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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of my thesis is to explore the relationship between humanity and rapidly advancing technology in a fictional industrial revolution setting, rather than the science fiction setting typically used for such stories. A primary focus will be on the ethics of merging the mechanical and the biological, and the potential for such a thing to be abused. Additionally, I wanted to consider the near religious aspects of exceptionally advanced technology and some pursuits of it – primarily those of a less ethical nature – by making this piece have an eldritch horror aspect to it, which will be developed later, as this is a section of what I intend to make a longer work.

While advanced technology and pseudo-religious aspects of it are my primary focus, there are numerous secondary themes I intend to explore through worldbuilding and setting. Greece in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had its own, little recognized, monarchy and I wished to explore what it could have been like had their power never waned and they remained the focal point of Southern European civilization. Furthermore, I wish to explore ethnic tensions in the midst of overwhelming social and technological change, a subject that is unfortunately ever-relevant. While we are far detached from the 19<sup>th</sup> century now, in both culture and technology, I believe that the time period and its issues mirror our own and exploring it with my previously mentioned themes in mind can be relevant in modern day.

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## Prologue

“Did you bring the organs?” Their buyer wasn’t the university type this time.

“Say it a little louder, why don’t you? Yeah, I brought them. Payment’s double,” replied Kostas.

“Curious,” the man said, raising an eyebrow under his dark hood.

“This isn’t the normal product. You want Komorros to get you something that’s not whale parts, you need to pay extra.” Kostas plopped the metal box on the ground in front of him. Any longer holding it and he’d be reminded of its contents. Henrich, behind him, involuntarily shielded his stomach.

“I thought he was a man dedicated to the advancement of the sciences, regardless of legal frustrations.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a line somewhere. Speaking of, don’t ask for something like this again. Komorros had a hard time getting this, and it’s just distasteful.” Kostas planted a foot on the box and held out his hand. Time to get paid and get out. He didn’t want to deal with this character any longer than he had to.

“I’m not surprised, but a little disappointed regardless.” The man arched his head. His eyes had no recognizable features on them – no pupils, irises, veins, nothing. By the Sun above, who was this person?

“Just hand over the money and the box is yours.” Kostas hoped for a quick and easy resolution. He carried a brass cartridge revolver in his pocket in case this new contact had other plans. His outstretched hand remained empty.

The man rooted in his coat pockets for a moment before pulling out a few silver coins. He slipped them onto Kostas' palm. The man's fingers felt unnaturally cold as they brushed against his. Kostas suppressed a shudder before checking the payment. Three white coins. They weren't silver, though. Their sheen was too clear and they were just a bit too heavy. He bit into one and saw not so much as a mark. The other two checked out as well. Platinum, just as they had agreed.

"Coins check out. Box is yours." Kostas shoved the box away with his foot and backed off. Good riddance to that thing.

The man approached it carefully, almost reverently, and lifted it off the ground. He peeked inside and both Kostas and Henrich reflexively looked away.

"I trust the way you acquired these won't raise further suspicion," he stated.

"I know what you're getting at, and no. All the...bits in that box were taken from bodies that were already dead. Nobody of significance, either. Dead tramps from the Harbor and Hill districts." Every time this character opened his mouth Kostas felt more and more uneasy about him. Even with the two men they had backing them up around the corner, his nerves were fraying at the ends. Someone that comfortable around a box of human organs was disturbed at best.

"These organs are old. How recently had the hosts expired?" the man asked, frowning.

"Not long enough for it to be a problem. Everything in there is soaked in that preserving liquid you asked for and the box is packed with ice, it was hard getting both of those too. You have any other problems, bring them up with Komorros. We're done here." Kostas had half a mind to bolt out of there. What was it with this character? He'd dealt with some of the nastier faces around the docks and never lost his cool like this. He needed to get out. He prodded

Henrich with an elbow and nodded. They started out of the salty brick and cobblestone dock alley toward the street proper and its oil lamps.

“These organs are diseased and useless.”

“Bring it up with Komorros.” Kostas quickened his pace. The street wasn’t too far off.

“I will need healthy ones as compensation. From living bodies.”

Kostas grabbed the revolver in his trousers. Someone asking for human organs should have been the first warning bell. They should have never agreed to a single part of this. He pulled and spun around, clicking the hammer back to fire.

The man stood right in front of him. He never heard him move. Before he could register what had happened and pull the trigger a tremendous force smashed into his chest and sent him skidding across the alley. Striking the ground knocked the remaining air from his lungs and the revolver from his hands.

“Friedrich! Ernst!” Henrich whipped a cudgel out of his coat and swung at the man’s head. He hit nothing.

Heavy steps pattered down the alley. Heinrich’s grunts meant he was still swinging, but Kostas couldn’t make out the hooded man. He staggered to his feet at the same time he searched for his revolver. Air forced its way back into his lungs with a gasp. Adrenaline kept the pain down to a dull throb on his back.

A glimmer of steel rushed into the fray. He heard the crunch of metal on metal but no cries other than grunts.

“Get the gun, local!” Kostas didn’t have time to chafe at the term Henrich used. Where did it skid off to? He dropped to his hands and knees searching the dark alley floor. His knuckles bumped something and he heard the sound of metal skidding over the cobblestone.

Someone yelled behind him and the sounds of fighting grew much, much closer.

“Quickly!”

Kostas heard a wet crunch and a scream of pain.

His hands grasped out to the darkness. Heat drained from his hands as they met the revolver’s barrel. Kostas grappled with the gun and the storm of adrenaline in his veins. The warm metal of the trigger met his finger after a moment’s struggle. He leaped two steps away from the fighting and spun the barrel of the gun around.

Coats fluttered around and glints of steel whipped around in a confused mess of limbs. The hooded man stood his ground in the center, handling them all without much effort. One of the hired bruisers swung his sword offhand in wild arcs, trying to keep the fighting away from him. His strong arm bent at an unnatural angle and his face paled. Henrich and the other bruiser tried pushing the hooded man into the wall, but somehow his bare hands more than held off their weapons. Nobody could do that outside of a legend.

“Back away!” Kostas shouted, but not before someone swung a sword at the hooded man’s face. It stopped when it struck his bare, mangled fingers. Not so much as a grunt or a drop of blood came out of him.

Shock so deeply infected Kostas’ mind that the revolver’s firing startled him. A reverberating crack strummed his eardrums and the flash of powder blinded him as the weapon fired, leaving an imprint of the scene on his eyes. Through foggy vision Kostas saw the hooded man’s head swivel toward him, whipping the hood off.

Everything about him was subtly wrong. At first glance, he might pass for an ordinary foreign dock worker, with his paler skin and light hair. With the hood and long coat, that’s all he looked like. The longer Kostas looked, though, the more disturbing the image became.



Unnaturally sharp angles cut across his face. His skin had the color of ice. It accentuated the odd lengths of his limbs, and the impossible angles at which they bent. Worst of all were his eyes, so pale and murky that Kostas could hardly tell where the whites ended and the pupils were.

He pulled the hammer back for another shot. The man tore the sword free of his misshapen fingers and dashed free of Henrich's grasping hands, on a path straight out of the alley and into the street.

Kostas lowered the hammer on the revolver and shoved it back into his trousers. He resolved to a foolish course of action. No time to plan a smart one.

"Follow me!" Kostas tugged Henrich by the elbow as he bolted past. Any seconds the Isler spent thinking about it were seconds wasted.

He staggered into the street after him, his eyes the size of a whale's.

"Are you mad?! That thing wasn't natural, we're lucky to be alive!" Henrich shouted.

"Just follow and stop making so much noise," hissed Kostas. Blood sloshed through his heart with the shock of fear and adrenaline. The hooded man zipped across the near empty streets in front of him. Some streetlamps weren't lit. The shot must have scattered the lamplighters. It would stay empty for a while. City watch didn't care much for a foreigner district like this.

It took every bit of breath Kostas could muster just to keep up. Corner after corner the man's grey cloak taunted him as he zipped just barely out of sight. The soggy air quickly got saltier and smokier with each soot coated alley and empty street they passed. Henrich trailed somewhere behind him. His clumsy footsteps drummed within earshot.

The hooded man ducked into a warehouse just as they reached the oceanfront, not bothering to close the door behind him. Henrich plodded up beside Kostas, wheezing. Red flushed over his cheeks and forehead and his boyishly long yellow hair clung to his face.

“Are you completely mad, Selekosian? That thing isn’t of this world. Oh, Eistryn save us from the dark-” Henrich invoked the name of his heathen god as he made a circle with his thumb and forefinger, pressing it over his heart to ward off evil. “-it’s a Fleshtaker.”

“I don’t know what your Isler superstition says, but the demons are long dead. It’s a legend, besides. With the right chemicals, a man can stop feeling pain and fight like that,” replied Kostas.

“And stop swords with his hands?”

“You keep your sword sharp so they can’t. You brought your weapon with you?” Kostas peeked inside the doorframe. Some electric lights shone inside, but nothing else stood out.

“You’re insane. Completely insane. Just forget about that thing and-” Henrich yelped as a steam ship sloshed past. Jumpy superstitious bastard.

“Stay by the door in case he tries to sneak out. If he does, hit him in the head. No concoction can stop that.” The cloud of smoke from the steam ship’s wake wafted over them. Henrich pressed the collar of his jacket over his face and nodded furiously. Or maybe he was trembling. Either way, he got the message. Kostas pulled the revolver from his trousers and cocked the hammer as he went in.

Cold struck him the moment he stepped into the warehouse. Even at night by the oceanside, Selekosian summers were notoriously hot. No electric fans whirred anywhere nearby. Kostas figured the warehouse was locked up for a long time. He couldn’t deny it felt a little off, though. Just like the hooded man.

Electric lights hung from the ceiling and steam boiler parts lined the colorless brick walls so whoever owned the place must have had money if they could afford that much expensive machinery. Strange it didn’t drum up any memories. Kostas liked to think he held his ear close to

the ground in the Harbor District of Naulos, even though he wasn't one of the foreigners that lived there.

Pale orange bulbs flickered above his head with uncertain light. Something about electric lights made Kostas nervous, and it definitely wasn't that he resisted change. Getting the revolver was his idea, after all. Oil lamps flickered and burned, that was something living to him. Electric ones did what they were supposed to, sure, but felt like lifeless mimics impersonating light.

He checked the room for anything suspicious. Aside from the steam boiler parts he noticed earlier, nothing struck him. Hardly a thing sat in the room other than a fine coating of dust on the concrete floor. Some light footprints cut through it. He followed the trail to a half-open door.

What was he doing here? He wasn't a lawman by anyone's definition, or some kind of vigilante that listened to one too many epic poems. It just seemed right, he guessed. Someone that disturbed and willing to warp their body with concoctions was hardly a man. Just a wild beast to be put down.

A burning chemical scent struck his nostrils when Kostas reached the door at the other end of the room. He pressed the collar of his jacket over his nose before his dinner hopped free of his stomach. What was behind that door? It felt like he snorted a jar of embers. He coughed reflexively, trying to clear the horrible feeling from the back of his mouth and nose. It subsided after a few seconds, but he still felt raw.

Kostas walked up again, holding his jacket over his mouth and nose this time. He tested the steel slab of a door and it opened easily. It didn't seem the slightest bit rusted or creaky, unusual for steel in the humid Harbor District. The next room flickered with more sporadic orange light, scattered across a larger space. His eyes watered and the smell pressed against his

jacket. Its source was front and center, a short metal table covered in open brown glass medicine bottles. An opened box sat next to it, filled with the same things.

He picked one of the open bottles off the table, gently as he could. Half the words didn't make sense to him, but the printed skulls told him everything. Another open bottle read "disinfectant." A third was some sort of preservative? Kostas remembered it being the same stuff their buyers wanted whale organs soaked in. The human organs, too. That raised more questions than it answered. The bottles had all or most of their contents used up already. What was it all for?

There were a few more metal tables scattered about. Compared to the dusty mess that was the room before, they were squeaky clean. A bottle or two sat on most of them. It seemed strange that they were all a bit longer than he was tall.

A single metal door lead out of the room. Kostas slid through into hallway in the center of the warehouse, judging by the height of the roof. Seemed as though the walls were put in recently to break up the big, open center of the building. Some nobles did that to make offices close to their assets, but the groups Kostas worked with had a few places like it, too. They used them to help hide the extra whale oil they pilfered, along with the whale organs they sold. Walls meant more time to stuff the products away when inspectors came around.

So what was hidden in here? Black market chemicals? Didn't make sense that they sampled or used the stuff before selling it. Full bottles and sealed containers fetched way more market value than the mess he saw in the previous room.

And why was there nobody inside? Granted, it was nighttime, but nobody in a place this suspicious should care about that. Somebody should have stopped him at the door. Nobody even watched their merchandise.

The little voice of paranoia stammered ideas into his mind. Why were the chemicals opened? Where were the people? What was the preservative for?

Why did the hooded man come here?

Everything he found only brought up more questions, but by now he was sure this wasn't just some questionably legal little business someone threw together to make a little more money. That's when he saw the disturbance in the dust ahead of him.

Someone had dropped something. Something small and metallic. Kostas walked over and nearly picked it up before he realized what it was and tore his hand back in revulsion.

A rusted metal finger. Not a full model of one with skin like a sculpture, but the raw bones under the muscle and sinew. They bent at unnatural angles. Moist, orange flakes of corruption concentrated around the joints, like fluid leaking out. Morbid curiosity compelled him to prod the thing. He reached out, slowly, and pushed gently as he could against the surface of the browning metal. It felt like the sinew and flesh of the whales he sometimes helped butcher: soft, slippery, and disturbingly warm.

He nearly pulled his finger back into his body. The warmth clung to it, even when he scrubbed his finger against his pants. He clutched the revolver tighter, trying to draw reassurance from its grip.

Another finger lay in the dust ahead. The footprints tracked a path beside it. The hooded man could well be deranged enough to have a collection of warm metal fingers on him. He didn't know why and didn't want to. Best to put him down and get out of there, quickly. Maybe give the police an anonymous tip about the place later, in exchange for something.

The trail of prints and metal fingers lead downstairs. Kostas came across three by then, each of them bent and rusted like the first. He checked behind himself before creeping down.

The basement divided into what looked like two wide rooms. Footprints and another four fingers lead to a closed door that likely lead to the second. A light, scalding smell hung in the air, with the nauseating sweet stench of rot accompanying it.

Kostas gagged, placing his jacket over his mouth again as he searched for its source.

It didn't take long.

Human shapes, covered under bloodstained sheets sat on long metal tables along the walls. By the Sun above, Kostas counted at least ten. The man, no, the perverted beast in the hood needed to die.

He rushed across the room and battered the door open with his shoulder. Whipping the revolver out in front of himself, Kostas took aim-

And froze.

The hooded man stood there, a hand held up in the air. Skin dangled off it, exposing his metal bones to the glowering orange light. He fastened the missing index finger to the ferrous abomination, giving his lightly bloodstained metal joints an experimental flex as Kostas watched, infected by terror.

The thing turned to look at him and Kostas fired. He pulled the hammer back again and kept firing, sending bullets ricocheting through the room until the revolver started clicking.

At least three of his bullets hit their mark, since blood oozed forth from the same number of holes in the thing's body. It didn't seem that bothered by it. Instead, it started to pull the skin back over its hand and walk toward him.

Kostas furiously worked the ejecting rod on his gun, scattering the spent brass to the floor. He yanked new bullets from his pocket, dropping a spray of live ones to join them. Just as

he half pushed, half convulsed a round into the drum a body from one of the tables sat up. The sheet fell off and revealed another unnatural face. A woman's, and Selekosian, like him.

It moved right beside him as though time were faster for it. A hand smacked the gun from Kostas' hands, numbing them with sudden coldness, and then wrapped its fingers around his throat. His breath froze. Its eyes weren't fogged like the other's, but unnaturally bloodless.

"Tharsciel. You will need new lungs." The woman-thing's voice jabbed into Kostas' ears. Tharsciel. That wasn't a real thing's name. It was a name from a legend. The thing that owned it was supposedly killed millennia ago. The creatures of evil were supposed to be dead.

"Eyes...first." Tharsciel wheezed.

"Your fondness for them makes you wasteful. They will see patterns soon."

"They lack-" Tharsciel forced a breath. "-belief to imagine it."

"Only time for eyes or lungs. We cannot take both," said the demon woman.

"Eyes."

"Then you extract them." She dragged Kostas over to the steel table she rose from. He tried to flail against her grip, but a coldness ran through his blood, making him sluggish and weak. She fastened him to the table with a series of leather straps, securing first his body, his limbs, and finally his forehead.

Tharsciel appeared next to him, skin still hanging loosely from his metal hand, swiping a thin metal knife against his digits to sharpen it.

Kostas mercifully fainted before it descended.

## Encounter

“Step up and show me what those soft hands can do, *m’lord!*”

They called Max’s odds at 1 in 12, which he thought unfair. He trained with a sword, albeit years ago, but he wasn’t some clueless lout who wanted to prove a point. He clenched his fists experimentally, running through his plan for the next three minutes in his head. Sword or no, the principles of fighting should be the same. Strike first, move quickly, and don’t take hits. That was the theory, anyway.

From across the ring an ugly, bulldog looking man grinned at him. Max felt a rise coming on but suppressed it. Anger wouldn’t do him any favors. Winning and walking away with twelve times his bet would be payback enough.

Someone struck a bell and the crowd’s cheering and jeering redoubled to mind-numbing. The bulldog man paced toward him, sending a shot of adrenaline that brought sudden clarity to Max’s senses. The roaring crowd fell into the background. He raised his fists to his forehead and circled with his opponent.

Max lunged into a punch at the open side of the man’s face. He met nothing but air. Then a fist to the head. Blue knives of electric light descended into his eyes. Pain pulsed through his face. Air rushed out of his lungs as a fist crunched into his ribs. Twice. He could faintly register something coming up toward him. Max staggered back and tried to bat it aside. A fist careened into the side of his head. He staggered backwards and tumbled onto his back, driving the remaining breath from his lungs. Light from a steel cage somewhere above him, faded in and out of existence.



An ugly, dirty face invaded his sight. Something prodded him. Max curled up and rolled over, anticipating a boot that never came. Someone grabbed him under the shoulders and pulled him roughly to his feet. The ringing in his ears subsided. He heard jeers from the crowd and voices around him.

“Good work on this one, Grigori. Six seconds is a record for you.” Someone waved a hand in front of his face. “Still with us?”

Max grunted something in response.

“Good. Last thing we need’re more nobles in places they aren’t wanted. Stay in your part of the city, with your Selekosian friends,” he spat.

Arms roughly hooked under his shoulders and dragged him. Metal screeched as someone pulled a door open.

A toss and slam into cobblestone later, Max was choking on salty, sooty air outside. Laughter erupted behind him and ended with a slam as the door behind him shut. The air split with the deafening retort of a steamboat’s horn, followed by an enveloping cloud of smog. The smoke burned against the lesions on his face, to say nothing of his eyes and throat. He shielded his face with his coat and crawled away from the immediate seaside. An itching feeling developed in his throat, and Max held his breath, taking periodic gulps through the meager shielding of his clothing. Only when the air was thick with salt again did he dare to breathe normally. He wiped the black crust off his eyes and took stock of his situation.

His adventure for the night ended with him broke, beaten, and sour, much as when he went into the warehouse, minus the beating and five drachmae. The scrape and smoke ruined his clothes, but they were shabby enough not to place too big of a dent in his warped line of credit. His family’s line of credit.

Max straightened his appearance, his ensemble of humiliation, as best he could. He forced himself back to his feet, his legs shrieking with protest at suddenly bearing his weight. Even they were trying to give up.

The salted brick walls towering up on either side of him hid the night sky. Cheap, stylized imitations of Selekosian waves etched onto their corners made them look cheaper than they already were. Max looked up, trying to find the sky, but nearly vomited with sudden vertigo. His legs popped and creaked with his unsteady steps, but he heard no snaps. He risked taking a deeper breath, and to his relief his body gave no screams of protest. Nothing was broken.

Max found his way past the outer warehouses in a haze of nausea and pulses of pain. His mind belonged to pain and confusion, floating further away the tighter he held. Movement happened of his body's own will. He watched, faintly aware of the world, as his body navigated the alleys.

His body found its way into a forking path, and unable to continue without guidance, stopped. Consciousness seeped back into him. Not that it sharpened his senses. A thick glow emanated from the streets some distance down the alley in front of him, but that wasn't what drew his attention. The scent of lamp oil drifted into his nostrils, thin and energetic. A faint yellow light pulled him toward it before he even realized he was moving.

Curiosity elevated his senses. Max found the cobblestones beneath his feet crumbling. The clay bricks were nearly white from what could only be decades of salt and neglect. Oddly enough, he couldn't smell any of it.

On a level of strangeness far above anything else, Max came across the source of the light. An oil lamp, sitting on a wooden desk covered in papers.

What was this place?

Max found no signs of anyone being there recently. The glowing lamp was the only clue. Instincts told him something was wrong with this place. It would be safe to simply leave and forget it existed. If he weren't enslaved to his curiosity, he would have. He knew, on some level, that he would never find this place again. The thought left him with such a profound feeling of loss that he could not abandon it. Not until he found something. But what was he looking for?

He sifted through the papers on the desk. Diagrams, symbols, images, there were hundreds of them. The script changed between each page, sometimes switching between several on one sheet. He recognized his own language at one point, but not the words written.

Without noticing it, Max had been staring at one page for an entire minute. The page stared back.

Max had a fondness for machinery, but the sight on the page eclipsed all others. In perfect, painstaking order, someone had assembled an entire man from metal and wires. Instructions and notes were written in his own language, as if meant for him. They described the composition, the order of construction, every detail needed. He knew nothing of engineering, but with a little professional help it could be built.

The longer he read, the more his eyes wandered to the mechanical man itself. The eyes, at first looking like nothing more than camera lenses, regarded him with oceanic depth. Its clockwork, piston pump heart appeared a moment away from injecting life into its copper veins. A work of beauty on every level, both functional and sublime. He could find a way to build it. He would find a way to build it.

He placed a hand on the sheet. Then someone placed a hand on him.

"Look away from the paper. Take your hand off it. Quickly." A woman's voice. Before Max could voice his surprise, a sharp edge pressed to his throat and kept his words in his throat.

His life didn't need to join the list of things he lost that day. He complied, but the design weighed down his eyes like an anchor. The woman snatched it out of sight, and his eyes burned with sudden relief.

"I don't have any money. You can check if you really have to," said Max.

"Give me your name," she demanded.

"What?"

"Your name. Say it."

"Maximilian Remthal." For once, his name proved useful, as the woman withdrew the edge from his neck. Careful to look as nonthreatening as possible, Max turned to get his first look of her.

His assailant looked odd, like an amalgamation of many things that didn't fit together. Her hair twisted, furled, and frayed like a vagrant's. She wore an old university uniform, but any identifying markers were stripped off in a fit of passion. Most oddly, her eyes sparked and crackled with a fascinating curiosity to them.

She clutched a wedge-shaped shard of glass with a rag for a hilt. Her eyes never moved from him, holding a disturbing intensity.

"I'd like to know your name. I gave you mine.

"Maria," she replied.

"Only Maria?"

"Yes."

"You can put that away, Maria. I'm not a threat. Look-" He lifted his coat to show his unadorned belt. "-no weapons."

She seemed unconvinced, but at least she did not tense further. Maria kept looking straight at him. He raised his hands, palms facing her.

“No calluses either. I’m not a fighter, just an idiot that thought he could box.”

“Why?” Maria asked.

“I’ve...Been in rough straits recently. Seemed a smarter idea at the time,” replied Max.

The question caught him off guard. Why would she care?

“Explains much. Marks on your face, state of clothing. How you got here.”

“Is this your desk? And those papers, yours, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Eistryn’s name, woman. Why would you live like this? You could buy your way out of poverty with just one of those papers. Every noble family in the city would offer you patronage.”

“Except yours.”

“I - No.” Max felt an impulsive idea fight its way into his mind. The second one in a day. His Remthal blood boiled with unnecessary risks he had tried to suppress for too long. If he waited any longer, they would transform into necessary idiocy. He released one. “My house included. Maria, I’m not a man of means anymore. I won’t lie. I’ve sold furniture to buy food this past month, but I can spare enough for you. Consider this my official offer of patronage.”

Maria looked at him with curiosity. Saying nothing.

“If you made even one of those, you have an incredible gift. It’s incredible even if you can read them. You don’t deserve to be out here, in this alley that’s barely a year away from being a dirt pile.”

“You should have walked away. Forgotten about this place and what you saw. Still have a chance to. Take it.”

“I can’t. You probably can’t see it, but do you have any idea what those papers look like to someone like me? I could barely understand the parts written in my language, but I just know that those things aren’t some daydreams. I can’t let you and those things be forgotten. I can’t let you walk your Lonesome Road without leaving something behind.”

“What did you see?” Maria asked.

“I saw a man made entirely from metal and machinery.”

Max didn’t understand why Maria looked concerned.

“You won’t forget. Not optimal.” She pursed her lips. “Leave me with two options.”

“By Eistryn, please don’t let yourself waste away here. You’re thin, and winter’s only four months away. You won’t last.”

“Does superstition cloud your judgement?” Maria snapped.

“What?”

“You talk about ‘purgatory roads’ and swear by an ocean goddess. Does it addle your mind?”

“It’s not superstition. It’s my people’s faith, and no. It helps me in these difficult times. Even without it, I’m my own man.”

“Hm. A typical response.” Maria pursed her lips. “-But satisfactory. I accept your offer. With my own conditions. No one touches my work but me. No one looks at my work but me. My work goes with me. Always.”

“Eistryn bless you, of course. I accept every condition.” he said, putting his hand out, palm up, in the proper gesture of acceptance to a lady. Max was waiting for Maria to put her hand, palm down, on top of it to formally accept. She gave him an odd look instead.

“I’m not noble. Verbal agreement is sufficient. Silly ritual, regardless.” With that, Maria took to her papers. Max stood waiting, awkwardly. He salvaged his dignity and watched, patiently, the incredible energy Maria applied to her task.

In less than a minute, she squirreled all her worldly belongings, save for the desk, into a few previously unseen moldy boxes. All but one.

Maria considered her dagger at some length. Did she have a sentimental reason for keeping it? Max didn’t think she was the type.

“I don’t think you’ll need that anymore.” Max said.

Maria pondered a moment.

“No. Perhaps not,” she said, and flicked it down a storm drain. It bounced once off the grate before soundlessly vanishing into an abyssal gap. Maria seemed no worse for its loss as she picked her boxes off the ground. Under their weight, her thin frame looked ready to snap. A gentleman would offer to carry them for her, but Max doubted she would see him holding her life’s work as a courtesy.

“Do you remember how to go home?” She asked.

“Yes. It’s. We can walk there.” Max took the lead, heading down the alley, leaving Maria’s old home behind. They quickly came upon the earlier street’s glow, even though he didn’t see any of it from Maria’s alley. He looked back to see how far they came. There was no desk, no crumbling cobblestones, and no the salt-crusted bricks. Maria looked back at him quizzically.

He dragged his eyes back to the street. Even though the lights were still meager oil lamps, not yet replaced with electric bulbs, they burned more intensely than he expected.

“Maria? I’m afraid everything’s a little bright at the moment. What street are we on?”

“Isleview Street. Silverfare Avenue on the left. Brinewater Avenue on the right.”

“Okay. We should walk Silverfare for three blocks, go left on Misty Street and then right onto Angela Remthal, it-”

“Angela Remthal has no connection to Misty Street. Need two more turns before reaching it. I should lead instead of you.”

“I know where my house is, even if I can’t prattle off all the turns and streets that lead there right now. How do you know where it is?” Max asked.

“Maps are simple memorization.” Maria replied.

And this woman lives in an alley, he thought. Naulos was a remorseless city.

The buildings of the Harbor District decayed into old, short things the closer they were to the water - mostly constructions of peach colored bricks and red tiles, turned pale by decades and even centuries of salty air. Each struggled wall to wall with its neighbor for little breaths of space between the decaying skin of pavement, bones of cobblestone poking out from underneath. Rusty loudspeakers occasionally hung off of the random electric streetlamp, nearly rusted to dust. Not that it mattered, since they had not been used in years and likely never would.

In a lesser travelled section of the district, they came across a crudely exaggerated image of king Konstantinos painted onto a wall, dressed in luxurious purple flowing robes. They parted near the bottom to reveal his leg, stomping on the neck of a common man. The warped, grotesque image of his face threw proportions to the wind. His attempts at a youthful hairstyle were degraded into a clump of hair that could have been a dead animal sitting on his scalp. He held a woman against her will with one arm and pulled her coin purse off with the other. He stared at them both hungrily, with such a twisted look of delight on his face that Max couldn’t



help but feel a spike of anger. Under the king was printed his title - Victor, or Nicanor, in his own tongue.

A great amount of work and detail for something so temporary. Watchmen would destroy it by morning. Maria looked at it with amusement, but said nothing. They continued walking.

Lively flames of oil lamps gave way to the dead, solid light of electric streetlights. A spike in both how magnificent and derelict his surroundings were told him home was close. However much longer it might be home. Ever since his grandfather's ill-fated endeavors nearly killed their house, what was once the shining jewel of eastern Naulos grew fainter by the day. His father hadn't helped much before it killed him, too. That left Max with the husk of the Remthal family as his home, and its bloodsucking debt collectors as inheritance.

At least his home remained an excellent work of art. A mesh of the utilitarian, plain style of their homeland and the native Selekosian love of light, reflective colors made it both functional and fashionable, which compounded its magnificence. Stout columns ran across the lengthy front. Some of the windows glowed in the electric werelight, casting their painted patterns both inside and out. Red brick and black iron bars cordoned off the house from the rest of the harbor district, while still allowing the squat, two story house a healthy view of the outside. The family crest hung on two banners by the gate: a golden wing, with gears at the joint, on a background of red - all the hues bleached three shades whiter by the ocean air. Max could almost ignore the giant weed of a garden and the rotting walls.

Ludwig, their guard, was still at the gate. Eistryn bless the man, he had more loyalty than sense. Any more of that and he would have left for someone who could pay him what he deserved. His aging crimson uniform bore the Remthal standard more proudly than their banners.

He signaled to the two of them to stop.

“Who’s there?” A muffled challenge crept through the night fog.

“Max Remthal, and a friend. Open the gate for us.”

“Lord Remthal! Your family’s been worried. Any longer and they’d have me out sear–by Her grace, my lord! What happened to you?” Like a bullet through the mist, Ludwig appeared by his side. Worry sank into the sea-worn cracks in his face with terrible drama.

“Hits to the head and upper body, from bare hands. No garroting involved.” Maria chirped.

“My lord, who’s this?”

“A friend, Ludwig. I’ll explain tomorrow. For the time being, I need a good wash and sleep. Is Rosalyn back?” Max asked.

“Yes, my lord. Back not more than an hour after nightfall. Should I see you to the door?”

“If I made it this far, I think I can make it there on my own.”

“Apologies, my lord. I meant no offense.”

“None taken. Lock the gate and get some sleep. Nobody else will visit tonight.”

“As you wish, my lord.” His eyes lingered on Maria, but he did as he was told. Max could hardly blame the man, considering her appearance. At least she did not smell of the back alley, as far as his muddled senses told him.

Max strolled through the outer section of his home, the decay and rot granting him unusual vigor. He knocked, the sound booming through the empty halls behind his door. The echo died out, the only noise being the rattling of keys from Ludwig fiddling with the gate lock. Steps came a moment later, echoing through the house’s hollow interior. A woman’s voice came from inside.

“Max?”

“It’s me, Rose. Open the door.”

Hinges screeched as the heavy wooden doors slid open. Rosalyn stood behind them. They shared the same tan eyes and auburn hair, but mother always said his sister was fairer. Max took heavily after the Remthal blood of his father, with the severity of expression and sharp cheekbones. Rosalyn had a better balance to her face, Remthal severity but more serenity. Her cheeks more rounded, general pleasing evenness to her features. Considering someone new was trying to court her every damned week, mother might have been right.

“Max? Who’s this?” Rose asked.

“Maria.” The woman cut in before Max could do more than open his mouth.

“Hello...Maria. Max, we should talk for a moment.”

“In a minute, Rose. Call Ana so she can make her some food and get a bed ready.”

“What about you? You’ve looked better, Max.”

“I’m fine.”

Rosalyn nodded slowly. “Ana!” She called.

Hurried footsteps followed her call. A young, plain looking woman rushed into view.

“My lady?”

“This woman is our guest. Make sure she eats and has a room ready to stay the night. Prepare some food for my brother too.” Rosalyn shot Max a silencing look in anticipation of his response. He frowned and said nothing.

“Bath too. Please,” Maria interjected. Rosalyn nodded.

“Right away, my lady. Might I help you with your things?” Ana asked.

“Fine on my own.”

“Of course. Follow me and I’ll lead you right to your room.” With that, the two walked away into the dimness of the light inside. Rosalyn waited until they were safely out of earshot before speaking.

“I’m not one to question charity, Max, but this is exceptional, to put it lightly. What have you been doing?”

“Warehouse boxing, in a few words. I’d rather be sitting before going into more detail.”

“Of course, but – warehouse boxing, Max?”

“Phenomenal payout if I won.” Max shut the door behind him.

“If you insist.” Rosalyn replied.

Max limped down the one lit hallway in the house. The smell of dust and burning wax pervaded. When were they last cleaned? He couldn’t remember. The last cleaner left their payroll long ago, and damn him if he knew how to take care of a house. He never learned, or thought he would need to.

He grabbed a candle from the main hall on his way. The salon still had enough furniture for two people. Rosalyn shut the door and Max lit the dusty, half melted candles on the table. He pulled out a chair and collapsed into it, now acutely aware of every bruised spot from his back to his legs. Rosalyn took a seat across from him.

“I didn’t get anything out of the bankers. Spent all day trying to get credit out of Oceanview Bank, but the moment I said my name was ‘Remthal’ I was doomed.” Max sighed.

“So you went to go box in a warehouse.” Rosalyn asked.

“It wasn’t like that. I stumbled across some vagrant who started flinging insults at me. Calling me a traitor to my people. Things like that. I started arguing with him, he told me I

should prove myself to him and the common Islers working at the docks. So, he challenged me to a boxing match in a warehouse, and I accepted.”

“Oh, Max. Where does Maria enter the story?”

“After boxing. You might not believe it, but I found her desk in an alleyway, covered in papers. I offered her patronage, and she accepted.”

“Patronage, Max? That’s a little extreme for someone you just met in an alley. I hope you have some very, very sound reasons for that.”

“She’s a genius Rose. I’m sure of it. Those boxes of hers are filled with wondrous papers. Designs and other things that I could hardly understand. They were written in at least 5 languages. Can you believe that?”

“Doesn’t it strike you as strange? A woman who can read and write 5 languages, making these designs or whatever she does, in an alley”

“It does. An injustice I wanted to fix. What are you insinuating?”

“Do you even know her family name?”

“She didn’t say. What does it matter?”

“All you know of this woman is that her name is Maria - or so she tells you - and that she lived in a Harbor District alley with boxes of designs. And you chose to bring her here.”

“I thought you trusted my judgement.”

“I do, but not everyone’s what they seem, Max. We’re all wrong on occasion.”

“You didn’t see the design. I did. You wouldn’t be saying that if you had.” Max snapped.

“I should like to.”

“That, unfortunately, you can’t. Not unless she lets you. That was part of our arrangement. Nobody looks at or touches her work but her. She’s very protective of it”

“If you’re trying to ease my concerns, it’s not working. What sort of arrangement did you even make?”

“Food and a bed for as long as she needs it, and we stay away from her papers.”

“Sounds rather one-sided.”

“The price of patronage, Rose. I saw a chance with her and I took it.” Max pulled out another chair and rested a leg on it. It was already dirty. His feet wouldn’t make it any worse.

Rosalyn got to her feet, a thoughtful look on her face. She strolled over to a dusty couch and ran her finger across the top of it, leaving with a smearing of grey at the tip. She flicked the dust off, scattering the specks back to the stale air.

“We’re already deep in the hole, Max. Patronage is expensive. It’s frivolous.”

“Not unless we patronize someone that brings us money back, Rose. I’ll work out an exact arrangement with her tomorrow. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind something mutually beneficial, since we’re feeding and housing her too.”

“Projects need money, Max. Bringing another person into our household could easily drain what little we have left. Do you really think this is a risk we can take?”

“It’s one we have to. We can’t live like this any longer, Rose. Everything we have will trickle away if we do nothing. We’ll have to leave Naulos in shame. How will we even pay for the ship back to the Isles? Who will we beg to back there, with our name worth less than dirt? We ‘ll truly become the great failure- “

“Yes, yes, I think you made your point. You can explain all this to mother tomorrow.”

Rosalyn interrupted.

“Thrilling.” Max grumbled. “We’ll have to sell double what we planned to this week, in order to have enough money to start.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Rosalyn replied. She dangled a hand above the table and out slid a gold coin, which sent up a small puff of dust as it landed. Then another. Max gaped. He picked a coin off the table and held it up to the faint candlelight. The golden face of the king stared back at him, the mark of the Naulos mints etched in beside him. The coin proclaimed “One Hekatodrachma.” Dense and firm in his fingers. Entirely gold, for certain. As was the other. He indulged in the feeling of holding both at once, only for a moment.

“Rose, how in Eistryn’s name did you get these?”

“Not without some effort. Let’s call it a gift from some people that aren’t hurt by its parting.” She looked terribly pleased with herself.

“You won’t say anything more?”

“The mystery is part of its charm. It’d be duller without it.”

“It’s a miracle, Rose. We won’t have to sell anything this week.” Max looked back on the radiant coin with gratitude, and then to his sister.

“Only a small feat. We’ll have to start working actual miracles, soon enough.” Rosalyn got to her feet and plucked a candle off the tabletop. She hesitated before the door.

“I worry, Max. If you’re wrong, and if you’re right. For if Maria isn’t what she seems, no one will know what might happen. And if you’re right, and she is the genius you believe her to be, how could we know if she started some design on us already?” She pondered in the doorway for a moment. “In either case, I believe we have interesting days ahead.”

With that she walked out, leaving Max with her two pieces of a golden miracle. He sighed. No negotiations outside of the home tomorrow, not with the catastrophe that was his face. The dull throbbing pain everywhere else told him he was in no shape to move, anyway. Luck alone kept his nose intact. Dealing with Maria and mother were his concerns for tomorrow.

He'd need to find something productive to do in the meanwhile. Plot out families that might donate funds, figure out what, exactly, Maria would start building, or maybe ask Ludwig for contacts with commoners. For now, survival didn't have to be his primary concern. He smiled at the two hekatodrachmas shining in his hand. His sister was truly a blessing. He mentally set one coin aside. Enough to pay Ana and Ludwig for a month, and their other bills.

Unless their debts all collapsed on them tomorrow. A constant risk for the last twenty years. A bitter feeling came over Max, the reassuring weight of gold in his hand not enough to keep it at bay. He held one coin to the light and met the golden gaze of Basileus Konstantinos Nicanor.

"You'll see what we Remthals really are. Who I am. We're not going to live as a second-class bloodline under you any longer." In the dead silent and half-empty house, his echoing promise sounded absurd. No matter. It was as it should be. He clenched the hekatodrachma firmly, repeating his promise to himself in his head.

But what of Maria? A shadow of her design still echoed on his pupils, as if he stared at the sun too long. Rosalyn was concerned, yes, but she didn't see. She couldn't. Her eyes would open in time. Any of Maria's ill will was discarded into the depths, with that dagger.

A knock came at the door. It squeaked softly as it opened a moment later.

"My Lord, your food's ready. Should I bring it to you?" Ana asked.

"I can get it myself. Get some water for a bath, please. I need one." Max answered, straining his sore muscles as he got to his feet.

"Of course, my lord. Your food's in the dining hall, along with your sister and your guest. Bath should be ready in just a few minutes," chirped Ana. She bowed and scurried off.



The unresponsive rolls of rawhide in blackened cloth Max called legs refused to move. He tried to step away from his chair only to latch onto it for balance. The damned seat made him stiff. He stretched as best he could and tried again. His body groaned in protest, but he could walk and that was enough. No need to mind how ridiculous it might look. With all the dexterity of a frozen fish he plucked a candle off the table and snuffed the flame of the other.

He left the room, greeted by echoes of conversation. It sounded civil, at least. With a gentle click he shut the door behind him. The grey halls made no noise as he navigated their vacuous length. His bruised legs found themselves invigorated anew as he caught the scent of a meaty soup, untainted by dust.

Echoes manifested themselves into words, clearer with every unsteady step he took towards the great empty room.

“-and forgive me for saying, you have been in our care for but a few minutes and you already look much better. We’d love to be of more assistance to you, if you’d let us.”

“Appreciated, graciously. I will consider it.” And that was Maria. Had she cleaned up? He was curious to see what she looked like now.

Max stepped into the hall, suddenly unsteady. Not on account of his legs, but he was overwhelmed with what he saw. The great electric chandelier his father had bought during their glory days was aglow. It bathed the entire room in a brilliant golden light that smothered the omnipresent gray dust. Flecks of rich crimson darted along the walls and off its golden arms from the designs on the bulbs. Under it all the banquet table was adorned for a feast. A feast for four, but a *feast!*

Maria sat at that table. Her old uniform still barely held together, but her eyes sparked with ravenous brilliance. The pupils in those gray-blue irises could see so much. They were hard to meet for too long.

The rest of her appearance had, as expected, cleaned up substantially. Her dark hair was washed, combed, and tied neatly behind her head. The thinness, mildness, and general mundanity of her other features made her eyes look abnormally large.

“Are you well, Max?” Rosalyn’s voice pulled him back to the world.

“Yes, I just didn’t expect the chandelier to be on. Aren’t we cut off from the electricity lines?” Max asked.

“Not quite yet. We might be far behind on our bills, just not so much that it’s drawn any serious notice. Rather, the notice of anyone who might do something. Have a seat and eat.”

Rosalyn pushed out the seat next to her.

Everything on the table before him glittered wonderfully as he sat down. In that moment, the aroma of Ana’s soup struck him. His stomach roared. Perhaps the hunger twisted his mind, but he had never tasted fish stew that exceptional. When he surfaced for air both Maria and his sister were staring. Maria with a look of mild curiosity, and Rosalyn with amusement.

“So, the soup is to your liking?” Rosalyn asked.

“Good as always. Merely hungrier than I thought.” Max replied, while trying to wipe a stain off the wreckage of his clothes.

“Well, Max, Maria and I have been talking, and it was truly good fortune that you came across each other. Every bit as exceptional as you have made her out to be,” his sister said with a smile, looking at Maria.

Rose endearing herself to everyone, as always.

“Appreciated.” Maria replied.

“We’re both grateful you’re here. You’re an exceptional mind, and I only hope we can be worthy patrons.” Max pointedly smiled at his sister.

“Of course. I only wish you could have met my brother under better circumstances,” said Rosalyn.

“No need for concern. Today was exceptional.” Max replied.

“Why did you fight?” Maria stared at him, cocking her head to the side.

“What?”

“Hard hitting opponent. In the Harbor District. Nighttime. Not a place for noblemen.”

“I know. I fought because of a dumb decision to prove a point. I’d rather not say more about today’s mistakes.”

“Yes. Understandable.” Maria looked to his sister, as if prodding her to chime in. Thankfully, she didn’t.

“So, Maria, I couldn’t help but wonder what land you’re from. I can’t place your accent.” Rosalyn asked.

“Palanska. I think. North of Selekos certainly. Ancestry’s a complicated matter. Never drew enough interest to examine it.” Maria’s eyes shifted over to Rosalyn with that same inquisitive look. She seemed fascinated by both of them now. Almost childishly so.

“That certainly explains it. Max and I, our ancestors came from a land east of here, the Sturmmauer Isles. Our family has lived in Naulos ever since foreign nobles were first brought here. I don’t think we’ve ever met anyone from Palanska. Until now, of course. What’s it like there?”

“Temperate, except cold winters from what I have read. No personal experience.”

Ana slipped in, quiet as the last winds of summer, while Rosalyn and Maria spoke.

“My lord Max, bath’s ready,” she whispered.

“Thank you, Ana.” Max nodded to her, and then she was gone. He glanced down at his empty soup bowl, thinking a little exterior warmth would do him good. He waited for a lull in the conversation to excuse himself.

“Thank you both for your company, but I should leave before my bath water gets cold. I hope we can speak tomorrow, Maria.” Max said, rising from his chair with some difficulty.

“Yes. We will. Thank you. For your patronage.” Maria answered.

“The honor is ours.” Max replied, mustering the most genuine smile he could on his battered face. He felt Maria’s eyes on his back as he walked out.

Max hardly remembered disrobing. Limb by limb, he descended into the bathwater. A subtle, pervasive warmth crept through his skin and into his body, gentle against his bruises. The sensation invited him to slumber, and he resisted with great effort. The rest of his conscious moments passed in a haze of exhaustion. He vaguely recalled leaving his tattered clothes in the washroom before stumbling into an empty room he called his own. His bed invited him closer, and he did not so much as collapse onto it as he was pulled forward. Sleep took him in seconds. His dreams were filled with skeletal looking mechanical men, with gears for joints and oceanic lenses for eyes.

He was afraid of them and didn’t know why.

## Reaching for Air

Rose was glad that Maria was receptive to her brother's suggestions. She would have needed to speak to her otherwise. It wasn't that she couldn't, but Maria made her uncomfortable. Something about the way she looked and spoke to her made Rose uneasy. Like she saw through her all her manners and politeness, all the way down to her bare suspicions. She acted like she didn't notice. Did she really know? She didn't particularly want to confront the topic, and it wasn't relevant for the moment. They had more pressing issues.

Max pored over a map of the city, with a diagram of his own on the table next to it. He said something. She wasn't necessarily paying attention.

"-and so, I think our best chance is with the Crowell family. We can at least claim some ties through our aunt, and we're both foreigners here."

"It's still a slim chance, Max, especially if we just appear on their doorstep. We'll be put on a 'waiting list' and never be spoken to again."

"So you'll have to be more forceful with them. Make them talk to you."

"Make them talk to me? This is entirely your plan, Max."

"In case you haven't noticed-" Max turned to her, revealing a narrow gaze under yellowing bruises "-my condition isn't exactly optimal. You're diplomatic. Tell them we need money for a revolutionary new project. Start with a smaller amount. Maria said she doesn't need anything more than a hundred drachmas to get started. Offer them an appealing deal."

"And contingencies? We need other options if this fails."

“We have a few other families,” said Max, shifting one of his papers toward her. “The Crowells are our best option, so we’re starting with them.”

Rose plucked the sheet off the table and gave it a quick read. It was really just a list of small foreign noble houses. She mentally crossed a few off that wouldn’t be happy to see her. Honestly, it was probably the Crowells or nothing. She considered trying one or two others on the list for sake of having done so.

“What do you think?” Max asked.

“We’ve been comfortably ignored by the rest of the nobility for some time now. I doubt they’ll suddenly come around, especially considering our reputation. I suppose it’s better than doing nothing, though.” Rose handed the paper back to him. He frowned and looked back to the map. “What kind of project is this anyway, Max? Secrecy is fine to an extent, but you need to tell me something about it,” said Rose.

“It’s...difficult to explain without showing you. Maria explained earlier today that it’s an automaton. A machine that can move like you or me.”

“A machine that moves like a person? Selling that idea is going to be near impossible, Max. Or have you forgotten that locals haven’t completely gotten over their older myths? The ones about half-metal demons mimicking people?”

“I haven’t, and that’s why it needs to be stressed that they’re not thinking machines. They can only do what they are told. Think of them as servant automatons.”

“And if they’re told to harm someone?”

“She told me there are ways to prevent that. They can be made to obey certain rules.”

“And if those rules allow harming people?”

“Could you not contradict me for a minute? The machines aren’t the issue right now. We need to get funding first, and then we can moralize about what doesn’t even exist yet.”

“I suppose I could. For a moment.” The machines *were* part of her problem, but Rose would let that point slide for now. Maybe it was the warehouse beatdown, but Max seemed awfully touchy when it came to anything involving Maria and her - well, whatever it was.

“Right. Is there anything else you need to know?”

“I should have enough to work with. Help me orient myself for a moment. The Crowells are north from us, yes?”

“Yes, and slightly inland. So, starting here-” Max placed his finger on the section of the map labeled ‘Harbor District.’ “-and heading up here.” He slid over to a portion labeled ‘Stone District.’ “Keep the ocean on your right and they should be simple to reach. You’ll know if you’re too far inland if you can start smelling smoke from the Hill District. Oh, and you’ll need to pass through the Basin-”

“That’s not an option.”

“Why isn’t it-oh, right. I forgot about him. In that case, you can go through the Selekosian Anatoloi, by the coastal road.” Max traced the route with his finger.

“Very well. What about the other houses?”

“The Baleron family is to the southwest, close to the Hill District, and so you would need to-”

“On second thought, I’ll just ask for directions.” Rose interrupted.

“If you say so.” Max stepped away from the map and found his way into a chair.

At that moment that it occurred to Rose that she would spend the entire day walking under the searing Selekosian sun, seeing as they were one of the miserable few families that couldn't afford carriages or motorcars.

“So what do you plan to do at home while I'm running around all day?” Rose asked.

“Find other options. Ludwig might be able to put me in contact with some merchants he knew when he was a marine. I'll make sure I'm being useful.” Was it her imagination, or did Max hiss that last word at her?

“I'm certain you will.” And with that, she left Max to brood over his map and papers.

Rose preferred their home at night. The lack of any real lighting was obnoxious, yes, but it meant she wasn't constantly bombarded with floating balls of dust. With the sun out, she couldn't ignore it. There was a period of a few months where the aggravation with it was too much to handle, and she descended on their home in a dust destroying fury. All two floors and however many dozen rooms, the interior courtyard, the walkways out front, everything. She brushed every surface she could reach, wiped down every bit of furniture, nothing escaped her. Or rather, that was the impression she had under that haze. The dust outsmarted her, she gave up, and now it mocked her, flittering around like mischievous little fairies in the light.

She swatted some specks out of a sunbeam with contempt. More floated in to take their place. A futile effort, just like everything else they tried to do with their home. At least she would be working outside it today.

Rose knocked once against Ana's door, neighboring her own. She answered enthusiastically and immediately.

“Rose?”



“I’d appreciate your help preparing for the day. It’s going to be long and involve a lot of walking.”

“Of course.” Her pixie face lit up with a typical, if not curious, enthusiasm. How the facts of their situation didn’t pull her spirit down into the depths was beyond her. Or why she stayed with them, for that matter.

“Then come along, I’d like to be on my way sooner than later,” said Rose, leading into her next-door chambers. Whatever kept Ana, Rose appreciated it. She was good for conversation. Max had trouble pulling the stick out of his behind most days now, and even on his better ones he couldn’t loosen up. Ludwig was, well, Ludwig. Marines weren’t known for being verbose. Mother hardly came downstairs for anything but food anymore, and Rose hadn’t been invited to a gathering of nobles in years. That left her with Ana, the charming little optimist that helped her with clothing, makeup, and more mundane things.

Ana took to rooting through her closet, although calling it that was a little excessive. There wasn’t much to be rooted through. She emerged in a few seconds with fairly businesslike trousers, a shirt, and a jacket. The clothes were only threadbare around the knees, and thus delightfully intact by their current standards.

“I’m assuming business, so I picked something that strikes a nice balance between being practical and fashionable. Might be a little hot outside, though. The thermometer’s sitting on a high mark today. Something lighter maybe?” Ana asked.

“Those will do.”

“As you say.”

Rose didn’t really need Ana’s help with the clothes. Some pieces were a little obnoxious, but she just made everything go faster.

“So about our guest...” Ana trailed off, but the question was obvious.

“I wish I could tell you something. Max was the one who met her, and she’s not much for conversation.”

“Maria, wasn’t it? She seems so odd. The old university uniform and that look in her eyes. I get a little nervous around her, to tell the truth. I’m not sure what does it.” Ana said, helping her put on a new shirt. “I know this is forward, but what do you think of her? Your brother said she was some sort of genius.”

“I think we need time to acclimate to our guest.” It wasn’t really a lie. At the same time, Rose doubted it would happen.

“She’s certainly interesting. It’s good to have new people here. It’s been too long, and it’s too quiet here sometimes.” Ana fastened the cape on Rose’s coat. “And that should be all. Your hat.”

“Thank you.” Rose plucked it from her fingers and briefly considered herself in their one remaining silver mirror. She tied back and adjusted her hair, then plopped her hat down over it. Rose avoided looking in the mirror too long, lest she start seeing the growing swarm of little wear marks on her clothes. Ana was good enough at maintenance that she didn’t have to worry yet. Rose went for the door.

“Fair winds,” said Ana.

“My thanks. Try to make sure my brother doesn’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

“Not sure if I can, but I promise to slow him down. At least minimize damage before you can get back, right?” Ana cracked a smile.

“Use Ludwig if you have to.” Rose smiled back and left the room.

She regretted her choice of clothing the moment she stepped outside. It was like walking into a solid wall of heat and humidity. Morning or not, the sun had been shining for a few hours now, and that was all it needed in Selekos. Isler clothing breathed at least decently well, but it was nothing compared to the almost air-light clothing of the locals. The climate demanded it.

Ludwig stood near the gate, by a little guard house that gave him shade. The visorless steel helmet he wore gleamed with razor brightness. He gave her an overly formal bow, as he always did.

“Good morning, my lady. Business trip?”

“Not the best day for one, I’m afraid, but yes. I don’t think I’ll be back until the evening.”

“We’ll expect you then. Fair winds, Lady Remthal.”

“Farewell, Ludwig. Please don’t feel you need to tire yourself outside all day. I’m sure the gate can do without you for a few hours.”

“No need for concern, my lady. The sun is an old friend.” He gave a slight nod in its direction, as if prompting confirmation.

“Friends can be tiresome.”

“As you say, Lady Remthal,” he cracked a faint smile and bowed to her once again, before closing the gate behind her.

The road to the seaboard was fairly straightforward. It was the Harbor District, after all. Walking was quite pleasant - minus the weather - in the area right around their home. Asphalt over cobblestone and designated walkways made traffic straightforward and efficient. Not that much of anyone walked around their home, or that the roadworks were anything more than an experiment done back when their family had money.

Life fell apart into the normal, controlled chaos of the city when she reached a part of the district that wasn't dying. Isler dock workers and sailors milled about in crowds on the road, only parting when a carriage forced them to. The scent of coal smoke and brine permeated the air, growing stronger the closer she drew to the water.

A little bubble formed around her in the crowd. It was fairly obvious she was a noblewoman, shabbier clothing or no. One of the few benefits of her status she could still enjoy? Perhaps not. People recognized her as an oddity, judging from all the second takes and glances she got, everything from quizzical to reprimanding. Who was this noblewoman, walking around like a commoner instead of taking a carriage or car? An excellent question, she thought.

The assortment of warehouses, cranes, and other dockside buildings shrouded the ocean quite well, so it didn't come into view until she was practically standing in it. The blue-green waters of Selekos gleamed wonderfully, like a precious metal under the midday sun. Their waters were remarkably clear. Generally. A steam ship passed within throwing distance, churning up the deeper blue of the harbor water and puncturing a thin, prismatic film on its surface, leaving behind its own oily trail. Rose pressed her jacket over her mouth and nose to cover the smell and carried on.

It got better when she reached the less industrialized part of the district, but by then she had a headache brewing. Probably not so much the fumes, bustle, and noise as it was the heat. Sweat thoroughly soaked her collar and the moisture was starting to creep its way down her clothes. At least she couldn't smell it yet.

Rose took a moment to indulge in the ocean from under the shade of a cafe's tarp. It had been a while, and besides, the Crowells weren't about to pick up their house and run off with it. She had time.

A few sailboats leisurely floated out of the harbor. Their boats were some of the first things they sold off, even before their fall. Father and Grandad said they needed more funding to get their project off the ground, and they insisted on just a few of the larger ones, costly as they were. The rest went when all their money did.

Rose didn't like thinking about the boats, since it always ended with her getting angry at father and it felt wrong to get upset at him for that. She missed him and sailing both. A day like this would have been good for the two of them to rig one of the small boats and skim those ethereal Selekosian waters, sail for a few hours around the golden coast. She supposed that Max could come too. He was good at fine-tuning the sails and rigging. He was also less irritable and annoying back then.

Rustling feet reminded Rose it was time to go. Someone was leaving a table and she didn't want to be around when a waiter came and asked her if she wanted something. That conversation would inevitably lead to asking what she could drink for practically nothing, and the mere thought of those words smeared a bitter taste onto her tongue. She cooled off enough anyway.

The headache still clung to her like a stubborn barnacle, but at least it was getting a little better. Or she just convinced herself that was the case. Either way, it was a good time to come to terms with it since it wasn't going away soon. It was almost reassuring to have a trivial concern to occupy her thoughts for the next few hours.

Rose blinked and missed the moment she walked into Anatoloi, the Selekosian coastal district. The faces, the clothes, the architecture, but most importantly the *colors* changed completely. It was as if the sun shone more brightly. Pure blues and whites bombarded her eyes,

so intensely she had to lower the brim on her hat. A sea of tan faces in bright, loose fitting clothes flowed around her. At least half of them stared at her.

Not only was she a noblewoman, she was an obvious foreigner. Cause for a double dose of curiosity and contempt, in unfortunately nearly equal doses. Rose decided it would be in everyone's best interests to find her way out of the district soonish.

"King Konstantinos the fifth declares special taxes for newly integrated foreign nobles! A grisly murder at the dockside! New details come out in the scandal around Lady Mira Thenon! Read all about it in today's paper, only one tenth of a drachma!" That was a boy's voice, somewhere off to her right, somehow surfacing above the sea of all the other street side peddlers.

She hadn't much interest for the Selekosian version of the news. Although the first story was far from encouraging. Their family integrated over a century ago, so would they be exempt? Another damned thing to worry about for the rest of the day.

"A paper for you, my lady? For free."

Rose slowed her steps and saw the little boy, dressed in man's clothes a few sizes too large, pointing one of his rolled-up paper tubes through the crowd at her. A few faces turned to look, but all avoided eye contact.

*Why thank you, you little rascal, she thought. More unwanted attention from people who hate my blood and my house was precisely what I wanted, even though you hid that under a trained urchin's smile and a "gift."*

"Thank you, little sir. You're very kind." Rose walked over and took the boy's gift, smiling. She unraveled the tube and was immediately met with the black and white likeness of the king under an obnoxiously bold printed headline about tax increases. It said nothing about

Islanders paying more, so that was some relief, but the king's face always made her feel as if she just swallowed a glass of saltwater.

And what was this other garbage they had printed on the front page? The article on Mira Thenon was hardly a step above court gossip, mostly speculation about her seeking some ten thousand drachmas as reparation for slander, and something about her husband having a mistress? And the article on the dock house murder was nothing short of ridiculous. A man murdered for his eyeballs? Nonsense from old legends about organ stealing demons, not something that should be flung at the common folk as fact. Probably written by some imbecile who had just read the legend of Tharsciel the eye stealer. *What drivel they can get away with printing these days*, she thought.

She lowered the paper to see the urchin's still smiling face. Just a little too broad. Too sweet, and his puppy eyes were too obvious. Of course it wasn't a gift, she reminded herself. He expected something in return.

Rose handed the paper back to him, with a twentieth of a drachma. The child's face lit up, only to be immediately extinguished with a torrent of disapproval and anger upon discovering how little money he made. He didn't say anything, so at least he had the restraint to do that much. Rose was certain he would do better next time.

"Work on making that smile more genuine," she said before walking off.

The rest of the Anatoloi passed by without special attention. Street vendors became less common the further inland she went and nobody bothered to stop her with their entreatments to buy something. The sideways glances never stopped, though. The Selekosians looked at her with the same incredulity as the passing motorcars. The question on their lips, that they didn't ask in

front of her, was what was that strange, rich thing which just passed us by, and why is it here of all places?

The glances annoyed her, and the thought of that question aggravated her. It came as a relief, then, when the bright, sun infused Selekosian colors faded to the more muted and familiarly foreign colors of the Stone District. It favored dark clothing and generally boring colors, so it wasn't a particularly hard place to look at. It bordered on depressing in some spots, with how ruthlessly dull some constructions were. That, and of course the people, who walked around clearly miserable in their dark clothes in the heat, none of them bothering to do something about it.

Max's words held true. The Crowells weren't the subtle sort, and thus very easy to find. Black bird on silver field banners lined the streets, leading straight up to their House. Which was another big, dull building, with some vague attempts at mimicking local architecture. Did nobody in the district have the slightest bit of architectural sense?

Rose adjusted her hat and jacket. She couldn't smell herself and didn't feel horribly mucky, so she imagined her current state was presentable. She strode up to the gate, stopping when one of the guards leaned his rifle over to block her way.

"Lady Remthal, we weren't made aware of your visit," he said.

*Because not everyone has a damned telegraph, you imbecile.* At least he bothered to remember who she was.

"I'm aware, and apologize. I'd like to discuss a business matter with someone from House Crowell. Might you let me pass?" Rose answered.

"That would be improper, with your visit unannounced and unexpected as it is."



“I’m here now, sir. You can announce me on my way in. Besides, I shouldn’t have to remind you I am cousin to House Crowell, though my aunt.”

“I’m not sure if I can, Lady-”

“I have been walking since morning to get here, dear sir. I’d hate to think how a certain Lord Crowell would respond to a letter informing him a noblewoman was turned away at his door, without good reason. I doubt it would be pleasant for either of us.” Rose held his gaze.

“I understand your point, Lady Remthal. I’ll inform the family that you’ve arrived.” The guard pulled open the gate’s bolt and jogged across the Crowell stone courtyard to their door.

That was the first challenge overcome. The easiest too, undoubtedly. Rose followed the guard inside.

The Crowell’s reception was pleasant. Their paperwork was not. A drink of water and a breeze of cool, electric fan air was nothing when it came to counterbalancing the abominable stack of papers they expected her to read and sign in a single lifetime. Her patience lasted maybe fifteen minutes, when she struck the first health disclaimer.

“Surely I can finish all this later?” Rose asked.

“I’m afraid it’s quite necessary, Lady Remthal. Not only for sake of recordkeeping, but for the legality of any business deal,” replied a servant named Griggs, assigned to ‘assist’ her with the papers.

“It seems like a bit much for a simple matter. Are you sure there’s no abridged version? I don’t have the rest of the day to fill these out.”

“I’m afraid the laws are what they are, Lady Remthal.”

*Especially when you want to get rid of your guest,* she thought. Time for a different approach. Rose plinked the Crowell’s pen back into the inkwell and shuffled the papers together.

“Good sir, send these to my home later today if you wish, but I can’t delay any longer. I need to speak with someone.” Rose plopped the stack in front of the servant more aggressively than she intended.

“This is a matter that must be taken care of before meetings, I would like to oblige you-”

“Sir, I know there is someone here I can talk to. Let me through and lead me to them, if you would. I would hate to waste more time looking for someone on my own.” Rose held his eyes for a few quiet seconds. To his credit, he held his composure without much strain.

“If you insist. This way, please.” Too collected. Rose could almost smell the bridges burning under her feet as he lead her into the bowels of House Crowell. She hoped nobody would be fired on her account.

The servant pulled up by a closed door after a mere minute of walking and knocked once.

“Lady Felicia, Lady Remthal is here to speak with you regarding a business matter.” said Griggs.

“Let her in,” answered a muffled voice.

At that moment Rose knew she was doomed. Even she, a political outcast, knew Felicia Crowell was a nobody. Even if she came to an arrangement with her anyone with actual money in their purse could deny or forget it ever happened.

Griggs opened the door for her, gesturing inside. A thousand curses gurgled up into her throat, but all that came out was “Thank you.”

An hour later Rose was back on the coastal road, having wasted some thirty minutes of her life and it felt like a metal prowed icebreaker was smashing through her skull. The conversation went nowhere, precisely as expected. It was a drawn-out exercise in finding a way to excuse herself from conversation, with the added challenge of not hitting anyone with

furniture out of frustration. She should have known better. They were notorious nobodies, a bottomless pit in the middle of the harbor district that hundreds of thousands of drachmas vanished into. Family ties meant nothing to the Crowells, and why should they? Claiming some sort of common blood through her aunt's childless marriage was a link flimsier than century old driftwood.

Had her imbecile brother not insisted on some half-rigged plan to foster his next failure of a pet project she might have avoided that ridicule. As it stood, she considered adding to his collection of bruises when she got home.

Early afternoon ship traffic only exacerbated her fraying temper and throbbing headache. Rose loved ships, just not the new coal fired, iron hulled leviathans infesting the harbor of Naulos. One passed by every few minutes, leaving behind a new black cloud.

A whaling ship passed close by the shore, trailing both blood and oil, with a creature's corpse occupying all of its massive, flat deck. A miasma of rot, dirty smoke, and brine drifted in her nostrils. It was like an oily paste condensing in the back of her mouth and sliding down her throat. The creature's dull eyes stared at her, meekly accusational in death.

Rose felt her gorge rising. She shielded her face from the miasma and fled for untainted air. Her stomach churned and vision blurred, and she desperately forced down the contents of her stomach and the resurgent, nauseating thoughts that suddenly became infinitely numerous in her head.

When the cold sweat and mind warping nausea subsided, the ocean was out of sight. A momentary relief, because it meant she strayed from the Anatoloi into the Basin. Eistryn's grace, how long had she been there?

“Roselyn Remthal. I’d like to say it’s pleasant to see you again, but the sight of you is a little too bitter for that,” said a familiar voice.

Too long, apparently.

“Domenico. How good to hear you again,” she replied.

“You look pale. Has guilt finally sickened you enough to bring you here?” Domenico Alerameci placed himself in front of her, not close enough to be threatening. He thought himself a dashing gentleman with a flair for the dramatic, so of course he was going to put on a performance.

“Why should I feel guilty? I’ve done nothing immoral,” she answered. The memory of whale carcass butted into her thoughts and she nearly doubled over with sudden sickness. This was going to be difficult, she thought, clutching her coat over her mouth.

“Hmph. Your body betrays your lying tongue. You took advantage of my good will for months, woman. You cheated me out of at least 200 drachmae over three months.”

“I cheated you out of nothing. Every coin of that was a gift, freely given.” Rose straightened herself, slowly.

“You lied about dozens of things. Your mother was never bedridden when needed money for a doctor. Your handmaid never started studying at the university.”

“I never said she was bedridden. I said her health wasn’t what it used to be. Nor did I say Ana was studying. She wanted to, and still does. Your gifts helped wonderfully with both of those problems. I’m sure a little more could even fix them.” Rose shot him a caustic smile. He wanted a performance, she would give him a performance. Rose raised her voice so passersby could hear. Some glances lingered.

“You actually have the gall to ask for more. Unbelievable. A siren, that’s what you are. Your former courtships all agree. I should have listened to them.” Domenico gave her a toothy smile in return, as if he delivered some great insult.

“I’d think they’re too dull to come up with something that clever. Perhaps if all of you worked together long enough you could manage it.”

“You’d be surprised how many people gossip about you, in spite of you being an outcast.”

“Domenico, stop playing about and tell me why you’re bothering me. 200 drachmas are nothing to you. Besides, you know well what my finances look like. I couldn’t return it if I wanted to,” answered Rose.

“I want an apology. An official, written apology for our records, saying you conned me out that money. Otherwise I’ll see what a Selekosian court has to say about the matter.”

A matter of wounded pride, then. That put most sensible resolutions somewhere far out of reach. Her mind drifted the Mira Thenon scandal. How much was the fine?

“Write the apology, and you’ll never be bothered for the money again. I might even work to fix your reputation in a few circles,” continued Domenico.

She remembered something about several thousands. A measurable percent of their debt. Not a large percent, but still, she wondered. They could do a great deal with that kind of money.

“So? I’m being more generous than I should.”

She wouldn’t do it. Of course not. Her pride resisted the notion too strongly. She needed to do something, though. Half-truths or not, Selekosian courts would favor Domenico over her. That several thousand-drachma fine was for slander, wasn’t it?

A horrible idea dredged itself up from a recess in her mind. She needed to push him.

“Why should I do anything for you?” Rose challenged.

“Are you back to this already? How many more of your lies do I need to remind you of?”

“Start with one. Remind me of a single lie I told you. I am an honest woman, Domenico.

Not some lowborn wretch you can push around because she’s fallen on harsh times.”

“Is that what you think this is? I would do the same thing if cheated by the Crown Princess Irena herself.”

“I’m sure fewer ‘friends’ would snicker behind your back if it were her. They see it differently.” Rose wrenched out the most passive aggressive, smug smile she could while still looking genuine.

“Unlike you, I have a good reputation. Frightening, the things people say about you.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure a few courtiers still haven’t gotten over me reminding them how boring they are. I see one certainly hasn’t. Hence why he’s still bothering me.”

“For all that is holy, you damned siren. Do you really want to know what they say about you? They call you a thief, liar, strumpet, all of those things and more. I find it easy to see why now.”

That was good, but not quite enough.

“I could imagine. What about you, though? What do they have to say about the ‘noble’ Domenico, the man who spent hundreds of drachmas on a woman over a mere three months, only to hound her for pocket change after she tossed him to the roadside?”

“They say nothing ill of me-”

“To your face, Domenico. Because they all know how you’d react if they told you that you have all the sense of rotting seaweed, the cunning of a slug, and the charm of a fish stall. The only thing about you that carries any weight is your purse!”

By now they had gathered a bit of a crowd.

“Filthy lies! I’m not some near half-blood noble who uses her poverty to skin unsuspecting men of their money and dignity. I’m at least a few steps above living in some run-down house that might as well be a brothel!”

The crowd was uncomfortably silent. He said what she needed him to.

“Would you be referring to me?” she asked.

“Of course I’m referring to you, you siren!”

Rose slipped a glove off her hand and stepped across the distance still between them. While what he said was enough to charge for slander, it would be near impossible to win in a Selekosian court. Her family was out of royal favor, the Alerameci were not. There was, of course, another way to resolve the dispute.

Before Domenico could say a word, Rose struck him with the back of her glove.

“I demand satisfaction for this slander against my name and the name of my House.” The words sounded alien as they left her mouth. To her horror, she kept talking.

“Go find your second.”

## Company

“I apologize for my state, but I’d rather get this business done with sooner than later. Please sit down, sir.” Max gestured to the seat in front of him. Max had sent Ludwig in search of business contacts outside of the nobility. He had recommended this man, Schiffer, if Max remembered properly. Ludwig said he was a reliable man, the only person his ship’s captain would do business with when he was still a marine. Honest and reliable, a “true man of the Isles”, according to Ludwig. Schiffer himself was an obvious Isler. No other ethnicity could claim their blonde hair or particular severity of posture. A merchant, he looked a few years older than him.

Max’s office looked oddly menacing. They had an electric light installed in the ceiling, but nobody in the house dared use it to dig their debt hole a little deeper. The only light in the room was from the shrouded, dusty windows behind where Max was sitting and two candles lazily burning down on his desk.

“Thank you, Lord Remthal. Your summons were unexpected, but welcome,” Erich said, seating himself. He wore fine clothes. Enough so that a commoner might mistake him as noble at first glance.

“Unexpected events bring unexpected summons.” Max paused. “I apologize, we haven’t been properly introduced. Maximilian Remthal, first son of House Remthal.” He extended his arm out to the man.

“Erich Schiffer.” He shook it.



“Well met, sir. Now, as for why I summoned you. You’re a merchant with assets I’d like to use. You have a lot invested in steel, don’t you?”

“I do.” Erich’s eyes glistened in surprise.

There was no need to inform Erich of everything. Only the parts which might concern him.

“Yes. I have a venture in mind,” Max started. “It would require minimal investment at first, primarily in raw materials. Copper, steel, lumber, with access to your tools and facilities to work them. We would then move to larger scale manufacturing, if all goes well in the early stages.”

“I don’t mean to be blunt, Lord Remthal, but why do you need me for these things?” Erich asked.

“I could try to buy these

“Could I speak freely, Lord Remthal?”

“You may.”

Erich nodded, loosening his posture. “I don’t want to be insulting, but honest. Your family name is infamous in my field of work. I know hundreds of merchants who dream of a partnership with a Noble House, but the name Remthal would scatter them to the ocean winds.”

“You speak of things I already know.” Max felt his cheeks flush.

“Then you know how this proposal might worry me. I see the past repeating itself. You want to experiment with something, and every land the ocean touches know how that ended before.”

“I’m not my grandfather. This isn’t some blind foray. This is a project directed by an expert. She directs what is made.” Max was surprised by the rage in his voice.

“I didn’t mean to insult you, Lord Remthal. I wanted you to know my reservations, is all that was.” Said Erich.

“I understand your intent. My reaction wasn’t appropriate. Continue, please.” Max cursed himself silently. A great deal of good he was doing, letting his temper sabotage his efforts.

“My choice for this venture doesn’t depend on your house or finances, but on you, Lord Remthal.”

“Your meaning?”

“A single man can change much. Common or noble, doesn’t matter. What matters is the man. I think you are one of determination.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Your house still floats, Lord Remthal. I admit, it’s fascinating that you’ve held on for so long. Bankrupt for over a decade, and you still take a risk, with this project. Most would’ve given up and sold themselves for debt protection.”

“Dispense with the flattery and come to your point, please.”

“Not flattery, Lord Remthal. Only telling you what I see. You are unique, a man I would be willing to take a risk on. I only ask for specific numbers, for cost, before I fully pledge my support.”

“You are willing to support us?”

“Entirely. As I said, provide me with an estimate for initial cost and I will agree, assuming ‘tis nothing excessive.”

“I expect nothing more than fifty drachmas at first. Not including the cost of using your tools. That included, I should expect sixty drachmas. Later costs will depend on how the

beginning of this project unfolds, but you'll have my written word that I won't tax you unbearably."

"A good amount. Lord Remthal, you have yourself an agreement." Erich offered his hand once more and Max shook it, sealing their arrangement. Relief washed into his mind like the tide, but anxiety built up as soon as it left. There was much to do.

"I appreciate your confidence and your honesty. I'd like to get started as soon as possible."

"Of course, but a few questions first, if you don't mind."

"I'll answer what I can." Erich's handshake was binding by Selekosian law. The written agreement they would trouble themselves with later was merely a formality, meant for recordkeeping. Max could afford to be freer with information.

"I haven't agreed to fund more flying machines, I take it."

"Of course not. I am not repeating my grandfather's mistake with the zeppelin. If man was meant for the sky, Eistryn would have given us wings."

"Man doesn't have fins or gills, but he conquered the sea."

"Only the surface. The rest belongs to the fish, and to Eistryn."

"Man could make wings, in time, and maybe gills too, so he could conquer both. But I forget myself. Back to the matter at hand, you said you had an expert directing this project?" Erich asked.

"I did. She's an excellent inventress. We have to procure her what she needs to work. You'll have an exact list of what she requires today, or early tomorrow." Said Max.

"An inventress? Apologies, but it seems strange she would pick your family as her patrons."

“We came to her. It was an odd arrangement, and the circumstances behind it are a story on their own. Regardless, she has every intent of remaining with my House and seeing this project to completion.”

“You are more interesting by the minute, Lord Remthal. Would it be possible for me to meet this inventress?” Erich asked.

“That’s for her to decide. She’s rather secretive.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t wish to be overbearing, only to hear her own words on her work. It’d be enlightening, I’m sure.”

“I’ll present the idea to her, but I wouldn’t place your hopes on it. Is there anything more?”

“Nothing, Lord Remthal, but one request, could we seal our arrangement like Islers?”

Max allowed himself a touch of a smile. “Of course. I see why Ludwig likes you,” he said, opening a cabinet below his desk. From it he pulled a bottle of aged brandy and two crystal glasses, relics of a bygone age.

“I have the blood of an Isler, Lord Remthal. I miss the ocean and tastes of home, all the time.”

“As do I.” Max said, pouring Erich half a glass of the amber drink. They both stood and Max raised his glass in salute. “-To prosperity and perseverance. May we be lacking in neither.”

“Eistryn smile on you, Lord Remthal.” They clinked their glasses together and drank. The smooth burn of the brandy was a rare treat. Max relished the taste as long as he could.

“Excellent brandy. I await your future instructions, eagerly.” Said Erich.

“You’ll have them soon. Until then, farewell.”

“Farewell.” Erich gave a short bow and left. Ludwig met him at the door, and escorted him out.

Max’s mind was a tumult of tasks and chores that needed finishing. He had taken the first step, but now he needed to take hundreds more. There were lists to compile and there was paperwork to fill. Maria would be the place to start. She needed materials to get started as soon as possible. Max extinguished the candles and left the brandy where it was.

They had given Maria a spacious room on the lower floor. It was isolated and quiet, by request. Maria said she wanted as little noise as possible. Max could hear some activity streaming through the cracks in the doorframe, but that was all. Maria opened the door before he could knock.

“Yes?” She asked.

“May I come in?”

She looked over him for a moment. “Yes. Enter.” Maria immediately lost interest in him and went inside, leaving the door open. Max entered after her.

They had given her somewhere around half the tables they had left in the house, and it showed. The bed and dresser were shoved into a corner and everything else was workspace. Her library was arranged across every table, and in spite of limited tools, Maria had already built several workstations. Stands, measuring devices, and other things that he could not hope to guess the purpose of. All within a single day.

Max was a momentary interruption to her work. She paid him no mind, gliding between papers, stations, and tables, scribbling down something here and there. That was not to say her space was messy. Max felt an immaculate sense of order to everything in the room. Papers were placed strategically, instruments were placed where they would be most needed, and spaces were

left clear in anticipation of new tools or contraptions. There was nothing that found itself where it was by accident, save for perhaps him.

Maria was a reflection of her workspace. Her shabby rags were gone, replaced with actual fitted clothes. A loose white shirt and trousers, good clothing for the climate. Ana had taken her measurements and purchased them earlier that day. Fairly cheaply, he hesitated to add, but they fit well. Her hair was tied back neatly. The whole ensemble made her look to be a practical woman, but not common.

“All’s going well, I take it.” He said.

“With what I have, yes.” She answered, not looking away from her work.

“I managed an arrangement to fund what you need to get started. Could you write a specific list?”

“On your right. Third stack of paper from the left. First page on the top.”

Max fumbled around for a moment, feeling as if he were a giant child, before he found the paper. He was struck by the quality of Maria’s penmanship. Quick and elegant, a cornerstone of good education. The list read easily. She required steel of various kinds - he did not know that it could be anything other than just steel - with their compositions described in percents. She needed copper, tin, bronze, rubber, some gold, and various oddities. Small bags of sand? Raw clay? Well, she was the inventor, not him, and she would have what she wanted. Max tried to calculate the cost as he read, but soon discovered Maria had already done that, leaving a tidy figure at the bottom of the page. Seventy drachmas. Not ideal, he had told Erich not more than fifty drachmas, but he would cover the difference with his own money. He’d stay true to his word.

“Anything more?” Max asked.

“Tools. On the paper below that one. And an assistant.” She said, still not looking from her work. Max checked the page, not attempting to read the catalog, for he could hardly understand half of the names on it. Another figure was on the bottom. Eighty drachmas, assuming he had to buy everything. He winced. Erich would pay for only ten of that, but he would also have some tools he could rent. Regardless, he felt his hekatodrachma vanishing quickly.

“I’ll get you everything as soon as I can. As for assistants, I suppose Ana might be able to-”

“No. You.” She said, now looking at him.

“Me? I’m not sure I can be useful to you.”

“Irrelevant. You are best able to assist. I will direct you.” Her gaze was uncomfortably intense.

“If you insist. Is there-” He took a brief glance at the papers and instruments laid out in front of her, their structure and purpose completely alien to him. “-Anything you need assistance with now?” Max asked.

“No. You can’t help with any of this. Other than doing what you came here to do. Close the door when you leave.” She turned back to her work as if he were never there. His pride stung, being spoken to like that, but he swallowed his tongue. She had peculiarities, and he would simply have to live with that. He turned and walked toward the door. She spoke again just before he reached it.

“Apologies. Shouldn’t be so blunt. Simply want to get started.”

“No offense taken. Let us know if you need anything.”

“I will.” She answered, and Max shut the door behind him. Interesting days ahead indeed, just as his sister said. Which reminded him, she had been gone for quite some time. The sun was setting, and his spring powered pocket watch told him that it was almost eight in the afternoon. Even travelling on foot, she should have been back already. It was probably nothing, but it would be best to speak to Ludwig. After last night’s incident, he might be worried. And mother. Oh, Eistryn’s name, she would be upset with Rosalyn now. What horrible delinquents her children were.

He would speak to Ludwig. Rosalyn would have to deal with mother this time. His progress to their gate was frustratingly slow, as his bruises and soreness had practically crystallized his muscles overnight. Noble and dignified, his gait was not. At least nobody could see him.

It was a few minutes before he reached the door. He went outside, finding the evening air comfortably warm. Ludwig was standing outside the gate, whistling the tune to a sea shanty, with his eyes focused on the streets.

“Does that song have any words to it?” Max asked as he approached.

“Yes, my lord, but all of them filthy. Nothing I would dare sing in your presence, unless you wished it.” Ludwig replied, with a smile.

“Another time, maybe. Any sign of Rosalyn?”

“Nothing, my lord. She said she wouldn’t be back until later in the afternoon, which tends to be early evening for her. No cause for concern.”

“Hm. Yes, she tends to run late,” said Max, not sure who he was convincing. The two of them watched together for a while, in silence. It did not look as if there would be mists, for the moment. The air was clear around them, but a brownish haze was settling out in the Hill



Districts. Most of the factories had moved there in the last thirty years. Plans for manufacturing in the Harbor District had dissolved the same time his House's money had. A mixed blessing. How he wished he had access to those factories, those machines. A means by which only a few men could make what thousands could at mere fractions of the price. A means out of his reach. For lack of that he had clean air, for what it was worth.

The languid, limited foot traffic of the Harbor District flowed by like thick oil on a gear. Constant, regular drips plodded down until the last rays of the sun fell, and the gears stopped. Streetlamps flickered to life. Max checked his pocket watch. A quarter past eight. Rosalyn was late now. Ludwig was pacing but not whistling. If she did not show by nine, then there would be cause for concern. As it stood, it was cause for anxiety. She had encountered some delay, perhaps. Had they the money for a telegraph, he would have sent a message to the last noble house she was supposed to visit. It could be that they were still entertaining her, although that was a rather fanciful thought.

Before long he saw familiar deep crimson clothes and auburn hair. He breathed a light sigh of relief. Rosalyn must have been only delayed. He was eager to hear what fruit her day might have borne. Ludwig unlocked the gate and cried a greeting to his sister. She gave him a halfhearted wave. That was unlike her.

She seemed distracted. Her eyes looked at the dimming sky and her mind seemed elsewhere.

"Rose, are you well?" Max asked.

"Yes, fine. Sorry I'm late. I was...delayed." She answered, not quite looking at him.

"Nothing to apologize for. Come inside. I'm sure you're tired."

“Quite. Next time either of us leave the Harbor District, we’re hiring a carriage. I’ve had enough of walking in the Selekosian sun.”

“You know I can’t promise that. Come on, tell me how your day went,” said Max, walking toward the door. He nodded to Ludwig, and he closed the gate behind them.

“It could have gone better.” She said as Max opened the door.

“Did any of them at least hear you out?”

“Briefly.” Her gaze was still absentminded.

“Rose, are you sure you’re okay?” Max closed the door.

“I do have quite a bit to think about, after today.” Rose paused, seemingly trying to refocus her eyes. She continued after a moment. “I only managed to visit the Crowells today. No headway.”

“How is it you were gone the entire day, then?” Max asked.

“I had other places to visit. For a different matter.”

“Are you going to actually tell me what the matter is?”

“In a moment, Max. I need a drink. Ana!” Rosalyn called. She appeared but a few seconds later.

“Rose?” Ana asked.

“I’m going to need a glass of water. And brandy.”

“No luck, then. I’ll be back in a moment.” She darted off, and Roe took a seat.

“Rough day then.”

Rosalyn nodded. Ana appeared a moment later, with a large glass of water and a smaller one full of brandy accompanying it. Rose thanked her and immediately took a gulp of the brandy. She coughed and set what was left on a short table next to her.

“I got myself into a duel.” She took a long draught from the glass of water.

“A duel? How in Eistryn’s name - Who challenged you? What’s the bastard’s name? I’ll kill him myself!” Max sputtered.

“I challenged him.”

“Eistryn’s blood, Rose! Are you mad?”

“Stop yelling. My head hurts enough already.”

“What came over you? Why would you challenge him - who is he?”

“I took a risk. I should hope it’ll pay off.” Rosalyn took another drink of brandy.

“Is it worth risking your life? Was father’s life alone not enough? What could you possibly gain from this insanity?”

“Max, please. You shouldn’t-”

“No, dear sister. We’ve bleed enough as it is. None of us should have to. Not anymore.”

Max’s mouth twitched involuntarily. Rosalyn stood up and embraced him. He didn’t move.

“Please trust me, Max. Like I trust you. I’m doing this for our family, not for myself. If I win, we’ll have enough money to wipe away a good part of our debt.”

“Or I’ll lose my sister.”

“That won’t happen. I swear it.” Rosalyn said, loosening her arms around him and returning to her seat. Max began to pace.

“Eistryn’s blood. Now what?” He nobody in particular.

“I should start training, I think.” Rosalyn answered, nonchalantly.

A loud knocking came from the front door. Ludwig’s voice followed.

“You have visitors. Lord Ioannis Laskaris, of the King’s Marshals, with his entourage.”

He didn’t ask if he should let them in. He knew the procedure. It wasn’t an option to refuse entry for a marshal. Rose didn’t seem surprised.

Loud steps echoed through the hall, and Rose pulled herself away from the brandy and to her feet. Max was already standing stiff enough for a marshal’s entry. Laskaris came down the hall toward him, dressed in purple cloth under a meticulously polished bronze breastplate, made in ancient Selekosian style. Three soldiers trailed after him, dressed in similarly outdated armor. He looked the part of an old soldier, with salt and pepper hair and a heavy stare. He greeted them with a short bow.

“Good evening, Lord Remthal, Lady Remthal.” He said.

“And to you, Lord Marshal Laskaris. Might I presume the purpose of your visit?” Rose curtsied and answered before Max. He could not get his mouth functioning quickly enough, but managed to bow.

“Lady Remthal, you should know. You’re summoned to Basileus Konstantinos Nicanor, regarding your challenge of Lord Domenico Alerameci, immediately. A motorcar’s waiting outside.”

“I’d like a moment to speak to my sister, Lord Marshal.”

“And you’ll have it. You could also go with her before the King if you’d like, Lord Remthal.” As if it would be any consolation.

“Thank you, Lord Marshal,” answered Max, and Laskaris nodded. He stood rooted to the floor, as if frozen by some gorgon’s gaze, and Max went into a nearby room. Rose followed, shutting the door behind him.

“What is it, Max?” She asked.

“You have to stop this madness, Rose. Ask if you can withdraw your challenge when you go to the palace. There’s surely something you can do. Even if we have to pay some fine, we’ll find the money.”

“I’m sorry, but I won’t. This is my plan, and I’ve committed to it.”

“Is that what this is? For Eistryn’s love, don’t tell me this is because of Maria and last night.”

“Max, you’re impossible some days.”

“This isn’t me being impossible, this is me being concerned for your life! Haven’t you grasped the idea that you could die?”

“I have, Max. I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Sorry if it’s hard for me to do the same.” Max simmered.

“We can talk about it later. I doubt the marshal’s a patient man.”

“We don’t need any more tragedies, Rose.”

“I know.” With that she left, and Max followed. Laskaris waited for them, still. “Lord Marshal, I’m rather out of sorts at the moment. Might I have a few more minutes to make myself presentable before we leave?”

“If you insist, Lady Remthal. I’ll wait outside, but remember there’s some urgency to the situation.” Laskaris answered.

“Of course, Lord Marshal. I’ll go as quickly as I can.” She curtsied to him, and Laskaris gave her a shallower bow in response. He was about to leave when the stairs started creaking, and slow steps started echoing from upstairs.

“Lady Amelia Remthal, a pleasant evening to you.” Laskaris bowed shallowly to the new arrival.

“I rarely think that a King’s Marshal heralds one, Lord Marshal Laskaris. Rose, why are you home so late, and followed by a marshal?” Mother was regal in her bearing and speech, in spite of their poverty. She looked much like Rose, without the Remthal severity in her face. Only terribly worn. Old age had come gracefully, but quickly. Strain resided in her eyes and on the corners of her mouth, and in the tips of her graying brown hair.

“I... think the Lord Marshal would best explain it, mother.” Rose replied, not quite able to look her in the eye.

“He certainly could, but I want to hear you explain it.”

She nodded and composed herself for a second. She strained to push the words up through her throat. “I challenged a man to a duel.”

Mother nodded gravely. She steadied herself against the nearest wall. When she spoke again, she was looking at the floor.

“Do what you have to. We will speak when you return.”

“Yes, mother.” Rose replied.

Mother gave her a long, careful look. Then Max. She nodded to him and started to head upstairs, much slower than she had come down. He looked to his sister, and they nodded slightly to each other. She turned to speak to Laskaris.

“Lord Marshal, we’ll be ready to leave in a moment.”

## The Victor

Rose was indeed ready in only a moment, and that was thanks to Ana. She worked quickly, helping her find some clothes that were not sweaty and smelly, and helped color her face a little, to bring out her eyes. She to go before the king, but was not going to overdo her appearance. That would give the perverse old man an impression she did not want him to have.

“Like you asked, Rose. Refined but businesslike. Anything more you want? Perfume? A different coat? Some water before you go?” asked Ana.

“Nothing. Thank you.”

“Aren’t you not nervous?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.”

“You’re better composed than me, then. I’m not even going and I can barely stand still!”

“I’m trying to keep my thoughts elsewhere.” Rose got to her feet checked her appearance in the mirror Ana provided.

“Excellent as always, Ana. Thank you.” Rose said.

“Best of luck.” Ana beamed nervously.

“Hopefully I won’t need it.” Rose gathered herself. Her ears felt comfortably warm from the brandy, but thankfully her legs and head felt fine. The marshal had come before she could reach that state. She checked all the buttons on her coat and adjusted her collar to allow for a little more air. Max was likely ready to depart, and the marshal would certainly be getting impatient. With a long breath and stride, she stepped out into the hall.

Max waited by the front door. He was pacing - still - and staring intensely at the ceiling. Curious he had agreed to go with her. The discolorations on his face were only looking worse, and yet he seemed to have completely forgotten about that. He straightened his back, changed his shirt and coat, and acted as if nothing was amiss. They nodded to each other. Rose took a moment to look for mother, to say goodbye before she left. She was nowhere to be found.

Laskaris was waiting outside, the handful of men he brought waiting in one of two motor cars. He and Ludwig were casting each other brief glances, and then looking aside when the other turned in their direction. They both seemed grateful she and Max had come out.

“Lord Remthal, Lady Remthal.” Ludwig greeted, with a bow.

“Ah, good. You’re ready. Take the rear motorcar, if you would.” The marshal said, walking toward one right in front of their gate. A man well dressed in servant’s clothes popped out of the other, leaving the door open as an invitation. Ludwig gave her a nervous look.

“No need for worry. Official business is all this is.” She whispered to him as she walked by.

“Eistryn go with you, my lady.” He swallowed and gave her a stern nod, as if she were a fellow sailor going to sacrifice her life. It wasn’t terribly reassuring.

She had not seen a motorcar up close before. The first thing she noticed was the noise. There was a constant pattering coming from somewhere in the front, under a sheet of glossy white metal. The second was the smell. Noxious puffs of smoke trailed out a tube in the back, invading her nostrils and making her eyes water. She hurriedly hopped inside, and the servant shut the door for her. The motorcar had a roof and windows, so at least there was respite from the fumes. The seats were rather nice, too. Soft, with black leather upholstery. It blocked out the



noise fairly well, but she still felt a constant vibration travelling up from the seat and floor into her legs.

The servant ran to the other side of the vehicle and opened the door for her brother, who entered a few seconds later. He sat as if his back was welded together, or as if he had a long stick stuck somewhere unfortunate. She considered mentioning it to him, but she doubted he would appreciate the humor. He did, after all, think she was going to die.

Had that idea not struck her yet?

Either way, Max looked silly to her. The yellowing mark on his face was not as obvious as he clearly thought it was. He did not need to exaggerate his posture that much to compensate for it.

The servant hopped into the front of the vehicle, in front of a wheel she assumed controlled it. He shouted something to the vehicle before them in his native Selekosian language. Something with few words, many syllables, and spoken very quickly - all of which were typical of the lounge. He slammed the door shut and the motorcar in front of them started moving. The sudden rumble and lurch as they moved too startled her. Her hands snapped to her sides and locked onto the nearest grippable surfaces: a well-placed armrest on her right, and the bottom of her seat on her left. The motorcar's movement settled down to normal in a moment, and only when Rose felt confident enough to pry her hands free did she notice her knuckles were white.

Max stared out the window and was very, very quiet. They were still in the Harbor District, passing mostly empty streets lit by hollow electric lights. Two lamps on the front of their vehicle illuminated the road before them. There was a faint haze all around. Mists would be rolling in tonight.

She did not know how long it would take to reach the acropolis at the city's center by motorcar, but it was a good few hours by walking. Twenty minutes, half an hour perhaps? It was hard to tell how quickly they were going, although it was certainly far quicker than any running pace. Buildings and people passed by in a blur. It was rather exciting, actually, now that they were up to speed and zipping through Naulos. How quickly people could travel with this contraption!

Oddly enough, Max seemed more relaxed now. He molded himself into the leather seat, his hands free and comfortable in his lap. If he still held any grudges or reservations, and knowing her brother he did, it would be best to deal with them now. The servant driving might hear, but better him than anyone in the palace.

“Max.”

“Quite a machine, isn't it?” He said, dreamily staring out the window.

“*Max.*” She stressed.

“What?” He turned away from the window.

“Can I count on your support when we get to the palace?”

“Rose, do we-”

“Yes, and now. Unless you want to bicker before the king.”

“If that is how you want to go about it, fine. This is probably the stupidest and most dangerous thing you've done in your life, Rose. You're asking if I'll support you in what might as well be suicide.”

“I wouldn't have challenged him if there wasn't a chance of success.”

“And if you die, I'd have supported your death.”

“Why can’t you see any end that’s not tragedy? I’ll train under Ludwig day and night if I have to. You know me well enough to trust me on this,” Rose said.

Max frowned deeply.

“Support me when we get to the palace. Nothing more than that.”

“I suppose I can,” he said.

“Thank you,” Rose said, and sunk into her seat. That was the first issue dealt with. The easiest one, unfortunately. What a mess this was going to be.

They had passed out of the Harbor District into the Selekosian Middle City. In the distance, great lights lit the giant slab of rock that formed the base of the Acropolis. The palace gleamed brilliantly white, even with the sun far below the horizon. It was quite the spectacle, no matter if it was day or night. A group of Selekosians stood and watched them as their little motorcade went around a turn toward the Acropolis. If they were staring on with fascination or contempt, Rose could not tell.

Other motorcars passed them on the streets as they neared the Acropolis. They drove more slowly, now that they were in the heart of the city. Buildings stacked themselves higher, and yet all were dwarfed in comparison to the great rock and palace towering above them. Several nobles, and those who would do business with them, walked the streets. Soldiers too, on occasion, wearing blue caps and carrying rifles. A rare sight outside of that district.

Buildings abruptly gave way to open space. Before them was the Acropolis, and everything except a few structures kept its distance. Their vehicles pulled to a stop before a gate flanked on both sides by massive electric lights. The marshal signaled something to a soldier standing nearby and he pulled it open for them. They drove out onto a great metal platform surrounded by a thin metal cage. She could not see far up, because of the motorcar’s roof, but the

roof of the structure must have been somewhere high above them. Rose heard the sound of the gate rattling shut behind them. Then she felt her stomach lurch as they began to rise. She grasped the sides of her seat to steady herself, but it was not just the vehicle that was moving. The entire platform was rising.

A loud whine grew louder from somewhere above her head. Just as it reached its peak, it stopped entirely, and so did they. A gate in front of them was pulled open, and they drove out onto the Acropolis.

The palace dominated most of the Acropolis grounds, and it was blinding. The painstakingly polished marble was illuminated from all sides by giant, powerful electric lights casting a faintly blue radiance on the structure. Huge, broad columns suspended a heavy roof, covered with relief sculpture, far above any human head. Reliefs were painted in bright, bold colors that pulled her eyes upwards. There were some other buildings and a garden, but they demanded practically no attention in comparison to the extravagance of the palace of the king of Selekos.

Their vehicles stopped right before the palace steps. Servants opened the door for Rose and her brother in seconds. She stepped out into a royal paradise. Lyre music filled her ears. The combined scent of dozens of exotic flowers wafted into her nostrils, accompanied by a hint of motorcar fumes. On her left and right, the faint glow of Naulos stretched out far into the distance. Shining lights illuminated glowing sculptures in a vast garden. The Acropolis was a bombardment on the senses, almost too much to take in at once. It was a reassurance, and a firm reminder, that there was nothing here the king could not control, even your senses.

“Lady Remthal, Lord Remthal, follow me if you would.” The marshal said, standing above them on the palace’s elevated base. It was obviously not a suggestion, but at least he was

being polite about it. She obliged him, and they were lead through an enormously tall pair of double doors to the inside of the palace. It was no less spectacular than the outside. It was like stepping into a giant marble house of mirrors. Everything was bright and glistening, and light from great electric chandeliers scattered down spectacularly from high above her head. The music was louder, the scents stronger, and almost everything that drew her eyes was clustered high above her head. She almost failed to notice the small crowd of nobles in front of them, and the king himself.

They were all, of course, fabulously well dressed and doing their finest to look good before the king. So much so that they did not notice her arrival. The king did, unfortunately.

In spite of the youthful facade he tried to maintain, he was clearly an old man. His short cut hair was wispy and white. His prominent, clean-shaven jaw looked skeletal, the skin pulled taut over it and muscles thin underneath. The king's cloudy grey eyes, sunk deep into their sockets, had trouble focusing on anything for too long. It visibly strained him to do so. That made it only more unnerving when they settled on her, and stayed there.

Being a poor noblewoman was a mixed blessing, of sorts. Her looks drew the interest of noblemen, yes, but her status prevented her from being much more than a passing fancy. Even those who had longer term goals in mind tended to be the dull sort, and she grew bored of them quickly. Her courtships were short, and marriage was seldom a risk. The king certainly never noticed her. There was no worry that one morning she might discover that her suitor had given up his pursuit, in deference to the king and his appetites. To whom there were few ways of saying "no."

The crowd of nobles noticed where the king's eyes sat, and turned rather suddenly to face her and her brother. The marshal stepped forward and bowed deeply.

“Hail to you, Basileus Konstantinos Nicanor, fifth of his name, Sovereign of the Selekosian people, Lord of the Foreign Lands, the King seated upon the Gleaming Throne.” His voice reverberated through the palace, gaining a peculiar quality to it when it blended with the lyre music. Rose curtsied deeply, staring at the ground beneath the king’s feet, as was customary. In the periphery of her vision, she could see Max was doing the same, the depth of his bow concealing the frown upon his face.

“Rise.” The king’s voice sounded heavy, dragged down by his age. Rose stood up and tried to ignore the weight of his eyes.

“Your highness, I have brought Lady Rosalyn Remthal, who is accompanied by her brother Lord Max Remthal, as you have ordered. She is the initiating party of her duel with Lord Domenico Alerameci,” said the marshal. She saw Domenico now, looking at her from within the now parted crowd of nobles, from under heavy brows. It seemed he had regained his wits for the moment.

“Good. Dismissed, Marshal Laskaris. Simos, record master, come up.” Another man dressed in Selekosian finery stepped forward, only without armor or weapons. Two plainly dressed servants came forth behind him, one carrying pen and paper.

“Would the involved parties come forward?” He asked. Domenico emerged from his small group of what must have been relatives, considering the glares she was earning from them. She took a step forward, and could feel Max tense up behind her. She kept walking until she was before the steps of the king’s gleaming white throne. Domenico stood beside her, and by unspoken agreement neither looked on the other.

The king's gaze was oppressive, as close as they were. It did not feel so much as if those cloudy, impotent eyes were trying to bore through her as if they were trying to bore through her clothes. She could not be gone quickly enough.

“Lady Remthal, you challenged Lord Domenico to a duel earlier this day. Please state the reason for your challenge.”

“Excuse me, Lord Simos. I think we've failed to address something here.” A noble came forward from the crowd. A Selekosian from the looks of him, although most of those present were in Selekosian dress.

“What might that be, Lord Cyrros?” replied Simos.

“The nature of this duel is... questionable. I do not mean to speak ill of Lady Remthal, but it seems hardly appropriate for her to challenge Lord Domenico to something so unfeminine as a duel. It is without precedent, for a noblewoman to do such a thing,” said the noble. So, the first of Domenico's allies stepped forward.

“I would argue otherwise, Lord Cyrros,” she said, turning to face him. “Lord Domenico insulted me in most base manner, and has clearly been spreading malcontent toward me, if the attitude of his fellows is anything to judge by. He called me a loose woman and a thief, baseless slander that I hotly contest. I have a right - an obligation - to take a stand against such defamation.”

“There is no law or precedent that I know of to allow a noble woman to duel over such a thing, Lady Remthal. I think it is improper to allow it to happen until review of the laws and dueling codices. Otherwise we run risk of breaking our own laws, and that would only invite chaos and tragedy,” countered Cyrros. To her surprise, Max was the one who rebutted.

“I think that little would change, should my sister be permitted to duel or not. There’ll be a duel, regardless of it being me or her that fights.”

“Lord Remthal, are you saying that you would duel in your sister’s stead?” Lord Simos said, with narrowing eyes.

“I am.” Max replied. A servant scribbled something onto her paper.

“Very well, then we shall proceed. Lady Remthal, are you committed to addressing your grievance by dueling Lord Domenico, instead of pursuing the matter in a court of law?”

“I am.”

“Do you consent to your brother taking your place in this duel, in the event you are not permitted or unable to?” Asked Simos.

She hesitated.

There was no time to admire the bitter irony of the situation, nor time to moralize with her brother. She felt his life in her hands. It seemed suddenly so ridiculous, so contemptuously stupid, that she would challenge a man to a duel for the hope of winning a punitive fine. Blood for gold. A price she hoped her family would not have to pay again.

With considerable effort, she responded.

“I do.”

“Do you understand that in the event of your loss, the fine of a thousand drachmae, which is the price demanded with the charge of defamation, shall be owed to the victor of the duel?”

“I do.” Rose was troubled a nagging feeling of digging her own grave. That, and the king was still staring at her.

“Very well. Lord Domenico, you are challenged to duel by Lady Remthal with the charge of defamation. This bears with it a fine of a thousand drachmae, paid to the offended house. Do



you accept this challenge, or yield the charge?” Simos said. From the corner of her eye, Rose could see a bead of sweat gather on Domenico’s forehead.

“I do, Lord Simos,” he said. She had not considered him yielding with any depth, but now that it was not an option a weight of dread sunk her heart. There would be a duel. It was but a matter of time.

“Then it is settled. As dictated by our Selekosian law, four weeks from now, in the month of Waning Midsummer, Lady Remthal - or Lord Remthal - shall duel with Lord Domenico over the charge of defamation, in the event the charge is substantiated by Royal investigation. The victor shall be paid a thousand drachmae by the defeated party. You shall both be provided with dueling codices, so that you might familiarize yourselves with our Selekosian dueling code. Royal representatives shall visit you later in the week, to confirm the status of your duel and to provide you with further information, such as where it shall take place.”

“Oh dear, I’ve missed the proceedings, then?” A woman’s voice - one Rose did not recognize - came from behind her.

“Hail to you, Crown Princess Irena.” Simos bowed in the direction of the voice.

“Hail, Lord Simos, my lord father, and greetings to our valued guests.” What Rose assumed were wooden sandals clacked against the floor as she drew closer. She turned toward the sound.

“Irena.” The king said to her, nodding.

The princess was, in some ways, her father’s daughter. She had eyes and prominence of face that mirrored the king, although not his current, impotent features. Her face was youthful, far from having lost her vigor, and her skin was a healthy tan, not like her father’s pale flesh. She

had long, carefully straightened bronze hair and flowing, loose fitting white Selekosian robes with a purple sash. It looked as if she were floating rather than walking.

“Ah, Lady Remthal, I take it.” She gave her a slight curtsy, to which Rose returned a deeper one.

“I am, highness,” Rose replied.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance. And you must be Lord Domenico. A pleasure.” She curtsied to him, and he bowed in response. It was proper to greet the princess in such a manner. Selekosian codes of conduct forbade touching the Royal family in almost any scenario, and therefore kissing hands was something reserved for greeting women of comparable rank. Which meant almost everyone but them.

“Likewise, your highness,” replied Domenico.

“Lord Simos, might you inform me of what I missed?” Irena asked.

“Certainly, your highness. I have arranged and confirmed the terms of a duel between House Remthal and Lord Domenico, to take place in four weeks’ time. We must review the details of our dueling laws to see if Lady Remthal, who first challenged Lord Domenico, will be allowed to fight, or if her brother Lord Remthal will duel in her stead.”

“That is...not pleasant news. You’re both resolved to dueling over this?” she asked.

“For all that it means, yes. We are.” Rose replied. It did not sound as though she were the one who said it.

“I’d ask you why, Lady Remthal.”

“For, highness, he called me a thief, a strumpet, claimed my House’s name is worth no more than a brothel, and this was done on a street, for the whole city to hear. I don’t have a choleric temper, but that was a serious insult, and it needed a serious reply,” answered Rose.

Murmurs of agitated conversation sprung up among some of those present. Good. They should know his exact words.

“Very serious allegations, Lady Remthal. Considering that, I think it’s only appropriate you be allowed to defend your own honor. My lord father, wouldn’t you agree?” asked Irena, turning to the throne.

“Hm. Yes.” The king’s jaw moved with glacial effort, as if he were slowly turning into the same marble as his throne.

“Your majesty, am I to officially allow Lady Remthal to duel Lord Domenico?” Asked Simos.

“Yes,” he replied, then snapped his jaw shut. A quick and clear indicator of the end of discussion.

“Very well, your majesty. Eleni, record that.” He pointed at one of the servants, and she began scribbling again. Rose wasn’t sure if she felt relieved or horrified by the decision.

“I believe that concludes our proceedings for this evening. If the two parties would-” Simos continued, only to be cut off by a new voice entering the fray.

“My dear Lord Simos, a moment please. Extend the proceedings just a moment, so I could be a part of them.”

“Hail, Crown Prince Stelios.” Simos bowed. “Unfortunately, there is little left to do, your highness. The terms of the duel between Lady Remthal and Lord Domenico are settled.”

“Welcome, Stelios,” said the king.

“You should be timelier if that’s what you wanted, brother,” chided Irena.

“Greetings, my lord father, honored guests, and my *dear sister*,” Stelios hissed. “I’m participating now, yes?” He stepped into view beside Irena, dressed in similar style but in more

masculine fashion, combining martial looking coat and trousers with the Selekosian penchant for flowing cloth. As for Stelios himself, he looked like what the king tried to be. Youthful, short but flowing bronze hair, and a firm jawline. He was more than just the image the king wanted, however. Under the outer layer of firmness and statuesque resolve, his eyes spoke to a craftiness, a capacity for cunning the withering Konstantinos could not hope to have.

“I thought the crown’s official position is that dueling is frowned upon? Most severely? And yet I see the end one's arrangement right here. Oh, I forget myself. A fine evening to you, Lord Domenico Alerameci-” chimed Stelios, with a bow, returned by Domenico. “-And to you, Lady Remthal.” He kissed her hand with flourish and graceful refinement that more befit a prince from a romance novel than an actual prince. While technically permitted for those in higher positions to kiss hands of the lower, it was not common practice and indicated a feeling of debt to the woman on the part of the man. A courtly, sappy way of telling a woman she was pleasant to be around. It was the sort of thing that would have sent her heart racing had she only been younger. Bitter years under his father’s reign, and his father’s eyes still sitting on her, rather dulled its effect.

“The same to you, highness.” She replied with a curtsy when Stelios released her hand.

“Your highness Prince Stelios, nothing has changed with regards to the crown’s stance on dueling, unless your lord father should say otherwise. Lady Remthal has made a rather serious claim against Lord Domenico and they have both accepted the challenge. You do, however, remind me of an excellent point.” Simos tapped his chin and turned to Rose. “To both parties involved, understand that further duels between members of your respective Houses will not be permitted for a period of at least ten years, regardless of the outcome, and that further challenges will come under intense scrutiny from Royal investigators and will only be tolerated for capital

grievances. This will be covered in the dueling codices you will be provided with before you leave.” He kept yammering on after that. Simos had a talent for it. It was amusing, all this long, flowery, technical speech just to describe two people trying to kill each other in a manner slightly more formal than murder. How long could that man talk without just recognizing that one fact? Rose supposed that it was because courtly language didn’t work well when it came to describing cut throats.

“-And that should address everything,” concluded Simos. At last. A Selekosian servant came forward with two obnoxiously large books. She and Domenico were both handed one. It was dense and sturdy in the hand, as if it was the weapon she was expected to duel with. Light gold leaf and design surrounded the title printed on the front, “Selekosian Dueling Codes.” Apparently they could frame killing in a courtly fashion.

Rose felt the king’s eyes again. He was looking at her expectantly, as if waiting for her to skip all the bureaucratic nonsense and get right to bludgeoning Domenico on his lovely, gleaming palace floor. An image of crimson pools and a broken body splintered against the immaculate white marble underneath invaded her sight. She shuddered and banished it from her mind.

“You are both dismissed,” said the king, a smile in his voice. Rose curtsied her proper farewell, the thought of spitting at the base of his throne not far from her mind. She gave a farewell to both the prince and princess, tucked the dueling codex under her arm, and walked away.

Max waited behind her, occupying a small void in the crowd of nobility no one dared enter. He stood pale, stance slightly too stiff, and his mind was clearly elsewhere. Much the same as when they left.

“Max,” she prodded.

“I think we’ve dived into deeper water than we expected,” he mused.

“Then I hope we remember how to swim.” She moved a little closer and added, in a whisper. “Let’s leave. I won’t stay here a moment longer than I have to.”

“Absolutely.” They made for the door, nobles and servants alike cleared the way with a kind of reverential disdain, as if they were sacrificial offerings. The music from earlier had paused, and Rose only noticed its earlier absence when it started again. Some Selekosian trick in design made the sound echo off of every wall and pillar, impossible to tell where, exactly, it was coming from.

“Remthals, a moment please!” That was Stelios’ voice. What could he want?

Max gave her an offhand glance, quizzical and almost indignant. She shrugged and turned around. Stelios covered ground between them quickly, and sauntered up with a disarming grin on his face.

“Ah, thank you for waiting. I’d like to borrow you for a moment, Lord Remthal, if that won’t trouble either of you.”

She and Max exchanged a glance. Requests from the Royal family never really were just that, since the only proper - and expected - answer was yes. Max nodded to Stelios.

“It wouldn’t, highness,” said Max.

“Excellent. I promise you will have him back in a moment, Lady Remthal, no worse for wear.” He embraced Max as if he were an old friend and they walked off, leaving her in the middle of Konstantinos Nicanor’s court, with a dueling codex under one arm, clueless as to what she should do.

As incredibly large as the main room was, there was little inhabiting it, other than the untraceable music and giant painted columns. Any servants or entertainment for visiting nobles seemed unreachably far off, something to be looked at rather than engaged in. For her and other foreign nobles, that was probably the intended message.

She opted for reading the dueling codex. Not anyone's idea of entertainment, certainly, but it was something to do. She opened to a random page, greeted by an image of two men in the nude, at various stages of one stabbing the other in the eye with a saber. There were various arrows and directions printed on the image, as if they made understanding anything easier. The accompanying text was at least in a script she could understand, thank Eistryn. Something about taking the sword to the outside, using the right arm to gain the point? It might as well have been coded language for duelists. She flipped to an earlier page and was greeted with an enormous wall of text. Her patience lasted long enough to discern that it was a page on acceptable dueling sabers, and the moment she reached the endless list of numbers regarding length, width, weight, and other nonsense she closed the book. Not only could they make killing sound tame and courtly, they could make it *boring*. Reading that would be worse than idling around. Besides, the last thing she needed to think on was her duel. She remembered the image of the man being stabbed through the eye and shuddered.

“Horribly dull stuff, I would know.”

Rose started and spun to the source of the voice. It was the crown princess, to her surprise.

“Highness!” piped Rose, embarrassingly high pitched.

“Oh, my apologies, Lady Remthal! I didn't want to startle you.” Irena patted her lightly on the shoulders, a gesture less reassuring because of her rank.

“I didn’t hear you walk up, highness, is all,” said Rose, trying to salvage her dignity.

“It’s these sandals. The wooden ones made too much noise and these cloth covered ones make too little. I just can’t seem to find the right balance.” She beamed apologetically.

“I’d choose which you think suits your station best, highness.”

“Be a princess who makes an entrance or appears unnoticed? That’s clever, Rosalyn. Can I call you that?”

“Of course, highness.” Did royals think they would ever get no as an answer?

“Please, let me be Irena to you.”

“Easier to say rules of conduct are gone than to actually be rid of them. The best I can do is try.” That was more honest than she intended. Was the day getting to her, or was that brandy stronger than she thought?

“That’s refreshingly direct. It’s impossible to get clarity from the nobility, some days,” said Irena. “But regardless of that, you have my condolences.”

“For the book or the duel?”

“For both. It’s terrible you have to fight a man to defend your honor and be dragged through that horrible book beforehand.”

“A procedure for death,” mused Rose. “A Lonesome Road of its own.”

“A lonesome road? I’m sorry, but I don’t follow,” chimed Irena.

“Part of our religion. When an Isler dies, they have to walk a purgatory road and confront their life. Fewer bad deeds means a shorter road, or something of that sort.”

“That’s interesting. What’s at the end of the road?”

“The ocean and a ship. Eistryn helps them sail back to the Misty Halls and join everyone else who passed on. That’s the simple version, anyway. My brother could tell you more.”



Speaking of whom, how long had he and Stelios been gone? The Crown Prince didn't seem the type to pull aside noblemen just to befriend them. He had some design on Max.

"Oh yes, I forgot that your people believe in only one god. An interesting choice, to have the ocean be supreme. She's a minor god in our pantheon," said Irena.

"To each their own," Rose answered. Good that Max wasn't there to hear that. He didn't need to be any grumpier.

"Speaking of your brother, I couldn't help but notice that mine borrowed yours. Do they know each other?"

And there was the point of their conversation. She wished for an answer, even if she was not inclined to share it. "Certainly not. Our family's been rather sheltered, as of the past few years," said Rose.

"Yes, and my condolences for that as well. It was a terrible tragedy, that zeppelin burning and your family's fate afterwards," said Irena. "Oh, I'm starting to sound like a mortician with all these commiserations. You're a clever and capable woman, Rosalyn. I won't insult that by rambling on about little things any longer. I supported you in front of my father back there because I think what you're doing is brave, but also because things need to change." Irena scanned around them, managing to make looking over her shoulders inconspicuous. She was quite good.

"If you want to continue this conversation, we should move somewhere else," continued Irena. "You can say no, mind you."

"I'd like to hear more, Irena," replied Rose, smiling. What was she getting herself into?

"I thought you'd agree. Please, come with me." Irena beamed at her, turning with a slight flourish of her flowing clothes. They made all her motions dramatic. She guided her through the

immense space of the main palace hall, which Rose wouldn't have imagined difficult to navigate until trying to find her bearings. Everything was so identical and spread out that there was hardly a point of reference, save for the throne. Irena clearly had no such trouble. They deftly darted between and around columns, the princess gliding over the marble floor soundlessly, and Rose's leather heeled boots clomping softly.

"I admit that I've something of an admiration for your Isler style of clothing. It's practical, but doesn't it get horribly stuffy in daytime?" Irena asked, over her shoulder.

"It tends to. A hat helps somewhat, but your sun is unforgiving."

"Yes, quite so. It burns everyone equally though, I should let you know. Even we get sunburned."

Rose tried to imagine the princess puffed up and red all over, as she herself had been more than once in her youth. It was a hard image to create.

They came to a short section of red carpet, leading into a neatly square door cropped into the massive blocks that made the main chamber walls. A single palace guard stood nearby, although not the more practical sort that were patrolling out by the acropolis. This one was covered almost completely in gleaming silvery armor and purple cloth, carrying a sword almost as large as he was over a shoulder. The purple cloth alone must have cost a fortune, to say nothing of the armor. The closer they got, the more gold inlay she could see on its surface. As was typical for Selekosians, they tried to appear nude in spite of massive amounts of clothing. His breastplate was modeled after a *very* fit man's chest and abdomen, which in all likelihood, was probably what he looked like under all that metal.

The guard's face, barely visible through a T shaped opening in his helmet, was impassive. The man was surely disciplined to not show shock, awe, or anything else at his clothes and armor probably being valued higher than his own life.

"Leave us for a moment, if you would," said Irena to him. He half bowed to, half saluted her and clattered off, leaving Irena to open the door. She opened it with a push of the hand and a soft click, leading Rose into what seemed to be a conference chamber. Unlike the overabundance of style that went into the design of the palace's main chamber, this room was dominated more by substance. A large marble table took the center, a few wood and white leather chairs arranged neatly around it and three rows of stone benches wrapping around the walls. Irena floated into one of the chairs and gestured at the one across from her.

"Please, sit. This would be awkward otherwise."

"I've spent all day on my feet. I'd love to sit for a while," replied Rose, making herself comfortable. Her legs suddenly felt very, very heavy.

"A tiring day, certainly. Didn't you challenge Lord Domenico today?" Irena idly ran her hand through her hair.

"I did. Your marshal came and dragged me over before I had the chance to do anything but drink."

"Laskaris is my father's lapdog, not mine. I wish I had another drink to offer, but you'd get the wrong impression from that."

"So why the interest in me, an impoverished noblewoman of no consequence?" Rose decided she might as well be direct. She already challenged someone to a duel, and was merely following through with a Remthal family tradition: When you've dug yourself into a hole, dig faster to see how deep you can go.

“You’re convenient. I hate to phrase it that crudely, but nobody’s going to be terribly curious about who you’ve been talking to. I think you’ll be a useful ally, especially if you win this upcoming duel.” Irena relaxed in her seat, leaving one hand on the table. “It’s no secret my father isn’t long for this world. He has his share of faults, and his reign has not been popular.”

“How astute. Are you going to tell me the color of the ocean next?”

“Don’t be coy with me. My brother wants the throne, Rosalyn, and it’s in everyone’s best interests he doesn’t get it. He’s already working against me.”

“I don’t think the crown’s cared much for me or my family for a while now. You’re going to have to convince me.”

“I don’t think that’s the issue here. What I wonder is if Stelios can convince your brother. Don’t you wonder what they’re taking about right now?” Irena leaned in a little.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t.” Rose felt the color in her cheeks rise.

“Then you should know he’s having a conversation a lot like ours. I imagine he’s telling your brother all about the things I’m trying to put in your head.”

“Leave my family out of your schemes.”

“I’m just informing you. Stelios will do whatever it takes to get crowned, and he’s very persuasive. He might have no designs on your brother. If so, wonderful, you can walk away from this entire affair.” Irena leaned back, holding one hand in the air idly. “Which I doubt will happen. He will turn your brother against you. You won’t see it at first, but my brother is cunning. Maximilian won’t even know he’s sabotaging everything he cares about until we all wake up under King Stelios of Selekos.”

“My brother hates you royals. He won’t be swayed by him.”

“He won’t even know he’s working on Stelios’ behalf. He’ll think every move is his own idea, his own tragic idea. I lament this is happening to you, but you’ll be convinced in time. When you are, I hope you’ll hear me out.”

Rose got to her feet without a word. She didn’t trust herself to say anything less than treasonous at that moment.

“We’ll be in contact, I think,” Irena muttered.

“By Eistryn, I hope not.”

Irena smiled at her as she walked out.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

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