

СЯООКЕД

RICHARD PETT



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BOOKS

CROOKED

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All characters and events in this book are fictional.
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*There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile,
He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile.
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse.
And they all lived together in a little crooked house . . .*

—nursery rhyme

Part One

VITAE

The sickly sun falls behind ochre clouds, almost apologising for illuminating the final moments of the day. In its embers, the evening air boils with insects, screaming as the shadow of night falls upon their countless billions.

A crow takes to the air, disturbed by movement in the ridge hive of chimneys and gables and spires. Lice dance upon the sickly bird, feasting as it soars over this fractured city. Below, streets are lashed by wire and chain-ferry, countless bridges rotting in the acrid air—a cat’s cradle of structures gazing downward. Brine, they call this city, but it has many other names. Stitched. Hive. Sweat Town. Despair.

The crow picks its way warily over the shrouding cliff towns of the Crucible, a cauldron of shantytowns staring petrified into its own dark depths. The crow flies swiftly over the canker-shrouded factories, fearful of being drawn into the poison choke, like the waters of the sea, which plummet into the lightless depths below, grinding a thousand, thousand waterwheels into furious screeching toil twice daily.

Rain falls, slithering over the makeshift dwellings of the upper city along the causeway—the levee between sea and Crucible. The bird’s gaze blurs as it sees the goliath Capitol towering above the river beyond, a broken hill of gables and spires and gargoyles rising into the clouds above. The Capitol ruptures as it threatens to fall into the sea, the cliffs broadening into the welcoming maw of the city. Iron tentacles grope blindly at the stacks around this grinning mouth, cranes and rusted piers and iron buildings piled one on another on another. These fangs are drawn from the Wall—the docks of this vast metropolis—and out across the river toward the sea, where the spires rise in their thousands, stacks of rotting stone and rust that call a mocking farewell to those brave enough to fish the waters beyond.

The crow roosts in rooftops lashed or spat or prayed into being by people desperate for shelter within a city dancing upon its own grave. Buildings on buildings on buildings, towering upward and outward like cancer. Growing, always growing. Someday, they say, a wren will settle upon a gable, and the whole city will collapse.

Has it already collapsed, rotted from within by its peculiarity and serendipity? Everyone knows the tales: a street takes an impossible turn, a shadow falls the wrong way as light enters an alley, revealing glimpses of things that have never seen the sun. People vanish or appear, followed or taken by others without shadows. Occasionally, a reflection in a puddle of water draws the two places together, and a new street is found, an alley returns back upon itself, or a whole district vanishes.

No place is safe in this rupture. The fangs of other predators gape and hunger at the sight of men and their children looking from their burrows into the dark.

Brine is an outpost, a place on the frontier of two places. Ask the old people to name of the other place, and they will blanch, anxious to avoid their own reflections in the windows of shops and the puddles of water at their feet. They know that endless incursions have left open wounds between, leaving a city in two places. "Between," they spit. "Be careful not to dream," they add, desperate to scratch away the verdigris of rot and time and return to the beautiful city of their childhood.

The crow aims for the cloven spire that is its scavenging guide, but its homeward dive is suddenly halted, its flight crippled by the suffocating embrace of a colossal web, cast by one of the gable spiders that make their home away from the stares of men and the strange hungers of the scrimshaw gargoyles above.

The crow struggles as it tries to escape, but the more it moves, the more it coils within stinging webs, which slowly begin to bite into its flesh. In a moment, the dislocated, spastic thing that wove the web will appear, and in the hours and days to come, weaver and prey will become one.

The light fades as another story begins in the city in a broken mirror.

Chapter One

THE EMPIRE MUSEUM

One thing was certain. The damned fool was gaining.

Jared snatched a quick glance over his shoulder and readjusted the leather case strapped to his back. It was hard to see much through the rain-choked gloom of the city smog, but he could still make out the squat, pygmy form of the Guthra following him, its bloated pumpkin head lolling, mandra sabre waving in the air.

How can he run so fast on those tiny legs?

“Don’t think why—just think how to escape. You stole from him, remember?”

Typical ghosts, always giving advice when you really don’t want them to.

“I’m not a ghost. I’m just a voice. I’m not like the others.”

Sure, just keep reminding me. The only one I want to be real isn’t.

“You can’t forget the voice you love.”

Love. One word, a million meanings, no two the same.

“You know this city better than he does, better than anyone does, so stop talking and start vanishing.”

You always did talk too much, even when you were alive.

“You need talking to.”

“Stop, thief!” The Guthra’s words choked in an accent as thick as the air itself. Words fell dead in the dockland’s poison air, suffocated by the swarms of insects dancing in the night. More cries answered the call.

He’ll lead the whole lot of them here if I don’t get away soon. Jared glanced at the case. *Is it worth the trouble?*

“Stop, thief!” Another voice joined the growing choir of calls.

“You know it is.”

Jared dodged a tonga wallah, his small cart creaking and crooked, and dashed between a pair of enormous grey crates the size of ships, hoping the fume of the city night would hide him, for once glad of its poison embrace.

The stench of breath enveloped him, decay reaching into his being and

making him turn to see the cause. He moved stealthily past the goliath carcass carriage gripping a great cage and on into the bronchitic night. Monstrous cast iron wheels towered above him, dripping in the wet grapple of city mud and labouring to move as the driver engaged the throttle. A chain wrapped a dozen times under the grime of her axle took the strain as the carriage slithered forward. At her front, a burden tugged the monstrous thing forward, sweat glistening from the dead shire's flanks, hooves trying to find purchase on the slippery streets. The horse's sweat smelt of chemicals and manufacture. Jared tried to avoid the creature's eyes but caught a glimpse as he moved by. Dead. The eyes were dead, but the horse still toiled. Always would, from dawn to dusk to dawn without halt or hope or need until... until? The pause was enough. Jared could see that everything that had made the creature what it once was had been taken away. Flies danced about the horse's ears, which were still. Its legs moved but like an automata. It made no sound.

The owner was cruel to it in life. I can feel its dull fear, the crack of a whip across its back... not now. Jared's head spun back to reality as he shook the feelings and echoes from the past out of his mind. He cursed beneath his breath and glanced at the cage behind. Recognition teased his mind: the huge creature within, a lithographic image whispered to him, was some sort of great paradise lizard from the Dark Continent. Its triangular grey head turned to him, and it gave out a great cry, anguish palpable as the burden pulled it forward in the wheeled prison that would one day become its tomb, if it was lucky. Jared stared into its sorrowful, dull eyes gazing at the bars uncomprehending. The creature's back, once covered with the long beautiful turquoise feathers that gave it a name, was bald, racked with scratches and sores where fleas were causing the worst allergic reaction. Images came to Jared of colonies and parades and heroes' welcomes for the great explorers who returned from the dark lands of the Empire with new riches and creatures to amaze the queen and the population of the city. The creature would spend its days festering in one of the city's zoological gardens, an amusement, a diversion, a statement on the strength of Empire.

I hope they let this one die.

A vast nearby ironclad unloaded more exotic creatures—those snatched from their natural homes to be brought to the smog embrace of Brine, the great metropolis built upon and smothering the fractured Cape of Hope. A military captain barked orders to dirty men who strove to attach another great cage to the huge crane above. Something the size of a bull with a bright red crest like a

cockerel was lowered over next. The creature gave out a piteous cry. Others on the boat answered its call of distress, and soon, the thick grey city air sang with the calls of displaced animals.

A constable's whistle blew somewhere close by, and Jared startled at the sound of excited calls in a foreign tongue. Some of the dockers glanced at him, pausing to wipe grimy sweat from their foreheads and take another puff on their brown cigarettes. Most were several-generation dockers—bred into their jobs by family history—with huge hands and arched broad backs. They were getting curious; maybe they would help the constables, but more likely, they would not, not in the current political climate. Jared couldn't chance their solidarity and pulled the collar of his long, brown leather coat about him, forcing himself to walk away from the docks clutching his plunder, cursing his noisy segs as they clattered over the jagged cobbles of the causeway.

The rain fell as he picked his way from the docklands through the waste- and beggar-filled streets to Larrup's Choke, above Flensing Quarter. Acid-poisoned smoke rose from the thousand chimneys of the Crucible beneath before falling back again to suffocate the city streets. He glanced in a shop window at his dark echo. His face was careworn, wearing his work. He was handsome once, but now just looked tired. His long coat made him look taller, but still not quite the six-foot he claimed to be. Despite its countless hidden pockets, hooks, and padding, it still couldn't add bulk to his frame.

"You're looking older."

I sometimes feel like my skin is on back to front.

"You always were handsome in an odd way."

Past tense, stray to the word odd.

"Stop talking to yourself, and keep moving."

I would never call myself oddly handsome, Laura. Those are your words.

"Were. I'm dead. Remember? Stop thinking about me—it only brings him back."

Stitch.

Opposite him, like colossal gravestones across the river, stood the titanic warehouses of the Wall, red brick ghosts of almost impossible scale, towering into the sickened clouds above the city, iron chains grasping blindly out toward the spires beyond, and bowing reverently to the Capitol they covered beneath. Between them sat a vast flotilla of ships: from tiny bay tugs with their gaudy

hulls to the almost impossibly huge treadmill paddle-ship HMS Goliath, an oceangoing trader more like a floating town than a vessel.

A hand grabbed Jared's shoulder, and he turned to face the brown rotting grin of a colonial Guthra.

"I have him!" He yelled, smile darkening. "You're a thief. Give it back."

"You're working for a monster. Have you seen it?"

Answering cries began to call through the smog, closing.

"We're paid well, thief." The man's head was bloated with disease and looked about to burst. Fingers dug into Jared's ribs, and a glint of metal shone in the gloom. A sabre danced in the half-slain light. The stolen box, the dispute and prize, fell onto the hard stone.

A human cry came from within it.

Jared tried to pull away, but the guard grabbed at his neck, his sword arching back, hypnotising in its graceful arch. Calm came over Jared, embracing death as adrenalin flooded his body, readying for the end. He fell free, dropping backward onto oil slick cobbles, the air forced from his lungs. The Guthra gazed at Jared's priest collar in his hands and stood, confused. Seizing the moment, Jared grabbed the box and dashed into the gloom, leaving his collar in the guard's hand.

Jared ran along the causeway, clutching the box as he made his way between the city streets, tracing alleys and steps he knew well by day but less by night. *Toil, Mudlark's Way, Liquorice Street. Which way? Where is it?* The sign he'd expected seemed to be longer in appearing than he remembered.

Finally, the words assembled in the murk on a sign. "North Bridge Closed. Danger. Do not proceed." He smiled to himself and moved on. *Crooked Bridge, as they call it. And for good reason. Jagg's Clough to Flinter's Way, up the steps to Fallow, and then the bridge.*

The damned bridge.

The streets thinned, and steep alleys shot off to his left and right, vanishing into the yawning depth of the Crucible beneath, the throb of endless industry echoing below. Jared moved along now familiar pathways, following ever-rising steps and timbers across gables that rose upward and outward over the Crucible. He paused: the pathway became more perilous ahead, and Jared's mind filled with the unwelcome memory of the mule train that fell off the makeshift bridge yesterday. A scuffle broke out behind him, and the Guthra once again appeared. Jared ran.

The path became more desperate—teetering lines of planks, some not even secured, rising until it reached the side of Crooked Bridge, its sides blistered with bamboo scaffolding. High above him, workers clung to the main bridge as they repaired the shattered structure. Beneath the bridge yawned the vast North Falls, and below, seemingly falling for miles, were hundreds of waterwheels, each throttled to a rusting iron mill. Ahead, a bridging path had been lashed onto the outside of the scaffold, a collage of timber, rope, and metal that seemed to have been prayed into being. It was at least two hundred yards long.

Jared stared at the path and at the abyss below it. *How long would it take to fall?* His knees and legs began to quiver in answer. *I hate heights.*

A noise behind forced him to move onto the first part of the makeshift bridge as the waters of high tide began to ease over the lip of the falls high above. His hands grasped at the scaffolding, and his feet slithered along the planking. A wave crashed over the levee above and drenched him in mist. Below, the mighty waterwheels began to turn as the waters fell. As he moved on, the wheels screamed and water tumbled into the Crucible below. A symphony of iron and water and industry struck up as the mills burst into life below him.

Jared paused, heart in mouth, eyes drawn to the impossible depth below the inch of wood at his feet. His knuckles were white, and he realised he couldn't move. The case at his back became like a trunk, its weight and size increased a thousandfold—lead pulling him toward the depths, calling him to fall and be done with the fear. He held the small box, fingers stretching to reach the next scaffold.

Behind him, the Guthra inched his way along the bridge.

The vast wall of mist soaked him and the planking he stood on. He tried to move, but his foot slipped forward. The world spun, and the planks strained and bounced as the Guthra readied his weapon for a second strike.

Jared began to shake. He forced his right hand to release the pole and grasp for the next and almost screamed as he lost his footing again.

The Guthra closed, one hand now on a scaffold not three feet away and the other on the sabre he prepared to swing.

He fumbled for his pistol, a companion he always carried with him in the city these days. He agonised as he found the pocket buttoned and tried to open it.

The sword arched again, blade glistening. Jared stumbled and fell with a

scream. The Guthra, swinging at thin air, turned a strange pirouette before vanishing into the boiling waters below.

Below.

Something was gripping him, saving him. His shoulder satchel had caught on one of the scaffolding poles, but his weight was even now threatening to snap the straps. He swung his legs up and onto the wooden plank bridge. The slick surface betrayed him, and he fell backward. He yelled and reached upward with his hands, the strap snapping as he grasped the slimy timber. “Laura!” he shouted and heaved himself onto the bridge, shaking but alive.

It took him an hour to crawl to the far side.



The sound of an organ playing in the Hulland Dread Market Hall brought Jared out from his nervous stupor. *How long have I been walking?* A patriotic tune—they all were—belted out at unnecessary volume. Jared clutched the bundle closer to his chest. The thing inside the box wriggled in defiance. For a moment, his reaction was to drop it, but he recovered himself and ran into the market hall out of the rain, passing a ragged poster that hung in the porch within. The artwork was garish and depicted the queen atop a vignette of mighty armies blistering with weapons. A trio of tanks formed an honour guard behind her gaunt head. “Love your Queen and Empire,” the words commanded. Someone had blackened out the queen’s eyes and scrawled the word *ghoul* underneath. Beside the graffiti-daubed poster hung a public notice: “Committee for the Prevention of Defacing Imagery of the Queen—Reward of 100 guineas for information leading to the arrest of the vandal responsible for this damage.” A fortune. Someone would squeal. Someone always did. The penalty didn’t bear thinking about for the person who would be caught, guilty or not.

A man appeared and began reverently removing the poster, replacing it with a new one. He stared at Jared. “God save the Queen!” he shouted.

Jared muttered in agreement and moved farther inside.

Within, the place was crowded with folks escaping the arsenic dance of the rainstorm. The scent of cardamom and ginger dominated the air, mingled with the cries of babies and the shrill laughter of a girl, amused at some juvenile flirtation. Countless figures in grey and poorly cured leather coats stared into the yellow sky through the tar-blackened windows in the roof above. The organ

played on within, its pipes wheezing the high notes. Above the crowd, a line of grubby pyrebeetle lamps sputtered feeble light into the hall, swarms of the beetles burning one after another as they immolated in bursts of bright ochre flame.

“Our lord knows all!” shouted a preacher from somewhere deep within the hall, his words almost sung as a hymn, commanding, assured. “The gates of heaven welcome all the good, the hard working, the pure. To toil is to say that you love him! Work hard, and you will be rewarded in paradise forever!” Weak calls of agreement echoed through the stifling spice-drenched atmosphere. Jared pushed his way farther in.

The preacher’s appearance brought a trace of a smile over Jared’s lips. The sight of the thin, balding, feeble-looking figure waving his fists seemed somehow comical. His appearance didn’t amuse his audience, however—it terrified them.

“But there are those in this beautiful city who would whisper other words to you, words of rebellion, words of sin. You know their fate, these low-caste rebels. You have heard the stories of those who have come back. They go to hell. Those who listen to them go to hell. Those who—even for a moment—give their vile words succour go to hell. You know what I say is true! You have heard the words of those who come back screaming! The terrorists say the queen is a ghoul, an undead, a vampire! That she has no right to go on, but what do these fiends really want?” The preacher paused for effect, surveying the crowd before crying out. “Anarchy!”

A few souls close to the stage couldn’t meet the preacher’s eye, particularly at the word *ghoul*.

“You, who toil on in new life, bless those in your family. They will be welcomed in paradise by your deeds. You will be reborn as she was, to bless you, to bless all of us. We rejoice that our monarch still lives. Rejoice, and thank God for the one hundred and eighty-three years of her glorious reign!” The preacher’s eyes fell on the crowd, most of whom would not live beyond thirty. The uniforms crowding the corners reassured him enough to carry on.

“God save the Queen!” he cried, banging his fist on the tea chest to accompany his words.

“God has already saved her. She’s dead!” shouted a voice at the edges of the hall.

Nervous faces glanced about, trying not to hear words that could send them to hell.

“And others are following—your husbands, puppets like her—living carcasses, still working on! Strike now while you can! Let the dead rest in peace!”

The constables moved toward the edge of the stage, trying to pick out the voice. Other uniformed men pushed forward in search of the prey.

A shabby, low-caste young man wearing a grey cap appeared in a circle of nervous onlookers. “Dead but not buried!” he shouted.

The constables began to push their way through the crowd toward the grubby man, exhausted people slowing progress. The young man stared into the faces of those closest to him. “You know what they did to her—our glorious queen! Preserved her, like salted meat—a manikin born of chemicals! A dead figurehead to hide behind!” He was backing into the corner now, nearing the door he had carefully ensured was at his back. Jared was pushed as he caught the sight of the guards moving, eyes straining through the gloom. “Look! Learn the truth!” He threw a bundle of papers into the air. The crudely inked figure of a ferret danced upon each.

“She has been returned to save us!” bellowed the preacher, his voice breaking under the strain.

“Save us for what?” the man screamed.

A shot cut through the air. A child’s cry answered its call. An arc of blood shot across the shabby man’s cheek. The constable moved further forward, taking aim with his dirty arquebus once more. A mother began to scream in shock.

My God.

The coughing preacher winced as he tried to shout again but, on seeing the crowd, fell silent. The grubby man leapt for the door and beyond to a carriage. “Murderers! One life! Join the strike!” he shouted.

One of the constables pushed through the crowd and reached the door. His quarry sat atop a carcass carriage, a black burden pulling it, hooves clattering on the cobbles as it moved away. He took aim once more.

“Anarchist!” yelled the preacher, his veins bulging with his hatred.

A shot screamed out, taking a chunk from the burden pulling the carriage. The horse moved on without noise, gathering pace as the figure above whipped its back.

The preacher, his composure sufficiently regained, waved his fists and shouted. “That filth commands you to throw your lives away, and for what? We

each have a *duty* to protect our glorious city, our great empire. Love her as you would love God! Love our queen as you love your mother! God has given us the riches of the Between to spread his glory! The miners dig deeper every day for his glory! The factory workers of the Crucible are blessed! Those who sin are forsaken. You know it is true!”

Blessed. A preaching pig to the slaughter, thought Jared, remembering a recent riot in Gallowgate Lane where, rumour had it, the crowd had torn the teller to pieces—apparently unhappy about being told how fortunate they were. Jared pushed by the stage and out into the rain.

“Leave those papers where they are!”

Another shot rang out.

“God save the Queen!” A woman cried out, her voice breaking in the hall, her call rising above the dismay of the beaten crowd. The rain swallowed her further hoarse cries.

A single sheet blew past Jared. He put his foot on it and glanced: *The Ferret*. Below it was a picture of a skull with the words “One life! The dead shall not be allowed rest! Strike or be damned!”

Behind him, some of the crowd were being led away. Voices questioned them, “. . . saw his words meant something to you,” “. . . why didn’t you stop him?” *They won’t be seen again*.

The narrow alleyways behind the hall were a river of filth, and Jared tried to avert his eyes from the flotilla of waste, animal corpses, and worse that cascaded through the narrow paths on their way to the river. Jared looked at his boots and congratulated himself: they were expensive, but they were waterproof. He entered Hob’s Mews.

The Feathered Ape Inn, his local drinking hole, sulked at a corner. Her iron guttering had long since dislocated from the building and hung twisted over the street—her cancerous black walls drowned in the rain. A huge stained glass lantern hung over the ornate mahogany door, dancing with bas-reliefs of the terrible flesh-eating feathered apes of darkest Aric.

The sound of stealthy footsteps from behind caused Jared to start, and he made his way inside. Something scuttled across the gable above as he entered.

A motley stuffed creature dominated the bar of the *Feathered Ape* and gave the inn its name. A grotesque skeletal ape with mangy, yellowing fur stood in a dirty cracked glass jar of considerable size. The ape stood six feet tall and was bowed, its skeletal head leering from within. A large bald patch on the ape’s

chest showed where the stitching was most obvious. Great green feathers had been thrust into the creature's back, their emerald beauty now dulled. A pair of large mangy wings hung at the thing's back. Mites and beetles danced on the crown of its head. One of its hands, brown and fragile as old leather, had fallen away from the stuffed mockery and lay dusty at the bottom of the jar. It was a cheap fake.

Jared passed the grotesque creature and entered the snug room.

There was a sputtering fire in the black hearth, its smoke choking the room. Patched chairs and innumerable iron-based tables cluttered the little chamber, while myriad eyes stared from hundreds of stuffed creatures in bell jars on shelves around the room, lending the place more the look of a morgue than a drinking establishment. A poster advertised the latest magic lantern show—about a clown called Trial. There was a single figure within the room reading a newspaper—huddled close to the fire, shivering and coughing, a stick-thin, mid-caste man dressed in poor grey breeches. A yellowing shirt with torn ruff clung to his skeletal frame, and a thick brown coat hung on weak shoulders. Sunken eyes stared out of a face that had somehow lost expression, almost vampiric in its gauntness. A thin, reedy smile crossed the figure's face, and it rose with grace, put down its paper, and proffered its bony hand.

"Klesh, my dear fellow," said Jared, shaking his friend's hand, cold skin enveloping warm. Klesh stared at his hand, smiled wanly, and then looked with anticipation toward the bundle.

"Yes, I've been busy." Jared said, placing the small bundle on the table, before moving toward the hatch-bar and ringing a small brass bell.

"You've caught something?"

Jared smiled. "No, this is the work of a surgeon artist. It is quite unique."

"It?"

"It. Whatever you do, keep it out of sight for the moment. Its keepers are not best pleased at its liberation, and this is something... distasteful."

Klesh stashed the bundle under his rickety chair, a short harsh cry followed by a furious flapping coming from within. Jared unslung his leather satchel and leant it gently by the bar wall nearby. As he did, his eyes kept flicking back to the satchel to check it was still with him.

"Distasteful how?" Klesh said, glancing at the box.

"More than distasteful. Monstrous, vile, appalling."

“Now, you’ve piqued my curiosity. Jake Stitch’s protégés? Sorry. I shouldn’t have said the name.”

“It’s alright,” said Jared. “No, not a copycat artist. This is more, well, I’ve seen nothing like it. Ever.”

A repulsive, grey-faced woman appeared from behind the hatch, followed by a small eddy of tobacco smoke and the smell of jellied fish. “Wormwood?” croaked the old woman rhetorically and shuffled her way down unseen steps into the cellar. Somewhere in the bar beyond, a brawl was breaking out over insufficient baksheesh. The bar was cramped, dominated by a gramophone player scratching the conclusion of another patriotic fanfare. Behind, faded with age, was a sign Jared had seen a thousand times. “By Order of the Patriotism Act 1808...” it demanded the playing of stirring patriotic music in public places. “... may enact the death penalty for non-compliance. By Public Order.” The signs were everywhere in Brine. Jared sensed something about the sign: the brush of sweat, fumbling in the dark, the ghost of young love, a feeling of lust. The crate had been used by a couple in some out of the way corner. They...

“Well?” asked the skeletal figure gazing at the box.

Jared smiled, “There’s something strange about this one. It was very well guarded. Guthra . . .”

Klesh frowned. “You think it was imported? From the institute perhaps?” He whispered the words.

Jared nodded. “I think so. You know how unscrupulous the surgeons are in the colonies, but this one has a more sinister edge. My usual contacts were . . . scared, I’d say. This is something special. I had to remind them about God and punishment. Luckily, they still believe enough to be afraid.” Their faces fell to the box as a deliberate and rhythmic tapping echoed from within.

“Thank God you didn’t have to use alternative measures,” Klesh said, staring at the hefty flat satchel nearby.

The other way in.

The hag came back and brought a battered tin tray bearing the absinthe over to the companion’s table. Seeing Jared glancing at the sign by the bar, she rushed to put another gramophone record on. She made a weak, fearful smile. A fanfare, explosions of artillery, and patriotic hymns breaking into supplicating praise drowned the air once more.

Jared handed over a coin.

“Your money’s no good here, Watchman,” she coughed.

“They’ve not been back?”

“Bless you, no. Not since you disposed of the nest and smashed the mirror.”

“Keep it that way, and you’ll have no more trouble, I hope. And thank you.” He tipped the ice water jug, letting water trickle through the sugar cube resting on the silver absinthe spoon. There was a special reverence in the ritual.

“I don’t know how you can drink that rot.” Klesh stared at his friend.

“It clears my head.” Beyond the snug, a grandfather clock chimed ten. Klesh’s paper, *The Daily Citizen*, lay on the table, declaring another great victory in the Broen Equator Military Campaign, a miracle by the Living Saint Cammartin, and stories of knight questioners freeing the city of a group of anarchists. They had been “suitably punished,” the headline said. No mention of any riots or the coming strike.

“And there were no more with this shipment?” hissed Klesh.

“The others didn’t survive intact.” Jared stared at his hands. “But this little one had strength to make the journey. And luckily, it won’t end...” He stopped himself and glanced at his friend, adjusting his sentence. “... neglected.”

Ossified.

“Yes, but why are you being so damned mysterious?”

“Because it’s partly human.”

“Human? A human homuncule?”

“Not so damned loud.”

“So he has a copycat?”

“I’ve already said no. This is partly human. He just used people. Reborn people.” *Except one.*

“I’m sorry. I’ve never seen one before, only heard the stories. Your stories, mostly.”

Jared nodded. “Stories have a nasty habit of coming true.”

“But who or what is it for?”

“Who knows? All I know is it needs keeping safe—and secret. For now. I need to prove where it came from, so we can arrange some action against those responsible and find out whom it was for and why, so they can be suitably punished.”

“I’ll take good care of it. Whatever it has to endure, at least it will face its future free,” said Klesh, yellow teeth bared. Jared returned his friend’s grin, pleased once more to be in the company of his old, dead friend. Klesh bent over and let out a long racking cough, arthritic limbs cracking.

"I'm grateful. You're the only person I know who has enough elixir these days. It may take some time."

"What's its composition? If that word isn't distasteful when talking about a life?"

"You'll see soon enough. It's considerably different to the work of Litton, less the jumbled work of a surgeon-artist." *Or rather, murderer.* "More... I suppose the word I'm looking for is *purposeful*."

"Was it a result of his work?"

"I don't know. Before he went to the gallows, he said he'd spread the word far and wide."

"Hanging was too good for him." Klesh let out another cough.

You are what you are because of me, thought Jared with a twinge of guilt, remembering the day of his friend's death, crushed under a huge crate of elephant bones. The arguments, the pleading, and the desperate submission. Second birth, but at a terrible cost. The price of the Journeyman's Pledge sometimes.

Klesh looked up and smiled. "Would you mind escorting me to the museum, old friend? I feel a little feeble, and besides, I received a bottle of Breaborn's Malt in the post this morning. As it's not much use to me, I thought you might like to come and sample it!"

Jared smiled, drained his glass of absinthe, and stood, leaving a coin on the table. He watched his oldest, dearest friend creak to his feet. He reminded him of a circus performer tottering on stilts. *I should have let you rest in peace.*

His friend donned his black top hat, wrapped a cravat about his neck, and grinned. From a room deep within the tavern, a broken clock chimed eighteen. Jared picked up his leather satchel and slung it over his shoulder.

The way in.

The pair exited the mouldering snug via the back yard, past the foul smelling urinals, and into Guber's Alley. The dismal rain fell, reeking and tasting of acid and splashing from overflowing guttering and drain heads. Puddles reflected the glare.

Jared and Klesh, avoiding the reflections, huddled close as they rounded the narrow unlit alley and came out into the pyrebeetle-lit glare of Gibbet End. A hansom swept past, pulled by a living nag, one step from the glue factory. The pair picked their way along the street.

"Pickled eggs, jellied fish, and fry!" called a seller, the scents of the foodstuffs

providing welcome release from the acrid taste of the city air. Strays and waifs, some human, scuttled between the vendors, begging, stealing, and crying.

One of them, a dirty boy no more than five, cried out, "Vampire!" at the top of his voice before running away in terror from Klesh's indifferent stare. A trio of linkboys huddled under the sickened light of a lamp, staring after the child before resuming their smoke.

"They're just children," said Klesh, in answer to Jared's glare.

"Nasty children can become nastier adults."

"And have nasty children. They don't need an excuse to fear Reborn, not now."

At the corner of Molder Watch, the friends paused as a carcass omnibus wheezed past. Jared held a hand out but was too late—the vehicle staggered by. The pair huddled on the street corner, stamping their feet to keep warm, and waited for another. The grand houses of the watch towered over the two men, colossal edifices of stone and marble, groaning under the weight of huge spires topped with rusting iron spines. From one, a tatty Empire flag hung. Beyond them, the Capitol rose high above into the cloudy sky, lights flickering in the town within a building.

Ten minutes later, another carcass omnibus appeared, dressed in colourful hoardings advertising snuff and pulled by a pair of burdens. The friends boarded and quickly occupied a hard bench near the front. The omnibus lurched into action, pulled forward along iron rails. Rainwater dripped from Jared's brow, and Klesh spluttered for breath, winter's cold bite making their breath plume. Jared wiped away the rain with his handkerchief. The omnibus was empty apart from the friends, and in a moment, the ticket inspector, his grey and red uniform grimed with oil, came into view.

"Two for Empire Museum," said Jared, handing over a pair of fourthlings. The inspector's face was blank as he punched a pair of tickets from an ageing ticket machine.

"We don't get many ask for that stop. The place closed years ago, didn't it?"

The pair nodded in agreement, not noticing his frown as he got a better look at Klesh, nor how fast he moved away, muttering oaths under his breath.

The lights of the causeway streamed past, the uncomfortable, juddering ride taking too long for either man. The rails occasionally left the safety of land and crossed some fathomless gap between stacks over the Crucible. The carriage lurched like a roller coaster before coming to a halt outside the huge blackened

hulk of the museum, her enormous pillars rising as a majestic black line towering over the omnibus.

They got out.

The museum was vast. Uncountable towers and gables rose above. Spires, arches, and iron ornamentation dominated the skyline along the river, caressing the smog-gorged clouds above. A gargantuan architectural mongrel, this schizophrenic monument, an agglomeration of a thousand different styles and inbred ideas, was a testimony to the greatness of the Empire while its dislocated eaves and mouldering façade were a damnation of its neglects and failures.

The pair jogged across the short, open cobbled street and came to the ironbound doorway of the museum, a dozen iron bars and padlocks dangling from its crippled, rotting frame. Klesh dragged a huge bundle of keys from somewhere inside his greatcoat and began the arduous task of unlocking each nearly rusted lock. The last bolt slid, and the huge door swung open.

A recital of empty echoes greeted them from within.

Klesh lurched over to the wall and, striking a short, foul-smelling match, lit a pyrebeetle lamp, scuttling insects catching light with the scent of damp earth and burning hair. A majestic, stained-glass shade depicting angels and cherubs in flight flickered and danced into focus. Jared walked in and shut the door, thunder symphonised from walls beyond sight. Echoes and creaks and bumps resounded back as the vast building settled to the idea of visitors. His eyes adjusted to the flickering light as his friend drifted from lamp to lamp, revealing the great hall ahead.

A thousand frozen animals stared from the mouldering cabinets of the room while the sagging plaster walls behind hinted at depictions of wild animals from all across the known world. Decay owned the museum now.

A bird caught Jared's eye. The label on the huge bell jar housing it read *Gyps turpis: Bald Ugly Vulture*. Its bloated, smooth pink head ended in a cruel hooked beak, and black feathers sagged over its huge, muscled frame.

The bird's eyes turned to stare back at him, awakening with the speed of the hour hand on a clock.

Jared moved away from the creature, seeking the comfort of companionship. "They still move, I see," he said as he reached his friend. His words echoed like whispers in gables high above.

His dead friend smiled. "Yes, even now, though one or two seem to have stopped. I never received enough elixir as the visitors dwindled. Without their

daily injections, they ossified.” Klesh used the last word like a cuss, an utterance that tainted his mouth and left an unpalatable taste. “Until they develop it further.”

Until they develop it further. “It’s macabre,” said Jared grimacing. His hand idled to his top pocket and clasped the metal syringe he kept there. *The Journeyman’s Pledge.* “Life is short, life is precious, life is sacred, life will go on.”

Klesh nodded, “But how were they to know? It was so new, so . . . miraculous. Who could have guessed it would be the beginning of the end for them? They inject them to keep them alive without knowing that, once deprived of the elixir, they don’t die, they just drift to a halt. May never die. Still, such things are rare now, thankfully,” he added while lost in nightmarish thoughts about what ossification could mean to him, an eternal halting dance from which there would be no waking. He paused to check that his own vial of fluid, the elixir vitae, was ready for tonight and then smiled. “And getting less by the day,” he added. “You’re still sure of your pledge?”

“Yes. Does it get any easier?” asked Jared.

Burning alive on a nightly basis by injecting fire into your veins. “Yes, a little,” his friend answered, averting his eyes. “There was a case only last month,” whispered Klesh.

“Case?”

“A third way.”

Jared moved closer to his friend. *A Returned suicide. A secondborn unable to face going on or contemplate the curse of ossification.* “What happened?” *Not that I really want to hear this.*

“Sold false elixir by a sham dealer. Didn’t notice until it was too late and began to ossify. Someone from the club.”

“How?”

“The note said the East Hambrey Furnace.”

“Nothing was found, I take it.”

“Nothing.”

“Did you know him?”

“Her.”

“I see.”

“Yes, I’d seen her at the club. I knew her by sight. She must have faced it quite aware.” His words began to trail away as he tried to imagine her feelings.

“I thought they had a new drug that could take away the awakening.”

“Something to put the Returned to sleep? Not that I’ve ever heard.” Klesh’s face was bitter, his eyes narrow and pained. “If you know something...?”

“No, it’s just a rumour. You know how these things get a life of their own.”

“She must have felt every last moment.” He brushed his hair from his face and shook his head. “Not anything I could ever face, in any case.” He smiled.

“Think of Angelica and your impending wedding.”

Klesh seemed far away when he answered, “Always.” He smiled, anxious not to make his friend uncomfortable.

“Time is on your side, my friend.”

“I wonder how much time, though?”

“You’ll get your nine lives, just as the chemists promised. There still haven’t been any deaths. Not natural ones, anyway.”

“Then I should have at least a century or two at the present rate. So little time. Halted at the age of thirty-seven. How strange.” Klesh looked at his frail body and sighed before putting his arm around his friend’s shoulders.

A raven shook its wings and stretched atop the stuffed head of a red lion pelican it was using as a perch. One of the bird’s huge tusks dangled from its gaping beak. Klesh smiled and held out his other arm. The raven obliged and glided across the great hall and onto its master’s arm. “Master Mort,” whispered Klesh. The bird gave him a curt sideways glance.

“That bird gives me the creeps.”

“Only because it’s alive. This way, my friends,” said Klesh, wandering along the huge corridor of the hall.

“No, not because it’s alive, because it’s a raven, and wherever I go, I see them.”

“Perhaps they like you—like the others.”

“People always like someone who helps them.”

“And you do that often.”

“Not as often as I can.”

“Even the Watchman needs rest.” Klesh led the way along the corridor and through a very low side door, which entered a small, tight hallway filled with crates of bones. Soon, they descended a tortuous and twisting iron spiral stair. As they moved down, the cries of birds and animals began to fill the air from below.

Klesh had many exhibits in his museum, but his menageries—his two distinct menageries—were his pride and joy. Since the early days, he had insisted that

the museum should be about life and not death, but over the years, the lines became blurred. As the museum died, so did many of its exhibits.

Including Klesh.

A rickety descent led them into the main museum boiler room, a coal-black chamber where four huge boilers sat. Only one boiler worked now, and the thin flame that greeted Klesh as he opened its iron belly gave little warmth or comfort.

The room was full of animals and birds, from huge, colourful parrots to tiny Indran chameleon cats, and they were in cages of various design, from thin bamboo frames lashed together to elaborate arched iron installations topped with dancing cherubs.

The noise was deafening.

Jared searched around the cages, sure of seeing something new, and found a large bell-shaped pen occupied by what seemed to be a ball of white feathers. As he looked, a grotesque skull wreathed in muscle emerged and yawned. Jared grimaced as he watched the thing's jaw dislocate and a wiry grey green tongue slither out. "A gift from Angelica, I take it?" His friend smiled and nodded. "You are a lucky man," he added.

"It hasn't even got a name. A species, I mean."

"How about 'pig-ugly-bird'?" Jared looked around at the huge iron-bellied boilers, his hand coming to rest on a black iron lever. A label lay above, the words of which had faded, but Klesh had scrawled "Fire Shutters" in his spidery writing underneath.

"Careful," observed Klesh as his friend's hand strayed.

"It surely doesn't still work?"

Klesh looked apologetic. "Well, it has been a few years since we had a fire drill." He began to laugh, "And I have about enough fuel to last me half the winter, so I'd be loath to stoke up a boiler enough to try, but I have a feeling we'd be unhappy if we were caught behind the iron fire doors if they did work."

"Point taken," smiled Jared, moving away from the oily lever.

"And it'd probably take me a year to check that all the doors had not seized." Klesh smiled.

Jared nodded and sat down on a rickety stool.

Master Mort flew onto the top of the working boiler and stared down. Klesh pressed as close as he dared to the fire. "I'm frozen." His deceased emaciated limbs craved the fire's blood, and he loathed giving it up.

“You’re not frozen, just dead. It’s no big deal.”

Klesh nodded at Jared’s friendly mockery and grinned. However, his curiosity for the package got the better of him, and he came to sit at the table opposite his old friend. The box lay between them, a childhood challenge, a dare. The smell of formaldehyde and bleach and decay drifted from it. Klesh took it in skeletal fingers and opened it, revealing a stained brown package. With a feeble grip, he unwrapped layer after layer of mouldering, stained newspaper. At last, he came to the final covering—a loose film of some sort of oil-covered skin—and he cast it off.

A small wooden box lay within: a box with a small metal grill. In the gloom, the pair could see something inside, something small and somehow unsettling.

It came to the grill.

The homuncule was a mockery, a stitched and sewn menagerie of life, reanimated by the skills of a master cadaverist. It shook a pair of leathery grey wings ending in cruel little horns, and pressed closer to the grill. The top of its head was that of a bat—huge black ears turning, searching, twisting from an elongated skull tattooed in stitches. It had short, stumpy arms ending in clever grey fingers. Its body ended in clawed feet akin to a great bird while a pair of membranous wings stretched behind, flapping feebly. But it was the face that drew their eyes. It was the face of a person, a tiny porcelain doll made up of a patchwork of faces woven together. Some angry, some sad. Some old, some young. The head stretched back in an unsettling and distorted bowl that itself was a patchwork of skin and bone.

It gave out a cry almost like a baby.

Klesh and Jared leapt backward, each giving out a yell. Their chairs clattered onto the boiler room floor as they moved, matched by a steady flap as the thing, the homuncule, sought for a place to hide back in its box. The animals, startled by the sudden strange noise, cried out.

“Sweet Lord, it is human!” shouted Klesh. “Why?”

Jared stared at the ground, lost in a thought. “Something very special. Animal intelligence clearly wasn’t enough.” His words died in the cacophony. “This is the result. Hail progress and human curiosity.”

“I can’t put how I feel into words.”

“And where one is found, how many more are hidden, I wonder?”

“Does the bishop know?”

“Not yet. I’m seeing him tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I have no idea. Once he’s seen it, he’ll decide.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think it’s a person, or people, and should be cared for.”

“Let me keep it. Her. There’s more female than male in there as far as I can see.”

“The bishop must decide. Perhaps the questioners will get involved.”

“I’ll hide it... her from them.”

“You can’t hide anything from them, believe me. If they take an interest in you, just hope they kill you quickly. If they consider it unholy or unnatural, they may decide to destroy it.”

“Kill her. Kill. Her?” Klesh’s hands gripped into fists.

“They’ll see it as blasphemous, an affront to God.”

“From what I’ve heard about them, they think of themselves as God.”

“Then let that thought stay in your mind. You know the times we live in and what they do to blasphemers.”

“But could you let it happen?”

“I’ve killed on seven occasions. Six of them were killings of something from Between. I’ve killed one man, and that was out of mercy. Killing stains me like a tattoo, remains within me and on me like a stench. If I thought talking about her would lead to that, he’d never get to hear about her. I could no more play a part in killing her than killing you.”

“It would be murder. Murder of an innocent life.”

“I know. Don’t worry. The thing we must worry about is keeping it alive and safe. For now.”

“I can help you prove where it came from.”

“How?”

“By the parts of the whole. Let me keep it here until I identify where it was made.” Klesh held four fingers up to the cage.

“What if it escapes?”

“We’ll take it to the other menagerie. It’ll be safe there until... the bishop decides what to do with it. With her.” He reduced the fingers held up to three.

“I don’t know. I meant to take it directly to him.”

“Take *her*. At this time of night? No, trust me. Keep her here, and I’ll tell you exactly where she came from... tomorrow.” He closed his hand. No response came from the homuncule, just a dead stare.

“Very well. Tomorrow.”

Klesh tried a few words in the languages he knew, all of which drew no response beyond idle curiosity. “Who would make such a thing?” said Klesh, his mouth dry.

Jared nodded, unable to take his eyes off the thing in the case. “And why? If I can prove it’s come from the institute, I may be able to act. Might be able to avenge.”

“But why? Why use a person in this way?”

“Who knows? A special order?”

“Wait, *others*, you said. You said there were others. Were they...?”

“No, they were animals.”

“Animals.”

“Yes, this was the only one, is the only one. It’s unique. I hope.”

Klesh regained his composure. “That’s bad enough. We must take special care of her.” He picked the case up in shaking hands and winked at his friend. As he did, he nodded to the side of one of the cold boilers where a bottle of malt sat within a cork-filled box.

Jared smiled and took the box before following. The old stair was rickety, and there was a worrisome break in the handrail half way up.

“I know, I need to fix it,” said Klesh.

Jared smiled.

Below, the animals continued to scream out their warning cries.

Jared followed Klesh’s drifting route along a broad corridor covered in pictures of cherubs: bas-reliefs of glorious religious miracles hanging like clumps of sod from the rotting, damp walls. Jared stopped before a huge painting.

“*The Blessed Angels at Play in Heaven*,” said Klesh. “Your favourite, I believe?”

Jared nodded. The artist, signed “Renshaw” in the corner of his work, had breathed true life into the angels whose smiling faces rejoiced in the beauty of the clouds and sunlight of heaven. In one corner, however, Renshaw had painted something, hardly noticeable. A darker area of clouds that was Brine.

It was filled with devils. Devils clad in human skin.

Jared paused to admire the picture once more and to stare at the darkened corner. “I wonder what you were thinking. Or seeing?” He tried to picture the artist, how he felt, and came up with nothing. Realising his friend had gone

ahead, Jared quickened his step, glancing back once over his shoulder to look again at the devil faces.

Beyond, through a marble-pillared doorway, was a room full of stuffed birds. A motley collection of mangy creatures crammed together. Some of them, like the massive great roc, or *Angha grandis*, stretched almost to the ceiling. The room was filled floor to ceiling with birds lined in dusty cabinets. To Jared's relief, Klesh was up ahead, and pausing to give the huge roc a pat, he sped after the curator. A host of buzzing midges swarmed behind him from the bird.

An arched doorway, designed like a looking glass frame, led from the side of the bird chamber. A single word was painted above it: *Between*. Jared hesitated before stepping in. This room was bare, yet its exhibits, strange as they were, did not hold Jared's attention. His eyes were drawn to the far side of the room, where an iron sheet was set high in the wall, rivets jutting from its sides. The sheet had a trio of punch-marks leering from it. "An incursion?" he said, whispering as he approached the wall.

"There's a mirror behind it." Klesh also whispered.

"I know. When did this happen?"

"Last week."

"And it hasn't returned?"

"No, whatever it is."

"You took precautions?"

"I placed the sheet some time ago. We tried to remove the mirror, but—"

"It proved impossible. Good, keep the sheet there. Thicken it if needs be."

The two men stood beneath the doorway and shook their heads, wondering at the strength of the visitor that had tried to break through. A thin noise, like that of a tuning fork, began to echo from Jared's satchel. "The amazing thing is, apparently some people go there voluntarily." Klesh patted his friend's satchel and left the room. The noise ceased. Jared eyed the exhibits in the room as he walked out, passing preserved things pickled in great jars. So different in death, so ordinary, so flesh. Caul cuckoo. Hyve. Slyne. Gifts he had made to the museum in his younger days. *Reckless days*. Impossible things, things that belonged in the depths of the ocean or within hives stared back. Taking one last glance back at the dented iron door, he followed his friend out of the room.

At the bird chamber's far side, near one of the innumerable brass and walnut museum dumbwaiters, was a tiny door with a long latch, which clasped the door shut. Klesh gave it a shove, but his weak muscles failed him, and he signalled

for his friend to try it with his firmer living muscles. The latch was rusted but gave after a hard shove from Jared. It opened into a narrow, cramped stair full of guano. The stale stench made Jared reel.

The clang of the releasing door resounded up the narrow stair.

“Don’t worry,” said Klesh. “It’s a shortcut. I don’t use it very often, but the lift’s broken. The last time I used it, I was in for fourteen hours.” He rubbed his hands across the top of his legs, clapped them, and glanced upward with a grin.

“After you.”

Klesh uttered a prayer and began to drag his bones, hand over knee, up the stifling narrow stone stair, which spiralled up.

“Some shortcut!” muttered Jared as he stared into the gloom.

“We can’t go direct anyway,” whispered Klesh. “The Ship Room is in danger of collapse and is not safe to cross—the roof’s become infested with some sort of termite. When something that big might fall on your head, you avoid it.” Jared smiled in agreement, remembering the huge chamber with a tall ship and a goliath windmill freighter somehow slung in midair.

Oh, Lord. Jared stopped as he entered the stairwell. He’d never seen common spiders as big as the museum ones. He caught sight of a massive one on a wall ahead, the size of his spread hands, hairy and covered in grey dust. He took a deep breath and tried to pull past the thing, but the closeness of the corridor stair made the arachnid seem vast. His heart began to pound, and his heavy coat became more like a suffocating funeral shroud.

“Hurry up!” whispered Klesh, returning from somewhere up ahead and, on seeing the spider, brushing it aside with a disparaging stare. The thing scuttled off, squeezing into a narrow, rusted air vent.

Jared sighed with relief.

“Ah yes, spiders and heights. Hmm. Surely, you’ve seen worse in your line of work?” Klesh hissed.

Jared shook his head. “I hate spiders. Death I can handle. Death and stitchborn, thralls, and Reborn are my trade. Hunting things from Between when called for. Spiders aren’t, even though it amuses you.” He smiled, shook a large pile of droppings from his coat, and followed upward.

“I wonder how the constabulary would feel if they knew the Watchman was scared of spiders.”

“I hate nicknames.”

“You’ve been called worse.”

Much worse.

“Anyway, they are nothing compared to . . .”

“The devilblind?”

“Yes.”

A chill ran down Jared’s spine at the mention of the name.

“I thought you crossed spiders in that business with the Scofton pit crawler?” whispered Klesh.

Jared shook his head and ended any chance of discussion by turning away.

The stair ended at a large iron trapdoor. A taut length of frayed grey rope hung from a pulley, and Klesh wheezed as he unfurled it from its rusty iron home. There was a clang and a grating sound, and a breeze stirred the powdered bat droppings into little ghostly eddies. Klesh gasped and pulled himself up through the hole and onto the roof above.

Jared followed.

They clambered onto a narrow ledge below a huge spire. “I must fix the weather vane up there one day. I don’t want it falling and hurting anyone.” Klesh stared over the edge. This spire was one of many the museum had, all dwarfed by the Great Spire, which nestled hidden somewhere above.

Jared leaned back. The ledge was no more than a foot wide. The battlement at his side, if it was worthy of that name, was for ornament and the benefit of those seeing them from below. It rose no more than six inches above the ledge.

“Funny, they look so much bigger from below,” said Jared while trying to convince himself that they were.

Beyond and below, perhaps a hundred feet or more downward, lay the long Museum Boulevard. Some pyrebeetle lights spluttered along the broad straight road, but most lay silent and vandalised. Beyond fell the Crucible, now lit in places. Its endless cliff townships vanished to tiny pinpricks of lamplight, perhaps a mile or more below. The spire sides were slick with rain, and for a moment, Jared pitched forward before a sudden rush of self-preservation forced him to push back on the sides of the steeple. He sucked in air. *Twice in one day. I must be losing my marbles.*

Klesh made his way awkwardly along the ledge to a corner of the building where a trio of gargoyles danced. “Don’t worry. There’s a rope. Ahead,” he said and disappeared from sight around the corner.

Jared decided that impressions and false bravery would not do him any good if he fell, and he shuffled his way along on his backside, slow and nervous.

Around the corner, the ledge did have a rope, fixed onto a high, blackened wall. Jared grasped it like a long lost parent, still nervous of the abysmal fall to his right. He looked on to see that his friend had made amazing progress for a corpse and was making his way up a short iron ladder onto a broad roof. Jared followed.

They were high above the city now—so lofty that they could make out the cape. The great river oozed below to their left, inching under countless blackened arched bridges, iron walkways, and chain ferries as it made its way out to the still sea. Far beyond, past the huge faces of the buildings on Town Bridge, Jared caught glimpses of ship lanterns. Nearby, the acres of spires and roofs and gables of the museum climbed and fell like the ramparts of a colossal range of broken peaks, a mountain range crumbling in upon itself. Jared lost count of the number of holes and collapses. He could make out the buttress form of the museum's east wing, a curve held back by the miles of bamboo scaffolding on the near side.

His friend came to a tiny arched door on the far side of the blackened roof, and Jared dashed after him.

“I’m not going back along that ledge or past that spider,” Jared spat.

Klesh rummaged in his cloak and produced his huge iron ring full of keys: some small, some huge and elaborate, some that didn’t even seem to be keys. “Have no fear, my friend,” he said, “we can get down into the Glasshouse Menagerie directly from here.” He smiled, and for some reason, Jared began to worry again.

Klesh led them off the roof and down an iron ladder, lighting a short, stubby torch as he did. Below lay a small, cluttered room full of mouldering, unframed landscapes of dubious quality. Beyond was a set of narrow corridors lined with pickled fish in huge bell jars. Larvae, which seemed to thrive in the vinegary pickle, had eaten out all the fish eyes. They swam frantically in the murk, which was cut into amber jewels by the light of the torch. A layer of insect carcasses stagnated in the tanks, swaying as their devourers escaped the glare. They passed halls of armour, carpets, thimbles, and torture implements, and they finally passed through a squat oak door into a huge space.

Beyond was a colossal glasshouse. Iron webs weaved into the air high above, dancing and coupling with blackened glass. Gaps like rotten teeth lay in between: occasional smashed panes, offering glimpses of the yellow grey night sky above.

The great chamber was full of cages, some large enough to house an elephant. Each held a prisoner.

But the prisoners made no noise. This was the undead menagerie: all within were still and staring.

The sides of the chamber were filled with trees, goliath and twisted things whose branches soared to grasp what feeble light drained through the blackened windows above. At the foot of a long ladder lay a carpet of brown decay. Jared followed his friend into the vast chamber.

The ground was littered with fallen brown leaves, some of great size with nervures the width of thumbs, twisting along crumbling orange blades, entwined in death. The air was alive with clouds of insects, stirring as Klesh crossed the chamber. Jared's footsteps echoed around the structure's brick walls as he made his way to a fetid green pond, strangled with weeds, a rusty iron bench lying next to its stagnant depths. He sat down and gazed at the towering trees above whilst Klesh paced.

The animals stared at the men: unforgiving faces stared uncomprehending, voices stilled.

Klesh's private menagerie was filled with the rarest specimens the Empire could provide. Great peacock lions and hippo-squids, Mortenson's dwarf elephants and Keppel's songhounds lived here along with many others—creatures few had glimpsed even in lithographs, things that seemed impossible. Things too valuable to be allowed to die.

And they were all dead. Killed to ensure that they would never die. Puppets kept alive by the elixir. No more than objects to be gazed upon.

Except that no one came anymore.

The animals stared, always stared.

"Animal grade elixir," said Jared.

"It's all I had for them."

"No success with your tests of using higher grades on your subjects?"

"On my *animals*. No, nothing I'd want to repeat twice anyway. What made them what they are—inside—has long gone. With the odd exception." Klesh made his way to a small yet ornate cage, a delicate thing of brass and lead, and opened the door.

"So you're going to keep it in here, Klesh?" said Jared, staring at the hypnotic eyes of a huge bloated sunlizard.

"This will have to do her for the present," replied Klesh.

“This will do,” Jared said.

Klesh nodded.

Jared looked on. “What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing,” whispered Klesh. He moved into the cage, shut the door, and opened the box.

A sickly patchwork doll’s face emerged, looking round, cocking its head to one side as an unkindness of ravens started on the roof and took to flight.

The homuncule stared again, gave out a wheezing cry, and took off, leathery wings flapping awkwardly after its long confinement. It made its palsied way through the air and battered into the side of the bars before falling back to the floor.

“Monstrous,” said Klesh, checking the homuncule to see that it wasn’t injured. “How could we let this happen?”

“Entertainment,” said Jared with shame. “Perhaps she was due to be a toy for some pampered child in Weaver’s Bank. Or maybe a spy.”

Klesh frowned. “What kind of people would buy such a creature?”

“Rich people, probably thinking about becoming journeymen themselves, maybe. The cadaverists are experimenting with transplants now.”

“I’d heard.”

“They say it may be easier for the body to bear. Swapping and changing body parts like components—torsos, limbs, *faces* . . . God knows where it will all end.”

“Immortality?” hissed Klesh. “*Continuation*. Maybe they expect to create perfection?”

“Perfection according to whom?” said Jared, watching with disgust and misery as the homuncule flapped about the floor struggling to control limbs it was never meant to have.

“Now, we’re back to Jacob Litton.”

Jared nodded. *Jake Stitch*.

“Do you think she can reason?” Klesh held four fingers up again.

“There’s some trauma to the head. She might be an imbecile. At least, I hope she is.”

“Would it be possible to change her back?”

“Not that I know of.”

“I wonder what she’s called. Where she’s from, who her parents were? They

must miss her. And the other fragments, they were people once, people with hopes and fears.”

“They may have sold her.”

“You work too hard. It’s made you cynical.”

The crying continued behind him as Jared walked away. He soon arrived at his destination, tucked away under an enormous eucalyptus. The black cage.

The black cage had thick iron bars, woven tight and filled with armoured glass, to prevent the thing inside from ever escaping. The prison was large, arching to a small, mocking figure of an angel twenty yards above.

It was full of webs.

Jared pulled in a sharp breath and stared, trying to make out the creature at the heart of the cat’s cradle, wanting and yet fearing to set his eyes on the thing that dwelt there. The very deadly thing that dwelt in the cage.

It was a spider.

The largest spider known in the Empire. *Devilblind*, they called it. And for good reason.

The spider obliged, pulled back its cluster of legs to reveal an ugly reddened sphincter that was its mouth. As it did so, it brought itself up and moved forward. Its massive, bloated abdomen, a sore-swarmed sac of foul-smelling filth, rose up behind huge legs.

The poison sac.

The spider was the size of a pony, a thing of flesh and chitin. As it rose on its thick grey legs, the cracking noise unsettled Jared in some primal way. A thin grey mucous fell from its mouth and dripped onto the warm nest. It stretched and pulled its abdomen up, over its blackened back. There was an unsettling squelching from somewhere within, and a thin gruel-yellow fluid dropped from its belly. It dribbled down the webbing before dripping into a poisoned circle of earth, almost scorched and bereft of colour.

It’s watching me. I feel so many things about you, so much fear around you. Jared’s head filled with images of screaming figures running through the jungle. Deciding he’d seen enough, he stepped away.

Klesh cradled the homuncule and made strange cooing noises. The creature seemed to like the attention and stretched out on its back. Both seemed to be enjoying the interaction. Klesh looked up and smiled. “I think this won’t take long to make her comfortable.”

Jared smiled.

“Been to meet our dear friend the devilblind?” whispered Klesh.

Jared smiled wanly. “Don’t get attached.”

“Don’t you get attached.”

“I mean it.”

Klesh appeared hypnotised by the homuncule, its little throat making curious noises. “I can’t decide what her wings are.”

“Her face looks like an Indran Pygmy of the Guthra tribe. The other faces are not so clear, too small to determine at just a glance.” The guard’s screams as he fell into the Crucible echoed inside his head.

Klesh stared at his friend but said nothing.

“I had a close encounter with an older one on the way to meet you.”

Klesh looked exasperated at his friend’s insistence on putting himself in danger.

“But,” added Jared, frowning, “the rest is beyond me. If you’re happy to establish exactly where it’s from, I can help punish those responsible and stop them from doing it again.”

“The feet look like some sort of vulture, and the crown of the head could be a Bendrin cave bat or some such thing. The wings could be the same. I’ll find out tomorrow, anyway, when I go to the zoological gardens. Do you want to come with me?”

“Sorry,” said Jared. “I have a meeting at the Church of the Miraculous Birth tomorrow with Bishop Orgreave. He doesn’t take kindly to being let down. In fact, he doesn’t take kindly to anything, so you’ll just have to go alone, I’m afraid. It’s the first time he’s asked for me since my last case, and my time . . . recovering. Plus, I need the money very badly.”

“Ah yes, your last case. *Genitus Mus Humanus*,” whispered Klesh under his breath. He patted his oldest friend on the back.

Born of rats and humans.

“The rats in this city know everything,” Jared said.

“Almost as much as you do,” Klesh added.

“They still owe me.”

Klesh frowned a little. “And me.”

Jared’s eyes widened at the unpleasant thoughts. He shook his head. “We did what anyone would have done.”

Klesh continued, anxious to relieve his friend of his turmoil. “You’ll be interested to know that, that...” he said, pointing in the direction of the devilblind,

“is another reason for my visit to the zoo. I need to see if Maxtible Willfend has sent Angelica anything. She’s asked him to write to me about how he caught it, but I’ve heard he’s mounting an expedition to the Naja Hills. He’s the only man who’s seen one in the wild and can tell us a little more about it. He has friends at the gardens I can speak to. We just hope he isn’t as bigoted as the others and may actually respond to her.”

“I think the less you know about it the better.”

“I want to know how it can still make poison, and why it still seems able to think.”

“Because it’s evil.”

“Creatures aren’t evil.”

Jared stared back toward the towering cage. “Are you sure about that?”

The homuncule came to the bars of its cage and rubbed, catlike, against them. It leapt back with a yelp at their approach.

Fumbling a sweet from his pocket, Klesh offered one to Jared, who took it absently.

“Anyway,” said Jared, “it’s late, and I have a busy day tomorrow. I must be going. Can you lead the way? I don’t want to end up an exhibit.”

“You’d make a valuable addition to our human display,” answered Klesh.

The pair wandered from the glasshouse and down a side corridor. The homuncule stared after them, sniffing the air.

A few wrong turns later, they entered a long chamber lined with huge copper pipes that, according to Klesh, once served the plants, pumping hot steam into the vast chamber—now cold and silent. They seemed to run around the entire museum, and it was some time before he opened a small door behind a huge, cobweb-covered pipe. The pair arrived back in the entrance lobby. Jared squeezed past the webs and into the room, noticing that Bald and Ugly seemed to be raising one wing with agonising slowness.

“Couldn’t we have come this way in the first place?” Jared shot his friend an accusing glance.

“We could’ve, but I needed to check the roof while I was passing.”

“And dragged me along.”

Klesh smiled sheepishly. “Sometimes, even I forget my way around,” he added and patted his friend on the back. “How about dinner tomorrow night at the Cadaver Club as a thank you?”

Jared smiled. “A thank you for what?”

“For saving that poor creature from ossification.”

“That would be delightful.”

“I’ll bring Angelica,” said Klesh.

Jared reached for the great door and made his way out into the dank city air. Somewhere out at sea, a billowing foghorn sounded the approach of another ship from the Dark Continent laden with new creatures to amuse the population of Brine.

He pulled his coat collar up and marched into the gloom.



Inside the museum, Klesh began his nightly survival ritual. His shirtsleeve was pulled high on his arm, a cloth wrap tightened at the elbow, and a syringe filled with a tar-like, black-green liquid lay adjacent. The elixir vitae. Klesh winced as he inserted the needle and depressed the plunger.

His arm burned as the alchemical fluid coursed through his body, colliding with what was left of his own natural fluids and making its incessant war with them.

“I am a worm and no man.” Klesh hissed the quoted words out in ritual as his head bowed. He thought a final silent prayer before biting on a short piece of wood covered in teeth-marks.

Wasp-like stinging began to trouble his arm—crawling up, growing, burning like hot irons, gripping his muscles in spasm, crushing them, twisting his shoulders to the point of dislocation. A few moments later, the raging hit his throat, danced like fire around his oesophagus, squeezing his arteries almost to bursting. It seized his head, and he gave a bellowing cry. Tears ran down his cheeks. The embrace stabbed at his mind, bit into his brain, seeming to take great chunks away, needles thrusting through his head. The fire wasn’t done with him, though. It still had another cruel trick to play in its embrace as it rushed toward his belly.

Klesh fell over the toilet and vomited as the fluid gripped and twisted his insides, retching up nothing as always. Minutes later, he fell to the floor, exhausted, and realised that his routine for survival was over for another day.

He wiped the tears from his eyes.

I. Am. Alive.

Klesh collected a small surgeon bag full of syringes and began his second

ritual. The undead began to stir at his footsteps. Hate and fear behind their blank eyes. In the glasshouse, a cry began to echo.

Chapter Two

THE ROYAL ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS

I should look. It's here again.

Jared woke from his dream in darkness, aware of the noise once more. Something scuttled across bare floorboards to his side and stopped. The darkness was physical—or was there a real physical presence hovering over him as he slept? In the blackness, Jared thought he could see a shadow and became aware of something leaning over him. He fumbled for his bedside matches and struck one.



“Get your lovely apples! Two fourthlings a pound!” the noisy fruit seller cheered in his happy voice.

“I hate the mornings,” said Angelica Queezil to the girl setting up the next stall.

“And particularly anything noisy in the mornings, which is practically everything in the city,” replied the girl.

Angelica frowned and stared at the inane brown grin of the fruit seller.

“Get your fine greengages, a penny a bag!”

“I don’t know what he’s got to be cheerful about,” said the girl as she unloaded a sack of mint. The fruit seller grinned like a rich man through the grey haze. His balding pate, hidden somewhat by a cap grimed with an age of grubby fingers, stretched almost to the back of his neck. His face was pocked like weevil-infested flour, and his back hunched from years bent over his wretched collection of apples and pears stolen from the gardens of the rich.

“I bet you wish you weren’t getting married. He likes pretty girls with curls.” The girl laughed.

“He looks more like your type.” Angelica grinned, waving away black wasps. She brought down the butcher’s knife with surgical precision upon the mangy grey piece of goat she had to sell today and hung the last piece from a rusty iron meat hook clinging to the sign advertising her wares. *Fresh goat meat*. Blood dripped onto the blackened cobbles beneath. At her feet lay a large, leather-bound book, marked in many places with paper tags: *The Biology of the Aric Wolverine, Volume IV*. A dirty notepad alive with spider-scrawled notes lay beside it. Beyond her modest dirty stall, the narrow market streets teemed with early life in Upper Crucible. The aroma of mint battled with ageing meat and root vegetables, all of which lay on the rugs of the poorer sellers, who could not afford the rent of a stall. Beetles and weevils slipped in and out of view like a moving carpet. Aged children sat behind huge bundles of tarragon, mint, and lovage. Bent old women in filthy woollen clothes emptied bundles of radishes from baskets on bent old mules. The thousand narrow streets of the market district were worn smooth by the passing of a million footsteps a day, from dawn to dusk a symphony of breath and voice and life.

Angelica, her meat cut and ready to sell, threw a lace cloth depicting the Miracle of the Ashes over her wares and walked the few yards up the street to her friend Mirella’s stall.

Mirella was rich for a market seller: her wares—fortune tokens, ancient cures, and blessings—were all precious commodities in Brine, where practically everyone’s luck was bad. Although now in her thirties and long past the glow of youth, she still kept her good looks. Her dazzling auburn hair, long and straight, had lost none of its autumnal glory. Her deep-set green eyes, though a little lined, had lost none of their life. Once, an artist had painted her. She wore a long green robe made of some rich velvet material, a gift from one of her army of admirers, held at the waist by a silk belt the colour of a November forest. As Angelica watched, her friend dealt with a grey gentleman who wanted a lamb foetus to bury under his new house for luck. A huge row of greying and mummified animals hung along the top beam of her stall. Live animals were often too expensive, but a sacrifice had to be given to any new abode for the sake of luck, and the rats and cats and dogs had become too clever of late. The church frowned upon the practice. On the stall, a cacophony of colours, shapes, and scents tempted and cajoled, promising luck, fame, fortune, and wit in small measure. Cures for all ills the physicians have named could be found amongst the dried snakes, black heather, and pottery fetishes.

The grey man walked away with his purchase, and Mirella turned. “What’s the plan for today?” she said, her voice rich and full.

“I’m considering the curious question regarding the Aric mating rituals of the wolverine. I may have it published.” Her sarcastic voice wreathed her feelings.

“I may publish it for you,” laughed Mirella. “Are there any murders in it?”

“No.”

“Love scenes with lots of tragedy?”

“No.”

Mirella moved close. “Any jokes?”

Angelica shook her dark curled hair. “Not many, sorry,” she answered while shuffling on her clogged feet.

“On second thought, I’ll pass on the publishing idea. Any other plans?”

Angelica cast an eye back toward her stall. A reed-thin woman without any shoulders was lifting the lace and inspecting the wares with a frown. “Maybe I’ll just sell my stock and then go and buy some fine perfume to please my love,” answered Angelica as she ran to her stall.

“Ah, the lucky Journeyman Klesh and his future bride,” answered Mirella under her breath, a pitying frown spoiling her brow.



The morning air was still, fetid. Klesh took several large gulps—his body yet to accept that breathing was no longer necessary for him—before making his way to the road, clutching the case with the homuncule close to his chest. A group of workers huddled around a foul-smelling brazier next to a huge bucket of boiling tar. Work seemed the last intention of the day. An ageing burden omnibus wheezed into view: four dead horses pulled the iron beast that towered with three precarious levels. Within, it was heaving with people elsewhere in spirit, and despite his dislike of crowds, Klesh hopped on, too busy to loiter for another. The crowd shuffled as he stepped aboard.

Pushing his way past a very young woman, herself little beyond girlhood but with a pair of ugly, dirty children, he made his way to the centre of the omnibus, almost falling as the ageing carriage lurched forward. The homuncule scratched and clawed at the corners of the box he held. Klesh smiled. “Ferret,” he said to the man staring at him. Klesh became aware of space opening around him. The stench of sweat began to grow as the omnibus speeded up.

It must be the ferret, he thought, glancing at his reflection in the grimed windows of the omnibus and adjusting his cravat. He grinned at the man again, just to annoy him.

The young woman was begging, and he was her next target. "Please, sir, my husband was in the Indran Colonial Wars, at the Front, when he died. Left me with these two mouths to feed and no pay."

A moonfaced woman with glasses and three chins stared at him with contempt as though the death was somehow his fault.

As if on cue, the youngest child, an infant sack of ill-fitting skin in her arms, began to wheeze. "Please, mister, I can tell you're a kind gent. Please. You've had two lives, sir. Give them a chance of one."

Two lives. Klesh stared at his emaciated arms and skeletal hands, a rueful grin forming.

The girl held out a dirty calloused hand and began shaking. Klesh reached into his pocket for change, but all that came into his hand was a double florin. Embarrassed, he handed the large sum to the girl.

She smiled. "Lord bless you, sir," she said and went to kiss him. As Klesh pulled away, she whispered, "Pity I can't offer you anything else," and began to laugh. He shook his head, repulsed, and faced the floor, his face unable to colour. The three-chinned woman stared down her glasses at him as the girl moved further into the coach.

The omnibus grated a metallic protest as it laboured up Bartholomew's Race toward Gibbet Hill in Low Capitol. The little huddle of humanity swayed as the carriage lurched and pulled onward up the steepest part of the hillside. At the next stop, Montnueer's Arch, most of the people emptied to go to work at the bleach factories that scarred this area of the hillside. Klesh was able to find a hard bench seat and slumped down, resting his lifeless feet. He watched as the mountainous factories and mills raced by, valleys between them dark places where the sun never reached, grey and white ghosts of people drifting to toil.

A ticket inspector finally reached him, and he paid his way to the Royal Zoological Gardens. "Day out, is it, sir?" said the ageing, grey-red uniformed man, his oversized livery crisply ironed.

"No, I have some... business to attend to," whispered Klesh, taken by surprise by the sudden friendliness.

"I remember it how it was, sir. Clean, new. They had a whole area of Royal Boronean tigers in those days. Do you recall, sir?"

Klesh nodded.

“Ah, it was a sight to see then, before... well, before all the troubles started.”

“Yes,” said Klesh, “the Between has much to answer for. And the elixir. Not that such things are not greatly progressive,” he added, aware that there could be more to the inspector.

“Do you think the strike will happen, sir? I mean, if it does, what will happen, sir? Who’ll make anything? What’ll the people eat? That’s what concerns me, sir. A breakdown of law and order like that and, well, the world could collapse into anarchy, sir. They say we may strike...” The ticket inspector stared into the distance, an old man scared of the future, and wandered toward the driver to seek further solace from civilised conversation. Klesh was almost sorry for him.

In the distance, through the grubby windows at the front of the omnibus, Klesh could make out his destination. A few moments later, he was standing on the pavement outside the Royal Zoological Gardens.

The noise and calling of the animals drowned the sound of the departing machine. As if in answer to their cries, the homuncule cried out.



A foetus with two bloated heads stared from the jar, resting over a pile of books several feet high: academic references on anthropology, archaeology, and exploration rubbed shoulders with picture books about the Empire. The walls lay hidden behind countless maps, sewer plans, and photographs of the city. A battered rolltop desk groaned under the weight of a dozen carved stone images of dislocated creatures stylised beyond recognition. Paper infested the chamber like a canker. And everywhere, jar upon jar of insects: some crawling, some dead, some barely visible, some the size of puppies.

The tang of photographic chemicals dominated the grey air, dancing with smoke emanating from a long brass hookah. Hundreds of grey pictures swung from the blackened beams of the claustrophobic living room. Jared walked in with a weeping picture in his hands and hung it above a low ceramic bowl. He frowned. The picture was very blurred, but what it captured was clear enough: a man running toward a mirror, a man whose face betrayed his terror. The image was inherently wrong, however, for the figure could not be running at a mirror and taking the picture. He was inside. The figure’s hand grasped for the outside

of the mirror from within, fingers straining, knuckles white, as something, some dark shape or shapes, dragged him backward.

He glanced down at the note on the desk. “*J, I escaped, he did not. I am not going in there again, nor should you.—P*”

Jared rose and opened his satchel. Within, wrapped in a sheath of lead, was his *undoor*—a polished mirror set in walnut. It was roughly two feet by eighteen inches wide, and its frame was bound in steel. The mirror reflected Jared’s care worn face.

That’s enough for now.

He returned the undoor to its sheath and strapped the satchel closed before putting it back into his strongbox and locking it. Putting out his pipe, he checked his reflection, pausing to touch the surface of the tiny mirror hung nearby. He headed out down the tight stairs of his lodgings and into the hazy heat of the city. Town Bridge, Jared’s home, arched over the second great waterfall into Crucible and soared upward and outward across the river, a confusion of construction in a web of chain ferries, rope bridges, and noise.

The street was busy with fruit sellers, hawkers, and constables. Jared had never seen so many police officers, all armed with cruel-looking hooked truncheons, more like butcher’s billhooks than pacifiers. He walked over the rutted cobbles of the bridge streets and eventually onto land. Ahead lay a white-tiled tunnel leading to the Underground.

Jared hated the Underground, but it was the only way he could make his meeting on time, and he shuffled onward. He had arrived late at his apartment and lurched into a deep slumber; stealing always made him tired. Purchasing a ticket from a man almost devoid of colour, he raced into the elevator.

He was the last in the packed tiny metal chamber. The operator closed the doors and pressed the enamelled button marked *down*. The lift shook and groaned, metal biting metal as they began to fall.

How long would it take us to fall? And what would be crossing our minds in the moments before death? And why don’t I use my imagination in a more wholesome and cheerful pursuit occasionally?

“Don’t start listening to the ghosts below ground.”

I promise I won’t, Laura.

The elevator picked up speed as it descended, juddering and sliding, the smell of hot irons and nervous people stifled the small metal box. Half way down, it

paused, and somewhere deep below, a whip cracked before the lift descended once more.

Do you really know? Do you know what lives beneath you now? Envy your freedom, your normality? You live in a façade. Hide, don't think, deny what you can't explain. It's all normal. It must be normal for you, mustn't it? That's it, be safe, be blind, don't... imagine. Jared stared at the people cramped around him, blank faces, trying to look at anything except a human face.

I think not. Who would dare tell them?

The elevator seemed to take an age to reach the bottom, and the air below was tropical. A sign said *Town Bridge North*. Jared followed the crowds to the platform where dozens of posters advertised goods loved by smiling happy people. The air was still, but from somewhere high above, Jared thought he could hear buzzing. He glanced up at the dark vents. Below on the tracks, a hefty iron chain stretched in both directions.

"Never gets any nicer," said a man with a top hat.

"No." Jared tried his best not to strike up a conversation.

"I was here yesterday, passing through Foetalmyre. You remember, one of the stations they closed down after the collapse?"

Jared nodded.

"Well, suddenly, this old dear next to me starts screaming. Says she saw something. Something tried to get on whilst the train slowed through the ghost station."

"What?"

"Something big with lots of legs, she said. *Too many legs* were her exact words. Gable spider perhaps, got into the old tunnels..."

"I'm sure she imagined it."

A curious sucking noise filled the air. The wind whipped up and the chain grated, stretching taught. Heat announced the arrival of a black carriage. The station filled with grey dust as the train pulled in, a thing of metal and glass and brass. Jared boarded, finding a seat with a scrap of leather to sit on. The carriage, once opulent, had been almost destroyed by vandals and had large gaps in the floor. A sign said those responsible had been punished. *Hanged*. The train began to pick up speed and pulled away from the station.

Three stops later, the train had passed under the great river and juddered into the Capitol station. Jared dashed out, deciding a run up the long spiral stair would do him good. The iron stair wound up, its wall one long repeating tiled

pattern. It took Jared several minutes to emerge at its summit, passing another pair of griffins—these twinned in gold leaf. He stepped into the daylight of the Capitol.

The air was cleaner here, the stench of the mills kept distant, deliberately *beneath*. The houses, halls, libraries, and colleges of the Capitol formed a perfect narrowing circle around the royal palace and cathedral, which paired together at the summit of the hill. A summit lost high, high above. The cobbled streets, though narrow, were tree-lined and cleaned by an army of workers. The streets were mostly covered, roofs of glass and iron. Byways, alleys, and canals all covered. Pausing to buy a newspaper, the *Daily Envoy*, he dashed off along Admiral Palsy Street and up toward the college.

A bell tolled ahead and, realising he was late, Jared quickened his pace. Within a minute, he rounded Halkin Gate and came to the college.

Back again. Fractured memories of the sounds and smells and physicality of youth awoke in his mind. *So many ghosts here. So many.*

Saint Tremon's had been a college for over six centuries. Jared had been educated there in classical theology before being thrown out. He knew every inch of the place: her beautiful cobbled courtyards, her ivy-draped master's studies with tiny lead-paned windows overlooking bright dancing fountains, and her many hiding places. He walked through the narrow entranceway, more akin to a castle gate than a place of learning, and strode into the first courtyard.

The sound of boys singing drifted across the huge circular space from the church beyond.

Jared adjusted his new dog collar and strode into the main garden with its glorious church: the Church of the Miraculous Birth. The college was deceptively huge within, and visitors got lost with regularity and had to be rescued. The sound of singing grew louder, and Jared, nervous and perspiring, opened the heavy, ironbound oak door and walked into the church.

The room was filled with boys and masters at assembly. Jared tried to slip into a pew behind the choir screen, but the bishop, through some hidden talent for spotting disagreeable boys, frowned his disapproval whilst casting an eye at his fob watch.

"The Lord shall watch and smile on thee . . ." The gathering sang as the grand pipe organ spluttered out the notes, hundreds of voices rising and falling with the instruments' lead. "Although I stray from love, I shall repent forevermore and chastened, Lord, shall be."

The hall became very still. The bishop, in the centre of the masters at the head of the church, rose and delivered a sermon on the sinfulness of non-punctuality. He gazed often in the direction of the choir screen from which Jared could just make out the portly old man's wispy grey hair that hung somewhat comically from his brow.

At its conclusion, the boys and masters departed for lessons, and within a minute, the room was empty save for the pair. Former master and pupil stared at each other. The bishop wagged a finger in Jared's direction. Following the bishop like a faithful dog, he moved out of the chapel and into the college through a narrow door carved into the likeness of three-headed dragons.

"You've not changed," said Jared.

"Perhaps in the manner of all masters when viewed by their pupils. You look older." His long, grey hair still wafted behind and around the side of his head, a tree in a storm. His black gown was still haunted by the ghost of yesterday's lessons, white chalk kissing his cuffs, his shoes still creaking with the same rhythm along the polished mahogany flooring as they did all those years ago. Seemingly as they had always done.

Will your footfall still haunt this place in a hundred years like the other ghosts?

"I've recovered something important."

"Not as important as I have." The bishop wagged his finger again.

The pair walked on in silence, passing through the long corridor, and entered a small conservatory filled with vines. The smell of decay caressed Jared's nostrils as they passed dried vines and tables and cobwebs on the way into the medical college. The dissecting table and auditorium were silent, and Jared smiled. He saw his first dissection by the master below, effortlessly and absently gutting a child's corpse as if it had been a side of beef—a butcher by another name. Jared had fainted dead away along with half his classmates that day. The dissecting table stood where it had then, where it had always been—the centre of attention. The bishop wheezed as he led the way into a small intimate classroom.

Within, the chamber resonated with knowledge. Deep shelves were lined with books in all languages. Lithographs of the Indran savages leant by ones of Aric Pygmies. The room was dominated by a huge map of the world split into two portions. The first showed the political boundaries and in only one colour: pink covering every land, island, continent, and subcontinent. The second showed geographical details: mountain, desert, volcano, plain, everywhere

known to man. Despite some large blank areas, others were shown in detail, and Jared had a childish thrill looking at the deep purple mountain ranges of the Boronean Volcanic regions, the swirling colours rainbowing about the Cape of Grief, the vast yellow deserts of Aric and New Celtic. He smiled at the joy it still gave him, the promise of mystery and adventure. He understood why those men went to exotic places: Fielding's Reef, Garten's Peak, the Black Jungle of the Calamir. He understood and envied. One place was not touched upon by academia: Between.

"You always were one for hard questions, Russula," said the bishop, pausing to pick a piece of chalk from the board ledge and begin drawing a series of circles. "Sit down, boy," he added, while wagging a finger at a chair.

Jared obeyed. The master's desk held a large neat pile of documents, Jared's old reports. Their names familiar: *Case of the Eldridge Consumptive*, *Report into the Weeping Coffin at the Village of Moppinwell*, *Of the Between*, and atop, the newest report, *Genitus Mus Humanus*. "You've been busy catching up on me." Catching the bishop's frown, Jared looked away as he moved into the crushing embrace of the arms of a rickety chair. He watched as the old bishop drew three circles and labelled them "heaven," "hell," and "earth."

"Basic theology, Russula," said the old man, while keeping his gaze on the board. "What happens to the pure of heart when they die?"

Jared shifted and shuffled in his chair, looking for an escape from this unexpected lesson. "Some people believe they go to heaven, sir. Others don't share that view." *And you know one of them very well.*

"Theoretically then, if it makes it easier for you to answer the damned question."

Jared squirmed in his chair, long years falling away under his master's fearfully connected eyebrows, and stared at the board. "Such people go to heaven, sir."

So they tell us.

"And bad?"

"They go to hell, sir."

"And what is hell, Russula?"

Jared knew the bishop was taunting him. He leant backward to see out of the window. "There are many," he said, "who think we are there already."

"Never a straight answer. If we are in hell now, why is it we can dream of hope in heaven? Surely, hell is without hope? I have hope. This cannot be hell.

I thought you were smarter than that. Have you been drinking all night? Or whoring?"

"And in the lowest deep a lower deep, still threatening to devour me, opens wide, to which the hell I suffer seems a heav'n."

"You can spare me the theological quotations, Russula. Answer the question. The first question. I need no flippancy." The bishop turned to face him.

"It is impossible to be certain."

"A fool's answer."

"Maybe, but a definite answer is impossible and, therefore, can only be conjecture. As we can with heaven and hell, you know my feelings. What is this all about, sir?"

"Yet you still wear the priest's collar."

"Very occasionally. Only because you turn a blind eye. When it suits me. Anyway, it's easier."

"Who for?"

"You know how caste works. A priest cannot be low caste. It opens doors. Bishop, you haven't brought me here to try to get me to change my mind. Religion is control. You believe, you go to heaven; you disbelieve, you go to hell. Ergo, do as I say, or you'll suffer in torment for eternity. Control of the masses."

"You were always such a damned cynic, Russula. Is believing in something that could be beautiful really so alien to you?"

"I am what you made me."

"Which is precisely why I threw you out."

"Nonsense, you were worried about me spreading anarchy amongst your hallowed halls. All right, if it'll help you, there must be some things about having a faith that must be wonderful. Does that make you feel better?"

"And what do you believe in, Russula? What about your ghosts?"

"That you are only flesh and blood once. That one must seek as much happiness as possible. And as for ghosts, they are just echoes of the past, nothing more, like photographs I can see and feel."

"And that's all."

"And the need to have a purpose."

"And you are very good at your purpose. So good that our dear constabulary have uses for you in the odd unsolved murder."

"Odd?"

"We must protect our flock from wickedness, keep the wolf from our door."

Do they still call you the Watchman? I thought so. You shepherd your flock and keep them safe from monsters from the Between. Admirable.” The bishop smiled. “Then let us talk facts and intellect, not faith. May we, for the sake of my argument, assume hell to be a very bad place where, in our religion, very bad people go?”

“The premise does not bear close examination since—”

“Enough!”

“We are islands of flesh, bone, and gristle. Prisoners, made of what’s around us. Slaves shackled to our flesh and circumstances. I see you, but I can never understand you—not truly—and why you are what you are. You’re a library of living events and shaped by them. And you cannot truly know me, or anyone else.”

“Didn’t somebody once say that no one was an island?”

“Alright then, let’s use your evil theory on the Naja hillfolk. They live in peace and harmony until the Empire comes along, repatriates them, and starts chopping down all their forests for timber. They attack to defend their homeland, yet to some of us, they are heathens who skin innocent workers alive.”

“You never could give a damned short answer to anything, Russula. Yet you have used the word *evil* in many of your cases laid before us.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“Because the things that walk from Between are not blank canvases. They are chameleons, cuckoos in the nest of humanity, who take dreams and give them a life. One thing holds them together. They hate us.”

“So you believe evil exists?”

Jared nodded. “You know I do. I’ve been a prisoner of evil. He killed the love of my life before my eyes. But I don’t believe it how you define it. I saw its talons yesterday: a doctor kills or maims someone to use a part for someone or something else, that’s evil. An act can be evil, and a person can become evil. I saw it and saw him hanged.”

“Even maiming someone as a cure?”

“That’s different.”

“Nothing is ever straightforward. And if evil exists, then by definition there must be good also.”

“Possibly.”

“So let us elucidate about evil. Is it a thing or a concept or a product of events and circumstances?”

“I prefer the latter definition.”

“So you do not accept that a thing or person can be inherently evil?”

“No.”

“Not even the others?”

“No, not even the things from Between. Not always.”

“So everyone—or thing—is born a blank slate?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yet you imply it with your answer.”

“Perhaps.”

“And what if I told you that I knew that hell existed? How would that affect your concept then?”

“That your belief is shrouded here in this place of learning. Or you mistake the Between for hell.”

“I’m not talking about belief Russula, nor that dreadful place that earns you your living. I’m talking about fact. When we die, we *go* somewhere. I have proof.”



Klesh paid the ticket seller at a wretched little red shed and pushed his way through a rusting turnstile. A pair of dying elms, twisted in a heady dance, marked the true gateway into the Royal Zoological Gardens. Behind were the first of the cages—the aviaries, decorated with spires and heraldic figurines.

Every time he came to the gardens, Klesh meant to be more businesslike, but the variety of colour and sound and life made him tarry. The gardens were tended by experts and had that rarest of commodity in Brine—colour. The rains were kept away by a series of glasshouses and roofs, grimed but functional. He paused to see a huge red pouchbill, its great beak faded a little since his last visit, stretch its huge wings and call. Beyond, a trio of nesting *Buteo cristatus* were almost invisible as they clung to the strip of dead oak in their otherwise featureless prison. Klesh frowned and moved on.

The cages towered over him, over the Lower Capitol of the city. Some, housing the largest birds, were nearly the height of churches, spiralling cathedral-like over him. A mangy-coated keeper moved by, meagre bucket of strange-looking

fish under his arm. He nodded at Klesh, perhaps embarrassed by the inadequate fare he had for his charges.

As the land rose and the pathway turned, the animals changed: wolverines and foxes with rodents as their neighbours. Klesh passed a small party of schoolchildren, gaunt faces lit by an encounter with the exotic, happy to be removed from the wallow of the city. The dirty faces of the children, who would soon be old enough to send to work, touched him. He would never have children of his own.

A grimy blackened stone building with a glass-domed roof came into view. The Exotic House. Klesh took a deep breath and marched toward the door. His knock remained unanswered for several minutes before a grim man in a white coat came out. He pushed the door shut behind him. Unable to meet Klesh's eyes, he hissed, "I thought I told you before. We don't want your sort around here."

Your sort.

Klesh wheezed, gulping air pointlessly, but when he spoke, the words rushed from his mouth like a torrent, without pause. "I am here on ecclesiastical business. Investigator Russula has asked me to check certain specimens." He patted the box with a shaking hand and stared at the man in front of him. "Perhaps you would like me to send the bishop a telegram about your non-cooperation?" Klesh swayed at the end of his tirade and gasped for air again.

The manager of the gardens scowled. "This must be the last time. I shall be writing to the church about you. I don't want to see you here again." He stepped back through the door and let it bang shut after him. Klesh walked in.

Beyond was a grimy corridor. The manager disappeared through an iron-bound door to be greeted by the frightened calls of some sort of monkey. "Angelica's fine, thank you for asking," hissed Klesh. How different the place had been before his death—how bigoted the living. He opened a side door and began to climb the narrow spiral stair that led to the library. The stair swung out over the dome, and below that, the manager was laying out a line of surgical implements at the side of the monkey cages. The creatures within shook the bars in terror, but the manager was oblivious to their calls. Klesh carried upward.



The Voyages of Captain Montnue in the Sub-Arctic. The titles rolled along the bookshelf, promising dark adventure. Jared's eye came to rest on the globe, a great sphere of polished wood with the huge ice continent filling the lower third like a measure of milk resting in its base.

"Are you listening to me, Russula?" growled the bishop.

"Of course, sir." Jared turned somewhat theatrically and smiled. "But with respect, how can you have proof of a place that exists only as an act of faith?"

"Is it so impossible, in our world of diabolical physical feats and living dead, that we do not know everything?"

"Of course, but—"

"You've become cynical, Russula. I can see it in your eyes. I've been neglecting my star pupil."

Jared smiled. "*More* cynical."

"Life passes through many stages, Russula: lust to cell to amphibian to air-breathing miracle to dust. Isn't it possible—just possible—that there is a stage we know very little about?"

"You say you have proof that hell exists?"

The bishop did not answer.

"Sir?"

"I have proof for myself, but that proof would be of little use to you. Yet I have proof."

"You *saw* it? You're sure it wasn't Between?"

"I didn't *see*, but I know what I heard was truth, could only have been truth. It is a real place."

"Tell me."



The library had a peculiar mustiness. Yards of ageing oaken cases with grimed and cracked glass fronts lined the long walls. A couple of cases held dissected lizards and snakes, and Klesh thought he recognised a Brantishan's owl somewhere in the back. Klesh dragged his chilled bones across the chamber to his favourite leather chair, oxblood leather, battered and frayed. He laid the box on the table before him and opened the hatch before wheezing and falling into the chair's welcome embrace. He opened the door of the homuncule's box. The creature flapped awkwardly before it swept out with a sudden leap and

glided with considerable difficulty onto a high cabinet where it began to preen its stitches.

Klesh's lungs relaxed their panicked grip on his futile breaths, and he stretched his legs before easing up and standing. He lurched toward the cabinet labelled, "Empire Specimens." The library floor was a hazardous maze of crates and cases, piles of mouldering books and bones. Klesh picked his way over this accidental obstacle course, clutching a short list of tomes, and opened the door of a pockmarked cabinet, which wanted to be left alone to moulder and groaned in protest as it was disturbed. Long rows of books filled the blackened interior, from slim pamphlets and treatises to huge leather-bound illustrated encyclopaedias. Klesh went through his list with patience and finally selected Corbishum's *Vespertilio Libellum*—his essay on bats, "Menagerie Between," regarded as a work of lunatic fiction—and the colossal *Magnum Opus Animal*, a book so large that Klesh's frail hands could barely lift it.

He heaved the tomes across the room and onto the nearest reading desk, bare save for a small reading light. Dust fled the table as the massive book crashed down. Klesh opened it—wafer-thin, brittle pages within—and began to read. Each page was covered in sumptuous pictures. Bright, beautiful images of mammals from all over the Empire adorned every inch of the pages. Lighting the spluttering pyrebeetle lamp, Klesh began searching, flicking past ant bears and antelope, leafing through Crafetron's aardwolf, acouchi, and anoa. Huge creatures came into view—butterfly apes and arctic great hogs, giant desert beasts and camouflaged monstrosities—before he finally came to his goal, bats.

The homuncule had preened itself thoroughly, and it was now busy playing with some sticks of charcoal on top of the cabinet, sketching and giggling with the black canes. Klesh could see the creature examining the little black sticks, rubbing them against a pile of old lithographs that lay nearby.

His progress slowed now as he checked each entry against the homuncule, analysing each perfect illustration against the playful creature. Page after page of bats went by, one specimen of which weighed ten pounds, but the identity of the homuncule remained unknown. Klesh's pocket watch chimed ten. He smiled as he turned another page.

The homuncule's sketching became more frantic.



Jared sat opposite the bishop and stared at his old master, lost in thought, focusing on the reedy flame of the fire.

“Last night, Russula,” he began, “I glimpsed purgatory.”

“Tell me,” whispered Jared, while moving his tiny chair closer and gazing intently.

A clock chimed ten times somewhere down the hall, and a trio of ravens took to flight and glided upward into the towering spires of the Capitol.

“Pain, hatred, despair. Blindness yet being able to see clearly the futility of what we are. She showed me all these miseries, God help me.”

“She, sir?” Jared said.

The bishop looked up. “My apologies, Russula. An old man forgets things like his manners, sometimes. And occasionally, how to explain himself. I have a friend with a gift—a gift she rarely discusses—and she and I have become close of late.”

“Gift? The word *séance* isn’t about to leave your mouth, is it?”

“Wipe that cynical frown from your face, Russula. There is more to the world than even you know. You have your ghosts, so does she.”

“They don’t talk to me, though. They leave something behind, something of themselves, and I watch and listen and deduce. They can be like guideposts, but I don’t sit and chat with them. Well, I sit and chat with one dead person, but he’s different.”

“Your investigations are useful, as is your friend Klesh, but the fact that you’re a journeyman abhors me.”

Life will go on. “I’m simply taking precautions.”

“Playing God.”

“I don’t want to die. Yet. My work isn’t done.”

“Spare me the journeyman doctrine, Russula. A drug is invented that allows greatly lengthened life, but at what cost? I had my fill of fashionable deaths when I heard of the first. Insane. Such a debate is for another day, however. Call it what you damned well like and pay attention. Just the lady and me: that would be Lady Lucy Carnwell to you and me. A Reborn with a peculiar gift she doesn’t like to share, but her family and mine go back a long way, and lately, she’s been troubled. She wouldn’t tell me why, before you ask, and no, I wouldn’t tell you even if I knew. When she mentioned her gifts, I wanted to find out for myself. Your look is one of the sceptic, Russula, as was mine.”

Jared realised he had a thin smile on his lips and removed it. “I’ve come across

hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people who claimed to be able to speak to the dead, and without fail, they've all disappointed me. One even went so far as to stick a four-inch hatpin into my shoulder after being unmasked. They are either acting or sitting at a gateway to Between and claiming it to be heaven. Only one person I know could speak to corpses, and that's because he was mad and took them apart."

"And your friend Angelica? She claims to have seen terrible things when she died and was resuscitated."

"Perhaps no more than a simple nightmare. Besides, she only spoke to me about it once."

"She died, Russula, and she remembered things when she came back. Isn't that why she's taken your precious Journeyman's Pledge?"

"She drowned—died but was brought back by mortal means, by the kiss of life. Brought back screaming."

"And swore she never wanted to die again, no matter what the price. She became changed."

"Yes."

"And she's not alone. There are others. Many others."

"Stories. Very well-exploited stories too. Some would say they make ideal propaganda."

"That's good, Russula. As my star pupil, I would expect as much. You've put my methods into practice admirably. You use your eyes and actually see. How many others can do that like you? None, I suspect. Not even the Between thieves you drink and whore with. As the great general Alexander Mulwade said, know your enemy like your brother. You will recall that he never lost a battle."

"He died eaten by syphilis, I seem to recall. Another high-caste syphilitic."

"That isn't public knowledge. And keep caste out of this. I simply meant that you know there is more to this world than..." the bishop paused and looked around, seeming to require inspiration. He lurched to the window and waved his arms outside, "... just this!" He coughed and resumed his seat. "Our . . . partnership has proved fruitful before and will do so again. You may unmask another actress, but I think you will not. And if you do not—"

Jared shuffled in the tiny chair and nodded "I have always tried my best in any of the tasks you have given me, sir."

"Which is why I'm able to continue providing you a stipend. I was reading

your notes on the *Ghouls of Garret Bay* this morning, Russula. A really excellent piece of work, admirable research.”

Jared smiled uneasily, worried about interrupting his master. He muttered a boyish “thank you” under his breath.

“And that . . . situation you resolved at Darkhouse with the Wicker Men, the thing you thought you saw there.”

“Did see, sir.”

“Yes, of course. How did you describe it?”

“It was an eye, nothing more. The sea was high, and the whirlpool at the point considerable, but I know it was looking at me. It had intelligence, and it was huge. The locals, the Briny, were too well organised not to have some contact. They warned me away from it. I gave it a name, nothing more.”

“But the kraiiken are legend.”

“So were lots of things until they were dragged out of the jungle or the mountains or the deep of Between and put on display.”

“So you have the faith that this creature exists, that what you saw and what you experienced was the truth?”

“I do.” Jared smiled. *Checkmate master.*

“*He’s much cleverer than you.*”

“You see, Russula. It is quite possible for one to believe in something on faith as well as logic. You say you saw a kraiiken, and I believe you. And besides, with your unique knowledge and abilities and your past brushes with the *others*, you are well placed to judge this. You have your own ghosts, as I said.”

“*He never liked me, though. But I never met him, so how would I know that? You never told me.*”

Jared frowned and glanced at his old master. “As for my ghosts, I’ve tried many times to understand why and failed, especially when I’ve tried to shut them out. On the other point, I know what I’m doing sir, I had the best teacher, but we are straying from your point.”

“Good, Russula. This lady told me things about my past that she simply could not have known—things I am... ashamed of. Things that I have not told anyone. Do you understand? I have not told anyone.”

“But you said she knows you well.”

“Not that well.”

“Then she’s a mind reader.”

“Impossible. I’d barely taken off my coat.”

Jared stared at his old master. "I see no ghosts about you, sir." The idea of this kindly old master having any guilty secrets was hard for Jared to imagine, yet he knew that scandals had been locked away here, buried deep to protect the image of the place and its masters and pupils.

"Yet the secrets were not all she told me, those secrets from my past that only one other person could have known. I have disgraced myself, Russula, but somehow, she knew, and my old demons came back to haunt me. Yet I do not believe these facts gave her any pleasure. Certainly, she left without further mention of indiscretion on my part, and besides, only one other person could possibly know."

Demons? "And where is this person, sir?"

"Dead."

"Dead, sir?"

"In purgatory." The bishop gazed into the distance. "He . . . is suffering for what we did together. Willingly. Suffering forever."

"Can you tell me more, sir?"

"No, and you must mention this to no one."

Jared nodded.

The bishop's distraught face gazed out of the window "This evening, Russula, I want you to confirm the truth about this woman, confirm that an old man is not losing his marbles and that she is indeed merely a mind reader who has reason to make this old fool suffer. Or prove her right and then... and then. Oh, what then? Meet her at Old Mews House in Ermine by the river at seven. Don't be late and, above all, don't be mistaken. I want the evidence before me at noon tomorrow. I cannot meet you before then. You must go incognito. I've arranged for her to expect a Squire Hepworth. And be subtle in your observations. She must suspect nothing, and remember, her family and mine go back a long way, so do your work with dignity."

"As you wish."

"Most important of all, Russula, she must not know I have sent you. Understand me, that's the most important part of all. She has no idea I have any connection with Squire Hepworth, and it must remain so. Now, Russula, you had something to tell me."

Jared told him everything about the homuncule.

The bishop turned to his books. "Then we must see what your friend uncovers

and take measures to see those responsible punished. Keep the thing alive until then at least.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m sorry. It must have brought back painful memories.”

“It did, but those memories were hung some time ago. The only time I greeted death with a smile for one of its victims.”

Still with his back to Jared, the bishop waved his former pupil out. “Say nothing to anyone about this business,” he shouted, almost as an afterthought.

Jared stepped out of the room and dashed downstairs into the open courtyard, his mind racing.

The bishop swayed at the window before managing to summon the strength to open it. Jared was already making his way out of the grounds. Back in the schoolroom, a door opened, and a tall and powerful figure in a grey uniform stepped in. “You see,” he whispered and put his arm around the old man, “lying is so easy when you put your mind to it.”

The bishop mopped his brow. “You won’t hurt him?”

“Not whilst he has his uses. The homuncule—it’s regrettable he mentioned it, but I suspected he might. You will forget about it, do you understand? As you will everything else.”

The bishop nodded. “Is there anything else, my Lord Questioner?” His words were barked out, terrified.

“Not until he returns. In the meantime, you will say nothing to anyone about this. You know what will happen if you do: your dirty little secret will become public, and you’ll bear the consequences of your sins for what is left of your time. Perhaps longer.” The knight questioner walked out of the room and down the corridor.

The bishop realised he was shaking and in a haze of misery and fear and anger. The knight questioner crossed the courtyard below, where he was met by a pair of men, both wearing long grey coats despite the heat. They spoke before departing, one with the knight. The other, a slender man leaning on a cane, hailed a carriage.

Is my life worth a warning to you, Jared?

He rang the bell to summon a house servant.



Klesh smiled. His pile of notes was considerable, but he had an exact location for the creature. He struggled with the books as he put them back in the cabinet and closed the fragile glass doors. Waving the homuncule down, he waited for it to glide back into its box. It refused, stubbornly staring down at him.

“If you don’t come with me, I’m leaving you,” Klesh lied.

The homuncule continued to stare.

He pulled a boiled sweet from his pocket and popped it into his mouth, making happy noises. The creature stared at him, cocking its head to one side.

He held another out and placed it before the open box.

After a few moments deliberation, the creature hopped down and sniffed at the treat. As it snatched for it, Klesh snapped the box shut. There was a moment’s protest, and then the noises stopped

Klesh walked out, a curious lapping sound following him.

From within, the homuncule stopped with its prize for a moment and stared up at the cabinet, its top now scattered with broken charcoal from its frantic play. Klesh failed to see that, hidden above, the homuncule had not been merely playing with the charcoal. It had been drawing.

The old lithographs and etchings were obscured by drawings of hundreds of knives.



The children continued to laugh as they played their game of hoppity-scotch by the alley—giggling as they tossed stones onto chalked squares. Angelica glanced across at them, smiling at how much they were enjoying themselves.

“Why do we ever let them grow up?” a man’s voice said.

Angelica put the book down, aware that she had a customer.

“You seem to be having a poor day,” said the man in an educated accent. He put his left hand on the book, keeping the other on his cane. “*Biology of the Aric Wolverine*,” he murmured. “A strange book for a butcher.”

Angelica nodded. The man had a slight smile on his face, “I used to work somewhere else but decided I liked the outdoors more.” She smiled. Books always caused her problems, questions that had to be answered, lies to cover the truth.

We don’t want your sort here.

“Well . . .” said the man, “I’ll take everything you have. I’ve had a busy day

but a profitable one.” He proffered a double florin. As Angelica wrapped the thin meat, she realised he was staring at her. She handed him some grubby change, and he took it and smiled. “Until we meet again . . . Angelica,” he said. He turned and proceeded up the crowded street, parting a pair of squabbling urchins with his cane and vanishing around a corner.

Angelica watched the stranger with the cane vanish into the grey crowd. *How did he know my name?*