel. "Folks dump all sorts of things into the river, much as I wish they wouldn't."

"Not like oil. Oil accumulates in the fatty tissues of the human body," said Anton.

"Just as in a whale," added Piero, winded. "That is its purpose, after all. To insulate the blubber."

"Like arsenic. Even a small amount will build over time to a dangerous level."

"You mean the whole city could take oil-sick?" said Samuel, taken aback.

"Precisely," answered Piero. He set down the crate he was carrying. "Oil-sickness among whalers arises as they absorb it through their skin, in their food and drink, even through vapors. Their masks and aprons serve as some protection, but it would kill far more of them if accidents did not take them first. The fatty tissues serve as an invaluable record of human activity," he added with some measure of pride. "I can discern a whaling man from a farmer simply by reading his fat."

"Oh," said Samuel, sounding unsure of how to answer that. "Well. I guess you'd better tell Miss Emily."

"I cannot believe no one thought to tell me about it," said Anton. "Honestly. Does anyone in this city ever use their rotted brains? It occurred to no one that this might possibly be a danger?" He threw down a bundle of cabling and stretched, pressing a hand to the small of his back and reading the stars. "It's nearly gone four. When was Curnow meant to get here?"

"Should be--" began Samuel, but Anton's stretch turned abruptly into a coughing fit that doubled him
over. He heaved a deep breath and spat. "This stinking muck," he complained. "Blasted mephitic
vapors."

"It should be soon," resumed Samuel. "Suppose I'll wait here till he does turn up. Just in case."

"'Hurry up and wait,' " grumbled Anton. "As usual."

Piero paced round the area near the dead rail-car that Anton had marked as safe, consulting his
mental maps of the city. He had rarely had the money to take the rail lines, but he thought that the
Commerce Chamber route had come down this way. Its support pillars marched in a long line along
the edge of the square, topped with a shredded ribbon of track. But the wreckage looked stable, and
rainwater channeled by the broken tracking had washed a clear spot among the ever-present mud.
No hollow sounds betrayed the presence of a sewer tunnel whose roof might suddenly give way.

"Here," he decided at last. "Let us begin."

They hung arc-lamps in the trestles and set up the metal framework of the emitter. Piero ran his
fingers over welds and joints soldered so long ago. The dust of the Hound Pits still clung to the
metal. As he and Anton assembled the components he felt again that strange deliberation, that rising
sense of presence that had haunted him in the smoky confines of the workshop. The arc-lamps
swayed in the sea breeze, making the sharp-edged shadows dance. Their harsh light split the world
into white and black. Though it had been months since they had touched it, each piece slotted into
place with precision. Piero felt as though he were armoring some old knight for battle, tracing over
the lines of a design already composed.

"You have been to Greaves," Piero asked Anton as they worked.

"Long time ago." Anton's mind was elsewhere, deep in thought. "Hold that steady."

Piero braced the framework of the emitter as Anton attached the emanation coils. "What would you
say is the capacity of their tanks?"

Anton stopped dead in the midst of his work to stare at Piero. Then his face broke into a sudden wild
grin.

"Exactly what I was thinking," he said. Piero felt the corners of his mouth curve into an answering
smile.

Samuel stood off some distance away. He had promised to be on guard for Weepers, but neither
sight nor sound of a single one had yet disturbed them. Now he said, "That's Curnow's sign."

Anton slotted the final emanation coil. Piero tipped the signal emitter back to an upright position.
Samuel was watching the mouth of one of the old avenues that intersected the square from the west.
A red light flickered, then another, then a steady column of them marching out of the darkness.

Curnow and Wentworth arrived in a knot of hard-faced men with swords at their sides and rifles
loaded. A company of marines in grey surrounded the core phalanx of Watchmen. Some fifty men at
least had made the trek. Two guided a wheeled cart that ran on heavy steel wheels through the muck.
When they drew up it stood on its back wheels like an upended coffin. Two more carried oil tanks in
special slings across their backs. Piero noticed a black-clad figure among their ranks and busied
himself suddenly with the wiring. Monitor Farbright had survived their nightmare flight through the
city after all.

Wentworth called out as they approached. "Her Grace's madmen. We're saved."
"Good evening, General," said Anton, greeting the man as formally as if they stood in the Council Chamber. "Admiral."

"Master Sokolov," said Curnow, returning the nod with icy courtesy. Wentworth only said, "You brought the gadget?"

"It will serve," answered Anton. His gaze lit on Farbright and he frowned. "I don't believe I've been introduced to your companion."

"Monitor Farbright attends on behalf of the Abbey," said Curnow, and for once the stiffness in his tone did not seem directed at Anton. Farbright inclined his head but said nothing. He, too, had a parcel strapped to his back, but its purpose was less obvious.

"Ah," said Anton, only the minute stiffening of his spine betraying a new tension. "General, my colleague and I were promised an explanation."

"Geoff, I'll get the perimeter set up, if you want to handle this," Wentworth told Curnow. Curnow nodded his assent.

"If you fellows don't mind, I'll have a word with the Admiral," broke in Samuel.

Piero half-feared Farbright would come with them, but instead the man walked off to the rim of the huge sunken pit and stared down into the glowing water, apparently lost in thought. The dirt and slime of the Flooded District seemed just as reluctant to go near him, and in his spotless black coat and trousers he nearly vanished into the night. Wentworth marched heedless into the darkness, ordering men with quiet words and curt gestures. Samuel followed him and they paused to talk, out of earshot. As Curnow picked his way through the muck Piero noted with professional concern the way the General kept his right arm close to his side, the bulge under the shoulder of his coat where the wound dressing had to be. It did not look to pain him too much. A fair job, he concluded with some measure of pride.

Anton led Piero and Curnow over to the stack of oil tanks near the wrecked rail-car. The rail-car itself was a passenger-type, a broad metal carriage two meters wide and nearly seven long, with generous windows for the viewing pleasure of the wealthy as they glided above the city. When the flood hit it had fallen hard on its side and half-collapsed under the impact, all buckled steel and shattered glass. Above their heads the string of arc-lamps turned the twisted tracks into an alien sculpture.

"We need to go to the Greaves refinery," said Anton without preamble.

"What?" said Curnow, taken aback.

"The old Greaves refinery is leaking into the river. I need to take a few of your men and investigate."

"Now?"

"No, at Fugue Feast," scoffed Anton. "Yes, now."

Curnow tried to cross his arms, but his injured shoulder balked him and he settled instead for glaring at the natural philosopher, who did not deign to notice. "I don't know what you want at Greaves, but I'll be damned if I'm furthering another of your schemes."

Anton scowled. Piero weighed whether he ought to intervene, but he had no idea what he would say if he did. Curnow watched impassively as Anton wrestled with the pain of having to submit his conclusions to someone else's judgement. Finally he glanced round them and lowered his voice.
before answering. "I think -we think- Greaves may be our arsonist's source of oil."

Curnow's dark eyebrows lifted in surprise. "If the refinery has continued to leak this long, there must be a substantial quantity remaining in its tanks," explained Piero. "Enough to account for the fires."

"How much is left at Greaves?" asked Curnow.

"To produce visible traces for this long?" Beneath the arc-lamps Anton's eyes were lost in shadow. "Enough to poison the city."

Curnow went ice-white. "You exaggerate," he said faintly.

"He does not," said Piero.

"Look around you," said Anton, jabbing a finger at the muck that surrounded them. "Use your wits, man. Even the earth here has taken on the oil's tint. The entire Flooded District is contaminated. Such a spill could fill the Wrenhaven from bank to bank. And if it were lit..."

The last traces of color fled Curnow's face. "An hour only," he said at last. "Back well before dawn. And you must complete the arc pylon first."

"Done," said Anton.

They returned to the pylon and took up the work again. Metal clinked and voices called around them. Once a swift rush of wings announced the release of a messenger sparrow, no doubt headed for the Ridgefort. When the pylon was complete they would venture back out into that darkness. Piero felt his pulse in his throat, beating fast in his fingertips at that thought. The muck and rubble of Fairweather Square suddenly seemed quite inviting. He closed his eyes for a moment, but the darkness behind his eyelids squirmed and bulged. His skin shivered as if beneath a cold rain. Scraps of black darted across his mind - no, not black, some color beyond it - some minus dream of absence absent--

A hand gripped his wrist and a voice whispered, "You're awake; this is real." Piero's eyes flew open and he jerked away fast enough to crack his knuckles against the side of the signal generator.

"In case you're curious, you've been standing there twitching for three minutes now," said Anton quietly.

Piero hissed a breath out through clenched teeth, pressing his bruised knuckles into the palm of his other hand. They stung even through the layers of waxed cotton. "Someone is here," he whispered back, distracted.

Anton's hand went immediately to the pistol at his hip. He scanned the blackness beyond their cone of light. "Did you hear something?"

"No, it is - I felt this at the Hound Pits, at times... I think it is Corvo using - his abilities."

"Ah," said Anton, sounding a little as if he had been punched in the gut. "You can..." he began hesitantly.

Piero removed his spectacles and nearly pressed his palms over his eyes before he remembered the protective gloves and the grime that already coated them. He dragged them instead through the air around his skull as if he could yank the pulsing sensation out of himself. "It pulls at me. It is like - hearing a conversation in another room, and--" He groaned in frustration. "It makes it difficult to focus," he finished.
"Okay, okay, um." Anton glanced around himself, although Piero doubted he could have said what he was looking for. "Is it..."

"I am fine." Piero blinked and shook his head briskly. "I can work."

"Good," said Anton. He glanced up again. "Listen, just - try to keep still if that damn Monitor comes by."

Icy fear bloomed in his stomach. Piero cringed around it. He had not considered that. The tonic still sat heavy on his brain. Why did he have to have an attack now, of all times? Another, deeper terror: what if he had a fit? In front of the Abbey's man? He clenched his jaw tight enough to send slivers of pain up his skull. Nothing would save him then.

"Why is he here?" he hissed.

"Why's a fucking Monitor in the city at all?" spat Anton. "Damned if I know."

"I think it has to do with Campbell. He was at the Council."

Anton scowled. "You didn't mention that."

"I had other matters on my mind," said Piero curtly. "I suppose he is here for the Overseers."

Anton's eyebrows rose. "Of course not, he's a--" He frowned at Piero. "Do you know what the Monitors are?"


"Well, not quite." Even in the middle of the night in a devastated district of the city likely infested with violent, mindless victims of the plague, Anton brightened up when he had a chance to lecture. "The Monitors are very few in number, and a rather secretive order, even for the Abbey; I daresay they're the most closemouthed after the Oracles. You're right that most literature claims they're some sort of internal police. But I promise you the truth is far stranger. The Overseers are fine for dragging innocent women from their beds, but what do you send to deal with a real heretic?"

"What?" asked Piero obligingly.

Anton's eyes gleamed. "Another heretic."

Piero furrowed his brow as he tried to puzzle this out. "They are witches?" he asked at last.

"Tame sorcerers," confirmed Anton. "The Abbey's got the biggest stash of occult literature and artifacts this side of the Worldsea. They find children with talent and train them up in the hidden arts, brainwash them with doctrine till they're beyond zealots. In theory their faith is so unshakeable that they can channel the power of the Void without being corrupted by it."

"That is...absurd."

"You think that's bad, try this. Farbright isn't his birth name. Names have power, you know. If the Outsider spoke his true name, he could influence him. So, after the Abbey took him? They would have killed everyone who knew it."

"Does that work?"

"The Abbey thinks it does." Anton shook his head. "A fucking Monitor," he spat. "I didn't think they'd stir themselves from Whitecliff."
"He came from Whitecliff?" Curiosity briefly chased away fear. "Into a plague city?"

Anton's face snarled into an expression of such pure bitter rage that Piero nearly took a step back. "His faith will protect him," he spat. In his mouth the words became a curse. "Arrogant, smug, supercilious bastard."

"Why would he risk such a thing?" A horrible thought struck Piero. "He is not here for you, is he?"

Anton gave a high, stretched laugh. "I wish I merited a Monitor's attention. And it wouldn't be for Campbell. Did Martin ever...?"

"Not that I knew."

"And when someone comes for Bentham, it'll be the Oracles." He stroked his beard. "Then it's Corvo. He's a foreigner, he's touched by the Void. But most damning of all, he's got the trust of the Empress."

"Politics," said Piero slowly.

"Always politics," said Anton.

Piero frowned. "But we have not answered the question. What is he doing here?"

Anton glared into the darkness towards the center of the square. One hand rested on the grip of his gun. The dull glow of the crater silhouetted Farbright still standing at its rim. "I don't like this. Attano didn't tell us everything. There's something else going on here."

"Corvo would not lie to us."

"Not even if he thought it would save the city?" said Anton.

Piero pressed his lips together in a thin line. Another streak of black-not-black flickered across the back of his mind. His fingers twitched.

"Come on," said Anton. "Sooner we're set up, sooner we can go to Greaves and get the hell away from him."

Piero nodded. He shook out his injured hand, trying to wring the pain from it, and took up his tools again. The shadows around him seemed less frightening now. Not when weighed against what stood in the light.

Conversation dropped to low exchanges broken by the clink of machinery; pass me that capacitor, de we forget the flat screwdriver, can you move those wires? Piero shut out the dark that circled round him in more ways than one, closed his vision down to steel and copper and glass. Every so often he paused to squeeze his eyes shut and let a cold shiver pass through him.

They had made mistakes, the first time. Given the less-than-ideal working conditions Piero was prepared to excuse them, and in any case the result had been adequate for the task at hand. But they were mistakes nonetheless and they required fixing. Piero untwisted wires and simplified obvious junctions as he went. They had not worked on the pylon since the Hound Pits, and now that he looked at it with fresh eyes he found himself spotting many opportunities for improvement. He completed his portion of the generator and stepped back for a moment.

"How many tanks shall we use?"
"It was three last time," said Anton.

"It ought to have been four."

"True." Anton waved a hand. "Four, then."

Piero ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. "Why stop at four?"

Anton looked up. His gaze went blank for a moment as his mind turned inward, and then he said, "We run the risk of overload."

"We will not have the constraint of placing the tanks near the emitter this time."

"I'm not certain it's necessary."

Piero frowned at Anton's reluctance. "It will expand the range of the effect."

"The range of the effect is already fairly damn large." In Anton's voice he heard an edge of warning. Their argument in the studio glided beneath the words like the shadow of a whale.

Instead Piero veered away and said, "How many Weepers do you believe remain in the city?"

Anton sat back. "Assuming Dunwall has lost half its population, that six-tenths become Weepers, that the average lifespan of a Weeper is one month..." He frowned as he calculated. "Perhaps a few thousand," he said at last.

"And how are we to manage even a hundred with one pylon?" argued Piero. "The body itself provides a shielding effect. Some amount of energy is lost from the emanation in nullifying each target."

"You're assuming every single Weeper is going to converge on our location. We can't be expected to handle that many."

They both turned to look at the ragged pit in the center of the square and the maw of the sewers within, like the wide black pupil in the center of a dead, staring eye.

"Perhaps we might use a few more tanks," conceded Anton.

Piero went to get the power cables while Anton began the calculations for the pulsation sequence. Their thick wrappings of cloth and rubber dragged in the mud as he hauled them along to the wreck of the rail-car. One welded seam at the back of the carriage had burst and left a crevice just large enough for a man to enter if he were slim and ducked his head. After enduring the nerve-rattling fear of fire touching the tanks on the roof of the workshop during the siege, the idea of protecting the tanks from stray shots did a great deal to soothe Piero's mind.

He dropped the connectors outside the crack, took a hand-lamp, and climbed inside. The narrow beam illuminated crazed angles of rusted steel. Cloth seats had rotted away and their coverings dangled from the former floor. Everywhere he shone the beam the shadows fled behind old plush and cracking gilt.

Anton had set up the tank receptacles a couple of meters in on a flat stretch of wall that had once held a poster advertising the route map. Piero stepped up into the car itself and shuffled over in a half-crouch. Down at the other end the wide viewing-windows had shattered in their frames, but here the walls had been decorated in wallpaper and plaster that had disintegrated into a thin slime. Piero brushed as much of it away as he could with his waxed-cotton gloves, but it still made the footing
treacherous. A clump of mushrooms sprouted from a wall-sconce, the first living thing he had seen in this place. Threading veins glowed whale-oil blue. *A shame we have no time for samples*, he thought.

He knelt next to the receptacles and set the hand-lamp down with a solid clunk against the steel. Something squeaked at the sound and Piero snatched the lamp back up in haste, but he heard only a fading scurry. After a minute of frozen silence he quietly set the hand-lamp down again and began to examine the apparatus.

When he emerged many minutes later, his heavy trousers covered in dirt and slime from the knees down, Anton was surveying the generator with crossed arms and a thoughtful frown. It looked complete, minus the resonant chamber.

"We have standard sockets for four, but I can rig it for eight," he said. The improvisation would be a little prone to sparking, but Piero reasoned that everything around it was far too damp to burn. "How much can the wiring take?"

Anton examined the generator with a critical eye. "Six is about as far as I want to push it. We burn something out now and it'll be an unholy bitch to repair."

Piero chewed on his lip, trying to estimate how powerful the signal would be. "That will likely suffice. But the resonant chamber adds an element of uncertainty," he admitted.

Anton snorted. "Once you start playing with nonlinear feedback, there's no telling what'll come out."

He straightened, cracking his back, idly stretching his left arm. "Time to find Curnow."

While they had been working the mixed contingent of Watchmen and marines had fanned out into the darkness. Piero could make out their shielded red lamps forming a ring around the square. A thicker, smaller ring now enclosed the mouth of the pit several meters from the edge. No one wanted to risk drawing too much attention when Weepers might be around, but so far they had neither heard nor seen evidence of any, and the men had given up keeping quiet. Voices called across the open space, metal clinked, stone shifted as they pulled makeshift barricades into place.

Without discussion they detoured in a wide circle around the place where Farbright waited at the edge of the pit. The Monitor had found a seat on a chunk of marble and set down the large parcel he had carried, but had not otherwise moved. Piero risked a glance at him and saw his lean, still face transformed by the oil's glow into a leering grotesque. The lenses of his spectacles shone with a flat blue light. Even the marines gave him a wide berth.

Curnow stood at the center of the brightest thicket of hand-lamps, inspecting the broken barge that had wedged itself broadside between two houses and blocked off an avenue. Spears of arc-light stabbed at its base and danced over the corroded steel.

"It's stuck hard," reported a voice from one corner where the hull curved up and bit into the brick building. A figure emerged from beneath the wreck. A flash of light showed Officer Kemp, flickered away, a second lit him again. " Someone might be able to squeeze under, but it'd be tight."

"Alright. Dump some rubble if you can. I don't want anything coming at us from our backs," ordered Curnow.

"It's ready," declared Anton.

Curnow turned, his own hand-lamp dangling from his left hand. A pistol and sword hung from his belt. "Excellent," he said. Whatever disdain might usually invest his tone when speaking to Anton
had been submerged by the business at hand. "I'll have the men line up to touch the charger shortly."

"It doesn't have a charger."

"What? You've forgotten - how are we supposed to use it?" Curnow asked incredulously. "I'll not risk my men--"

"I forgot nothing. The new model has no charger."

"Weeper neurology differs significantly from that of a healthy human," volunteered Piero. "We need only tune the pylon correctly."

"Which, fortunately, all my research has allowed me to do," put in Anton.

Curnow ignored the goad and said only, "Fine, then. Set it up near the edge of the pit. It'll be the first line of containment. The walls of light will pick off what it misses, and we'll keep everyone else in reserve to seal the cordon. If we're lucky they'll turn back once they realize what's happening."

"Er," began Piero, then found he could not figure out how to explain the problem with that idea.

Anton pressed the heel of one hand to his forehead. "General, please tell me someone briefed you on how the new device operates."

"Corvo explained it."

"Oh, good, Corvo explained it," sighed Anton. "Because he is certainly an authority. Why do I even bother sometimes?" he asked the sky.

"Do not trouble yourself on our account, Master Sokolov," said Curnow, with a cold glare. "We're only attempting to protect the city from a mindless horde."

"And so am I," growled Anton. "Listen. The new device doesn't work like the old one. It'll clear a city block, yes? But it's a one-shot deal. Once it fires, the tanks are drained."

"What in the Void is that good for!? We might have thousands of Weepers on the move--"

"So what you need to do," continued Anton, overriding him, "is get them all in the square at once, and then fire it."

"You want me to deliberately allow a mob of Weepers to congregate in the square," said Curnow flatly.

"The device is more akin to a grenade than a pistol," tried Piero. No one seemed to be listening.

"When I say it will clear a city block, I mean clear," said Anton. "Put a thousand men in its radius and it will drop them all. Understand?"

Curnow's eyes narrowed, fine wrinkles standing out in the arc-light. "You make a lot of promises."

"I assure you I have no more desire to face a horde of Weepers than you do." Anton's voice dropped a fraction. "This is the simple truth, General. When we trigger that device, everyone in its range will die."

"You may wish to remove your men from the square entirely," advised Piero.

Now Curnow noticed him. "You said it wouldn't target them!"
"It won't. Not deliberately. But there can be...well. It's just not a good idea to be nearby," finished Anton.

"Alright. Let me be certain of this. It can't maintain a perimeter. It can only fire once. It might kill everyone around it. Anything else?"

"There is a slight risk of accidental detonation," supplied Piero, before Anton elbowed him in the ribs. Piero scowled and returned the shove.

"And it might explode. Wonderful." Curnow pinched the bridge of his nose. "And here I thought you were bringing me a weapon. You can't fathom how relieved this makes me feel. I'm so glad Corvo insisted you be summoned. Is the damn thing at least ready?"

"The firing circuit needs tuning. And we need some tanks."

"You didn't bring tanks?"

"We brought four," said Anton, unabashed. "We need two of yours."

"We don't have any spares."

Anton scowled. "I saw your men carrying them in."

"Those are for the tallboys," said Curnow with a wave of his hand. "No, you can't have them."

Both of them stood in silence. "You brought tallboys?" said Anton after a moment.

"Of course we brought tallboys!" burst out Curnow. A few Watchmen looked over, but the General waved their attention away. "You understand that this is an emergency, right?" he ground out through clenched teeth. "We'll need everything we've got to push them back, and from the sound of it, the tallboys are going to be far more useful than you've made yourself so far."

"The pylon will--" began Piero.

"To hell with your blasted pylon!" Curnow's face twisted as he forced his expression back to neutrality. "I will inquire if the second detachment has spare tanks when they arrive," he said a moment later, all business again.

"And we need to go to Greaves," said Anton. Not a hint of anger perturbed his voice either, but Piero saw rage in the high set of his shoulders.

"Fine. I'll send a squad in a few minutes."

Anton managed to make it nearly the entire way back to the pylon before he burst out, "Idiots."

"Yelling will not help," tried Piero, but Anton ran on with, "Do any of them even listen!?" He paced in a furious circle around the pylon, kicking at rubble. Piero suppressed a sigh and went to the workbench. He shuffled through the papers where Anton had been calculating the new firing sequence. Anton had written down all the relevant constants for the Weeper nervous system along one side of the page and Piero ran a finger down the list, checking them against his own research.

"I'll tell you, Joplin, none of them fucking listen," Anton burst out again, shaking a finger at Piero. "None of them understand it."

"Understand what," said Piero obligingly as he considered one of the constants. He scribbled his own guess next to it and checked the equations. The change made reassuringly little difference. He
"Understand the oil," said Anton. "Understand what it can do. They all grew up with wood and coal and steam. The oil is orders of magnitude more powerful, but they just don't get it."

Piero finished tracing the lines of Anton's math. It seemed correct. The Weeper firing sequence required only known modifications from the existing one and thus spared them the bulk of the effort. He found a screwdriver and pulled the complex brass cylinder of the firing circuit from its crate, then sat atop the bench and tuned the relay junctions as Anton stalked back and forth to wear out his anger.

"They don't have a concept for it, you see?" continued Anton. "They've never seen it before. They just don't have the mental capacity to comprehend how dangerous it is. What it can do."

Piero measured one of the relay gaps with the calipers, frowned, and twisted the screw just a fraction tighter. The gap narrowed. His shoulders relaxed. That was the right distance, he knew. He moved to the next one.

"I promise you Curnow's still thinking of the pylon like some sort of automated gun. Because a gun is a concept he understands. He's got room for it in that thick skull of his. None of them truly understands how close they are to blowing themselves straight to the Void!" He aimed a particularly sharp kick at a rock. It flew up and struck the steel trestles with a clang. Something shifted in the wreckage above and they both froze, listening.

After half a minute of no further sounds, Anton unbent. His gaze fell on the firing circuit balanced across Piero's lap. "Are you done with that?" he asked.

"More or less," said Piero, holding out the brass barrel. Anton took it and raised it to the light.

"Seems correct," he said at last.

"Of course it is," said Piero.

"Don't get your hackles up," said Anton. "We've only got one shot at this." He carried the circuit back to the generator and slotted it in halfway. "Let's get the chamber in and go."

"Alright," said Piero, getting down from the bench reluctantly. He had hoped to wait on the resonant chamber till the last minute. He did not like being around the pylon when the chamber was connected. It became worryingly capable.

It took both of them to lift the glowing blue pearl and carry it over to where the cavity gaped empty at the heart of the pylon. The chamber clicked into position as if not a day had passed since it had been built. Anton grunted as he pushed down the lever to lock the main junctions. Brass and copper ratcheted into place. At the moment of contact Piero could have sworn the soft blue glow intensified.

"There," said Anton, stepping back to regard the generator with a look of satisfaction. It slipped quickly from his face, though. Piero stepped back as well.

"We can put the trigger relay inside the car with the tanks," said Anton. "That car will be the only safe place when it fires."

"Perhaps we ought to leave the firing circuit uninstalled," ventured Piero. "Merely for the moment."

Anton made no reply. But neither did he touch the circuit again, and they finished their work with the brass barrel still left out of place. Piero was rolling up blueprints and stowing them in their
Piero turned to see Admiral Wentworth striding towards them. Someone had finally been found to retailer his officer's coat so that it no longer hung loose about the shoulders; its silver trim had been smeared with soot to hide the gleam. When he came within the range of their worklights the harsh glare draw long shadows in the creases around his eyes, picked out the new grey in his black hair.

Anton stiffened with a sour look at the Admiral, still sore from Curnow's dismissal. "Insofar as it matters, yes."

"Good," said Wentworth with a distracted nod. He turned to Piero. "Joplin. A word."

"Um," said Piero.

"Why?" said Anton.

"Personal business," said the Admiral. His weathered glare had fixed on Piero and the natural philosopher found himself stammering, "I su-suppose I have a m-moment, yes."

"Walk with me, will you," said Wentworth, and it was not a question. Piero fell in next to the man, trying to match his long strides without tripping over the uneven ground.

Wentworth walked out several meters away from the rail-line before he spoke again, his gaze never pausing in its scan of the shadows.

"Geoff tells me you were a Loyalist," he said abruptly, and Piero nearly caught his foot in a turned flagstone.

"I w-w-was," he answered, then added, "A-a-at least, while Corvo was, or r-r-rather - that-t is--"

"Before Havelock went over the rail," said Wentworth.

Piero had no answer for that. The Admiral paced another few strides, glaring into the darkness.

"I knew Farley Havelock," he said at last. "I was his flag captain in the Morley Rebellion."

"Oh," said Piero. "Um." What should he say to that? I am sorry seemed impolite.

"My first command. Never saw his like as an admiral," continued Wentworth. "We've got plenty of gentlemen who pay to make post captain and sit on their asses till someone hands them a flag. Not Farley Havelock. He whipped the Morlish right up the Strait of Shale and back down again. He was a fighting man."


Wentworth frowned at him then. Piero shuffled frantically through possible responses in his mind, wondering what he had said wrong. But then Wentworth wheeled and stared out again into the night, up at the stars, anywhere but at him.

"What was he like, at the end?" asked the admiral.

A cold sweat broke out along Piero's skin. His throat clenched tight. "H-h-he tried to k-k-kill Anton a-and m-m-me," he forced out. "He l-l-lied to us. He p-p-poisoned Corvo. H-h-he k-k-killed the staff. M-m-men a-a-and women who n-n-ever d-d-did him any ha-harm. Who s-s-served h-him."

His voice dwindled to the barest thread. "I s-s-served him. B-because I b-b-believed in him. A-a-and he be-be-atrayed us f-f-for a th-throne that was n-n-never his."
Wentworth took this in without a twitch in his expression. "I know the man on the quarantine blockade, too," he remarked, as if they were talking over tea. "It's all the isles on the line, but the man in charge is Morlish. Admiral Shea. He's a fighting man too. I know that because it was him we sailed against, in the rebellion. And I know, because of that, that he'll never lift the blockade." Now Wentworth turned back to him, watching Piero as though to make certain his audience was paying attention. "Shea's a fine man and a fine commander, and Morley lost through no fault of his; the Sokolov ships outsailed him. But Havelock didn't stop at beating Shea. He humiliated him. He ground the Morlish fleet into scrap." A wry twist of the mouth. "Now it's Shea's turn to do the same to us."

"H-h-havelock always said that we had to use w-whatever means we c-could." To his surprise Piero found the knot in his throat easing slightly the more he spoke. "He s-said it was r-r-right to d-destroy C-coldridge. To s-send C-corvo to k-k-kill in the n-night. That the cause j-justified the f-f-force. B-but every d-death only m-m-made him more eager. I re-remember him after Burrows was deposed. Even then he was restless. Unsatisfied. Planning for more."

"Farley Havelock used to be a good man," said Wentworth quietly. "But he never knew when to stop."

A heavy silence hung in the air after that, till the Admiral straightened up and cleared his throat. "Thank you for the truth, Master Joplin. Now, if I may ask you one last thing." Piero tensed, but Wentworth continued, "Your gadget. Can it truly do what the Lord Protector claims?"

Familiar ground at last. "Oh, well, I do not know what Corvo has claimed," said Piero. "But it is as Anton says. Put a thousand people in this square and it will kill them all."

Wentworth stared at the ground, shaking his head, huffing his breath out in silent amazement. "Hard to imagine. Well. We'll find out in a couple of hours, shall we?"

"Indeed."

"Then I'm certain you have a lot to finish. Pardon me." Wentworth gave the merest inclination of his head and headed back towards the crater without waiting for a response.

Piero stayed where he was, chewing on the inside of his cheek and thinking about the Admiral's words. For some reason Havelock had begun to seem like a monster that only he had known, an ogre he had glimpsed in the night and now struggled to convince the others was real. To hear him spoken of as an admiral, an officer, a sailor, made the ogre lose its fangs and claws. Havelock retreated into the shape of a man. Just a man.

A man who had still done so much damage. I am not certain that is any more reassuring.

When he returned to the pylon Anton was nowhere in sight, but as he looked around the man emerged from the rail-car and said, "What was that about?"

"He wanted to know about Havelock," said Piero.

Anton looked baffled, then shrugged. "Tank rig and trigger are done," he said, waving absently behind himself as he wiped slime from his hands onto his apron. The trigger relay's fine long wire coiled along next to the thick power cables that led from the rail-car's shelter out to the signal generator behind its fortifications of crates and chests. "Ready for Greaves?"

Going out into the darkness. Another chill flutter in his stomach. "I w-will get my kit."

By the time they had both packed and shouldered their leather satchels a small squad of guards had
assembled near the tracks. They headed over, but Anton stopped short when he saw the man in the lead. The Watchman's face fell at the same time.

"Captain Howlcreek!" exclaimed Anton, with a smile that showed far too many teeth. "Why, I'm impressed! It seems you managed to retain your position after all."

"Oh no," said Howlcreek. He waved his hands towards Anton as if he could push the man away. "I refuse. I'm done dealing with you."

"Piero, have you met Howlcreek?" said Anton. He extended an arm towards the Watchman with an exaggerated flourish. "The dear captain here was charged by our late and unlamented Lord Burrows with the enviable task of monitoring my every move. A sordid detail, but while a lesser mind might feel a mite constrained under such circumstances, a genius such as myself is capable of rising above mere physical discomfort, yes? But one might hope to garner a few advantages from such an arrangement, namely, some defense against being drugged and abducted from one's own home!"

Anton glared at the man with such anger that Piero half-expected him to start throwing off sparks.

"You can't blame me! It was Corvo Attano!" burst out Howlcreek. "The man's not human! One minute I was walking the Bridge, the next I know I'm waking up in a sodding dumpster with a crossbow bolt in my leg! He probably witched me or something, I'm cursed, I don't need this shit from you!"

"Were you the target of a sedative dart?" broke in Piero.

"A what?" said Howlcreek.

"Did he drug you," translated Anton. "Or did you simply fall asleep on the job, I shouldn't wonder."

"Yes!" said Howlcreek. "There was liquid in the bolt. It looked green."

"Excellent," said Piero. He silently cursed his lack of a notebook. "Now. First. Approximately how long before the sedative took effect? Second. Approximately how long were you unconscious?"

"Perhaps a few seconds? I must have been out for an hour," said Howlcreek, bewildered. "What do you mean, 'Excellent'?"

"Did you experience any of the following effects? Please note all that apply. Lingering hallucinations. Ringing in the ears. A craving for pickled eggs."

"Extreme sensitivity to light," grumbled Anton.

"I have already recorded that one," Piero informed him.

"No?" said Howlcreek. "Wait a minute. Were those your darts?"

"Please answer the questions asked. How did the sedation compare to your previous experiences?"

"Of being drugged!?"

"Poorly," volunteered Anton.

"Hush, I am not asking you," scolded Piero.

Howlcreek threw up his hands. "By the Void, there's two of you. I quit. Darion, you can take them to Greaves. The General didn't say anything about this. I quit." He stalked off into the night and left his baffled squad behind.
"Um," said a tall blond wearing a lieutenant's leaves, watching him go. "Well." He turned towards Anton and Piero. "It seems I'm escorting you to Greaves."

Lieutenant Darion took a few moments to consult a map and get his bearings, then led them into the mouth of one of the avenues and out into the district. The Greaves refinery enclosed a substantial lot at the tip of the shallow ridge that marked the northern boundary of Rudshore, close enough to share in the prestigious address but far enough away to have direct access to the Wrenhaven rather than being fenced in behind the now-shattered levees. The outer wall began a few streets over from Fairweather and much farther down Rud Hill.

The chill flutter in Piero's stomach did not abate as they moved out. The tall townhouses that bordered the square had provided enough of a horizon to comfort him while he had worked on the pylon, but out on the streets he felt the staring abyss above him hot on the back of his neck. The men carried hand-lamps, but they were set to red and the lights strung up in Fairweather Square soon fell behind. The endless stars outlined the rooftops. He saw himself pinched between the empty black sky above and the empty black maw of the sewers below, pinned and terribly exposed.

In the darkness that closed in around them the unmistakeable sheen of oilglow emerged. It pervaded the district, streaking walls and outlining brick, clinging to slime and rock and rotting wood. The support pillars of the rail-line crossed the road ahead of them, stripped of track. From the shattered masonry Piero heard the echoes still ringing, the rattle of hooves and carriage wheels, the genteel hum of prosperity. Anton's words in the workshop flashed sharp in his mind. *I saw cities. I saw the ruins of empires.*

One disastrous, mighty storm had ground the jewel of Dunwall's traders into mud. He could feel it beneath his fingertips, the thin smooth veneer of order, the rip current that pulsed so close beneath it. That calm despair woke again in his chest. All this wealth and power had meant nothing against a single freak twist of the elements. *I saw civilizations that rose so much greater than us, and only the leviathans remember their names.*

"There should be Weepers here," said Anton. He had not taken his hand from the grip of his pistol since they had left the square.

"Sir, please keep your voice down," said Darion from the head of the group.

Anton glared at the back of the man's head, but his next words emerged in a murmur. "It's too quiet," he told Piero. "There should be Weepers. Rats. *Something.*"

"I cannot say I am disappointed," Piero whispered back, but his mind turned that fact over. "There should be krusts."

"That too. So why is it so damned quiet?"

"Perhaps Curnow is right, and they have all gone down into the sewers."

"But it's absurd. They seem to seek out abandoned areas, yes, but to all congregate in one place..."

"It does not explain the rats or the krusts, either." Inspiration flickered at the back of Piero's mind like a momentary glint off a wave. It all meant something, he knew. Somehow the refinery and the fires and the weepers and the dead krusts sliding past their hull were all connected. If only he could get far enough away to see the shape of it.

The cost of Rudshore real estate kept the Greaves refinery from sprawling the way Talisman or old Fisher's Rock did, but the architect had made a virtue of necessity and built up rather than out,
producing an imposing structure they could see from blocks away. The outer wall of the refinery lot loomed nearly two stories. Jagged iron spikes and broken glass had once studded its top, but the mortar between the bricks had already begun to crumble. This close to the river the ground could no longer be called anything but mud and the slosh of the Wrenhaven echoed up the streets. The faint glow that had permeated the soil in the square grew to visible swirls of blue that seeped through the base of the wall. Piero tried to catch a glimpse of their destination through the larger gaps, but he could make no sense of what he saw; an unparsable tangle of shapes both light and dark.

Lieutenant Darion led them around the slimy bulk of the wall till they reached the front of the lot. The abandoned tram line that passed through Fairweather Square ended here. Its inexplicably intact platforms rusted away as they waited for nonexistent passengers. The silhouette of the wrought-iron arch wrote Greaves Lightning Oil Company across a backdrop of stars. Beyond loomed the heights of the refinery tower, abandoned lift cranes swaying slow in the breeze. The moving air brought a thick stench of rot and oil. Four huge cylindrical storage tanks rose above the wall. From beneath the gate a persistent trickle of glow drained out and down into a nearby sewer.

Darion halted before the gate. His men fanned out with the instinct built of long training, some taking up flanking positions, others watching back the way they had come. Darion only frowned at the heavy steel doors, then turned to Anton and Piero.

"I don't suppose either of you's got the key," he said.

Piero edged around the little stream of oil runoff to inspect the doors. Up close he could see the massive electrical locking mechanism that drove the bolt home. His heart sank and he tapped the metal with little hope of good news. The ringing sound confirmed it. It would take an incendiary to cut that grade of steel.

"An electrical," he said, turning back to Anton. "We had best try the wall instead."

"What model?" asked Anton.

Piero shrugged. "Something more costly than the ones I have seen."

Anton splashed through the mud to peer at it himself. Piero swept his gaze along the wall, searching for - yes, there were the remains of the cable that would have connected the lock to the punch-card reader where the code would have been inserted. The card itself must have long since rotted into the river. Perhaps there was some way of fooling the reader, but none of the apparatus had power any longer. He bit his lip and inventoried the contents of their kits, grabbed in haste. He could brew up something quite volatile, of course, but nothing that he could be certain would not ignite the oil as well. No, their best option would be find a means of surmounting the wall.

"We might be able to breach with a grenade," suggested Darion. Both Anton and Piero turned to give him a long stare. The officer looked baffled.

"A poor idea," said Piero finally. Darion's helpful expression soured.

"It's a Blackthorne Iron Works mark seven," announced Anton suddenly. "Sword." Everyone stared at him this time. He looked away from the lock long enough to scowl at Darion and make an impatient gesture. "Your sword, now."

Darion opened his mouth. And then Piero spotted the exact moment the man gave up on understanding any of what was going on around him, and simply drew his City Watch blade and stepped up to the gate to put the hilt in Anton's outstretched palm.
"Thank you," growled Anton. He returned to a minute scrutiny of the crack between the two doors. "Joplin, please tell me we brought the electrical magnet."

"We must have," said Piero, fumbling in his kit. "This bag is far too heavy not to." He moved beside Anton, who had now started scraping away at the mud piled at the base of the gate. Darion mutely shone his handlamp on the spot.

"Hold this," ordered Anton, and Piero did, holding the blade away from himself as if it might bite. Anton crouched down to peer at the bottom edge of the doors and, amazingly, whatever he was looking at made him grin.

"Greaves, you stupid old miser," he said, straightening and taking the sword back. "Got the magnet? The big one."

Piero pulled the fist-sized cylinder of copper and iron from the kit. "The potential-jar will only be good for half a minute of charge," he warned Anton.

"Plenty of time," said Anton. He pointed to a spot on the opposite door that looked, to Piero, like every other spot. "Put it there, will you, and trigger it on my signal."

"Fine," said Piero, moving to place the magnet. "And before that, you can explain what on earth we are doing."

"Here's the trouble with electrical locks," said Anton. "People tend to forget that in the end they're still locks." He hefted the sword and, with great precision, jammed the point straight into the gap between the steel doors. Metal screeched and Darion started forward involuntarily. Anton ignored him. All his attention had focused now on the blade.

"And when the power's out, they're worse than the regular sort," he continued. He leaned his weight sideways on the sword as if to lever the door open, making Darion wince further. "Because if you know the right spot, and if they're fool enough - or cheap enough - to have a single bolt, then all you have to do is apply the right kind of--" he braced a hand on the hilt and Piero readied a thumb on the magnet's switch "--pressure!"

Anton smacked the hilt of the sword hard, warping the blade; the steel door jumped, Piero jammed the switch, the magnet surged with current, and the thick bolt slammed back with a crash of iron and popped the gate free.

The Watchmen stared. Anton smirked wide as the proverbial cat that had gotten into the cream as he returned the now-twisted blade to its owner. "No door is closed to a true man of natural philosophy," he declared.

Darion took back the sword, examining the damage with a pointed expression of suffering. Anton turned to help Piero haul the door open further, but paused once he'd gotten a grip on it. "What're you smiling at?" he asked.

Piero ducked to try to hide the grin that tugged at the edge of his lips. "Only remembering that poor hound crate," he said. "Do you have some vendetta against locked doors?"

"It's where they keep all the good stuff," answered Anton, but he was trying not to smile back. That lasted until they managed to pull open the gate against the muck.

"Oh dear," said Piero.

Greaves shone. The outer wall now circumscribed a pit of fetid blue glow that breathed gently with
the river's motion. Wrecked machinery and broken timbers jutted up like ferns in some hideous phosphorescent swamp. Old cranes and hoists still dangled from booms like dead moss. The Wrenhaven itself had long since swallowed the jetty where the oil barges had once tied up and now worried at the edges of the wall, tugging the yard down into its embrace piece by piece.

"Outsider's eyes," cursed Anton quietly behind him, all his good humor evaporated.

Piero heard the door drag in the mud behind him. He ignored it. How much had spilled? The yard crackled with potential. He could almost earth a copper rod and draw it wholesale from the air.

"That's not good," he heard Darion say. It wasn't a question.

Piero took a tentative step inside and hoped that the rubber of his wading boots would hold. From within it was apparent that the four large storage tanks they had seen before leaned against each other like noonday drunks. Everything else in the yard had been trampled down into the muck. Bright oil streaked the base of the refinery tower, but as Piero followed the hypnotic swirls of blue in blue in blue, the drift of draining oil clearly flowed from the tanks. And in its eddies lurked a tint of briny green, kin to what they had found at Smelter's Bend.

"Stay outside," Anton told Darion.

"I'm not to let you out of my sight," the officer protested.

"You'll do more harm than good. This isn't a place for the untrained," said Anton curtly.

"And what if the Weepers have come within?" retorted Darion. That gave Anton pause. "My men can wait at the gate. But I'm coming with you."

"Fine. On your head be it." Anton splashed into the glowing swamp. Piero followed, edging along the walls where the mud had piled up to get as far away from the contaminated water as possible. Some part of his gut held the terrified conviction that if he stepped into the pit it would swallow him up; that the luminescent blue had no bottom, that he would fall forever. The wind ruffled its surface. What's your name?

The first tank had been stove in through its center and its top had tumbled to the ground. Vertical strands of steel splayed open like drowning fingers grasping at the sky. The base of it held nothing but a little pool of rainwater. Beneath its struts several fat river krusts lay dead in the mud. Thin veins of blue threaded their innards. Anton moved on silently while Piero looked them over with narrowed eyes. Killed the same way. The connection flared in his mind again; but though he groped for it the idea evaded him neat as a dream.

The second tank had lost its tap valves entirely and though a few smears of blue still stained its insides, it must have discharged its load of oil long ago. A dark trickle ran from the plumbing of the third one, but Anton had ignored it and when Piero neared it the smell told him why. He caught a sample in a beaker to confirm and nodded when the lamp showed him a clear brown. Cadeckett's marine acid. For the first step of the Roseburrow process. He dumped the beaker out to make a dark blot against the glow. I would not like to drink it, but it will not kill the city, either.

Anton had already reached the fourth tank and disappeared around to the riverward side. His stillness told Piero all he needed to know. He approached reluctantly, tarrying at more dead krust shells and odd bits of wreckage as if Anton could fix it all before he arrived. But the wind carried him a gust of ink and when he came around the huge cylindrical bulk the problem still loomed in all its crackling glory: a bent valve on the tank's outflow plumbing that poured a thin but steady thread of cyan light into the water at their feet.
Piero's jaw set at the sight. Some part of him took it in with a calm satisfaction. Hypothesis confirmed; theory borne out as fact. The cool thrill of a puzzle solved warred against the dread that leached into his stomach. It hardly seemed necessary to test the oil. The dilute glow, the rotting green edge to the mix that swirled in the pit of the yard, all of it matched the aborted arson. But they checked it anyway, and when the sample foamed up with the same charcoal residue as the oil from Smelter's Bend, Anton's face only drew down into a fiercer scowl.

"This must be the redline tank," said Piero as Anton dumped the sample back into the pit, looked in the beaker for a moment, and tossed it in after. Piero did not stop him. Even through a double layer of waxed cotton his skin crawled with imagined contamination. "Closest to the dock. A refining mistake that severe and Greaves would have written off the batch. They tanked it here to wait for the waste-oil barges."

"But the waters came up," agreed Anton. He pulled a small hammer from his toolkit. "And some shit-brained pox-riddled skinflint cunt left it here to fester rather than pay the dumping fee. May he drown in a tanner's vat. Stand back."

"Why?" said Piero. "If you strike a spark it will not matter where I am standing."

Anton shrugged, conceding the point. Piero held the beam of his handlamp steady on the valve while Anton delivered three carefully-placed blows to straighten it again. The thread of oil shivered, fragmenting into brilliant drops, then dissolved into nothing with a final splash. Anton let out his breath in a rush.

"Needs a bloodwax seal later. But that ought to hold it for now," he said, swiping a gloved finger around the valve's edge.

"Here!" called out Darion. Piero jerked his head up. In his focus he had forgotten completely about the Watch officer. Now Darion's voice floated from the refinery tower on the other side of the glowing marsh. "You two, you, uh... physicians. You'd best come and have a look at this."

Anton straightened. "What is it?" he called back.

"You'd just better come see for yourself," said Darion's voice. Piero still could not locate him.

"Why?" shot back Anton. "Use your words, man. I'm not traipsing over there for nothing."

"It's..."

"Well, spit it out. We haven't got all night."

"It is likely some machinery he is unfamiliar--"

"It's Hiram Burrows," yelled Darion.
path integral formulation (physics) A prediction based on the infinite sum of all possible trajectories.

It wasn't Hiram Burrows.

At least, according to Piero. Anton maintained that it was, and that formed the subject of their current debate.

"I agree that the head is the seat of the mind," said Piero. "But the vital essences also inhabit other portions of the anatomy. For instance, the heart."

"There is an animal vigor, yes," said Anton. "But the brain contains all of our identity. When a man's arm is lopped off the limb is only inert flesh. So too the rest of the body when parted from the head. This, then, may be considered the true corpse."

The object - or subject, perhaps - of their remarks would have stared at them vacantly, had it still possessed eyes. Instead two blood-clotted sockets gaped in the dead white expanse of the face, the slack jaw showing the dark cave of the mouth and at the back of it a gleam of the metal pole that had been driven up through the severed head of Hiram Burrows, the other end jammed through the steel grating of the refinery tower walkway so that it stood, grim sentry, staring out the open doors at the dark ruins beyond. A few remnant vertebrae hung like a macabre ponytail.

The head lolled to one side, placed, as Anton put it, "by someone who has no experience sticking heads on spikes." Indeed it was already sinking as its own weight drove the pole's end up through the bone of the skull. Eventually it would fall off and land among the huge red letters painted on the plates that formed a spiral walk around the center of the refinery tower: TRAITOR LIAR YOU CANNOT KILL US.

"Is it Burrows, though?" said Piero. It did not much resemble the portraits of the man; but then again, most people looked different once they had been decapitated.

"Well, it's definitely his head," pronounced Anton. "Ugly old bugger."

"Seen an awful lot of Weepers, but I've never seen something like this," said Darion behind them, sounding dazed. The Watch Officer looked, to Piero's eye, to have gone a little green about the face; but that might have been the glow that shone within the refinery tower. Blue light suffused the air and the walkway they stood on wound around a core of massive pipes like huge strands of muscle that ran to the shadowed apex of the roof.

"Yes, it's quite peculiar," said Anton. One hand went to stroke his beard before he remembered the muddy gloves and made a fist of it instead. "Weepers displaying ritualized totems, that's far too advanced behavior for their level of cognition."
"Burrows' corpse was left in the sewers," said Piero. "Someone had to deliberately retrieve the head."

"He does look some..." Anton squinted at the clotted blood. "...Ten to fifteen days dead. Rats must have gotten the rest."

"Uh..." came Darion's voice. Both of them turned to look. The lieutenant had been staring around the tower, carefully avoiding looking at the macabre trophy, and now he pointed further up the walkway that spiraled around the inside of the tower. "Um, that is...I don't think that's supposed to be there."

"What?" said Anton, already climbing towards the anomaly. "What isn't supposed to be here?" Piero sighed and followed without wasting his time arguing for caution. A crumpled mess of refuse lay on the steel plates another quarter-turn upwards around the central shaft, surrounded at one end by a few candle stubs and tins that might have once held food. But the most remarkable aspect of the scene - the feature that had drawn Darion's attention - was the huge curling shape scrawled on the wall behind it. Piero traced a finger above the dark grey lines. The paint looked like a suspension of some black powder. He peered closer, lost in thought.

"That's an Abbey sigil," said the lieutenant. "It belongs to one of the Overseers stationed in Holger Square."

It resembled nothing so much as one of the first colors he had ever mixed: the simple pigment that could be made from lamp-black. "Ash," he murmured, and drew back. "The paint is made from some form of ash." He frowned as his brain caught up to the conversation. "An Abbey sigil?"

To his surprise it was Darion who answered him. "All the Overseers choose a secret name when they're ordained. It's supposed to protect them from the Outsider. It's never written down or spoken aloud. Instead they pick a sigil. That's how they sign themselves on Abbey correspondence."

"Someone's done his reading," remarked Anton.

Darion flushed beet-red. "Look, I know some of the Overseers, okay?" he said defensively. Too defensively. Anton quirked an eyebrow and a gleeful expression spread across his face.

"Intimately?" he asked with a leer.

"Anton!" barked Piero, feeling his cheeks flush with secondhand embarrassment.

"No!" blurted Darion. "Why would you -- that's ridiculous, I mean--"

"Well done, lad!" said Anton proudly, then added, "Don't worry, no one cares." He winked. Darion looked like he was contemplating tossing himself over the walkway's railing.

"I am sorry," Piero felt compelled to mutter to the stricken officer. Darion just hung his head, his expression equal parts embarrassment and defiance.

Anton had looked back at the curious sigil, already distracted, and now he said, "There's another one."

Piero looked up. Anton was pointing further up the walkway, and when he followed the line of the man's arm he could see, almost hidden by the next turn, another grey-black marking on the wall.

Before they ascended Anton took the time to dig in his kit for the medical gauze and unwrap some for a mask. Piero gratefully took a length and rubbed it with camphor before he wound it across his own mouth and nose. It damped down some of the eye-watering miasma of oil and death. Darion
watched them do it with such a look of misery that Anton finally relented and measured him out a portion too. Once his hands were free the Watch officer discreetly drew his sword and followed them up.

Beneath its crust of rags and dirt the corpse propped against the wall could still be discerned as a young male. Piero did not need any of his formidable experience to identify a Weeper who had, at last, gone beyond its physical limits and been released by the disease to die. The ashy sigil above it resolved itself into a double twist like a pair of eyes that stared at them as they ascended, and Piero could not help but think of the gaping sockets of Burrows' skull, could not help but stare back at them-- and a spear of pain shot up through his right knee as his foot slipped and he went down hard on the steel plating, biting off a curse at the cold impact, kept from falling any further by Anton's sudden grip on his arm. Something clattered and he raised his head. The vibration that rang through the walkway had caused the corpse to slump over and expose the other side of its face: a pitted, grinning skull. One side of the neck had dissolved away down to the spine and the spalled bones rattled as they moved. Around the edges of the wound the skin twisted black. Sinew and tendon poked out like unclipped threads. Darion made a choked-off sound.

Anton frowned at the mutilated corpse. "Wrong damage for rats."

"Krust acid," diagnosed Piero, rubbing his injured knee. "I will be fine," he added to Anton, who released his hold. "Just a patch of ice."

"Krusts, you say?" asked Anton, a curious lift to his voice. He searched his pockets.

"Without a doubt. That blackening is peculiar to the acid."

"Painful way to go," Darion said. A hysterical chuckle bubbled up through his lips. "At least it's faster than the plague."

"Not painful at all," said Piero. He stood and winced, but the knee bore his weight. The thick padding of his leather apron and wading boots had cushioned the blow. "The disease attacks the nervous system first. I once performed a vivisection on a subject who showed no reaction to any injury. Its sensory fibers had dissolved beyond the capacity to register pain." It had writhed and moaned constantly, though, and all his sedatives had only a fraction of their usual effect. He had had to sever the spinal cord below the neck just to make the subject lie still.

"This is, in fact, the secret of their reportedly freakish strength," added Anton. He had found a long file in his pockets and was using the point of it to lift the edge of the blackened skin. It came away from the bone in flakes. That green tint in the Watch Officer's face was definitely not the oilglow. "Weepers are no more robust than a healthy human, but they lack our limits. They will pull till their own bones break." He shook a few particles of charred meat from the tool and moved his examination lower, out along the limbs and trunk. "In fact, see here--" Darion did not look as if he wanted to see here "--left radius fractured at the attachment of the bicep. Self-inflicted. A fresh break." He frowned as he reached the hands. "Head wound killed it, but it's burned here as well - it grasped something..."

Suddenly Anton stood up straight as if a bolt of electricity had lanced him from crown to foot, sharp enough that Piero's heart started in alarm. But his face had gone slack in the joy of enlightenment and his eyes blazed with new understanding.

"The Weepers killed the river krusts," he declared, and Piero drew a sharp breath of his own. His mind tumbled the idea over and over like a pebble in a wave.

"This specimen could have simply encountered one in the wild," he countered. But already the
notion slotted perfect into place and in doing so swung the whole snarled mess around to a new angle.

"What else has the strength to pull one from the rock?" said Anton, echoing his own thoughts. "What else is so heedless of its own safety that it will walk straight towards one?"

"So heedless of pain that it will pull even as the acid dissolves it," said Piero. "But why?"

"They don't need a motive. They'll attack any living thing. Save the rats, which the disease recognizes as kin."

"But such wholesale extermination?"

Anton frowned, a mulish set to his jaw at having the joy of his revelation thus damped. But he conceded, "Perhaps we don't have enough data."

They looked together up the curve of the ascending spiral. Another corpse. Another inscription. A moment of shared gazes.

The pipes split and branched as they ascended. At their junctions bulged the warty growths of holding tanks frilled with fine plumbing. Cabling shrouded everything in a swaying net of cloth and copper. The occasional narrow glass pipe spiraled through the mess, coated liberally in the maroon bloodwax rendered out of the leviathans, sealing in the corrosive trans. Piero felt a flutter of fear in his chest whenever he spotted one of those, but all the conduits were mercifully empty.

The Weeper corpses repeated at irregular intervals, all different; some nearly fresh, some hardly recognizable. Each one had an ashy sigil painted above it. Every few meters the spiral flattened into a mezzanine that ran level around the entire tower. Broken equipment, discarded tanks, and more and more scavenged trash cluttered the aisles between the control consoles and intake/extraction ports. Piero paused at one to lean out over the railing and look down. Far below the tower opened up into an underground cavern. At the center of it the drainage ditches scrawled trails of eye-stinging brightness down to the sewer outlet. A square of thick steel pillars braced the tower above. Beyond them the cavern fell off into shadow; he could not gauge its size. Shapes swam in the gloom like sunken shoals.

He craned his neck upwards to try to gauge the height, the volume of the tower, the weight and complexity of the structure, and all at once the scope of it made him dizzy. For a moment he could not breathe. The band clamped around his brain squeezed and starry blackness pulsed before his eyes. Gravity slewed for a moment, some vast rotation misaligning his self and his body, and when he came back around he found himself on his knees staring blankly at the cold steel floor and Anton sitting on his haunches across from him. Darion had started towards him, sword raised, but now he had paused a respectful distance away.

Piero opened his mouth to speak.

"If you say 'I will be fine' I'll knock you out and make Beechworth take you back to the Bridge," said Anton cheerfully.

Piero closed his mouth. His fingers twisted around each other.

"This place is wrong," he murmured instead. The words appeared in his mind only a fraction of a second before he spoke them. His pulse beat in his ears, the swell of the tide. "The shore, the edge..." He met Anton's gaze. "It does not want us here."

Anton's brow set in a determined frown. "We have to..."
"Not the refinery." The moving air brought him hints of the acrid sting of raw trans. "This entire district is not...not our place. Not anymore. The river took it, it drowned, it is dead; it does not belong to us. We might as well be walking on the bottom of the ocean." Anton's gaze flicked away for a moment. "You know it too."

"We have to find what we came here for," said Anton, softer now, as though he feared to be overheard. Piero only nodded. There was, in truth, no need to speak at all.

Somewhere in the tower that cold sea breeze hissed through gaps in the plumbing, shook loose brackets and set a low vibration thrumming through the building. The Outsider's gone walking, Piero heard again. Liquid dripped in distant corners. The air itself seemed luminescent. Whispers tickled at the edge of hearing, murmurs that rose tantalizingly close to words. Piero flinched every time one brushed against his mind. He stuck close to Anton's side and stared down at the walkway as they went, watching for more slick patches. When he could he glanced back over his shoulder, saw Darion's form thrown into sick pallor and absolute shadow. The weird color of the light bleached his blond hair to white strands that made Piero think of blind and questing roots. His naked sword focused the glow, threw it back in sharp glimmers.

The final Weeper had no inscription. They halted where the walkway flattened out into the last mezzanine before the huge knot of piping that marked the beginning of the refining cascade. On the other side of the circle a single staircase led up to the rest of the refinery. The Weeper here had been pinned upright by bars of rusted steel shoved straight into the wall behind. A field of candle stubs littered the walkway before it.

"Weepers marching through the city," murmured Piero. "Weepers clearing away the river krusts. Weepers composing the corpses of their own - of their enemies..."

"Worse and worse," muttered Anton in reply. "I hold to what I told Corvo. A Weeper is incapable of such a degree of thought. That is a fact I have verified with my own hands and eyes."

"Is it?" said Piero. "All we truly know is that we've never seen it before. Perhaps this is a symptom that only appears in the latest stages. Perhaps the disease has changed again." Skepticism still ruled Anton's expression, but Piero could see the gears turning in his mind as they stood before the gruesome makeshift shrine. "How can we know?" persisted Piero. "Can we truly rule it out? What if... What if there were never enough Weepers before?"

"Alone, the rats flee." Anton worked the thought over and over. "But together they swarm..."

"We should leave," said Darion from behind them. His voice wavered, face drained of color. Anton wheeled sharply on the officer to deliver some stinging rebuke; then he hesitated, and Piero knew why. With the pause all his own instincts had taken the opportunity to advertise to him what a spectacularly poor notion continuing would be. Heat flared behind his eyes, the dry bitter taste rising at the back of his throat, the strain that he knew would end with him convulsing if he did not treat it soon.

And yet - and yet now he knew how Anton must have felt on the threshold of that onyx city. Every animal part of him shied from the thought of climbing further. But the curiosity, the need - and a strange humming compulsion, that weirdling song that drew an answering echo from deep within his self--

"We need to leave," repeated Darion, abruptly in front of him rather than behind. Piero blinked at the sudden shift. While he had been lost in contemplation his body had already taken a step towards the staircase. He backed up again and bit his lip hard enough to draw a focusing sting of pain. A trace of blood ran salt and copper in his mouth.
In his moment of absence Anton had come up next to him as well. Now he stepped forward. Darion's expression wavered, but the sword flicked up to bar their path. "Don't be absurd," scoffed Anton. "When something requires killing, we will call for you." He slapped the blade aside with the back of his hand and stalked forward. "Till then, stay out of my way."

Darion, to Piero's surprise, stepped back and moved again across the man's path. "We've seen all there is to see, alright?" said the officer. "I was wrong. It's not important. I'll not go back and say I lost the Royal Physician."

"I'll be the judge of what's important, thank you," snapped Anton. He looked up at the shadowed thicket of pipes and squared his shoulders. His fingers twitched towards the pistol before he clenched them into a fist. "There are answers here," he went on, more quietly now. "Ignore a mystery like this at your peril."

Piero braced himself again on the railing, gripped the cold metal hard enough to feel the bones of his palm flex. An electric chill rippled through the air and settled queerly in his stomach. It filled him with a shivering lightness. Darion set his jaw, glowering at Anton for a long moment. Finally the blade dipped and he said, "I wish you hadn't nicked my sword."

"I'm beginning to feel the same."

Darion climbed the staircase first. He held his sword at the ready as he eased open the door at the top, inched into the darkness. Finally he called, "It's clear."

Piero's handlamp showed him a small room, square, wood-walled. Wind whistled through the cracks and the air was positively icy. Two doors had been set into adjacent walls and a ladder leaned against another. The only furniture was a small wooden desk bare of any clutter, but as they played the light over the walls it revealed board after board of posted messages.

"Sparrow shack," guessed Anton, and although Piero pulled up the papers, eagerly searching for some clue to the tower's more recent inhabitants, all he found were missives related to the old refinery operations.

Darion eased open one of the doors. The sound of the wind sprang up and he shut it quickly. "Outside," he reported unnecessarily. He went to the other. That one must have proved more fruitful, since he opened it all the way and vanished inside.

Anton shone his handlamp onto the ceiling and paced around the room. Piero watched him, distracted from his search of the messages. Finally he asked, "What are you doing?"

"Ladder means something that needs a ladder," Anton answered. "Hah!" The beam of his handlamp rested on a darker square set into the roof. He dragged the ladder over and tested each rung before he set his weight on it, but after a few minutes he had reached the top, clenched his handlamp between his teeth, and shoved the trapdoor upwards. Through it came a patch of lesser darkness, a pale tint of starlight.

He took the handlamp out of his mouth and called down, "Definitely birds," before disappearing up the ladder. Piero let fall the old bulletins and memos and climbed up after. He emerged into a small square room with a waist-high wooden barrier around its edge. Four posts at the corners supported a pyramidal roof and the space between railing and roof had been left open on three sides to permit the birds to pass. And hacked into the wood, scrawled in charcoal, smeared in blood and less recognizable fluids, the words overlapped each other across every inch of the walls: Restrict the wandering mind. Restrict the lying tongue. Restrict an errant mind. Over and over the tumult ran, making itself unintelligible through the very force of its repetition. The verses written in trails of oil
lent the space their dilute glow.

"Someone was serious about their prayers," murmured Anton. He stepped cautiously onto the floor, covered as well in the chaotic writing, then went to the railing and looked out. Darion called something from below. Piero climbed back down the ladder a few rungs and asked, "Yes?"

"Oh, there you are," said Darion with some relief. "The other room is crane controls, by the way. Nothing in there."

Piero gestured upwards. "You should perhaps take a look," he said, and climbed all the way down off the ladder to allow Darion to pass. Once he was back on the floor, though, he found himself reluctant to go back into the mad shrine. His brain reeled from so many unsettling oddities in so short a time. He needed, he thought, to clear his head. Without thinking much about it he moved to the opposite wall and opened the outside door.

Instantly the sea breeze shouldered through the frame and smacked against his chest in an icy wave. He curled in on himself instinctively, letting go of the door. The wind seized it and flung it hard against the wall, hard enough that Anton called down, "What's that?"

"Only wind," answered Piero. He pulled his cold-weather gear more tightly across his torso. Out through the open door the black boom of the heavy lift crane stretched away, lit from beneath by the distant glow of the stew of waste in the refinery yard. Its dangling chains rattled in the breeze. He stepped out cautiously onto the balcony that ran around the building. The view above him - around him - opened up into crystalline depths of stars, drowning him again in that awareness of distance, of space. But now he found the familiar anxiety strangely, paradoxically, calming. Its cold flood washed away the sticky, fetid dread of that tower, of what had fermented in its decaying belly.

Anton's pale face appeared in the open door. His dark beard vanished into the shadows and made him look a floating head. "Find something?"

Piero shook his head.

Anton leaned over the balcony to look down the sheer drop into the oil swamp so many stories below. "Vertiginous," he pronounced.

"Did Darion find anything?"

Anton shrugged. "He's still looking, but nothing more than what I knew already," he said. "It's a bit unorthodox, but the closest match is an Abbey 'cleansed space.' Supposed to sit there and focus your mind."

"So," summarized Piero. "We have Weeper corpses. Overseer sigils. Stolen oil. And now...?"

"Bugger-all," finished Anton. He growled in frustration, but it turned into a long sigh. "Hells, but it's been a long fucking night."

Piero could only nod in exhausted agreement. He leaned against the railing, staring upwards. "I have not seen the Silver River in many years," he remarked.

"The what?" said Anton. He followed Piero's gaze. "Oh. I thought Gristol called it the Wake."

"The coast does. Inland it is the River." He traced its arc, still unwilling to go inside. "What is the Tyvian name?"

"Depends on where you're from. In coastal Tyvia it's Velikiy Zhértva. The Great Tithe. See, that's the
Ship - that group there. That's the helm--"

"The bright one?"

"No, next to it. The bright one is the Captain. The blue one there is the Whaler, and that group down in the Tithe is the Leviathan - no, there, it's the long chain - no, see the red star? That's where the Whaler's harpoon pierces the Leviathan. Then the cloud of light is the Lady's Tithe."

Piero frowned as a memory sparked. Callista had said that too, back at that disastrous party. *You don’t know anything about the Lady's Tithe.* "What do you mean?"

"When a Tyvian ship takes a leviathan, the Whalers drain the oil from it and burn it on the waves as an offering to the Lady in White. It had to be done before the ship returned to dock or the soul of the beast would haunt them. Tyvia burned the oil for centuries." Anton scowled. "Every man aboard those ships knew the power it held. And yet none of them reached out a hand to take it. The chains of superstition." He stared daggers into the night as if the force of his rage could echo back in time and correct their error. *We threw it all away on gods who never gave a damn for us.*

"In coastal Tyvia, you said."

"The coastal city-states are where all the real culture is," said Anton. The way he hit the word *real* made Piero guess, "But you are not from there."

"I was born about as far away from the coast as it's possible to get without actually crossing the Whitethorns."

"What is it there?" asked Piero.

Anton settled his crossed arms on the railing and looked up. When he watched the stars his face softened into a look of equal parts awe and despair, like a man gazing at a beautiful but forbidden shore. It made Piero think of the youth beneath it, of a young boy staring up at an infinite sky. *Linnunratah,* he said at last. "It means 'Path of Birds.' The old seers were obsessed with birds. Each of the four winds has one." A sweep of one arm described the shape of the glowing arc. *Linnunratah* is the path the birds take between this world and the next. A bird flies along it to bring your soul when you're born. The Pole Star is Raven, or Raven's Eye. A long time ago, when the first humans began to die, their souls got lost and couldn't find the way out. Death belongs to the north wind, so it sent its raven familiar up into the sky to perch on the axis of this world and show the dead the way to the next."

"To the Harmonic Cosmos, I expect."

"Some people say that. Some say the Void, some say it's nothing at all. Some think it's the same place you came from and one day a bird will take your soul back into this world to be born again." Anton scoffed. "Which doesn't fit any population model I've ever heard of. Me, I think Ravenseye just happens to sit right about where the planet's axis points. The rest is in our heads. The stars don't have anything to do with us."

Piero scraped through the dregs of his early life. "Inland the Pole Star was *Stel.* It's Old Grish. It just means 'fixed place.' Though I do remember an old story that called it *Wéofod. 'Altar,' I think.*"

"And Serkonos?"

Piero shrugged.
"Your mother never told you?"

"I was never fond of astronomy," he admitted. "I do not care for stars."

Anton's brows knit in honest confusion. "Whyever not?"

"They remind me. Of... of the size of things," he finished lamely. But Anton only nodded and said, "What do you think it is, then? The River."

"Some kind of cloud, I suppose. I expect you have done more research than me."

"I've searched it with my telescopes, yes. Parts of it are made up of more stars. Maybe the whole thing is."

"Like a mist," said Piero, nodding. "The droplets cannot be discerned until you are close."

"Exactly. If the sun pulls on our planet, then the stars must pull on each other. Or perhaps they are all made in one place and spraying out from there."

"Or perhaps they condense out of the aether just as the water condenses into fog," suggested Piero. "You know, there's a thought." Anton resettled himself on the railing. "Then we truly would live in a cloud."

_A cloud._ The thought flared again in Piero's mind. He stared down, far down, into the shifting surface of the pit. A cloud. A swarm of stars. Ripples that became waves. _The Weepers are moving through the sewers._ The dark flicker of the rats moving from shadow to shadow. The litter of dead krusts, shells flopping open in black water.

"I think one might be able to see all of Dunwall from up here," said Anton, gazing out into the night. "Look, that dark patch must be where the Southcliff fire burnt out. And there's the one in the Distillery District. And Rudgate." A faint frown creased his brow. "You can see all the fires, in fact."

_A lone, the rats flee_, Piero thought, clear as though he were reading from a book. _But together they swarm._

And then his mind's eye seized on one particular image with such sudden clarity that he breathed in deep and the cold night air burned in his lungs: the great heap of oil in Smelter's Bend. Jars and tubs and barrels and even, he would swear, a gutted river krust shell.

"They're starting the fires," he breathed. "The Weepers are setting the fires."

Anton whipped around with a look caught between confusion and fright, as if he thought Piero might be having another fit. "What did you say?"

"_They swarm, _" said Piero. "Think of the rats. Mindless and chaotic on their own. But together an order emerges. Together they begin to act."

"Impossible."

"As impossible as a horde of Weepers moving through the city?" said Piero. Anton opened his mouth to protest, then half-closed it as his attention turned inwards. "What if you did not need one person to ferry a hundred casks of oil?" continued Piero. "What if instead you had a hundred people who each carried one?" _They're moving, and they're moving fast._ The kid on the river. _Theyse all gone down there now, 'n good riddance._
"And no one would think twice about seeing a Weeper staggering through the streets," said Anton slowly. "Only avoid them."

"That is the key to their disappearance. They have not been dying off. They have been gathering. Preparing to act."

"But the deed is wrong," interrupted Anton. "Arson suggests a deliberate malice. The Weepers have never shown that."

"You said yourself, they will attack living things--"

"Yes, but that's a local reflex, borne as much out of fear as from a need to spread the illness. They've never singled out individuals to target. They don't - they don't hate. They don't plan."

"They strung up Burrows."

"We don't know that that was the Weepers," countered Anton. "And the arsons are another level of scheme. The Weepers may attack individuals, but to carry out a plan like this - all the canal sites were chosen for maximum damage. The fires have gone on for at least a month. It's more than personal. It's the act of someone who wants Dunwall dead."

"The rats are--"

"More aggressive in swarms, yes. But they're no smarter." Anton frowned and nearly ran his hand over his beard again. "Who on earth wants to kill a city?"

There was an answer for that, he knew it. They almost had it. The key needed only one more turn in the lock. "What if they did not want Dunwall dead? What if they wanted Dunwall..." Piero scrabbled for words and the graffiti of the tower came clear. "Restrict the lying tongue that is like a spark in a man's mouth. It is such a little thing, yet from one spark..."

"...An entire city may burn to the ground,'" finished Anton. "Ah."

"They don't want to kill the city. They want to cleanse it." The lock clicked. The door opened. Piero's voice rose in triumph as he saw the solution clear at last. And then the magnitude of it slammed into his chest hard as a breaking wave and spread ice through his blood.

"They aren't coming to Fairweather Square. They are coming here. To break open that tank," said Anton. His voice had gone distant, flat with shock. "They're going to burn the whole city down."

"So," said Piero. "If we cannot stop them here..."

The thousand lights of what remained of Dunwall shivered in the windy night.

"Fuck me," sighed Anton. "I picked a hell of a time to quit drinking."

"I think it is about time we returned to General Curnow," said Piero calmly.

"I think you're right," said Anton. He stuck his head back inside the message room. "Darion! We're leaving."

The Watch officer reappeared from above at the same time Piero pulled the door shut against the hungry wind. "You have...what you need?" he asked in some surprise.

"The Weepers are starting the fucking fires," growled Anton. He grew more agitated by the second as the realization soaked into his brain. "This is an order of magnitude more fucked-up than we
thought."

Darion gaped at him for a second, but quicker than Piero would have imagined he recovered and answered, "Not just the Weepers."

"Explain on the way," barked Anton. He disappeared down the ladder without waiting for either of them. When all three had their feet back on the steel plating of the walkway Darion resumed, "I found at least nine sigils in that mess on the wall. Written in blood. That's how an Overseer seals a solemn vow."

"Blood pacts!" said Anton. "Better and better."

"I don't know what they were there for," continued Darion as they descended the walkway. "But I do know..." He hesitated for a moment, lowering his voice as though he feared to be overheard even here. "There are people in the Abbey who think the plague isn't wholly natural. That it won't be cured until Dunwall purges all taint of heresy."

"Of course they do," sighed Anton. "And now we have another ugly question."

Piero nodded. "Is Monitor Farbright here to stop them? Or to help them?"

Anton nearly stumbled. "Bozjemoi," he said after a moment. "Fuck me. That is so, so much worse than what I was thinking of."

"What were you thinking of?"

"If Weepers brought all that oil to set fire to Smelter's Bend, then what stopped them?"

Darion's squad still waited at the gates of Greaves, looking tense but otherwise unharmed. By tacit agreement their discussion went silent the moment they rejoined the Watchmen. Darion issued clipped orders to return with all haste, and though his men looked puzzled at their lieutenant's unusually sharp demeanor, they obeyed without question.

The lights in Fairweather Square had brightened and now spilled down the avenue to lay a path back to their makeshift base. A rhythmic thud echoed from the dead façades and when they came close enough Piero saw the tall insectile armatures pacing in long circles around the central crater, their cockpits visible only as dim white blotches against a black sky.

One of the Watchmen squinted up at the tallboys and told the lieutenant, "Second division riot containment squad's here."

"At last," said Darion.

A rank of blued-steel barricades fastened together with steel pins now cut off the avenue's mouth, but when the squad emerged from the darkness the Watchman who stood behind them, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands for warmth, saluted Darion and unhinged one to let them through. Darion halted once they were back within the range of the lights. "Men, find the Captain," he ordered. As they dispersed he moved closer to Anton and Piero. "Gentlemen, I have to make a - report to General Curnow," he murmured, softly enough that the other Watchmen would not hear the hitch in his voice. "It would, er...it would be beneficial to have one of you accompany me."

"I will go," Piero told Anton.

Anton's eyebrows rose. "You want to talk to Curnow?"
"Of course I do not want to. But if you go there will be a flaming row, and we do not have time for that."

Anton pursed his lips, then shrugged. "Fair enough. I'll check everything over." His voice dropped to a growl. "Void knows we're going to fucking need it." He headed back towards the pylon. Piero turned to Darion, hoping that the tremble in his hands did not show, and said, "Let us go and make our report, then."

As they walked in towards the center of the square, now a buzz of activity, Darion nearly collided with a shape in the darkness moving without a handlamp. "Pardon me," said the lieutenant, backing up hastily. The man's pale face, angled towards the ground, came up.

"No, lieutenant, pardon me," said Farbright, with a slight smile and a nod of the head. Piero froze completely. "Do not let me keep you from your duties. Although I would ask that you mind my circle."

"Your...?" began Darion. Farbright twisted the ring to wake his lamp and shone it on the stones at his feet. A thin black line of some powdered substance ran along the stone, ending in a little splatter where Farbright stood, funnel in hand.

"Ah," said Darion. "I'll be certain to, um, mind it."

"My thanks," said Farbright, still smiling. "Good morning, gentlemen." The handlamp winked out, but neither Darion nor Piero moved until the Monitor had passed several meters beyond them.

Darion took a deep breath. "Well. Anyway."

They found Curnow supervising the placement of the walls of light. White cord described a large circle laid a few meters from the edges of the pit. Knots in it denoted the spots where Watchmen and marines were working to drive tall masts into the ground and raise them with long wires. The two tallboys lurched along the perimeter with emitters slung over their side plating. The three-fingered claws at the base of the armatures' legs wormed through the rubble to find a grip on the broken ground. Curnow stood next to one of the masts, listening to a sergeant whose agitated gestures did not bode well.

"General," said Piero.

Curnow flicked a hand towards him and continued listening to the Watchman's report. Piero's mouth twisted in a sullen frown. Next to him Darion shuffled his feet awkwardly, kicking at a loose stone. A dull heat built in his temples as Curnow pointed around the circle and the sergeant nodded and replied.

At last Curnow dismissed the man and beckoned them over. "Evening, Lieutenant. Joplin. What do you and that scoundrel want now?"

Curnow's words stung him anew. In the urgent mystery of the refinery, following threads of oil and flame and plague, he had forgotten about human things. Now their bitter taste came sharp and unexpected, and he regarded Curnow with a flat expression and said coldly, "The Weepers have been starting the fires."

Curnow gaped at him, face gone utterly slack.

"That can't be," he managed faintly.

"Twelve hours ago I would have agreed with you. Now the situation is changed."
"How?" demanded Curnow.

"Based on the evidence within the refinery, the arsonist has been operating out of Greaves, is at the very least being aided by a large group of Weepers, and has as their ultimate goal the destruction of the city. Oh. And some number of Overseers are also involved."

Curnow's eyes went to Darion. The lieutenant nodded.

In the silence that followed Piero heard a shout, then the scrape and clash of metal on stone, a final thud and a cheer. A new mast wobbled upright against the sky.

Curnow breathed in deeply and pressed his palms together, intertwining the fingers. "I suppose it's too much to hope that this is just Sokolov having a laugh at my expense," he said heavily.

Piero stiffened. "We risked a great deal of danger to gather such infor--"

"Relax, Joplin, you're the last person I suspect of having a sense of humor." Piero glared at him until he recalled that he was supposed to be the diplomatic one this time. He carefully resettled his face into what he hoped was a neutral expression. Fortunately Curnow either hadn't noticed or hadn't cared.

"Who else knows about this?" asked the General.

"I do, sir," said Darion. "I accompanied them into the tower."

"No one else?"

"No, sir."

"Keep it that way," ordered Curnow. Piero had no time to protest before the man swept on. "What does this theory mean for...?" He waved a hand at the square surrounding them.

*Only the facts. Focus on the facts.* "It is highly likely that they are not coming here per se. They are passing through, to Greaves. To break open its waste tank and seize the rest of the oil."

"And then what?"

"And then they will attempt to burn the city down. And if they obtain such a quantity of oil, they will almost certainly succeed."

"Tell me you found something in that refinery that will actually help us."

"We believe that the Weepers have a kind of...swarm intelligence," said Piero. "Like the behavior of bees, or rats. If a significant fraction are killed, their purpose will fragment. The rest may aimlessly disperse."

"'May'," echoed Curnow.

"Well of course there is hardly time to test the conjecture."

"Alright," said Curnow. He closed his eyes for a moment as though allowing the new knowledge to settle over him. "Kill as many as we can. The old strategy still holds."

But Piero was already shaking his head. "You gravely underestimate the number of Weepers in the city, General. I believe we will require the pylon."
"Do you," said Curnow.

"You must expand the radius of the walls of light," said Piero. "Set your men in the gaps between to serve as a cordon. Allow as many of the Weepers as possible to gather within the pylon’s radius before triggering the device. This will maximize our chance of dropping their numbers below the threshold of coherent action."

"You want me to risk it all on that device."

"It will work, General."

"And if it doesn’t?"

Piero blinked at him. "Anton and I built it. It will work."

"This is a complicated situation--"

"It does not seem so complex to me," snapped Piero. "Either you may trust our device, or you may lead your men into a wholesale slaughter."

He knew at once that he had gone too far. Curnow's shoulders stiffened and his expression went completely flat. "Thank you, Master Joplin, that will be all," he declared.

Darion tried to say something, but Piero turned and stalked away, struggling to contain the harsh words that sprang at once to mind. He swallowed hard around the knot of frustration that threatened to choke off his air. For all his glib words to Anton, he had been the one who ended up causing a row; and yet he could not master the rage that swelled within him, reflexive and fundamental as his heartbeat. How dare Curnow dismiss him like that?! The General was just like all the others in the end. Too blinded by prejudice and ignorance to understand the clear truth before him. You must listen to me! he wanted to shout at the man. You are making a mistake! You do not know what you are doing!

Tears stung the corners of his eyes and his skin felt hot all over. Anger mingled with shame at his outburst. Anton knew politics, he reminded himself. Anton knew how to make people do what he wanted. He had been a fool to try to convince the man on his own. Anton would go and force Curnow to understand what had to be done.

But when he returned to the space beneath the rail-line where the pylon stood Anton was once more nowhere to be found. Piero checked inside the rail-car, where six tanks now sputtered faintly in the gloom. Curnow had made good on his word, at least. But the Royal Physician was absent. He walked round the signal generator and surveyed the shadows. Frost rimed the pylon and the mud crunched underfoot. No sign of the man.

Piero removed his spectacles and began to polish the lenses in tight circles. What had he done? What was Curnow going to do now? He replaced the lenses and glanced up at the sky to read the time, but the stars seemed hazed with a light mist. He scrubbed the lenses again and the glow remained between the black silhouettes of houses. Dawn had begun to lift its first grey feathers above the world.

He needed Anton. He scanned the square again, with its laboring shades beneath the arc-lamps, but saw no sign of him. Piero skirted the edges of the occupied area, listening, orbiting the knot of lamplight and armed men. He had traversed all the way round to the decrepit townhouses at the southern side of the square before he caught Anton's voice raised in argument. The distant doorways made deep wells of shadow. Anton's voice went sharp, as it did when he was pressing a point. Piero
twisted the ring of his handlamp to close off the beam and followed the sound to a house whose corner had collapsed, making an opening into its wrecked lower floor. When he peered around the edge of the gap he saw a pair of shapes, a pair of dimmed handlamps bobbing in the darkness among the rubble.

"You're ill-suited to playing the fool, Royal Physician," came a cool voice, and Piero flattened himself against the wall quicker than thought. The Monitor.

"Fine, then," Anton's growl cut the darkness. "Keep your foul secrets. I don't know why you're here and I don't care. But if you interfere in our business tonight, I'll make it my task to find out."

"So quick to assume that we are on opposite sides. Have you considered that the Abbey might be as invested as you are in Dunwall's survival?"

"Not for a single damn second," retorted Anton.

A theatrical sigh. "Then it is my turn to give an ultimatum. Interfere in my business tonight, and I will make it my task to discover precisely what you mean to hide."

"Go ahead," barked Anton. "Do you think the plague would still spread if I had the hidden arts at my command? Show me proof that I have worked one act of heretical magic and I'll cheer to see it."

"And your companion?"

A frozen silence, and then Anton's voice, light, too light. "Who, Joplin? What about him?"

"You're not as fair a liar as you think, Physician. Do you think I am some blind Overseer, some brutish hound trained only to kill what it is pointed at? That man reeks of the Void. For some rot the only cure is fire."

"That is a threat you do not want to make, Monitor. Stay out of my city. Stay away from my affairs. Or we'll find out who's more useful to the Empire."

The Monitor gave a cold, bright laugh, precise as if he had studied the sound. "You do not frighten me, Physician; please do not humiliate yourself further by trying. I am the white sword of Harmony. I have looked into the face of the Void and denied its corruption. The Oracles have granted me a task, and I will see it completed. Now if you have no further concerns to raise, I have duties to attend to."

Anton sputtered some reply but the Monitor did not wait for it; the shifting of loose brick told Piero that he had walked away. Piero froze, his gaze darting about; could he make it to the doorway? The shifting rubble beneath his feet give him away? But the Monitor walked past him without so much as a glance. Piero was still staring after him when Anton tapped him on the shoulder and he nearly leapt into the air.

"I--" he sputtered as he struggled to regain his calm. "I apologize, I was only - looking for you."

Anton watched him with a hint of a slanted frown, but said only, "Well, you found me. They turned together back towards the rail-car. "You saw Curnow?"

"We spoke," said Piero. Think of it as an experiment that has gone wrong, he told himself. Report the outcome objectively.

"Well?"
"He would not listen."

Anton nearly halted in his tracks. "What!? Darion can corroborate all of--"

"Oh, he believes us about the Weepers. He simply does not plan to do anything about it."

"He's relying on the walls of light?" guessed Anton as they reached the pylon. Piero nodded and sagged down gratefully onto one of the chests that surrounded it. Anton followed suit. "Damn that idiot! I know how much oil every one of those drains. I know exactly how many Weepers each one can kill. No matter how many they set up, if any significant fraction of the city's infected have gathered, it won't be enough to stop them." Though his words were angry Anton only sounded drained, utterly resigned. "Void take him! That's just math."

Words piled up in Piero's throat, but now that he had stopped moving his body all at once remembered a night's missed sleep and the dregs of the sedative in his veins. Exhaustion had cored his bones. The adrenaline surge of confrontation had dissipated and all emotion shrank into a sort of distant mental list, a record of things he ought to be feeling. Even fear had lost its power to move him. Before he noticed he had slumped over onto his side.

"Have to get someone to move the emitter," he heard Anton mutter.

"Mhm." The rims of Piero's spectacles pressed into his nose. Anton was saying something else, but it had ceased to consist of words. He could see the pylon's shadow lying like broken glass atop the pavement. The square swam before his sight. The black buildings cut off the horizon, but an undeniable hint of light stained the eastern sky.

"Dawn," he murmured.

His sight blurred and his thoughts scrambled further, and without any sign of the transition he slid into a violent, rapid flood of images and words and fears that drowned his consciousness; till a sonorous tone rang through the chaos and he jerked up as if electrocuted and for one horrible moment he was falling.

Then the ground smacked him hard and pain bloomed along his side. His eyelids were heavy and the acid burn of fatigue still filled his head. He could see his hands before him. The light had risen to a clear twilight that threw long shadows across the square and woke a white glow from the old flagstones. Had he been asleep? Was he awake now? The pain argued in favor. He groaned and rolled himself over, then curled up again on his side, shivering. He must have slept, or at least passed out; his body had gone cold and stiff. The icy stone drew away still more heat. He lay on the ground and struggled to shed the flailing confusion of the dream.

And then the song began.

It came in the shifting of stones, the grinding of boulders, so deep and wide that for one wild moment Piero thought the earth itself was turning over. The paving stones underneath him rumbled. The glass of the pylon rattled in high counterpoint. The music of it drowned his mind; it flooded out his thoughts and overwhelmed any sense of his small and fragile self. Memory held him in an iron grip. Although he had only heard it once, venturing down to the docks, it had stung him then with such pain and misery and a powerfully repulsive hate that he had fled at once, that noise branded on his brain: the death-song of the leviathan.

The tide slackened for a moment, dropped to a lower pitch, and he seized his chance to push himself off the ground and stagger towards one of the crates. The sounds of the human world resurfaced: men shouted and ran for weapons; Admiral Wentworth's practiced bellow rose above the voices to
shout "Clear the square!"

Piero crouched behind his crate, trembling and trying to pick a direction to run. The frantic intensity of the dream had not left him and all this new turmoil seemed only an extension of it. On the far side of the crate the silent shadows of the night had resolved into men in blue and grey shouldering arms and running to their stations, but the sight felt as real as a painting and Piero thought they might disappear when he looked away. He sought desperately for some known landmark and his gaze finally latched on to a curving form that lifted bright and strange in the grey light. The signal emitter had moved, somehow, up to the top of the rail-car, and now its steel and copper and brass sparkled among the muck. That was real, he reminded himself, staring at it as if he thought it could tell him what was happening.

He had no warning before someone slid in next to him, and then he nearly bolted before a broad hand caught his shoulder and held him behind the shelter of the crate.

"There you are," said Anton, bending his head close to be heard.

"What is happening?"

"I imagine they're coming," said Anton. He drew his old naval pistol and snapped it open, examining the breech, checking the loaded cartridges yet again.

"Whalesong," murmured Piero. "I know that sound."

Anton cursed under his breath. "Damn. I hoped I misheard it."

Piero shook his head mutely and risked a glance over the barricade. Watchmen and marines stumbled as they ran, trying to clap their hands over their ears to stop the sound. Only a few had still been inside the ring marked out by the masts and they scrambled out as fast as they could given the vibrations shaking the earth, joining their comrades behind the steel and stone barricades that formed a ragged second ring some twenty meters farther out. A forest of rifles and pistols focused their sights on the central crater.

Curnow stood next to the small temporary shelter that had been dropped to protect the junction where the cabling of the walls of light joined into one main bank of switches. He said something to the captain by his side and the man reached within. The arc-lamps died in a brilliant flare and the walls of light screamed to life, slicing through the whalesong with their high hum. A buzz of blue laced between the poles like cracks spreading through glass.

"Is this it?" babbled Piero, conscious of how foolish he sounded and at the same time not caring. Only a trickle of thought made it through the roaring sound. "Is this how a fight begins?"

A solitary figure was walking out from behind the barricades. Farbright stood tall and straight at the edge of the great dark circle he had traced out in the night. The light had risen enough now to show that the black line was in fact two lines, concentric circles nested with a few inches of space between them. They surrounded the crater several meters further out from the walls of light. Someone must have been hailing him, because he lifted his head towards the shelter where Curnow and the switches waited, but he only gave the man a small wave. He cradled his still-wrapped parcel in both arms as if it were a child.

Anton snapped his weapon shut in apparent satisfaction, laid it across his lap, and pulled a City Watch pistol from his belt. The whalesong struck some resonant pitch and for a moment it bored through Piero's head; he squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head sharply as though he could knock the noise out of his ears. When he opened them again Anton was holding the second pistol out
to him. Piero looked down at it in confusion. "What is this for?"

"Ideally, shooting people."

Piero shoved Anton's hand away in belated realization. "I don't want that!"

"You need a weapon!"

"It is dangerous!"

"Yes, that's the idea."

It could kill me, Piero meant to say, but a sudden rushing noise drowned out all other sound, a torrent like water rising in the sewers beneath. Both of them turned to watch over the edge of the crate. At first Piero thought it was water, flooding out black and thick from the crater mouth, but then the edge of it emerged fully into the light and he understood: rats in all their thousands flowing together like a single beast charging towards its target. The first hit the walls of light only seconds later and the device screamed in reply as it vaporized the body.

Next to him Anton let loose a string of curses half-heard in the din. "Fucking rats! I didn't think of that. They'll drain the tanks in a matter of minutes, Curnow's screwed the fucking pooch already!"

Blue lightning sparked and flared all along the walls. Some of the rats only brushed the barrier before the pressure of their fellows forced them away, and their fate was worse; burning fur ignited everything it touched till flame spread back along the endless black bodies. But more came behind them, an uncountable horde, the terrible multitude that had been brewing beneath the earth. The base of the walls became a solid mass of electric blue. The smell of scorched flesh and burnt hair suffused the air, the smell of guts and ashes, and still the swarm hurled itself against the aetheric barrier.

Piero's eye caught the first flash of sparks from one of the tank receptacles, and as he focused on it another began to show the same telltale signs of overheating. Needs more oil, his mind surprised him by thinking quite calmly. The familiar concern grounded him. Even as he considered it a Watchman ran out to change the offending cylinder for a fresh one, keeping the burning light intact. But the new tank began to drain as quickly as the old one.

A cold touch of metal on his skin drew Piero back to himself. "At least take this, alright?" said Anton.

"Take what--" said Piero, frowning at the pitted steel sphere in Anton's hand, and then recognition clicked and he blurted out, "That is a grenade!"

"Full marks," said Anton.

"Where did you get a grenade!?"

"Took it off Darion. He won't miss it."

"I am not using that!"

"The theory's simple enough."

"What if I sit down on it?"

"Just take the fucking grenade!" snarled Anton.

Piero snatched it out of Anton's hand and shoved it into one of his own pockets, too dazed and
terrified to argue further. "There," he told Anton. "I am more likely to injure myself with it."

The whalesong had dropped in intensity throughout their conversation and now the buzz and squeal of the walls of light overrode it. The rats still flowed from the crater's mouth but the black tide had slackened, seemingly daunted by the slaughter. Patches of stone could be glimpsed between the flowing bodies. But the deadly flares, too, were lessening in strength. The tanks sparked and grew hot as the mechanisms demanded still more oil. Piero squinted at the levels of the glowing fluid. A few minutes left, no more. The violence in front of him felt no more real than a play in a theater.

The Monitor alone stood straight in the space between the barricades and the inner ring, his lean face betraying as little as expression as usual. Now he undid a pair of clasps and let the velvet fall away from his parcel. The grey shadows of dawn slid along drawn wire and glittered off the dozens of small brass barrels laid side-by-side in their curved steel armature. Farbright slung the instrument's strap around his neck and drew his fingers across the metal strings, raising a sound like the grinding of broken glass.

The whalesong redoubled in force, loud and furious. Farbright struck a chord that pierced it, and then two of the barrels began to turn and the instrument unleashed a deafening drone that lanced through Piero's head like a nail being driven in just above his left eye, shoving him back down behind the crate with his hands clutching uselessly at his brow. The vibrations did something to the whalesong that still beat inside his brain, nulled it out, the clash of two waves that mirrored and inverted each other.

"Hah!" cried Anton. He looked wholly unaffected by the sound as he looked round the corner of the crate. Whatever he saw in the square made his expression lift, so Piero chanced a look himself. The rats had slowed in their flood, some even running back towards the rim, squeaking in what might have been pain. The fading walls of light shivered and sparked along their length in time with the droning pulse. The tide of vermin shivered and seemed for a moment as though it would draw back entirely.

Then a human shape clawed its way up from the pit, lurching in that characteristic gait, and the first Weeper emerged into the dawn. It was impossible to tell if it had been male or female, young or old; hardly possible, this late, to tell it was human at all. It paused for a moment after heaving itself over the edge, then shambled forward as if blind, unthinking, wholly unconcerned with the light of the wall before it hit.

Emitters screeched and the circle flared again. But it glowed dull in the grey twilight, and when the Weeper fell its wet flesh only singed and smoked in patches as the device struggled to incinerate it. Close behind it more and more pulled themselves over the edges of the pit and stumbled forward. The waking sun showed the scabbed black streams that still ran from their eyes. Blue glow outlined the grotesque patterns of their wounds. The rats raced and gamboled about their blistered feet, now chittering happy as a pack of hunting hounds.

Farbright shifted his fingers and began to play a more complex song. The pain at last dissipated in Piero's head and he breathed a sigh of relief. The Weepers hurled themselves against the barrier and the walls flared and dumped their energy, but as their mass increased the emanations dropped less and less of their power into each pound of flesh, and at last one stumbled through half-burning and knocked the oil tank behind the mast from its socket. The hum died and instantly all the others changed their course.

"Look at how they're moving," murmured Anton. Piero nodded.

"Like they are speaking," he answered. The Weepers converged and rebounded like a single mass, flowing together without ever crossing each others' paths.
"They're about to lose the walls," said Anton in the same coolly objective voice.

The other tanks tried to take up the slack, rifles cracked as sharpshooters took their shots, but more and more Weepers flooded through the weak link and drowned it in sheer mass. The tanks sizzled, burning hot, and then with a thunderous crack the entire circle snapped and shorted out. The killing light fizzled into a fading stench of flesh. The Weepers paused for a moment, all together, all looking up at the masts as if registering the dissolution of the wall.

"Aim!" bellowed Wentworth. No need, thought Piero's brain in its dazed calm. They can hardly miss so many clustered so close. The Admiral sounded nothing like he had a few hours ago as he had discussed his old commander; now his voice might as well have been the dial of a machine declaring the current action. Light gleamed off a forest of steel barrels as the men that lined the barricades leveled their firearms on the advancing horde. The Monitor stood still and calm as stone at the rim of his circles, only his fingers moving in that rapid, complex playing that still warred with the whalesong.

At Wentworth's shout the Weepers returned their gaze to the square. Every blank and bloodshot eye seemed to notice Farbright at the same time. The swarm converged, moving in an eerie silence, heading for the Monitor with the blind instinctive need of the infected.

Farbright struck the high chord on his instrument.

All the lines he had traced into the stone blazed to life. Piero recoiled behind the crate but even so the heat burnt his skin like strong sun. The Weepers screamed as they burned from the inside out, or tried to; half of them had their vocal chords dangling useless or rotted away, and only a hoarse gasp emerged as pale white fire raced through their veins, powdered their flesh. Piero squeezed his eyes shut against the blinding glare, the cacophony of battle at last overwhelming his senses completely.

"Go! While they're distracted!" roared a voice in his ear. Piero cracked one eye to see Anton gesturing urgently towards some distant point. He could not tell where the man was pointing, but he grabbed Anton's arm anyway and stumbled after him, trying not to twist an ankle. The white fire seared his vision and left smears of color in its wake. The Weepers screamed as they burned from the inside out, or tried to; half of them had their vocal chords dangling useless or rotted away, and only a hoarse gasp emerged as pale white fire raced through their veins, powdered their flesh. Piero squeezed his eyes shut against the blinding glare, the cacophony of battle at last overwhelming his senses completely.

He tried to blink away the phantoms that glowed across his sight; as his vision cleared he found himself level with the old rail-line from which the car had fallen. It looked strange all of a sudden, seeing it from a new angle, and he had to reassure himself that yes, it had always been there. He turned carefully, squinting and shading his eyes with one hand. Anton crouched at the edge of the car staring out into the square. Piero scrambled across the slanting metal. When he was close enough to be heard he sat on his knees and gripped a rusted handle with both hands. Anton had bound white gauze around his eyes to cut down the light and he wordlessly handled him the roll. Piero cut a strip of gauze and tied it carefully around his own head, all the while marveling at how routine an action could be carried out in the midst of such violence. The battle had finally drilled through the armor of his exhaustion and now his guts were trying to go both hot and cold at once. He found all of a sudden that he was shivering and could not stop.

Anton knows what he is doing, he repeated to himself. Anton went all the way through Pandysia. Just stay with him. The grenade made a heavy lump in his pocket and he felt a brilliant flash of
"Well, I suppose Farbright's on our side for now," grumbled Anton as he watched the fight below.

He sounded as if he were considering a hound-match.

Piero looked down. The Monitor's body stood rigid as a statue, his jaw clenched, his face a bone
mask no more lifelike than the Overseers' bronze. The lens of his spectacles made flat white coins
where his eyes should be. He was the only living being visible; all the men had disappeared behind
their barricades, sheltering from the uncanny flame. The Weepers clawed their way into the light and
stumbled forward, never pausing, as if gravity itself pulled them onwards; and still the wall of flame
held and burned them in their multitude.

An eye-stinging flare of color burst from the square and they both flinched back. Piero shaded his
eyes and peered over the edge. The Weepers still writhed in their fiery trap, but the white lines had
dimmed. He watched one of the infected struggle towards the boundary. Even as its corpse blew
away into ash black blood oozed out, swirled with a blue taint, and where it spilled over the lines the
Monitor had drawn the white fire screeched and bloomed into a million colors and went out. Piero
pointed wordlessly towards the sight and Anton stiffened as he watched. More of the infected were
moving now, seeking out the weak spots in the lines the same way they had assaulted the walls of
light.

He didn't see which one threw the stone, or even if it were a stone; the first he knew of it was the
clang of brass as it struck Farbright's instrument square on. One whirling drum hitched for a moment,
the song caught, and the witchfire winked out of existence as Farbright collapsed with a cry of pain.
It was the first genuine sound Piero had heard him make.

The whalesong roared gleefully back to life. The Weepers left raised their heads, moaning in a sort of
triumph, and as their fresh kindred climbed their way out of the crater they lurched forward again.

"Fire!" bellowed the Admiral, and Piero nearly leapt out of his skin when a volley cracked from the
barricades in a wall of smoke and lead.

Weepers went down with their skulls burst, legbones shattered, necks torn open. But when the
clouds of powder smoke blew away their fellows emerged, simply walking over the corpses, and
where the balls struck limbs or guts the infected only stumbled for a moment before righting
themselves. More of them copied their fellow, reaching down to grab chunks of rubble and hurling
them with inhuman strength towards their tormentors. The tallboys let fly their incendiary arrows and
Piero cringed automatically at the familiar crash of heat and sulfur. Even simple earthly fire made the
Weepers thrash and scream as the oil-taint in their blood worked against them, letting the flame find
purchase and race along their skin.

The tide breached the edge of Farbright's circle, but even if they no longer feared the white fire the
Weepers gave the Monitor a wide berth. Some winding coil within his instrument still drove the
droning barrels and the infected flinched away from the sound. One of the tallboys waded into the
mob, scattering arrows, dropping pots of flaming paste onto heads below. Gunsmoke and soot
shrouded the square in veils of grey, dyed the rising light red. And still the Weepers spilled from the
pit like maggots hatching from an open wound.

Anton elbowed him sharply in the ribs. His expression had gone from calm to intense to a newly
worried frown. "If this goes pear-shaped, take the rail-line," he told Piero. Piero glanced back
towards the old tracking in surprise. "Climb up, run along it, head uphill. The Weepers are going to
Greaves, they'll go the other direction."

Piero turned back with a look of puzzlement. Anton grabbed his shoulder before he could say
anything, fingers clutching through the layers of fabric. "Listen, listen, alright?" he said. "If Curnow
dies here it's his own fucking fault. But if we both die the cure is gone. And when it gets out of
Dunwall - because it will - then far, far more people are going to die than you and I would manage to
save by getting ourselves torn apart with the rest of these fools."

"I understand," said Piero. "I understand," he repeated, when Anton's grip did not abate. "The rail-
line."

Anton nodded and released his shoulder. "Fire!" yelled Wentworth again. Another volley of lead
smacked into flesh. It had to be the hundredth such volley. The reek of rotting flesh, burnt flesh,
diseased flesh permeated the air, sharpened by gunsmoke and electricity and a tang of blood. Piero
wanted to vomit and no sooner had he thought that than he was lurching forward to the edge of the
rail-car and throwing up down its former roof. He felt a strong hand grasp the back of his leathers so
that he did not fall. Time stretched like rubber. Guns barked. Bodies fell. Men and women and
children - things that had been men and women and children - howled inhuman screams. His
stomach had emptied itself, but the bitter taste of sickness remained.

All at once a gap opened up in the crowd. Piero lifted the bottom edge of the gauze, squinting to see.
At the center of the space the Monitor slowly stood. The Weepers crowded in again but Farbright
traced a strange and careful gesture in the air and slammed his open palm through it. The infected fell
backwards as if before a strong wind and left him unthreatened. But it did nothing to halt their slow
advance, implacable as the flood tide, and still the shaking laughing crying sobbing song that beat
beneath the earth, railed against the sawtooth drone that still rang from the Monitor's device, clawed
its way in through Piero's ears and grappled at his mind.

He pressed a hand against his brow, swaying dangerously. Dizziness spun him round for a few
moments and black swarmed his vision as if he had stood up too quickly. Blobs of shadow pinched
off and squirmed back together, pushing through Piero's mind with an odd feeling as though the meat
of his brain were being squeezed and released. If this were Corvo, he had somehow come apart into
dozens pieces. He blinked in the half-light and the silhouette of the horizon flickered like a heat haze
- and then he grabbed Anton's arm and pointed towards the distant houses with an incoherent sound.

"What--" Anton squinted and his brows shot up in surprise. "Holy hell, there's someone up there."

"Oh, wonderful," breathed Piero. "You can see them too."

Black shapes flickered from ridgepole to ridgepole. They covered the space not in leaps but in
flashes, dissolving and reassembling before he could make sense of them. They came clear on the
nearest rooftops - and bolts rained down into the square, stones from slings, grenades that burst
among the shambling infected. Some of the Watchmen cried out and turned their own weapons
upwards, but Curnow's shout of "Mind your targets!" brought them back down again.

"Who on earth..." said Piero faintly.

"Fucking witches, bouncing around like that," said Anton. He leaned forward, perilously close to the
edge, straining for a better look. "Who the fuck cares, they're armed." But his voice had taken on an
edge of thoughtful suspicion.

Shouts rose sharply off to his left. Piero threw off a shiver like cold water and tried to focus his
thoughts. He clambered over to that side of the rail-car, sat up on his knees, and froze. A clot of
Weepers pulled at the stacked masonry that formed the line of the barricades near the pylon, aiming
for a stretch of heaped rubble free of Watchmen and marines. They were close enough for him to see
the oil-tainted blood that ran from the cuts on their arms, the clotted stumps where ears and noses and
fingers had fallen away, the gangrenous sores that ate through their skin. Surely they would notice
him. How could they not? He sat dumbstruck and pinned, staring at the creatures that were going to try to kill him.

A thin click just next to his ear snapped his attention away. Anton had followed him and cocked his pistol. The men had noticed now and turned to fire across the gap in their lines, but they could hardly aim for fear of hitting their comrades on the other side. Officers shouted for reinforcements and waved swords and signal flags. Anton sighted down the barrel of his gun, but his hand wavered and Piero thought he could see the man counting his cartridges, and at last he decocked the gun with a snarl and another click.

The tallboy within the square took long skeletal strides towards the breach, firing as it went. It stepped in between the Weepers like a stork stalking the marshes. Pots of burning paste broke on the stone and sent bodies reeling. Men cheered. Then the tallboy's operator jerked to one side, swaying as if drunk. His next arrow went wide and splattered against a distant wall. More Weepers grabbed at the legs of the tallboy and pulled. The operator flailed and tried to raise the taloned mechanical feet. Gears squealed and shrieked, but the weight of bodies pressed them down. His high perch swayed back and forth till one savage yank whipped him loose with a cry of pain and the metal skeleton toppled over. The operator screamed as he flew, all the way down, till he struck the ground and the tanks of oil on his back burst from the impact. Blue-gold fire blew out in a searing blast of heat and carved a crater in the crowd. The Weepers wavered in the aftermath of the blast, but the soldiers, too, shrank back, stunned.

Then into the silence a voice cried, "To me, lads!" A blue-clad figure leapt up atop one of the barricades and thrust his sword aloft. The razor edge caught the first glitter of sunlight. "To me!"

"Fuck me," blurted out Anton. "That's Howlcreek."

Without waiting another moment the captain plunged into the melee. Men surged after him, drawing gleaming blades. Piero saw the flash of Darion's blond hair among them. This was not Hallem Tobias' Watch.

The Weepers still stood puzzled and aimless in the wake of the explosion, but when blade met flesh they all started awake as one. Any hopes that they would be easy prey in a melee died instantly. Weepers yanked and bit at the living, caught blades in bare hands, pulled the fighters to them and vomited stinking black blood in their faces. Yet still more men poured over the barricades, forming a cordon at the farthest extent of the mob and hacking forward. Marine sharpshooters fired into the melee, picking their targets with utmost care, the way they would find them on a pitching deck. A few climbed atop the barricades to find a better angle while their comrades slashed and fired away at Weepers who came too close. Blades flashed through the air, every one of them quickly drowned in black blood.

A brief convulsion of the mind and black figures shivered into existence along the elevated track, lining the nearest rooftops, pouring bolts and bullets into the fight. A few of the masked and hooded figures blinked out and reappeared in the fight itself, and though the men stumbled back in surprise at their sudden appearance, no one had any complaints once their swords flashed to cut Weeper necks.

Then Howlcreek stumbled in the hole left by a broken flagstone and before he could regain his footing a Weeper grabbed his arm from behind and yanked it hard enough that Piero could hear the distant pop of the shoulder. The man screamed and spun to face his new attacker when another seized his other arm. Even as his lieutenant fought through to save him the two Weepers pulled apart hard enough to tear the limb whole from his body, and as he fell backwards a third bit into his throat and ripped it out wet and red, let the body fall, and lurched onwards, mouth bubbling with blood.

His followers drew back for an instant, stunned, wavering on the edge of flight.
And then a man in bright red precipitated into existence in the heart of the fight, standing over the captain's corpse, already sweeping his blade through a grim arc that parted both Weepers' heads from their bodies.

Before Piero could form a thought Anton lunged upright and in one motion drew his pistol. "Assassin!" he screamed as he sprang from the rail-car, heedless of the distance or the melee or any other threat, heedless of everything except emptying his gun at the man in red.

Not a single ball struck home. Even in the midst of battle the man turned faster than the eye could follow and then he was simply gone, disappearing from the heart of the melee; and then back again, close before the shock had a chance to show on Anton's face, and with a sweep of his hand green light burst between them and threw the Royal Physician full into the air to strike the side of the railcar with a hollow boom, slumping along it to the ground.

"Anton!" screamed someone, shrill and far away. Piero could not figure out who was yelling. He could not figure out how he had gotten to the other side of the rail-car, either, down the side and onto the ground. But that didn't matter, because what mattered was running, fixing his gaze on his target, measuring the blood, gauging the angle of the neck - surely he had not snapped his neck - surely not-

"Anton!" cried Piero again when he reached the man, but did not wait for an answer; he hooked his arms under Anton's shoulders and began to drag him the short distance back to the opening in the rail-car's side. No chance of regaining the roof, not with Anton's dead weight against him - no, not--

He stumbled into blissful darkness, propped Anton up against the chill, slimy wall, then took off one of his outer layers and wadded it up to make a cushion for the head. His gloves came away stained dark red and there was so much blood running sticky through black hair and even though a calm voice repeated *Head wounds are known to bleed excessively, far more than their severity would indicate* surely they did not mean *this much blood*. Piero frantically stripped off layers till his hands were free. The icy wind froze his exposed skin. The kit. He pawed frantically through the kit. Where had they put the bandages?

Anton emitted a long, painful groan and Piero returned to him at once. He clicked the handlamp on and shone it into the man's face; Anton blinked at him, eyes unfocused, pupils huge and mismatched in the light. He still had his pistol in a loose grip and now he tried to raise it. Piero quickly seized the weapon and laid it out of his reach.

"Jackassh..." Anton slurred.

"You have a c-concussion."

"No shhhhit." Anton leaned to one side, coughed, and spat.

"You are not s-s-supposed to move your ne-neck," ordered Piero as he folded a pad of cloth over and over with shaking fingers. That was the procedure. He knew the procedure. He could follow the procedure, and everything would be alright.

Anton tried to take the cloth from him but Piero batted his hand away. "I know how to - treat a - hh...head wound," said Anton. His breath came in short, shallow gasps.

"You cannot patch the back of your own thick skull," snapped Piero.

"Let me--" Anton tried to push himself up on one hand and a sudden sharp yelp escaped his lips. He
dropped back against the wall as if he had been shot. "Ribs," he gasped out. "Fuck." The tanks' glow caught bright tears of pain standing in his eyes.

"There," said Piero, with a satisfaction he did not feel. "Sit." He pressed the white cloth against the bloody patch with one hand and wound a new length of gauze around Anton's head with the other. "How do you feel?"


"W-w-what in the v-v-void possessed you?" stammered Piero as he knelt and rustled through the kit bags again.

"His name - ish - Daud."

"Well, I hope he is worth your broken ribs," said Piero peevishly. His hand shook as he held a brown glass vial up to the dull tank-light, trying to read the label.

A hand seized his arm in an iron grip. "He killed Jessamine," intoned Anton.

Piero wordlessly handed him the tiny vial of laudanum.

Anton tipped the bottle towards him in a mock toast before drawing out the pipette and letting a few drops of the solution fall onto his tongue. The *spang* of a ricochet off the rail-car's flanks made Piero duck instinctively and shoved the fight back to the forefront of his attention. It seemed terribly distant now, another day entirely. Surely they had been at this for hours; surely it must be over by now. But the stones still hummed beneath them and the song resonated up weirdly through the steel, every so often hitting some critical note that made the entire structure ring. He glanced once more at Anton to reassure himself the man would not vanish if he turned his head, then shuffled over to the crevice and peered out.

The hole in the rail-car faced roughly towards the melee outside and so Piero could see the twisting, violent clump of bodies. The man Anton had fired at - *Daud*, if he had it right - whipped through the chaos with supernatural grace. His bright red coat blazed in the scrum of blue and brown and black like a lit torch and both the black-masked figures and the Watchmen had rallied to him, hacking through bodies and being pulled and bitten and beaten in turn. Everything in the world had dissolved into screams and gunfire and blood and mud and Piero thought with a sudden sharp longing of their escape route along the rail-line above the car. It might as well be in Pandyssia now. Anton could never make it in this condition.

Anton capped the vial of laudanum, swallowed, and sighed in languid relief as he leaned back against the metal wall. "What's - happening?" he asked, as if he could sense the drift of Piero's thoughts. Piero shook his head mutely. He risked creeping outside the shelter, still crouched on the cold stone, and looked towards the central crater. Sulfur and ash stung his nostrils. Most of the square had disappeared into clouds of dust and powder smoke. The breeze shredded them apart and through the gaps sparks flashed, endless volleys pressing the infected back towards the mouth of the sewers.

He looked back at the melee and blinked in surprise, then stuck his head back inside the rail-car.

"I think we are winning," he said, astonished.

Wretchedly, resisting every step of the way, the Weepers were retreating back into the square. The dent they had made in the cordon flattened out with agonizing slowness like a bend in steel being forced to straighten. As the fight receded it left a slick of bodies like debris behind the retreating tide, blue and grey tangled with muddy black and all swimming with little red gobbets of flesh. A few still
gasped for air, pleading for water or succor or mercy. The remaining tallboy fired without pausing as it paced bright circles herding the foe back towards the crater. The curls of smoke cleared as the rate of fire slowed. Farbright pushed through to the edge of the pit, his device singing now with a note of triumph. The lenses of his spectacles flashed in the rising light as he lifted his head. His fingers drew blurred shapes in the air.

As the square cleared the man in the red did not follow. The black figures converged and bloomed into existence around him, resolving briefly into masked and hooded figures. Daud turned to look back up towards the rooftops - Piero flinched, another warp of the world - and Corvo was there, flashing down upon him with sword drawn.

The collision occurred far too fast for the merely human eye to follow. By the time the ring of steel on steel reached Piero's ears they had already disappeared, dropping back into existence nearly a dozen meters away. They met in stillness for another moment and rebounded, leapt away, flickered across the square. The black figures flashed in around Corvo, but a wave and a shout from Daud sent them back away. Instead the assassin leapt up onto the elevated curve of the rail-line and Corvo followed, racing away after him.

Piero ducked back into the rail-car. "It seems Corvo has much the same idea you did," he said.
Anton's brow furrowed and Piero added, "You are not the only one with scores to settle with Daud."

Anton did not move from his half-collapse, but he grinned a wholly vicious grin. "Good," he declared.

When he looked again Corvo and Daud were gone. The ceaseless beat of gunfire had slackened to merely thunderous now that the Weepers had been pressed back to within a few meters of the crater, almost back to the original walls of light. They swayed and jostled each other, their backs to the pit, but they had gone strangely still, only wavering in place like a field of tall grass. Farbright's instrument shot up in pitch and the whalesong ebbed to a single long sustained note that woke resonances in the steel and made Piero grit his teeth and Anton curse in renewed pain.

The mob rippled. The grass bowed before the wind. A taller Weeper pushed aside its fellows and headed unerringly for the Monitor. Farbright was waiting for it. He stood fast and made his sign again, pushing through it, and this newest Weeper stumbled back.

Then it braced the heel of one foot and lunged forward, and before Farbright could make another move it thrust its hand clear through the Monitor's chest.

Furbright's jaw dropped open in surprise, one hand flying to the attacker's wrist, but he might as well have tried to bend a bar of cast iron. The Weeper seized the Monitor's instrument with the other hand and ripped out the brass drums. The droning counterpoint screeched and died. It pinned Farbright's other arm to his side in a massive grip and lifted him clear off the ground, shaking him like a terrier with a rat; and then it spat a clump of wet black blood in the Monitor's face and threw him aside across the cracked stone, and Farbright rolled once or twice and slumped, still.

And now the Weeper turned, the Monitor's blood still slicking his arm to the elbow, and the brightening dawn drew a hint of red from his filthy coat, and blue-white oil seeped along the deep gashes that marred his face, three in a line like the swipe of an animal's claws and one athwart the end, and Thaddeus Campbell grinned a hideous grin.

Piero pulled back into the rail-car and stared at the opposite wall in silence.

"What?" prompted Anton.
Piero opened his mouth, then closed it again. He frowned, as if in thought, but in truth his brain had gone utterly blank.

The laudanum must have taken effect, because as he sat there Anton eventually pushed himself into a careful crouch and came over to look outside for himself. "What are you so--"

He fell silent, then drew back into the car.

"Well," he said at last, and then, "Okay." His jaw worked for a moment, but whatever he had been about to say vanished into the new blast of gunfire that erupted outside.

Some part of Piero quietly hoped that he had been mistaken. But the huge brand across the man's face left no doubt. Campbell advanced towards the barricades with speed and a smiling, manic intent. Arrows drew fiery streaks down towards him and he swatted them away like gnats. Piero saw one arc down towards him and sizzle out when it came within an arm's length. Behind him came a fresh surge of Weepers, more, and more, and more, no end to the human tide that boiled up from beneath. They swarmed out with vigor, seized by a new and feverish aggression.

A calm despair opened up in Piero's heart. Of course the ones they had beaten back weren't the end of it. They were only the vanguard, the advance scouts. There were more Weepers. There would always be more Weepers. Perhaps there were more Weepers, now, than living inhabitants of the city; and the earth would vomit them up till they filled the streets and the buildings and the squares and finally claimed Dunwall for their own. He watched in calm and utter detachment as they swarmed the remaining tallboy and brought it down just before the operator could make it under the cover of the barricades. Glass sailed through the air and he registered the makeshift incendiaries with no more than dull surprise. The bottle smashed and a plume of blue-gold flame rose with a concussive whumph behind a barricade. More explosions followed in a swift and rattling cadence that scattered men like leaves before a wind.

Piero retreated once more into the darkness of the rail-car, drawing his knees up to his chest and hugging them tightly. Words had fled his mind. At last he murmured, "Are we going to die?"

Despite his attempts to focus Anton's gaze skittered across Piero's face. His pupils were still huge, drowning his eyes in black. "I don't know," he admitted.

"It isn't fair. We could not have known," protested Piero.

"Curnow miscalculated. We all miscalculated."

"And now we are going to die."

Anton leaned to one side with visible effort and dropped his hand on the massive knife-switch that joined the tank rig to the distant pylon.

"There's still a way out of this," he said.

On an island of Blackglass that its inhabitants called *Sutharna* lived a cult that believed that the tides moved the world. Existence, they said, ran in cycles, and so every aspect of experience repeated itself from the smallest to the largest scales. That memory filled Piero's head right now and he could well believe that was true. His life had wound back on itself and here he was again, hiding with Anton Sokolov, facing death, and betting everything on the coiled copper and steel of the arc pylon.

"Should we ask Curnow?" he wondered. "Or Corvo?" Surely such a decision couldn't come down to just him and Anton throwing a switch.
Anton laughed, or tried to; his broken ribs caught and turned it into a wheeze of pain. "It's up to us to bail them out," he answered. "As per fucking usual."

"There may still be more Weepers. And the square is full. There will be casualties."

"There will always be casualties," said Anton. "It's risking it all on Curnow's men or ending this now."

Piero closed his eyes and took a deep breath. None of this was real. It didn't happen like this, a battle, a decision like this one. He was still dreaming. Had never moved from his bed at Kaldwin's Bridge. He wanted, quite desperately, to go back there. To a place that made any damn sense at all. All he wanted was to make this go away.

And that was the decision made, wasn't it? Because he could.

He opened his eyes again. "Ready?" said Anton.

"Ready," said Piero.

Anton threw the switch.

The tanks stayed silent. No sparks flashed at their sockets, no new glow lit the oil within as the pylon began to draw its power. Anton flipped the switch back and forth a couple of times to no effect.

"Hmm," said Anton. "Bad connection?"

"The rig is fine. I spliced it fine," said Piero, annoyed. He put a hand on the thick power cabling that wound into the rail car and shone his hand-lamp on the connections he had twisted together a few hours ago, double-checking his handiwork. He followed the cable down and out to the rail-car's wall, then traced its length back to the pylon, where it connected to--

And then he spotted a barrel gleaming in the long light, a half-twist out of sync and still jutting from the pylon. A hole opened up in Piero's stomach. "The firing circuit," he breathed. "Oh, Void take us. We never replaced the circuit."

Behind him Anton swore in long strings of Tyvian. "Won't arm without it," he completed needlessly. "Got to--" He tried to push himself upright.

"Do not be a fool," snapped Piero as he seized the man by one shoulder and pressed him back down. "You cannot even stand." He snatched up the trigger relay where it lay coiled across the tank rig. "Listen," he said, pressing it into Anton's hand. "I will replace the circuit. You fire the device."

"You don't have to do this," tried Anton, but it was only for form's sake; he knew the situation perfectly well. Still Piero felt compelled to answer, "There is no one else."

Anton leaned back, a slight nod, a concession to the irrefutable logic.

Piero breathed in, breathed out. He ought to be feeling something right now; but the fatigue and the sound and the fear had once more overloaded his capacity for any emotion. Existence had disintegrated into a series of abstract concepts. The idea that he might die felt no more real than the surface of the sun. He stepped out into the waking dawn, scanned for danger - as if he would see it coming, the bullet that would end his life - then breathed deep and ran along the path of the power cables to the little nest of crates and chests that hid the signal generator. It rose untouched still beneath the rail-line. The long cylinder of the firing circuit still sat halfway inserted and he gripped the brass barrel and twisted it a half-turn, felt the flanges line up, then slid it fully into the mechanism.
Relays clicked, junctions sealed. He made certain of its position and waved his arms frantically in the direction of the rail-car.

A hum burst to life within the generator as power flooded its cables and circuits. The fluid within the resonant chamber whirled into chaotic motion. A shower of small arcs rippled through the signal emitter atop the rail-car like a waking beast shaking off snow. The pylon was live.

Piero took a step back and looked the device over one last time. He could hear the emitter crackling as it gathered power. Blue-white energies flared in the resonant chamber's heart. The generator's static hum was already coalescing into a rhythmic pulse, that weirdling call like a mechanical crow.

This was it. This would work. He turned back towards the shelter of the rail-car.

Thaddeus Campbell was standing directly in his path.

Piero stared at the shape of his death, precise and alive. No instinct galvanized him into flight; he was beyond that now. The world came to him in a series of images he struggled to process at all. Campbell leered at him with an unfocused hatred plastered across his features. He did not recognize Piero - and why should he - but he hated him anyway. It was enough that Piero was alive and breathing and in his way and Campbell was--

It is not the swarm. Time stretched and everything around Piero had gone crystal-clear. All that moved were the gears of his mind. It is a focus. The Weepers are acting with intelligence because they have a focus.

The sigils of the Overseers. The blood pact. The sight of the long black fire-scars from the height of the tower.

One man can let a spirit in.

Thaddeus Campbell, who had betrayed his Empress. Thaddeus Campbell, who had been abandoned in return by his co-conspirators. Who had been shunned, branded and sickening, driven out of the society that he had ruled. Who had stood atop Greaves, rotting from the inside out, watching the lights of the world that had turned its back on him, and hated.

"Who on earth wants to kill a city?"

Who had stood atop Greaves and cursed.

Behind him the pylon boomed out loud as breaking surf, crying its rising power.

It's you. It's been you all along.

"Fire it!" he screamed at Anton.

He heard a click as a relay closed.

Nothing happened.

Oh no.

His heart plummeted through his chest. A wave of buzzing cold swept outwards through his limbs. He stood frozen. That was it, then. Campbell's harsh dark eyes bored into him above a snarling mouth. Now he would die.

A shot cracked overhead. "Hey!" snarled a rough voice. "Asshole!"
The ghoul that had been the High Overseer switched its focus immediately. Anton leaned half-in, half-out of the rail-car, smoke still drifting from the barrel of his pistol. Campbell's face twisted at once into a broken grin. The skin of his cheeks split apart to show peeling gums and the bone beneath.

"You!" he shouted, and his voice had ripped apart into the same stony rumble that had resonated beneath the square. He lurched forward and stabbed an accusatory finger at the Royal Physician. "You brought this down on us!"

When Campbell's gaze left him Piero tried to back away, but the heel of one foot caught on broken stone and he went down hard on his backside. The long grey twist of the trigger relay lay beneath him now and he pulled on it. One end rippled towards him like a snake.

"Wonderful to see you too, High Overseer," drawled Anton.

"It was your madness, your Void-cursed machines and your demon fire!" declaimed Campbell in righteous fury as though he still stood in the lectern of the Abbey's Great Hall. "You and that thrice-damned sorcerer Roseburrow, all of this is because of you!"

Piero knew he should be running, but the strength had drained out of him like the oil that bled away from Greaves. He stared at the broken wire in his hands. Some stray arrow-shot, some flaming scrap; who knew what, but it had burnt through the wire. A bright fan of slagged copper trailed from it like entrails spilled across the stone. The sight made him want to weep.

"The city will suffer until we are cleansed of your crimes!" railed Campbell. "You and your witchcraft and that pathetic bitch excuse for an Empress--"

Grey eyes went ice-cold. "You murdered her."

"Go to hell," snarled Campbell.

"I've been," said Anton, and shot him through the heart.

The impact of the ball blew a fountain of black blood out Campbell's back and sent him down on one knee - and then he staggered upright with that sickening lopsided grin, mingled blue and black leaking from the fresh hole in his chest.

Anton's eyes went wide, showing the whites all around.

"Oh dear," he murmured.

He fired again, aiming for the head, but this time Campbell moved so fast that Piero could hear the bones protesting and the ball passed harmlessly above his left shoulder. Anton cursed and tried to steady his aim, but the Weeper simply slipped past every shot till the pistol clicked down on an empty chamber.

*Why is Anton bothering with this?* He couldn't kill Campbell. Campbell was no longer a thing that could be killed, and they had failed. They were all going to die, because he hadn't been good enough. His mad dash to replace the firing circuit had meant nothing. Their only hope had been dead before he started. Piero wanted to wail in agony at the utter bleak unfairness of it all, that the wire should melt, how could the universe--

The universe didn't give a damn about him. The realization struck him straight between the eyes. He had devoted his life to natural philosophy and natural philosophy neither knew nor cared. No matter how much Piero Joplin needed it to happen that single relay would not close, that motivating spark
would not bridge the contacts of one all-important switch. Was it fair that this weight should fall on
him? Absolutely not. But the universe did not know about fair. The one thing capable of caring
about what he wanted leaned concussed and bleeding in the mouth of that rail-car, fumbling to reload
his pistol. Fate knew only the laws of metal and oil and current, and those dictated that unless
something bridged that crucial junction the pylon would not fire.

Duty, courage, cowardice, faith, honor, sacrifice, foolishness; none of it changed a thing.

All that mattered was that last half-inch gap.

Anton had barely slotted a fresh cartridge before Campbell ripped the pistol out of his hand, then in
the next instant slammed an elbow into his chest. Anton toppled back into the darkness with a cry of
pain. Campbell grinned.

Piero stood up and let the wire drop from his hands.

"Toothless as always in the end," the ghoul proclaimed, tossing Anton's gun aside. "Party tricks and
fancy words, that's all you ever were." He pointed one finger at the fallen man as if passing sentence.
"Hide in your cage, Royal Physician. Watch the doom that you have brought down upon us all."

"You!" Piero shouted at the High Overseer. His voice broke halfway through and he had to cough
and clear his throat of smoke and dust. "You..." Um. "You - heretic!"

Campbell looked over, perplexed.

Even as he pulled it from his pocket Piero's mind presented him with a clockwork schema of the
grenade's workings and he yanked the crucial pin from the center of it and flung the device towards
Campbell's feet, bolting the other direction. The grenade burst behind him and he felt it not as fire but
as a solid wall of air that tossed him over a crate and rolled the crate on top of him. Shards of stone
and wood and steel peppered the other side of it like hail. He flailed and kicked at the heavy wooden
box till it rolled off him and he could push himself back to his feet. The explosion had thrown up a
dense cloud of smoke and stone-dust that sealed him and the pylon away from the world.

Then a dark shape grew in the fog and Campbell walked out, unhurried, unperturbed. His body been
pierced in a dozen places, but even as Piero watched the blood clotted in the wounds like new flesh,
black and smooth. The hole Anton had left in his chest had already sealed over.

"What are you, then?" he called, amusement in his grinding voice. "Sokolov's latest bedwarmer?" A
choking sound that was half laughter and half snarl. "I wonder if the coward will even try to save
you."

Piero backed towards the pylon, riveted by the ghoul's drooling smile, the mesmerizing hatred in
those black eyes. Behind him stray electrical arcs snapped from the generator to the steel rails above.
His hair wanted to stand on end. The air hummed and that queer magnetic effect had come into play,
tugging at the fastenings of his boots, making the rail-line groan and shift.

Some brass protrusion jabbed him in the back. The hypnotic fear broke and he whirled, moving
around the pylon. That dazed calm still shielded his thoughts, but now he felt it as some crystal
bubble that raised his cognition above the stew of panic and terror. The initiating switch lies just
below the firing circuit, the calm told him. The wires for the remote trigger relay are connected
there. Piero found the grey cord where it met the brass. He yanked at it, but it held firm. Anton
spliced the connection, he remembered. So of course the wires would be wrapped neatly,
methodically, with no room to slip or break.
Campbell grabbed for him and he ducked around the pylon, keeping it between them. Campbell moved too; his mouth curled back in what might have been a smirk, and a stony chuckle rose from his throat. The pylon sang in ever-louder, ever-sharper pulses. Campbell feinted to one side and chuckled again as Piero scrambled to avoid it. Piero's gaze darted frantically across their abandoned workbench, searching for the wire cutters, and his moment of distraction nearly killed him; Campbell grabbed again and this time his fingers brushed the trailing edge of Piero's coat, yanked back for one sickening moment. Piero stumbled, regained his footing, darted around to that grey cord and pulled at it hard enough to cut into his palms. The twin wires held firm. He did not have the strength to part them by force alone.

*But somebody does,* whispered that calm portion of his mind.

As Campbell came around the pylon's curve Piero grabbed the grey cord in both hands and whipped a curl of it towards him. Without pause the ghoul snatched it out of the air. The fine strands of metal snapped at the joint and Campbell tossed the wires aside without looking away from Piero. The innards of the pylon blazed with an acrid white light that threw its framework into silhouette. The switch lay exposed against it, a few frayed strands of copper still sticking up from its contacts.

Campbell lunged for him, blood and oil dripping down his lips. Piero backpedaled - too slow - but then the pylon snapped off a blinding arc that cracked between them and earthed itself in the rail-line's supports. Piero dove around the other side of the pylon towards the workbench, blinking away the searing arc-light, hoping his memory would be enough; his fingers scrambled uselessly on wood for one heart-stopping moment and then he felt a round handle and snatched up the screwdriver just before the edge of the bench punched him in the gut and he toppled to the ground. His lungs burned, his eyes watered, and when he opened them again his spectacles were gone and the world had blurred into a mosaic of colors. He scrambled to his feet and came up again with the pylon between him and the ghoul. Every inch of his body protested. His muscles had begun to simply shut down, refusing to answer his commands.

"Well, this has been amusing," rumbled Campbell. "But I think our little game is done."

And then he laughed and dashed forward fast as lightning, and Piero Joplin thought *Let us see how far my luck can stretch,* and jammed the screwdriver down across the contacts of the switch.

A spark leapt.

The world shatters.

---

The sun sinks slowly behind the west bank of the Glaiwes. Reeds rustle in the cool wind of dusk. The riverwater makes soft sloshing sounds as it tugs at their roots, swirling thick mud, washing over frogs and salamanders and little fish biting at the last mayflies. And from the grassy banks as they slope away, the high and distant piping of childish voices, a blind and idiot sound.

*Where's he gone?*

*Run home to his mama again.*

Closer now, in among the shadowed green forest of the reeds, in among their woody stalks and threading roots, in beneath their nodding heads. In along the edges of the river, not quite land and not quite water, in to the secret world of dragonflies and herons and thin red snakes. In to where a boy curls in a huddled lump of misery, where hot tears splash into the river and startle the little fish.
The voices call to each other across fields where the scent of tilled earth hangs rich and heavy.

*You see he had a fit when Bradley chucked his stupid book in the water?*

*I saw, swear he was foamin' at the mouth, like a mad dog or summat. One day he's gonna bite you.*

*Yeah, yeah, you'll catch bein' a weirdo too...*

Dusk stretches long fingers across the fields. The last sliver of red sun slides beneath a distant treeline. On the other bank the blue dies into indigo, into violet, and an ivory moon creeps up full and round. The wind blows with a slip of cold like a hidden knife.

*This is boring. I'm tellin' you, he's run home.*

*It's getting dark anyway. We can tell Overseer Falchion tomorrow.*

*I guess. Let's get out of here.*

*Alfie says his mom's putting on apple pie tonight.*

*Yeh? Brilliant.*

The wind stills. The world goes black against a glowing sky. The river calms to a deep blue mirror framed in the shadows of the reeds.

The boy sniffs and tries to wipe his eyes. One lens of his thick spectacles is missing and the other is scratched. He has cried himself out for the moment. He is not satisfied in any way. He has simply run out of strength to cry further.

A breath of wind, but the surface of the water does not stir.

"What's your name?" asks a clear voice.

The boy raises his head. The deep blue mirror of the river opens before him into another blue. A stunning depth runs between the banks. It is luminous within, as if light has replaced water. White rock twists up in spires like reaching fingers, like old curving bones. And sitting atop the peak of one is a child, now, sitting next to the boy, except the child is sitting beneath the water that is no longer water.

The boy coughs once in surprise, his throat still tight from sobbing. But the child smiles invitingly, and he leans closer to the blue.

"What's your name?" the child asks again.

"P-p-piero," the boy stammers out miserably. He chews on the end of his sleeve. "J-joplin."

"Why are you crying, Piero Joplin?" asks the child. It has all the androgynous beauty of the very young. Its black eyes are wide and sympathetic.

"They w-w-were m-mean t-to me. Th-they t-t-took my b-b-book." The words spill from him. A fresh spate of tears wells up and he bursts out, "Why are they s-s-so m-mean to me!? I n-never d-d-did anything t-to them!"

"Because they are jealous," says the child. "Because you are not the same." It cocks its head to one side. "Because they are afraid."
Piero sniffs again and wipes his nose on one sleeve. The child is only inches away. Yet his brain keeps trying to tell him that he is seeing something distant, something vast.

"Why are they like that?" he mumbles into his hands.

"Because they're small and stupid and boring," says the child scornfully. It leans closer and favors him with another smile. "Not like you. Your head is big inside. Full of fascinating things."

A hint of humor and something else dances in pitch-black eyes. Light flows like water in the infinite abyss. Piero can see a thin gap between him and the child like the glass of a mirror.

"You should come with me, Piero Joplin."

He should be afraid.

"You should come and play with me instead."

Piero reaches out one hand, palm flat, towards the surface of the river. He has touched it hundreds of times and watched the skin of the water ripple. But this time the luminous fluid shifts and thin, graceful tendrils reach up from it. He watches himself move with a distant curiosity. A chill wind blows through him. This must be a dream. The black depths of the stars watch him with smiling eyes. The blue is rising up, swallowing the sky. The glowing strands of water lace themselves into a beautiful net. Any moment now he will wake up.

The child beckons him forward.

He touches the water.

He falls.

---

The howling scream is wind and not wind. Colors whip up before it and fly like leaves that splatter against the planes of substance congealed into unparsable shapes, their curves intertwining, their dimensions deceiving the eye. He is plunging endlessly towards an abyss he will never reach, hurtling upwards into void. He might be cold, might be burnt to a crisp, but his body is long gone and even the anchor of flesh is denied him. Distance ripples and billows, bulging and swelling, and the endless droning singing screaming rushing sobbing of the wind and he can see...

He can see everything.

Triangles, tetrahedra, stellated icosahedra swarm around him and invert themselves into a thousand interlocking reflections, other places, other times, and he can see them all. He sees himself as a child, as a young man, as he is now, in futures where he is old and bent and grey, and then he sees the world shift--

He sees the board convened to cast him from the Academy, but Master Archibald Garvey contracts a headcold and is unable to present his case, and the annoyed faculty dismiss his tedious complaint and move on--

He sees the studio that had bought his 'prentice mark find out about his surreptitious sales, the raising of his private capital, and they manufacture some excuse to seize his funds and keep him in Potterstead under their mark for a decade more--

And in another reflection the door opens, a message comes at the wrong/right time, and Esmond
Roseburrow lives--

And without his mentor's suicide a young Sokolov grows into maturity wiser and more controlled, helping guide Dunwall into a new golden age--

And without his mentor's suicide a young Sokolov grows rash and frustrated, quitting Dunwall to return to a Tyvia eager to challenge Gristol's dominance, and fleets of steel ships clash on the waves--

The city of Karnaca rebels against its tyrant child Empress, and her answer comes not in swords or shells but in grey-green mists that creep through its streets, creeping upon the sound of the markets and the squares and the avenues and leaving behind only coughing, choking, silence, and on the deck of the ship that flies the bloody Kaldwin flag a man tends lovingly to the fat round tanks of poison gas and it takes him a moment to recognize himself--

A shape dark and helical hovers at the edge of his sight, ever in flux, spiraling through itself in dizzying waves. The wind forms itself into words, speaking from just behind him, and it says, "This has become quite an interesting reaction."

"Who's there?" he shouts into the chaos. "What is this!?" He strains to be heard above the noise before he realizes sound has no true meaning here. The words tumble away in cycloid curves.

"Why, it's you, Master Joplin." That helix branches, inverts, collides and recombines in a manner he cannot describe but which he knows is, in some unfathomable way, amused. "This is your potential. Cradle to grave, peak to valley, a life rolling down the hill. How very many paths it can take."

The shards of diverging fate swell to gigantic size and the unbound reality flexes and squashes him back down into an approximation of his body, stranded on a flat black ground dwarfed by massive images of his past, his future. He finds his feet, the newly-strange pull of gravity, and runs after the apparition through the maze of edges.

"You will never know the consequences of your every action, nor how the actions of others have had consequences for you," continues the voice. A flicker of dark planes realigning. He pursues. "All of these could be you, and none of them are." The voice paces him, speaking always from the left, speaking always from a point just behind and above his left shoulder and he knows that if he turns he will see the truth, and that if he turns he will die.

"All men travel through this world no more aware of its true nature than a sleeper is of his surroundings. Those few who are fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of its real aspect tend to go irrevocably insane, of course." Another fleeting glimpse. He runs forever, he goes nowhere. The maze bifurcates endlessly, like a dream, changing every time he looks away. "I wonder if you will as well? It might be quite an interesting sort." The voice becomes a writhing nightmare, a black vision that bores its way into his brain. He is doomed to race forever through this endless labyrinth. There is no way out.

Except that all at once he realizes there is; and he does, then, something terribly simple, and something he has never done before.

Piero stops running.

"No," he declares.

The voice is silent.

He looks up at the depthless walls that rise above him and thinks, No. And the labyrinth splinters,
then, and falls in shards all around him, and leaves him free on an open obsidian plain.

"Do you hear me?" he shouts, raising his voice again; he does not care if it matters or not. It matters to him. "I said 'no,' you cruel specter."

The ground beneath him tries to shiver apart and drop him again into the abyss; don't you dare he snaps at it without thinking, and it obeys. What else could it do? "I have had enough of your schemes and tricks," he tells that invisible apparition. "I have had enough of being your plaything. A debt is owed, and a debt will be collected."

The voice laughs in a shrill, high cadence like splintering ice. "Poor mortal. What could possibly make you believe that one such as me could owe anything to one such as you."

"Because everything in nature is in balance," repeats Piero. The words are familiar as they come to him, though he cannot place them. Beneath his feet a light is brewing, blue-green ripples moving beneath the black glass of the plain. "You steal my life away in minutes and hours and days, you take what I have never given, and now you must render up in turn. You owe me a debt."

The helix thrashes. Cracks appear in the black glass. But that waving blue-green light beams up through them and the tiling shifting triangles spin and fling themselves away. "And if I ever did, then what would you claim?" spits the voice, no longer amused.

"Help me. Help us. End the plague. You have the power to intervene. Stop this."

Another laugh, condescending, relieved, curious. "All manner of power is at your fingertips, and always has been. It is only your mortal soul that quails to take it. How much, I wonder, do you still fear your own self?"

Piero turns around.

And comes face to face with the Outsider.

He freezes, utterly. He stops breathing, if ever he had been. The being smiles a little smile. Its face is tiled in shifting triangles; its eyes are endless tessellations; its grin is a shape that turns in on itself, holding nothing. It plumes outward in graceful motion from an enfolding darkness like ink in water, a shadow caught in the midst of eternal collapse.

"An interesting reaction indeed," it murmurs, in the sound of summer rain. And in that moment, for one infinite fraction, all of Piero Joplin assembles itself; every fragment, every hidden memory, every errant wisp shed or stolen or lost, forms into a single clarion glimpse, and he remembers everything.

The Outsider takes his chin in one hand, a light grasp of finger and thumb. Tilting his head. Meeting his gaze. He drowns in fathomless black eyes. The voice is the break of a killing wave.

"Time to wake up."

- - -

Here is what Geoff Curnow sees:

A white whipcrack of brilliance strikes first. The flash is light beyond light, light he sees not only with his eyes but with his skin and bones and the back of his skull. And for the first time he perceives the world as a thing, he senses existence as a substance, a clay, stretched thin and plucked by that light like a violin's string.
With a shriek it draws back in upon itself, regathering around the pylon, and for a moment he hopes that that was all; but every hair on his skin stands wavering upright, and he knows it is only the hiss of breath, the drawback in the harbor that sucks the foam from the strand and leaves the fish gasping.

Then the tidal wave breaks, and sweeps the land clean.

- - -

Piero opened his eyes in three dimensions. That surprised him, and then puzzled him that he was surprised. A strange golden clarity underlined his thoughts; his dazed calm had disappeared into something curious he could not yet name. The memory of a blue-green light came to him, shimmering beautiful like sun through water, but nothing more.

He was lying on the ground. He dragged his hand along the uneven stone for a few moments before locating his spectacles, replaced them, looked up at the pylon that loomed above. A low descending hum wound down within it. The sight filled him with a cool pride.

He stood. Campbell was gone. In his place a long streak of charcoal painted the flagstones. Piero turned and looked back towards the center of the square. All around it lay heaps and smears of white bone-ash, black scorchmarks on stone; that was all the pylon had left behind. Some few corpses retained vestiges of their former shape till the wind blew and they collapsed into dust. One lying at the edge had burnt red, and then he squinted and realized, no, it was the man in the crimson coat - Daud; his body alone remained intact.

Piero pulled down his spectacles and rubbed at his brow out of habit, but the headache had vanished. That blue-green light pooled within him. He felt the way he did when he knew he had completed one of his inventions, a sense of unshakeable rightness, as though some internal mechanism had come at last into its proper alignment.

He picked his way across to the rail-car and looked within. For a moment, silence, and fear-- "Still here," came Anton's voice, weak but steady, when he saw Piero silhouetted against the entrance.

Piero smiled back. "We're both still here," he replied.

"What have you done!?" yelled a furious voice behind him.

Piero turned, walked a few paces out into the square. Geoff Curnow knelt with Corvo's still form draped across his lap. White ash streaked him from head to toe. The General's expression had twisted into a vision of agony like an Overseer's scowling mask. A brown splotch marred the lower part of Piero's vision. He removed the lenses and found a smear of blood on one of them. Wiped it away with the hem of his jacket. Resettled them on his nose.

"What have you done!?" Curnow shouted again.

"As I was asked, General." Piero spread his arms wide. "Here is your weapon."

And the sun poured over the horizon behind him, over the wreckage and the ruin, the scarlet rays setting fire to the ash that swarmed up, up, up, into the sky, the bitter white ashes of the dead.
Two more chapters left. I swear! I really promise this time.

I've been waiting to play this series of revelations for a very long time - since January at least - and that's why it took me so long to write. Action sequences drive me crazy and after so much effort building it up I wanted the payoff to be as close to perfect as I could make it. I hope it's worth the wait.

I've played a little fast and loose with the facts. Past the end of the game I'm working with a mix between High and Low Chaos, and there are aspects of canon that I either forgot, glossed over, or decided were stupid. Fair warning.

Link to story post on tumblr.

Works inspired by this one:

- Unstable Equilibrium by Mertiya
- The Young Prince of Tyvia by Mertiya
- The Empress of Dunwall and the Dangerously Irrelevant Variables by Mertiya
- Adventures in (Accidental) Field Science by Mertiya
- Gender Segregation in Tertiary Educational Institutions by BookishScout
- On Souls and the Scientific Method: A Treatise by Anton Sokolov by Mertiya

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