



Brother Dustfish

R. E. Warner

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Part 1

Mother of Able

Chapter 1

In which we meet Able and learn of his simple existence in the Shattered Land.

Able stood in the starless, crimson night, beneath the great, glowing Skybow of the Goliaths, holding a small squirming, copper rodent. It fizzled and smoked and threw out sparks in his hands. Able presses his metallic thumb to the top of the creature's head. The lights in its eyes go out. His own eyes, circles of cyan light, scan the creature's wound. He lay the little desert rodent on its back and removes a bag of electrol from his backpack. He poured it liberally on the little creature's back legs and moving his hands as if he were engaged in the delicate choreography of thread and needle, worked the electrol into the legs where the shiny substance formed new pistons and shiny ligaments on the animal. After ten minutes of this, the rodent's four back legs look solid to Able, so he holds the creature in front of him, presses his thumb to the critter's head, and the gold lights in its eyes return.

"There. All fixed!"

The creature, detecting its newfound mobility, squirms in Able's grasp and tries to get free. Able lets it go where it scurries off into a crack between some piles of cartridges and other metallic refuse. Able stares after it. "You're welcome."

Able turned his attention past the piles of junk to where the Skybow touched the horizon. To where he knew Delphine's scar lay, where surely the monstrous meteor Delphine rolled across the land even now, like a titan's marble fired across the game of the landscape. His imagination carried him past the scar to the Silt Sea, and its massive of undulations of dust. Having never seen either of those vast beacons of a world beyond his, he knew they were there. His mother had told him so. She had told him of other wonders beyond the scar and the sea. He sighed into the night, dreaming of towers of technology and the scientists of legend.

He looked down at his small feet and wondered. He was created here, in the rocky, metallic Desert of IDEX MORTAZ, the desert of dead ideas. It was a barren gray vista made up of ancient wreckage—piled precariously—as high as buildings in places, interrupted by mesas that lorded over the vast wasteland and that got up and lumbered about at night, static lightning tracing the silent steps of their many spindly legs.

The bodies of giant, fossilized trilobites and silt centipedes, with transparent exoskeletons were draped all across the landscape, forever frozen in death, for nothing really rotted in the IDEX MORTAZ. And over all the carcasses and refuse, smaller creatures—silverfish and scurrying six-legged cybernetic rodents—made their homes, feeding off the

forgotten circuitry and launching themselves into the air with rockets fueled by electrol.

The piles of broken technology leaned as they eroded and slowly turned to dust. Upon those trillions of artifacts were, in a sense, chiseled stories both true and false. There were philosophies and theories, both true and false. There were secrets and myths. There were discarded writings from a more stable age, long forgotten. The Archelux, the world, had long ago come undone and become the Shattered Land.

At night, while Able poked about for injured or friendly animals, he would occasionally look up. Most of the sky was covered by the Skybow of the Goliaths—a massive bright white and blue rainbow that stretched from one horizon to the other. There were only ever just a few dim stars, red smudges, in the night sky. The world was never dark in the Desert of Idex MorteZ, lit by the Skybow. Twilight blue on nice nights, crimson when the storms were throwing up dust from the sea.

The mesas only moved at night. Occasionally some errant trader might ride a centipede through the area, looking for schwag or treasure. It is said there are still *books* in the desert, but Able's father always dismissed this as myth. He had scoured the land for ages. Those travelers often make the mistake of making camp near a mesa. When a mesa stands, ripping its long-settled bulk from its crater, stretching out its crustacean legs, its sudden locution can be heard for miles around like thunder. It is a mystery why the mesas of the Desert of Idex MorteZ move at all, but they do, walking for a few hours in the dark of night, lit up by their halos of lightning, only to crash down their entire bulk on a new spot

for reasons known only to them, often crushing what life is unfortunate enough to be where they land.

While it is difficult to tell a dead mesa from a living one, it is not impossible. A dead mesa's legs will close up around itself in a tight, spiny fist; like a dried-out spider. Another sign of life is the ultrasonic noise that living mesas put out. You cannot hear it, but you can feel it in the ground. There are other ways, other signs, but the first sign is the best guarantee of some safety.

Nestled beneath one such dead mesa, there is a rusty shack where a man named Jedediah and his family live. He has a wife, Evo and two sons: Able and Kane. Evo is sick and bedridden in the shack, her body covered in rough blankets and surrounded by pumps and machines that are keeping her alive. The older brother is a nasty brute; one who decided to turn his discomfort and pain on animals and his brother.

Every day, Jedediah and his two sons travel out into the desert where they gathered the ancient detritus, stacking it on carts and hauling the remnants of a lost civilization back to a clearing between the great dead mesa and their homestead. There, they load the stuff on to a brundlex, which scans the junk and then pushes it along a conveyor belt where it is crushed. Out of the back of the brundlex comes blackrock—a fuel that can be sold to the trader caravans and others. With the right technology, blackrock can be used to create small amounts of energy, enough to run other brundlexes. The junk rodents, with their built-in brundlexes thrive on blackrock.

A second substance comes from the process. To nearly anyone, it simply looks like dust. But Able can tell the difference between mere dust and electrol. Jedediah keeps

the electrol for his younger son. The boy has a strange knack for making things with it. It is, without question, a heretical behavior to make the things that Able does. The things... the things-that-move-of-their-own—even the things keeping his wife Evo alive—they are of a spontaneous nature, not of Enubys. Jedidiah thinks, one does not make Enubys in the face of Enubys. Movement without soul is to spit in the face of Enubys, but Jedediah is old and tired and loves his wife, so he looks past Able's abilities and strange creations. Still, Jedediah is suspicious of his adopted son and believes him to be cursed.



Evo, buried among the hissing pumps and ventilators that her son Able made for her, breathes heavily in a tattered and gray linen nightgown. In a fever she has pushed all the blankets aside. A mask on her face covers her nose and mouth and even that only lets her breathe with difficulty. Able, on returning from his nightly sojourn stands in the doorway, listening to the hum of his machines that are keeping her alive. The tall accordion towers surround her, moving asynchronously up and down with tiny huffs and sucking sounds; liquids gush and rush from one tower to another, the paltry air squeezed in to a sphere that spins a liquid and dispenses it over and over again.

Although Able brought the machines into existence, he does not know how they function. It is the way of the electrol that he gives his creations a will and a purpose—though he knows the purpose is unnecessary. As bad as he feels for his

mother, he feels bad for the machines as well. They will never know more than to do one thing over and over and over. This is not what she taught him to do with his talent.

The small back room where his mother lay is a miniature city skyline, filled with tubes and pipes and dirty glass huddled in around the valley of where her body lay on a small, rotting mattress. A single window, high up on the rickety bedroom wall allows in a tea-colored light pushed through a filter of dirt.

Able holds his hands uselessly at his side, then clasps them behind his back, watching as the machines make their symphony. The tired light in the room captures and frames a thousand motes of dust, each in a Brownian dance. He closes his eyes and takes a moment to miss her. He travels backwards in time.

Lost in memories behind closed eyes now, he turns his head up from the floor, playing with bits of rock, to see his mother looking at him with that familiar and perplexed look on her face, wondering at the measure of oddity in him. He sits and plays with electrol creations that roll about on the floor, aimless but excited. Then, as always she smiles and pets his head, light from nowhere silhouetting her head. "You are so special Able. You are one of a kind. I love you."

Able opens his eyes to the reality of the room, filled with colors like mold, mildew, rot, and he is not sure why he remembers the sunlight ever being golden. Outside dust devils come to rattle the windows and pay their respects with obsidian-eyed sorrow. East, further off from Jedidiah's little valley, running against the dun-colored sunrises, marred by

wavy lines of heat, run the shadows of the traders' centipede caravans; slow, rumbling, multi-legged.



Able slips quiet into his room after foraging with his father for the morning. He slides a loop of twine around the door knob and a rusty nail in the wall—a privacy of sorts. Able smiles to himself as he reaches underneath his cot for secret treasure. He smiles because he knows that not all the ideas in the desert are dead, that not all machines have purpose. He has three that he calls his *mistakes*. They are, all three, small orbs of shifting parts and twinkling lights. They are more to him than the machines he's created to assist his mother at his father's command. He has given these "mistakes" only their own purpose.

When Able has spoken to his Father of machines he has made, his Father's answer is always the same: "This is a valley of men and women who have been outspoken against the True nature of things; who have thought their words history! They ignore the shadow of the Skybow and how it blots out the home of the Gods. They have all been wrong! Their petty and unnatural thoughts have come to rest here because ideas cannot outlast, Enubys, the Ungod of Time. All those outspoken against the True Nature of the universe are dead and wrong. They die with their mistakes. And there is no idea ever conceived that does not rest here; in this desert at the end. Enubys is entropy, boy. Entropy is all."

Able's mistakes roll about the floor, lit up, whirring and blinking as they bump into the cot and Able and each other.

He can hear the sound of his mother's kind voice, asking him, *What are you dreaming, Able?* Unlike his other creations, when he made these three, he only tried to imagine what purpose they might want for themselves.

Po, the littlest of the three wants very little. Able amuses himself by walking around the room in a circle and watches as Po follows him everywhere, dodging the other two more rambunctious mistakes, singing a short sweet song of relief when Able sits down and Po can roll up against him and also sit in quiet.

Ka and Nip were much more content to explore the room to its edges, sometimes getting into pushing matches with each other when their paths crossed. In large part they ignored Able and Po except when Able has gathered electrol to feed them. When Able placed his hand down with a small pile of shiny dust, they rolled to him in a hurry and sucked it up with tinks and blips of satisfaction. Able fed Po separately for this reason; the littlest of the three could not compete with its siblings when a feeding happened.

After a feeding, all three of his mistakes would light up, burning with orange and violet and green and pink light that seeped out from between their clockworks and panels. Ka would just grow larger, heavier. Nip sometimes would throw out a new appendage of a disc around itself. Po, though, never changed much, except that his insides, between the cracks in his shell, were more dense than the other two.

Able sat with his arms around his knees, Po by his side, cooing, while Ka and Nip duked it out hyperactively, until the afternoon respite was over. Able's father would call out from the other room, "Boys!" and Able would herd his mistakes into a small burlap sack where they would fuss at first and

then calm down, turn their lights down and “sleep” until later in the day when Able would check on them again.

After today’s feeding Able is delighted and takes in a sharp breath when Nip does something new and extraordinary. After having bumped up against Ka several times, Nip sits still and quivers. Its light fades, and then with a burst of renewed energy, Nip is surrounded by twin halos and lifts itself off the ground! Able’s eyes stretched wide open as Nip hovered over its sibling Ka, circled around it once or twice teasing, and then fluttered back into Able’s hands, as if looking for approval.

Curious, Able held Nip aloft, not touching it. There was a force field between Able’s hands and Nip’s new rings. The rings around Nip glowed and rotated. Able almost shouted out with glee, before a furtive look around in the quiet. He can’t call attention to his creations. Instead, he held Nip close, a neon green light reflecting on his face, and said, “Nice trick, Nip!”

Chapter 2

In which Able is exiled from his Father's lands.

Able dumped an armload of clanking mass of refuse onto the conveyor belt. He watched as the relics rumbled down to the brundlex that crushed and fired it into powders, saddened by the sense that these scraps once carried a purpose he would never now know. Suddenly, painfully, he was awakened from his brief reverie by his brother slamming a cart into his back. Able staggered forward, turning to see his brother's smug grin.

"Get moving, clockworks." The words were a familiar barb, spoken with disdain. Kane hated his little synthetic brother.

Able stepped aside to let his big brother lift the cart's contents on to the conveyor belt. He bent down and rubbed the backs of his ankles. His father approached with another cart, shouted out to Able, "If you don't keep moving in this world, son, it will cause you nothing but pain."

Able didn't reply, instead wandering away from his father and brother off toward one of the mesa's legs. He climbed a

high pile of jetsam to the top and scanned southern horizon for any of the dust clouds kicked up by the traders and their centipedes. This day he saw nothing, just an expanse, broken and empty. Later, after many more armfuls of dross had been crushed and churned and broken, Able and his brother and father loaded a large cart with the blackrock. The cart was as tall as Jedediah, groaning under its weight, and required both Able's brother and his father to pull it down the long, uneven trail to a small station where they pile the blackrock in the hopes that traders would come and leave grain or jerky or cloth or wood in trade. This journey would take several hours, and to Able, their absence was a rare reprieve and the best part of his day.

As Jedediah and Able's brother were preparing to leave, Able—almost without thinking—said, “Father, I think I could make a machine that would pull the cart for you, if you like.”

Jedediah turned to Able, a lean silhouette against the low gray sky. He removed his large-brimmed black hat and wiped his brow. “No.” Able was not sure what to make of the response. He stood dutifully waiting to be dismissed, looking up at his father, whose eyes were so wrinkled and frowning that Able could barely see his pupils. “We do that for your mother because she is *ill*. We men, and you, have our health and it is ungodly to use your—“ Able's father searched the sky for the word, “—your curse.” The word landed with a weight that made Able flinch. “We have our health and should do this work ourselves.”

After a moment, Able's father squatted down to Able's level and said, with more patience, “The Ungod forsook this world because men were lazy. Whatever your creations are, Able, you must not use them idly. You should not use them

at all... unless you must.” Able’s father put his heavy, almost stony hand on Able’s shoulder. “You can still be an ungodly man, my son, but to do so you must be humble about what you make.” Able looked to the ground and thought about the mistakes in his room, hidden beneath his cot. Jedediah’s grip tightened slightly. “Humble yourself before what you’ve been given, or it’ll own you.”

After his father and brother had left, leaving the air heavy with the silence of the brundlex, and after he had checked on his mother, Able sat on the floor of his room among his mistakes. For weeks now, after a feeding, Nip, the most curious of his creations now, fluttered about in the dim light. And now, for the last few days, Nip had taken to flying up next to a small window, high in the room. Nip would sit at the window, bumping against the glass with a faint, rhythmic insistence. Able, stared up at Nip said, “There’s nowhere to go, Nip.”

Nip flitted several times from the window to Able, but when Able tried to hold the flying mistake, the little machine whisked off back to the glass. After a while, Nip did what it did that first time it transformed, hovering in place and quivering, its glow intensifying, pulsing with a sharp, frantic rhythm, growing brighter and brighter. The light became so bright that even little Po came out from behind Able to look. Able sat up, alarmed. (Ka was paying no attention whatsoever to his sibling’s seeming tantrum.) The light grew searing, casting vivid green shadows across the walls. Then, with a flash, Nip had sparked a third, new halo, and in a fury, Nip’s glow surged bright green and in a flash Nip shot through the window, shattering the glass in a burst of sound and fragments.

Able's eyes grew wide in horror. "No, no, no, Nip! Nip!" He scrambled up and ran to the wall. The window was too high for him to reach. He strained to see if he could make out the mistake anywhere in the sky. It was bad enough if his father saw the broken window, but that was not what made Able's chest ache. His mistake had left him and in a strange way it felt like a piece of himself had left, lost to the vast, uncaring world beyond.



The broken window, much to Able's relief, was blamed on an errant rock shaken loose from the mesa. Able escaped punishment, which usually consisted of Jedidiah having him break something he loved—it hardly mattered what. It was a grim ritual that Jedediah justified as "teaching humility."

Able scoured the towers of junk for days searching for Nip but seeing no signs anywhere. Each morning, as he trudged around the mesa collecting refuse for the brundlex, he kept his eyes sharp for the faintest glimmer of green. Every night, when the sun set, despite the danger, he snuck outside hoping that the dim, blue, light of the Skybow would be enough to let him see the outline of the compact, ringed machine. Or that in this world of shifting shadows and whispers, Nip's light might pierce the darkness. Unlike his family, he didn't require sleep. He would stay out late. Still, the desert was vast and his efforts felt futile.

One day, after his father and brother had hauled the big cart away, he open the simmering brundlex to collect its

cache of electrol to feed Po and Ka. Without Nip, the two remaining mistakes had thrived on the surplus. Po, still small, had grown sturdier, while Ka—always the glutton—was now the size of Able’s head, its mechanisms clicking and whirring with disconcerting vigor.

When Able went to feed them, he was ecstatic to open his sack and see that there were once again three mistakes.

Three. Po, Ka and...

“Nip!” Able whispered, pulling the third creation into the light. It wasn’t quite the Nip he remembered. This Nip was altered—half the size of Ka now, no longer a smooth sphere but encircled by a gleaming ring of polished metal, its surface bristling with spires that glinted in the dim sunlight coming through the high, still broken window.

He had no doubt it was Nip. No sooner than all the three mistakes emerged, Nip and Ka resumed their rivalry, colliding with one another in a mechanical dance of clicks and whirs. Nip hovered inside its new ring but it wasn’t long at all before its three halos appeared and it was off the ground again. Nip rushed by Able’s face a few times, even faster than it had been when it had left before. It hovered in front of Able and Able gently put out his hands to hold it. When he cupped it gently, Nip seemed to hum with satisfaction, glowing faintly under his touch. But it wasn’t content to rest for long. It tugged at him insistently, pulling him toward the wall with the broken window.

“What is it, Nip?” Able asked, already following.

When he grasped the vertical ring around Nip, its purpose became startlingly clear. The mistake lifted him clean off the ground, its augmented strength carrying him upward with

surprising grace. Able scrambled onto the window ledge, his heart pounding in exhilaration. Nip made the strangest cheering tweet. “Wow, Nip. Neat!” laughing as the mistake chirped in triumph.

Nip wasn't finished. Able tightened his grip as Nip hauled him out the of window. Po and Ka watched and made songs of ah, like watching fireworks. Nip whisked Able far above the cabin, around and above the great spiny legs of the dead mesa and with a loud triumphant sequence of chirps, pulling Able into the open sky. Able gasped as the ground fell away, the world transforming beneath him into a sprawling tableau of peaks, valleys, and winding paths carved into the desert. Nip carried him in a wide arc, soaring up the side of the mesa until it gently landed him at the top.

Able was ecstatic now, containing himself only just, as he stood on top of the mesa and looked all around at the yellow afternoon sky, the Skybow of the Goliaths shimmering faintly gray in the tea-stained sunlight. He could see so far he didn't even know what he was looking at. Far below, the junk fields spread like a patchwork quilt, each pile and path blending into a strange, almost beautiful landscape, like a circuit board unto itself. To the east, a peculiar shape caught his eye—a colossal horn of sorts, its surface sprouting smaller, spiraling horns. It shimmered faintly in the distance, hazy on the horizon like a mirage.

Closer, something stranger: a beetle the size of a house, its head buried deep in the ground, its legs moving aimlessly in the air. Smoke curled lazily from its carapace, and surrounding it were a cluster of hexagonal domes, their metallic surfaces gleaming. Lights blinked and flickered

among them, casting tiny beacons of intrigue into the vast, empty desert.

Able's heart raced as he took it all in. The mesa, the junk, the desert—all of it felt suddenly small compared to what might lie beyond. Nip buzzed at his side, a soft, eager hum, as if to say, *This is just the beginning.*



Able sat with Nip on top of the mesa for a long time, marveling at the view, Nip an oscillation of halos casting ripples of light across the dust-scoured plateau. The world stretched vast and unknowable in every direction, a patchwork of metallic mounds and jagged canyons. Northward, the horizon buckled under a shifting tide of brown clouds, billowing with a strange, rhythmic pulse like breath. Able squinted at it, unsettled. "What do you suppose that is, Nip?" he murmured, the words slipping into the wind like stray thoughts. Nip chirped softly, its response more question than answer.

He walked in a circle around the top of the mesa and decided to lie down on his belly and peer over the edge at his own house, hundreds of feet below. The shanty cabin looked like a toy, crooked against the waste. But then his stomach flipped when to his horror, he saw that the big cart was back. "Oh no, Nip! My father is back!" He reached out to grab Nip by its ring and pulled it close. "Please, Nip, take me back! You have to take me back!"

The little construct gave an uncertain trill.

“Please, Nip! Down! Back down?”

In a panic, Able grabbed Nip with both hands and started to climb down. Nip shrieked and its panels all flared open all over its sides, releasing a flash of light, spinning its halos and straining to slow their fall as they scrabble-jumped to the ground. The landing was hard but safe. Able’s heart leapt out of his chest in a way that he had never felt before. He had been afraid of his father many times, but that fear was nauseating and creeping; this fear was sudden. Nip ripped itself out of Able’s grasp and flew to his face spinning and chirping in agitated bursts, scolding him with mechanical vigor, but Able could pay no attention.

Running around the side of the cabin, then inside, the smell of sweat and hot metal greeted him. A sharp, rhythmic clanging was coming from his room. There he found the door open wide and his brother crouched over Ka with a chunk of blackrock in his hand. Kane was beating Ka with it. Ka moaned. The mistake was battered, its once-smooth surface dented and cracked, wobbling weakly as Kane raised the rock for another strike. Po hid under the bed crying.

“No!” Able roared, throwing himself forward. His hands closed around Kane’s arm, his synthetic strength overwhelming the older boy’s muscles. They crashed to the floor in a tangle of limbs, Kane snarling, “What’s wrong with you, Able? Are these things yours? Did you use your *curse*?” Kane wriggled free long enough to snatch the blackrock again and fling it at Ka. Able screamed, his voice ragged, “Stop it! Please!”

Nip blazed red and darted at Kane, slamming into his face with a crackling burst of energy. Kane cried out, swatting at the construct as it zipped back for another strike. “C’mon,

Able, what are these things? How do they work?" He reached for Ka, but Able struck him with a fist and knocked him to the floor.

"No!" Able yelled, having lost all sense of thought, his vision having gone red. "Please! Stop!"

Jedediah stormed into the room on hearing the commotion and saw his one son bleeding and the other waving maniacally at a heresy—Jedediah knew what it was the moment he saw it. He shouted, "The Ungod forsakes us!" With one hand, he grabbed Able by the neck and hoisted him clear off the floor away from his now unconscious brother. Able's legs kicked uselessly as Jedediah shouted like a thunderclap, "What heresy is this?"

Nip, hovering near Ka, touched its fellow mistake gently and then turned back to a bright red color and flew in a flash at Jedediah's face, crackling with bolts of energy, its halos shimmering with sparks. Shocked, Jedediah dropped Able to the ground to swat at Nip who electrocuted Jedediah every time the old man's stony hands struck it.

Able hit the floor, coughing, but wasted no time. He snatched up Ka and Po, slipping both into his bag as Jedediah bellowed curses. As Able ran through the main room to the door, Nip changed from red to orange and slowly hovered away from Jedediah, who stalked the mistake as it floated away, keeping his distance. "This is vile, Able! This is evil! I warned you about your curse and you ignored me, you ungrateful wretched invention!"

As Able reached the threshold, he froze. From there he could see that his mother had sat up and was staring back and forth from him to Nip to Jedediah. "Mother," he choked,

the word catching in his throat. For a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. He backed outside and Nip zipped between him and as his father, a cloud of cacophony. Jedediah, looming taller than ever, his fury filling the silence. “You are a curse on this house! Your mother's heart was too big! You are no son of mine! Get out! Get out of this house! Get out of my valley! Never return!”

Able stumbled out the door, the weight of Po and Ka pulling on his shoulders, Nip buzzing at his side like a tiny, furious guardian. He looked back once, at his mother's haunted face and his father's towering rage, then turned toward the vast emptiness beyond the cabin. His legs carried him forward, away from the only home he'd ever known, toward the horizon of dust and shadows. The sky, smeared with the browns and reds of an impending storm, seemed to swallow him whole.

Chapter 3

*In which Able wanders the Desert Idex MorteZ with
Po, Ka and Nip*

With no direction to follow other than his father's bony index finger jabbing like a dagger away, Able trudged toward the upside-down beetle. He didn't know why he was heading there, other than the faint idea that it was better than staying. With its mysterious half-buried hives, there might be something for him to—he didn't know what. Suddenly, as he had granted his mistakes, he also had no purpose. At the bottom of the hill between his Father's cabin and the brummagem breaking brundlex, he quickly swept up as much electrol as he could find. When the bag felt heavy enough, he hoisted it over his shoulder and started moving again.

Scrambling over a path that wound through the graveyard of thought and invention; piles of cartridges, motherboards, antenna, discs, with the sack of electrol, Able with Po and Ka stowed in a bag, with Nip flitting about his head, he inched his way through small paths that had been carved out over many years by his family and others who mined the scrap. Hours passed like this, and by the time he stumbled into a

crater—an immense hollow where a mesa had once rested—the sky had deepened to a bruised purple.

The crater stretched wide and jagged, its edges like the tissue of an ancient wound. Able slid down its slope, loose shards of metal clattering beneath his boots. At the bottom, he stopped, finally letting the weight of the day press down on him. He dropped his bags and sat with his back against the crater wall. Nip hovered high above, its green-yellow light beaming like a satellite.

It was then that Able realized the full scope of his dilemma. He was alone, at night, when the mesas traveled (crushing everything underfoot). He did not know where he was going. He had no reason to go anywhere. He turned to the only thing he had: the sack of electrol. He might as well feed his mistakes. As he sat and fed Po, Ka and Nip, more problems surfaced. And of all of them, the worst was that he was not sure if he would ever see his mother again.

As usual, Po quickly re-electroled and rolled to Able's backside to hide behind him. Poor Ka, though, was in bad shape. It had gashes in its side that were leaking a vermillion dust. Nip was high above the crater, about in its center, hovering. When Able looked up, Nip was the brightest thing in the night sky. There were few stars to be seen, not that Able knew what stars were. He thought, *maybe they're siblings of Nip*?

He attended to Ka, taking a handful of electrol from his sack and pouring it on and around Ka, who seemed to swell up a tad and then sigh, and then shudder. As it did so, Ka retracted in size a smidge and then the gashes disappeared from its surface. Ka brightened in color.

"Feeling better, then?" Able asked, and Ka spun in a circle and chirped.

"At least one of us is doing all right." He reached out and pet Ka, who reacted in no particular way, just rolling in angled circles, appearing to enjoy his renewed smooth surface.

Able peered under his arm at Po. Po never grew in size or transformed like Nip. "My father said I was a runt. Are you a runt?"

Po growled.

Finally Able turned a handful of electrol up to the sky, looking up at Nip. Nip made no noise, did not move closer. Ka was bright enough that it never really got dark at the bottom of the crater, and Able curled up at the bottom of the ridge and slept, hoping that mesas did not come to rest at the same place twice.



The next morning, Able found himself standing at the edge of the crater, watching the upside-down beetle loom ever closer, its spindly legs frozen mid-scramble, jutting skyward like the dead remains of a colossal, alien arachnid. The wind tore at him as he moved, carrying with it the endless whispers of the valley, secrets murmured through the currents of dust and grit. The world had never seemed so vast, and for the first time, Able felt like something small and strange within it. He pressed on, though his curiosity outpaced his stride.

Also that morning Able awoke with Po and Ka close by his side, but Nip, back down from his vigil, was scrounging around in the sack of electrol. Able tried to drag him out of the bag to make sure that he would not eat all of it, but Nip was too heavy. Instead, Able had to pull the bag off Nip, revealing a very swollen machine, faceted like a jewel, angles rising and falling in mesmerizing patterns.

Able shooed Po and Ka (who were rolling in a perimeter around Nip) back into their bag. He picked up what was left of the electrol, and then began to make his way to the opposite side of the crater. But when it became obvious that Nip was not following, Able turned and walked back to him. "Are you sick? Did you eat too much?"

Nip hummed faintly like a restaurant patron on their fourteenth waffle.

"I'm not leaving without you. You need to come along." Able tried to push Nip with his shoe, but the mistake wouldn't move. Able squatted down to Nip's level. "You don't *look* sick." He reached out to grab Nip's outer ring, hoping to be able to drag the little machine, but much to his surprise, the ring was warm and removable. Able lifted the outer ring up and with a loud *brrraaaat* Nip's center ring and then the core of the mistake rose up from the ground as if pulled by puppet strings. All of Nip's parts were in line with the outer ring raised over Able's head. Nip's core spun wildly in midair, vacillating violently from a smooth sphere to a pointed dodecahedron while the spinning center ring made an infrasonic whump. Nip's center shimmered like a rainbow, one color chasing another all across its core. The ring began to pull up on Able's hand and lifted his arm up

over his shoulder. Able hung on, but wasn't sure he should. "We tried this before, Nip! I don't think it's a good idea!"

The core spun until it was bright white, the humming turning into a melodic chord, then a flash, then two metallic ribbons burst out from the core and dropped down to wrap around Able's waist and behind his legs. The tones that Nip was emitting grew louder and higher, as Nip began to lift Able off the ground. As Nip beamed and sounded out, Able found himself sitting comfortably in a swing seat made of the metallic ribbons. Then, Nip's music ceased, and light burst out of it, returning it to a bright green shimmering. Its core took the form of a flattened dodecahedron, cool and luminous, and the sound returned to a low hum. Before Able knew it, they were above the crater and racing off in the air toward the upside-down beetle.



The descent was nothing like the chaotic tumble from the dead mesa nights ago. This landing had grace to it. Nip brought Able to the ground with care about ten feet away from the beetle. Only now, it didn't look so much like a beetle. Up close, it revealed itself to be something else entirely. Its legs were long and strangely smooth, less like insect limbs and more like enormous thumbs. They didn't thrash in desperation as he had expected but swung gently, pendulous and deliberate. Each leg ended in a lazy turning fan, as if the thing were idling. Nip retracted its ribbons and hovered in place. Able reached up and patted him, "Thanks, Nip. That might've taken us days to walk."

They had landed on top of a hill, and from where they were, Able could see new things. For one, he could see the top of the dead mesa near his father's house, smaller now than he had ever seen it. Knowing he could travel faster with the help of Nip, he felt less upset about being away from home and his mother. Maybe his father would calm down. He could go back later.

Looking down the hill, away from his home, he saw the structures that looked like hives. They were covered in hexagonal windows, almost the whole of them being dark glass, their purpose inscrutable. Not too far from those structures, he could see a figure digging in the ground with methodical determination. *Well*, Able thought, *I guess I could ask where I am.*

Chapter 4

In which Able meets the Lady in Green.

As he approached he saw that the digging figure was an old woman clad in a green cloak so bright it seemed to defy the dust and gloom of the place. Able wasn't sure how to start an interaction. He generally only spoke when spoken to. With his metallic feet crunching the rocks, she must have heard him coming, but she did not look up. He stood still for several more moments now near her, and then, "Hello. Could you tell me where I am?"

Without looking up, she said, "Did you know that Enubys ate one of his children?"

Able was struck silent by the unexpected question.

"Do you even know who Enubys is?" She still did not look up.

"Yes. Enubys ate Levy, his son, the blacksmith. He ate him whole."

"You know that, do you?"

"My father told me."

“Enubys’s place in the skybow is over there.” She pointed to the Skybow, where on the eastern horizon, there was a mark. “And he wouldn’t take kindly to you gallivanting about on whatever that contraption of yours is.”

“I... I couldn’t really help it,” Able said with a shrug.

She stopped digging and looked at him surprised. “You couldn’t help it?”

“Not really.”

Finally, the old woman looked up, directly at Nip. “I suppose it has a mind of its own, hmm?”

Able just shrugged again.

The old woman furrowed her brow and with a great effort pulled herself up from the ground, bringing her digging instrument up as a cane. She was so hunched over that she was almost at eye level with Able. “So how do you feel about Enubys eating Levy?”

“Seems sad.”

She raises her makeshift cane and pokes it in Nip’s direction—Nip flits back away—“And how did you come by such a thing?”

“I made it.”

Bringing her cane down, and stroking her chin with her other hand, she closes one eye and looks Able up and down. “I find that unlikely.”

Able was shocked, but replied, “It’s very true.” He pulled out his sack with the other mistakes, and poured them on the ground. “That one,” pointing to Nip, “is Nip. These other two are Po and Ka.”

"Ha ha! They have names, do they?"

"It seemed... appropriate? To name them?"

"Maybe. At any rate, I need to eat. I take it you do not."

"No."

"Then, I suggest we go inside and I eat and we talk, little one."

"My name is Able."

"Oh, it has a name too! Well, my name is Ghendra." She turned to walk away, paused, and turned back, "That is not my only name, but it's the only one you need to know."



The inside of Ghendra's home was crowded tight, filled with a hodge-podge of knick-knacks and thingamabobs, all piled and stacked and pushed into corners in no particular order or pattern. She cleared out an area and a cleared off a chair and offered it to Able to sit. Able picked up Po and set him in his lap as Ka rolled around the base of the chair, bumping into things. Nip had stayed outside. Once seated, there was silence for a time until Able began asking questions, and he found that once he'd begun, he had no end of them in mind.

He asked about the beetle. It was some kind of "moisture collector" and had something to do with gathering water and some other things that Able didn't quite understand. He asked about the hives and was told that they were greenhouses—houses for plants. He remarked that they were

not green, and she replied that they were on the inside. She lay a wooden bowl of stew of mushrooms on the table. Po, had been bouncing on Able's lap, seemingly wanting up onto the table, so Able lifted him up and let him roam about there. All eyed the stew. It was nothing like the food Able's father made, but it must be for eating. Able stared curiously as Ghendra put spoonfuls of the stuff into her mouth.

After a time, Ghendra finished her bowl of stew and burped. She pushed it away from herself. "Now it is time for you to answer some of my questions, little one. How did you come to acquire these little friends of yours?" Able explained that he had not acquired them but had made them from leftover material from his father's brundlex. He wasn't supposed to make them. He told Ghendra what had happened with his father and how it had brought him here. Mostly, she listened, but at one point she mumbled when Able spoke about his father, "Witless old fool. Don't know what she ever saw in him." Able was not sure of whom she was speaking. As she asked more questions, Po made his way around the table near her, veering away when she first reached out to touch it. Able pet Po and said, "It's fine Po; she's a friend." And after that, Po allowed Ghendra to poke him and roll him over to examine him.

"I imagine, then, that you have built other constructs like this one, but they were different, no? More like my beetle—as you called it, yes? Mechanical?"

"Yes."

"But these three that travel with you, what is different?"

Able squirmed in his seat, unsure of the answer. "I didn't—or I don't—tell them what to do."

"Yes." Ghendra said with a sigh, "Such a boring life has a mechanical that has an intent—a purpose. I suppose it is good to have a purpose—not everything does—but then a purpose does cause one to repeat actions over and over. Can you imagine being such a machine?"

Able thought on this for a while. He did not know of any purpose that he had or had been given. His father spoke of their purpose at times, but Able never felt it in his body. "I guess not."

Ghendra smiled and arose from the table and said, "Let's check in on the garden."



Once inside the greenhouse, Able felt the strangest sensation—that his surface was covered in some substance. It made the air feel heavy and cooled him. All around him now, he could see all manner of pipes that shot up from the ground, split in any number of directions and ended in bright green plates. He was baffled. He'd never seen so much color, let alone felt such a sense of life. Ghendra explained that the thing he felt on his skin was moisture—very thin water—and that the many things he saw were called plants, and that though they did not move or talk, they were indeed alive, and in fact, she pointed out, they tended to make more of themselves. They needed water and light, and beyond that, they would "do their own thing." In fact, she pointed out, the moisture that he felt was, in fact, their breath. Able marveled at their beauty.

As Ghendra and Able shuffled down winding paths between all the plants, Ghendra spoke, "It is said, that a long time ago, back when the world was still balanced, these plants grew *everywhere*. They did not need houses to thrive. They didn't need mechanicals to find water for them, for water was everywhere, said to even fall from the sky. That was when the council was whole. That was when the codification of the world was clear. But, as you know, from digging up garbage with your father, the codification has been broken for some time."

Able followed Ghendra as she walked, but didn't really follow her speech. *Water falling from the sky?*

Even more amazing, some of the plants had small bowls of bright colors, seemingly folded together as if out of paper. Ghendra called these flowers.

"Look at how much color you've created! It's fantastic!"

"I didn't really create it. I built the houses and gathered the water and planted the seeds. The rest was up to Enubys's wife, Gaea."

"I did not know that Enubys had a wife."

"No doubt. Many believe she left this world long ago. But that's not entirely true. She is merely sleeping."

The pair stayed in the garden for a time, Ghendra tending to the plants, and Able examining them all, breathless at the sight of yellow and blue and pink and green.

After a time, Ghendra and Able returned to the house. Able sat at the table again and Ghendra joined him, picking up Po to examine it further. It chattered with nervousness as she held him. "This one makes me curious." She spoke to Po,

"Your brothers seem content to absorb things and change, but you—you've been remembering things haven't you?" Po shook in Ghendra's thin fingers, seemingly spinning on the inside, until she set him down. Once on the table, Po rolled in a circle and then, three small feet unfolded from him, setting on the table to hold it still. Then, a split formed in its center, and a section opened up revealing a gem that was filled with light. The light stretched up from Po forming many dots that danced and coalesced into a picture of Ghendra's own face. "Oh my." A three dimensional blue and green light picture of Ghendra rotated above Po.

Able was stunned. "He's never done that before."

"I see." Ghendra got up from the table and made her way over to a stack of papers and books.

Able reached out across the table and grabbed Po and dragged it over in front of him. Po chirped and suddenly the light picture danced and changed into a picture of Able. Able laughed and said, "Po, how come you never did this before?" Once more the light changed and danced, turning deep purple, and creating the visage and Able's father's face. "Oh," said Able, sadly.

Ghendra set a heavy tome down on the table and let it fall open. She grabbed Po once again and turned it upside down. Po made a churlish sound and the light spread out over the book. After a moment the light fell flat on the book and the letters and characters began to also glow. Po made many, many noises, a rapid sequence, all in a quick succession. And then, after a moment, light from the characters in the book faded, and Po uttered a low bell sound. Ghendra laughed and turned the page, whereupon the whole process happened again.

"What is he doing?"

Ghendra smiled and looked at Able, again turning the page, "He's eating." She picked Po up after the third page turn and turned him feet-down on the table. "Now, show us."

Po's lights danced about and in as many colors as a rainbow, he quickly illuminated a series of shapes and objects—a castle, a mesa, some tools, a wave, creatures—all so fast that Able could barely make out what they were.

"My, my," whispered Ghendra.

"I don't understand," said Able, his brow furrowed. "How is he eating pictures when there are none in your—" Able looked at the book on the table.

"Book," Ghendra said. "It is a book and it contains information."

"What is that?"

"Information is many things, Able. The world is filled with it, really. Your name, for instance, is information."

"My name?"

"Yes. Just a moment." Ghendra got up again and knocked a stack of papers and books to the ground. She picked up little Po and set him on the messy pile. "Have at it, little one." And Po's feet grew longer as he held himself over the jumbles of characters and began rapidly tracing them with lights.

Turning back to Able, Ghendra said, "If I wanted to talk about someone in the world, how would I do it if no one had names? I can't speak to you about my plants because even though they have names, you don't know them. But a name gives things a kind of uniqueness. Names are information. They aren't the only kind of information—there are many

kinds of information. Po, it would seem, eats information. You and I also eat information, but we do it differently. In fact, the way you and I do it is even different from each other. And when we want to remember or trade information, we have to talk about it. Po, he can simply show us what he's thinking."

Able nodded. "I see," he said, although he didn't really.

Ghendra made a quizzical face and then asked Able, "What do you feed your little mistakes?"

Able reached into his sack and pulled out the smaller bag of electrol dust. "It comes from my Father's well. He says it's just dirt but I call it electrol."

Picking up the bag, Ghendra removed a handful of the shimmering dust and let it pour from her hand back into the bag. She set it down for a moment and got up, walked to an armoire, and pilfered through some drawers. Retrieving a small tube, she returned to the table. She held the tube top to her eye and once again pulled a handful of the substance out of the sack and poured it back. Able could see her eye without the tube grow wide. She removed the tube from her eye and blinked a few times, removing a charm from her mind. "Most people in this world of ours are fools, Able." She handed the bag back to him. "They would think this substance useless, as your father did. But it is special—very special. And you, since you know what to do with it, and I assume, how to find it, are also very special."

Able looked at the bag, noticing how light it had become. "Yes. I was thinking that, maybe after my father—maybe he wouldn't be mad anymore—and I could go home to get more."

"No. Your father is also a fool. You should seek out others like yourself. There are those that can do what you do, and they can show you more." She reached over and picked Po up and said it on the table again, where's legs shrunk down, and where the light again formed a picture, this time of a brundlex. "Bah," said Ghendra, "a primitive mechanical at best." She leaned in close to Po and said, "Show me the Ultracircus."

Po quivered and whirred and the picture of the brundlex transformed into an eight-legged machine with a plate on top of it, and on top of the plate, castle walls surrounding tall glass buildings. Though the image stayed in one place, the city on legs seemed to walk through the air. Ghendra spoke again, "You must find this place, Able. You must seek out your kind."

"I don't know. Is it far?"

"Who knows? I do not. It moves and I don't. However, I know someone who can start you in the right direction—a friend, of sorts. But I think he would be interested in helping you. His name is Gef. He is a trader. You will find him near the Delphine's scar.

"I don't know. I should go home. I need to help my mother."

"Your mother, Evo; I do not think there is anything you can do for her, Able."

Able wondered how Ghendra knew his mother's name, but not for long. "I don't know."

Ghendra made a bed out of blankets for Able. He lay down and watched as, across the room, Po continued to shine lights on books and papers and sometimes make

squeals and beeps. Ka rolled over next to Able and nuzzled him. Able asked him, "What do you do?" to which Ka replied by purring. Able smiled and stared at the ceiling, marveling at how strange his life had become.

In the morning, Able gathered a now quiet and spherical Po and Ka and his sack. He crept about the house and saw Ghendra sleeping in another room. He made his way out of the house and looked up to see Nip hovering far above in the dusky morning light. He waved Nip down, and said to him. "Take me home, please, Nip."



When they arrived at his father's house, Able, from the sky could see his brother outside digging in the ground. He had dug a large, long hole. Nip set Able down away from the house, near a large outcropping of junk where Able could see the house. As his brother continued digging, Able's father came out of the house with something in his arms—something wrapped in sheets. In his heart, Able knew what was in his father's arms—*who* was in his father's arms.

Able watched as his father lowered the body into the hole. The two nomex stood quietly over it, Able's father having removed his hat, speaking, though Able could not hear him. Then, after a time, the two of them began filling in the hole. Po and Ka made soft noises in the sack. Nip hovered close by. Able grew immensely sad and wished he could cry.



Able had returned to Ghendra's house in the afternoon and she could see from his posture what he had discovered. She felt poorly for him and hugged him. But she also knew that it would only be days before the caravan would leave at the next approach of Delphine, and then it would be many months before the traders built a new bridge and returned to Idex Morte.

"You'll find the caravan to the east of here. You'll know them when you see them. There, among them, you will find Gef. Tell him that I sent you. And perhaps, don't show him or the rest of the caravan your mistakes—not right away. Don't show anyone the mistakes until you are sure the time is right. You'll know when."

"Gef has been searching for some time for an object called the Cyclopedia. Tell him you can help him find it in exchange for taking you out of Idex Morte."

"But I don't even know what that is."

"It won't matter; not right away. Just know that he will help you, and then you will be on your way. And remember that Po knows things."

Chapter 5

In which Able finds Gef and the Caravan and Delphine.

As they flew through the air again, Able comfortable in Nip's seat, the little machine's smooth arcs through the skies were a perfect contrast to the storm of thoughts in Able's mind. He could think of little else but his mother's eyes—kind, steady, and impossibly far away now. He missed her desperately. In his lap, sat his sack with both Ka and Po and now a great deal of sweetbread and something from the plants that Ghendra called fruit and vegetables. She said he could use them to trade for things he might need. He was glad to have it, glad to have met Ghendra, but he was also sad and scared. Never in his life had he known so little about what would come next.

In a way, he supposed, he had never known what would come next. In the Idex Morteze, days only seemed to repeat themselves without much change. But now, having lost his mother, having seen his mistakes do amazing things right before his eyes, having met Ghendra and seen bright, new colors... now, it seemed like his life was changing hourly.

There was wonder in it that he liked, but anxiety in not knowing what came next.

In the distance, he spotted a massive crack across the land—a huge wound in the ground that was wide and dark and stretched from one end of the horizon to the other. Before it, the refuse of Idex Mortez spilled everywhere, like old, broken dreams, but as they flew the piles of ancient inventions and artifacts grew shorter and shorter in height until there was just barren ground. Nearby the massive rift, Able saw a mass of movement, a chaotic camp sprawled between the diminishing junk and the abyss. He could see yurts, and people moving about, and massive creatures of a kind he had never seen or heard of before. Some were two-legged, with rough skin and feathers. Others were long and made of sections that had many, many legs.

Able, looked up. "Nip, don't get too close. Let's just land nearby." Nip chirped a gleeful reply and flew lower to the ground, whisking them over the shrinking hills of debris. Nip dipped low and landed with a satisfied purr near the edge of the camp.

"Now, Ghendra said to keep you all hidden, so I need you to hide, okay, Nip?"

Nip hovered for a moment, its lights dimming as if sulking. It buzzed with some annoyance, but then sucked up the ribbons into its ring of light, and then swallowed the light into its center. Nip turned a dull, metallic orange and dropped out of the air onto the ground with a thunk. It made a sound like a huff. "Well, all right," said Able. Nip was now just a dodecahedron and Able rolled him into the sack with Po and Ka who chirped different greetings. Nip made a farting sound.

Able hefted the whole, now **very** heavy sack onto his back and set off in the direction of the caravan. It amazed Able how quickly he had become used to the idea of flight. One day he had no idea that such a thing was even possible. Then another day he was breathless and amazed that it was. And now, he disliked walking and carrying heavy stuff.

As he trudged into the caravan camp, he saw people pulling down the tents and tending to the massive creatures in their midsts, tying sacks and crates and saddles to them. The animals, which had looked so small from the air, were actually massive, many times his own height, and bigger and longer than even his father's house. The desert clothes clad traders gave him suspicious looks, eyes hidden behind goggles, or just pointed at him, muttering. When he asked them about a man named Gef, they would say nothing and turn away. Able felt a very odd feeling. It wasn't quite fear; something like it but more creeping. Finally, though, one man, looking him up and down, shrugged and pointed at another man who was tying bags to one of the many-legged mounts. "Thank you," said Able to no reply.

The man named Gef was dressed in heavy robes and wearing a mask with glass eyes and a large-brimmed hat. When Able got over to him, he forgot himself and said instead, "What is that?"

Unlike any of the other traders, this man seemed to take an immediate interest in Able. The man paused and turned toward Able with some curiosity. "What is what?"

"Um... your animal."

"Have you never seen a centipede before?" Gef pat the monster on the side.

Able silently shook his head. The man scratched his head underneath his wide-brimmed hat. "Well," he said, "It's a centipede." Able nodded.

"You're a pretty far ways off from anywhere, kid."

"Oh. Well, I'm looking for a man named Gef."

"Okay. That'd be me." He stared down at Able from behind his mask. "And you are?"

"My name is Able. Ghendra sent me."

"Ghendra, huh?" The man turned and tightened some straps on the bags on the centipede. "Okay."

"She said that you were looking for a—um—a cyclo..."

"A cyclopedia?"

"Yes. She said I could help you find it."

"She said that, huh? Now did she mean that you **want** to help me or that you **could** help me?"

Able thought. "Um... she said I **could** help you. And she said that in exchange you could help me pass Delphine's scar."

"Really? So you know something about the Cyclo?"

"No."

Gef chuckled. "Wonder what that old bat is up to..."

Able thought on it. "She's growing plants."

Gef laughed louder. "Yeah, we all know that. Won't trade seeds for nothin', so what of it? What do you got in that sack?"

"Fruitsandvegetables."

"Fruits and vegetables."

"Yes."

"No, kid. They're two different things. There's fruit, and then there's vegetables."

Able stared blankly.

"Well, you're the only one around here who's got any of that, so that's something."

"Okay," Able said.

The pair just stared at one another for a moment.

Gef squatted down to be on Able's level. He looked around the crowd and pulled his mask up. His face was like Able's!—metallic, with no nose and glowing cyan eyes. "You are a curious thing, little man."

Able just stared.

"Where did you come from again?"

"The Desert of Idex Mortex."

"Sure. I doubt that."

"I did! My mother..." Able paused and looked down, then continued, "My mother and Father lived out there and farmed."

"Your mother and father?" Asked Gef. "You have a mother and father?"

"Yes."

"And are they like you? Like me?"

"What do you mean?"

Gef scratched his head again. "Did they eat and drink water?"

"Yes."

"But see, you and I don't."

"I know."

"Okay. Huh. Mother and father, huh? Well, if you don't know nothin' about the Cyclo, I don't know how she thinks you could help. But then who knows what she had in mind—probably something. She knows things."

"She showed me lots of books."

"Is that right?" Gef paused.

Able panicked, and did something he did not like, he lied. He thought of Po, and said, "I've memorized all of them."

Gef looked at his mount for a moment and then turned to Able again. "Well, you don't weigh much, so I suppose it's not too much trouble. Get yourself up on my pede and find a place to secure that sack of yours. We're getting out of here pretty quick. Delphine is coming real soon."



The bridge across the chasm was long, thin, and badly built. Mostly it was constructed of steel wires shot across the crack with massive crossbows. Everything on top of that had been knitted with steel cable. The trader's camp had entirely disappeared; now there was just a traffic jam of centipedes waiting to cross the rickety steel-sewn bridge one at a time. The riders shouted at one another about their place in line. From what Able could tell some people had more reason to cross than others. At times there were families onboard of massive insects and yet the order of the crossing was only respected in that it should be one at a time.

With not that many pedes in front of them, Gef called back to Able (barely hanging on to the chitin of the monster) that "We'll get to the other side soon! Until then, hang on tight to Arthra."

"What's an Arthra?" Able yelled back.

"You're sitting on her!"

And then, the order broke apart. Someone riding something other than a pede—a kind of steam effusing minimesa—came racing down the edge of the chasm, screaming, "Delphine's coming!" The world seemed to lurch as every driver of every pede now rushed the bridge and began crossing without waiting, the entirety of the bridge beginning to vibrate and undulate with the thousand legs of tens of different centipedes. Gef somehow convince Arthra to muscle onto the bridge ahead of many other riders. Able noticed she was one of the larger pedes and seemed to be carrying much less.

He looked all about the confusion to try to figure out what was going on. He couldn't see Gef's face while sitting behind him, but he could see panic in the face of the driver behind them. He wanted to grab on to Nip and fly, but the words of Ghendra kept in his head. *Do not reveal them too soon. You'll know when.*

Then Able began to see changes in the light all around. The whole time he had been with Gef and waited in line for the bridge, the light was normal just like at home. There were clouds in the sky, and from them light. Now, a shadow had overtaken the horizon. It was different. The shadow was like a new horizon. It was moving, stretching out from one end of the chasm and reaching towards the riders and the

bridge. He could see shadows down in the chasm changing, lengthening.

He could feel the shadow in the center of his body, so much so that he even thought he could hear it. He looked towards the source of the dark at the end of the chasm and saw what looked like a sandstorm, only it was getting taller, and unlike a sandstorm, it was curved. A sandstorm would have been drawn across the horizon like a line, but this was like the edge of circle, and growing.

Gef, in the meantime, with Arthra maybe an eighth of the way across the bridge, began to laugh. "If you wanted to ride with me, son, you picked an amazing day to do it!" The centipede wound its hundred legs out over the steel knitting, each leg sticking to the cables with massive fibers.

Beyond the bridge, far down the chasm, a dark arc continued to reveal itself. Able could see that it was like a sandstorm, dust and clouds broiling around a dark center. Shouts across the caravan went up, "Delphine!"

The massive body rolled slowly and crushed everything in its path, smashing the sides of the chasm, tearing massive pieces off as it went. The sound Able had only thought he could detect earlier began to truly vibrate his insides and soon there was no question he could hear it. He could hear little else, only Gef shouting at the top of his lungs, "Move, move, move!" There was death in it, and he had not felt fear quite this intense—or at least only in the last few days. This was even more fearsome.

They neared the far side of the bridge and Able could begin to see much more of the outline of the the giant rock, the meteor. He could see its pock-marked surface rolling

slowly over from top to bottom, huge boulders being thrust off of it and the edge of the canyon, landing with explosions hundreds of kilometers off. Surrounding the edge of the massive object was a twisting ebony nightmare of roiling, twisting clouds. Some of the debris even flew at the bridge down into the chasm or up over their heads. The air was growing thick with dust. The light from the sky was disappearing.

"C'mon, Arthra! C'mon!" The centipede zigged and zagged across the steel cables. Gef had bent way low over her and Able did the same, clinging to the insect's armor and jostling all about, sometimes so much he couldn't make out the shape of anything at all. Past Gef and over Arthra he could see the other side of the chasm, but he had no idea how near they were.

Would this not be the time to use the mistakes? But how in the world could Po, Ka and Nip even manage to deal with the massive beast? And even though Able had only known Gef and Athra for maybe an hour, he couldn't imagine leaving them behind for some reason. Something inside him felt attached to Gef. Gef's questions had raised questions in Able. There seemed to be so much to discover. Able wouldn't abandon them and fly. He hunkered down and dared to gaze again in the direction of Delphine.

With the rock blocking out so much of the sky, so close Able thought he could reach it, with the noise so loud, it drowned out everything, the dust so thick Able couldn't see the riders behind them, Arthra's shape changed. Suddenly, she was not rippling from one end to the other or side to side. Had they reached the other side? Dust was everywhere.

Another few minutes and the centipede was climbing up out of the dust cloud, up at a steep angle. Able had been worried about sliding off the side of the creature, no he was worried about rolling backwards as the centipede climbed and the dust began to dissipate. Able felt a rise in his belly as the centipede crested a mesa and began to slow. "Woo!" Shouted Gef and he slapped Arthra hard on her armor.

The centipede slowed to a crawl and began to turn to so that Able could look out and see the top of Delphine moving through the chasm, leaving a massive, long deluge of smoke and rubble. Able couldn't make out the bridge. From where he sat, he could see other riders on other peaks. He could see some emerging up from the dark torrent, dust streaming off of them.

Chapter 6

In which Able frees a Dustfish.

Gef, Able and Arthra (Po, Ka, and Nip, too) ride away from the rest of the caravan. Even over the scrabbly badlands that they are in, Able can look behind and see the remnants of Delphine's desrtuction. "Where are we going?" Able asked. "Why aren't we going with the others?"

Gef replied, "We're going where they're going, but we're going a slightly different route." Gef turned in his seat to look at Able through his mask, "I don't want them getting too much more of a look at you."

"Why?"

Gef laughed. "By the clock! You have no idea what you are, do you, kid?"

Able thought about this. "Of course I do."

"Okay then, tell me."

"I'm a boy."

Gef laughed again, harder this time. "Who in the world would make something like you? I just can't figure."

Able had no idea how to reply to this.

"Do you know what a Noman is?"

"No."

"Well, you ain't it."

They rode on for a while in silence. In fact, the silence was immense to Able. With the rumble of Delphine growing in the distance, only questions hung in the air; that and the sound of Arthra's feet scraping at the dirt. Finally, Gef spoke again. "I really don't know how to tell you this, Able—I don't know if I *should* tell you. It seems nice to me that you're ignorant, because the world is not going to like you, Able. Not at all."

After a time, Arthra began descending down a large hill. She wound back and forth, her body curving into a long S. As they descended the hill, small gray things began appearing on and around the rocks. "What's that?" Able asked.

"Lichen." Gef answered. After a moment he said, "They're kinda like those plants that Ghendra had... sort of. At any rate, Arthra eats them, and when we get down to the bottom of this valley, we're gonna give her a little break."

Once in the ravine, Able noticed that the temperature had dropped. There was a small trickle of water running down through the rocks and even small spots of fuzzy green. There were more lichen and they varied in shapes and sizes. Some were almost as tall as he was! Gef brought Arthra to a halt and hopped off. He signaled to Able to do the same. He also removed some bags from off Arthra's back and then gave her a pat and she began to wander away.

Gef sat down on a rock and took off his hat and mask. Able still had his sack with his mistakes and the fruits and vegetables. He stood and looked at the creek. In the desert where his father lived, water came from far underneath the ground. To see it spilling everywhere like this seemed like a terrible waste.

"I'm going to have to make you a disguise," Gef said.

Able turned to look at Gef.

Gef knew immediately Able had no idea what a disguise was, so he just said, "You can't go around looking like you do. You need to cover up your face."

"Okay."

"Ever heard of the Dust Men?"

"No."

Gef chuckled. "They're a legend in these parts. Pirates... uh... raiders who can live on the Silt Sea somehow. I dress like a Dust man so that people mostly leave me be. I'm gonna dress you up like one, too, okay?"

Able shrugged, "Okay."

Gef cocked his head in wonder. "So, this mother and father of yours; they drank water?"

"Yes."

"And did you do things for them?"

"My mother was very sick. I built special brundelaxes that helped her to do things like breathe."

"I see."

"She loved me very much."

"She did? She said that?"

"Yes."

"That's... that's wonderful, Able. You should never, ever forget that—that you were loved." Gef sat back on the rock and paused. He shook his head. "I can't say that for myself."

"What about your mother?"

"No. I have no mother, Able. The truth is, you don't either, but... well, I suppose you do in some sense... maybe in the best sense."

"I *have* a mother." Able looked at the ground. "I had a mother."

"What do you mean?"

"She's gone now."

Oh, Able. I'm so sorry." After another long moment, "That's why you're out here."

Able sat down cross-legged on the ground, letting go of his sack. "Yes. My father hates me."

"Why?"

"He said I was a heretic. He said... he said I do things that I shouldn't. But I can't help it!"

"I know, I know. That's the thing Able. Your parents—they're Noman. They aren't like you and me. They... work differently. We, well, it's awful, but you're going to hear this sooner or later. Better that you hear it from me. The nomans, they call us 'clockworks'. It's terrible. It's not true. We are nothing like clocks. We are so much more than that. But they hate us, so they reduce us to the simplest thing they can think of it. It makes it easier for them to destroy us. They

don't have to feel anything when they do it. Does any of that make any sense?"

Able just stared. He put his head in his hands.

"What we really are is synthezoids. We don't eat, we don't drink water. We can think differently than the nomans. We can do things they can't. We feed off the light and crysoprase. And they hate us for it, and they blame us for the way the world is."

"What's wrong with the way the world is?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. It just used to be different is all." Gef began digging around in his bags. "Like I said, we're gonna put together something for you to wear." He chuckled. "You'll be the funniest little Dust Man anyone's ever seen!"

"Can I go look at the water."

Gef smiled. "Able, you can do whatever you want now. You never have to ask me."

Able wasn't sure how he felt about that. It felt strange. But, he got up and walked down to the water.



The dirt all around the water was brimming with electrol! Able was so happy to find more to feed his mistakes. He ran back to his sack by Gef and got out his sack of electrol. He heard Po make a low worried sound, but didn't dare say anything in front of Gef. The mistakes seemed to understand that they needed to stay quiet. He went back down to the creek and began gathering more of the glittering dust.

While digging, Able saw something very strange. It was metallic and shiny and squirmy. He dug around it and finally was able to unearth the whole thing. It thrashed in his hands. It had eyes and a mouth and thin panels all over its body.

He took it over to Gef. "What is this?"

Gef looked up from the mask he was working on and said, "That's a Dustfish."

Able looked at the dustfish, which had stopped squirming quite so much. He thought it was beautiful.

"It'll die if it doesn't stay in the mud, Able. You should put it back."

"I want to keep it. It's so pretty."

"It's cruel, Able. A dustfish need moisture to breath."

"Oh," said Able. He took the dustfish over to his sack, reached in and pulled out Ka, keeping his body between Ka and Gef. Then he walked back down to the water. "Ka, I want you to take care of this new friend." Able took some of the electrol dust and spread it on the dustfish. He took Ka and helped him expand to the size of the dustfish and then pushed the two together and set them down in the water.

Ka furzeled and sucked in water and changed his color from yellow to blue. It grew a band around itself and two small pipes that begin pulling in air, making bubbles in itself. It also grew two small half-globes that whirled and allowed Ka to hover up out of the water and come to Able's eye-level. Able peered inside Ka and saw the dustfish swimming.

"What should we call you?"

Suddenly, from behind, Able heard Gef shout, "In Gaea's name! What is that!?"

Able was startled and turned suddenly to Gef. "I-I'm sorry! Don't punish me! Don't make me break it."

Gef immediately squatted down and put his hands on Able's shoulders. "Able, no. No. It's fine. I'm just—I'm just amazed is all. I'm not mad. I promise." Gef looked past Able at the dustfish floating in the air inside Ka. "It's just... how in Gaea's name did you do that?"

Chapter 7

*In which Able and Gef travel to the outpost of
Kinton Station*

"I have no idea how we're going to hide this thing," was Gef's main concern after everything settled down with the new floating aquarium that was Ka. Able had decided then that the dustfish's name was Rolly, and had begun referring to the whole contraption—dustfish and Ka—as Ka'Rolly. But Gef had other concerns, like what in the world was it that Able had done to create such a thing. Once the jig was up with Ka, Able showed him Nip and Po as well and Gef was beside himself.

Able showed him that he could fly with Nip and showed him how Po knew things. Po happily showed Gef his own image and Gef just laughed and laughed. He had never seen a complete picture of himself like that, not in hundreds of years. A little entity like Po could help so much in restoring the Cyclopedia! He wondered if Ghendra had really known what she had sent him. Gef wondered that especially because the boy would be not only be useful, but downright revolutionary.

And Able had never had the chance to tell anybody how he made his mistakes! Once he started explaining it to Gef he couldn't stop. He had never talked so much in his life. The only odd thing was that when he showed Gef the bag of electrol, Gef confessed that it just looked like dirt. Whatever it was that Able was seeing in it, Gef could not see it.

Gef had only heard about such things coming from the monks of the Ultracircus and that was total legend—children's fairy tales. But there was no denying what he was seeing. Able was somehow affecting the code of the world.

Gef attended to Able first. Like himself, he wrapped Able in linen bandages everywhere and gave him a belt and a small robe he'd sewn together. Arthra had shed some time back and Gef had kept some pieces of her chitin. He used an old piece to fashion a kind of helmet for Able and some very small pieces for goggles. The rest of Able's mask came from various leftover brundlex pieces he'd found in his travels. When he was done, Able did indeed look like a very small Dustman. It would have to work.

Fo Ka'Rolly, Gef decided to fashion a long cloak that could drape over the shell that Ka had formed around the dustfish and then he made a face out of more brundlex parts and hung it on the shell. He fashioned a kind of body out of lots of junk and hung it off Ka's floating sphere, like a scarecrow. When Ka'Rolly floated along, he sort of looked like a big-headed synthezoid in a cloak. Sort of. Again, it would have to do.

It was extremely hard explaining to Able that most synthezoids had masters, that they weren't free, and that synthezoids that were free were hunted and destroyed. Able just had no way to conceive of such things. But the boy

synthozoid seemed to understand that he must keep his identity a secret, and that they should act like Ka'Rolly was a pet, not a friend—just around Nomans. Finally, Able needed a Dustmen name. Gef explained that the Dustmen had a sort of language of their own that sounded a lot like the movement of the Silt Sea. They had a word for that which was unique which was "hazkerets". Able and Gef agreed to shorten it to "Haz".

"Wait," Able said. "Your name is Gef. Is that your real name?"

"No. I've had several names."

"What's your real name?"

"Truth is Able, I forgot it a long time ago. I've always hoped that if I could piece the Cyclo back together, I might be able to find it, but who knows."



Able could see the outpost in the distance. Much like his father's misshapen shack under the mesa, the buildings silhouettes were haphazard and jagged, pushing out of the scrabble of the badlands like bad teeth. He could see many other pedes gathered around its edges. It looked like many of the other members of the trader's caravan had made it this far, though Able still worried greatly about the ones that maybe didn't. He also noticed a great many giant flags billowing from different camps and around the outpost. When he asked, Gef explained that these represented crews from various far-off cities, the places these traders would

eventually return to when they had acquired what they were after. Cities, Gef explained, were like the outpost, but much, much bigger.

"Like the Ultracircus?" Able asked.

"Yeah, not that big. And most cities don't move around." Gef thought of the sky city of Uchava. "Most."

As they rode down the center street of the outpost, Able could practically feel the stares of the people milling about. Gef had explained that people were wary of Dustmen but they didn't hate them like synthezoids, so they were okay. "Trust me," Gef said, "they're more afraid of us than we should be of them."

The main drag of the outpost was very wide, offering accommodation too not just pedes, but all manner of other things—rigs with two legs, four legs and rigs with wheels and rigs with tracks. Sometimes rigs with wheels were pulled by things with legs. He didn't like that. Then again, he thought, he was riding on Arthra. Then again, she was so big, she must hardly notice. Able made a mental note to try and ask her some time.

Regardless, he was fascinated by every single rig that passed. They came to a big wide space that was filled with tables shaded by big pieces of fabric. Able smelled so many smells, he had a hard time processing any of them. There were smells like smoke, like flesh, like the fruits that Ghendra had given him; so many smells that they combined into a miasma that he couldn't even identify. As they moved closer, the scents would vacillate between delicious and then suddenly off-putting, nearing poisonous even.

They stopped and Gef hopped down off Arthra. Able did the same, sliding himself down her side with a rope attached to his "seat" (a bunch of blankets rolled and tied together with twine, strapped to Arthra with leather straps.) Ka'Rolly followed him, slowly hovering down to the ground. Gef rolled his eyes behind his mask. "Okay, look. You... uh... you *two* stay right here by Arthra. Just hang out. I'm going to go make some trades." As he was talking he brought down a crate off the backend of Arthra. He knew the curiosity regarding the market would be too much. "I need you to guard Arthra, okay? She needs you to stand watch."

Able nodded. Ka'Rolly beeped.

"Okay." Gef thought for a minute. "And do not let anyone see your other two, uh, mistakes?"

Able nodded.

"It's so weird you call them that. Have you ever thought about calling them something else?"

Able shrugged.

"Well, whatever. Guard Arthra, okay?"

"I will," said Able, mustering all the confidence he could.

With that, Gef walked away with the crate.



For an hour or so, nothing happened. Able watched rig after rig go by, observing the different forms of locomotion. Sometimes when one in particular had something new, Able

would point it out to Ka'Rolly. "Look, that one's got a brundlex." Ka'Rolly would make a kind of wheezing whistle.

At one point, Able felt something brush up against his foot and he looked down to see a ball. At first he thought it might be Po, having left the "nest" he'd made on Arthra's back. He was about to admonish the object until he saw that, in fact, it was just a ball. He gingerly picked it up and showed it to Ka'Rolly who made a sound as if to say, "There it is." Able looked around to find where it came from and about a fifty meters off saw some children standing in a group staring at him. He bent down and with the ball between his legs, did his best to roll out back to them.

Ten minutes later Able found himself face-to-face with a girl from the group of children. She was chewing something. She looked at Able, who was shorter, and then up at Ka'Rolly who "stood" at two meters. After a moment of mutual staring, she said, "You're clockworks is weird."

Able looked up at Ka'Rolly, who looked down. From beneath his hooded head, his makeshift face peered out with a permanent, dumb smile on it. Able looked back to the girl and shrugged. "I guess he is."

The girl squinted her eyes and looked at Able again. "Are you a dust man?"

"Yes," Able said confidently. He was new to lying, but this one he knew.

The girl looked unsure. "You're a very small dust man. Are you a kid?"

Able had no idea how to reply. "I am a small dust man."

"But you're a kid."

Able gave up. "Yes."

"You can come play ball with us if you want."

Able really liked this idea, but Gef's words stuck. "I have to guard our pede."

"You can see it from where we are. We've been looking at it and you and your weird clockworks."

Able looked to Ka'Rolly for advice and the creature replied with a sound like, "I don't know. I'm a fish in a jar."

"Okay." Able turned to Ka'Rolly and in a kind of imitation of Gef he said, "I need you to stay here and guard Arthra."

Ka'Rolly sighed. If he could he'd rather play ball, too.



After trading fruits, vegetables, brundlex pieces, metal parts, and centipede chitin for bars of silicon and aluminum and a few tubes of argon, Gef heads away from the market to an alley on the outskirts of the outpost. There he enters a little shop filled from floor to ceiling with books, papers, stone tablets, beads, jewelry, trinkets, and all manner of small animals (organic and inorganic) in small guided cages. Gef has to stop over piles and slide past stuffed shelves to make his way to the back. There's a counter and a young man seated at it. The young man looks up and it immediately terrified.

"Uh, yes, sir?"

Gef asks, "Is Wacamolo around?"

"Um. Yes!" The young man seems relieved to leave the counter and go in search of his master. A moment later he returns with an ancient bad noman with a wrinkled face and a long mustache. "Gef! You old rust bucket!" The old noman shakes Gef's hand with vigor. "I hate to tell you, but I haven't heard a thing about cycle relics since the last time you were here."

"That's okay Waca. I'm actually here about something else."

"Well, let's hear it."

"It's hard to explain, and it might even sound silly, but I have reason to believe I have something that should be delivered to the Ultracircus."

Wacamolo's right eyebrow raised high on his forehead. His left one followed while the right one went down again. "The Ultracircus?"

"Yeah."

"Are you crazy? Did you bust a circuit board? There's no such thing as the Ultracircus. It's a myth—a legend—a fairy tale for Gaia's sake!"

"See. I have reason to believe it's not."

"What?"

"I can't say."

Wacamolo shook his head and shrugged. "I mean, there's nothing. I have nothing to help you with that."

"The cyclo says that there are texo compasses that can locate it. Maybe we could figure out where one of those is located."

"A texo compass tuned to the Ultracircus? I can't say I've heard of that before. But if there's anybody who would know, I can think of one person."

"Yeah?"

"Baron Rollo Leocadia."

"The mad scientist!?"

Wacamolo nodded.

"The master of the city of Horn?"

Wacamolo just nodded again.

"Great." Gef put his face in his hand.

"Texo compasses are hard enough to come by. You know that. But a texo compass tuned to the Ultracircus?—only a scientist would know about such a thing."

"Well, prap. I don't know what else to do."

"Now hang on a moment. Getting into the city of Horn—*that* I might be able to help you with. C'mon back. Let's consult the board."

Gef rolled his eyes, but followed the old noman anyway. When they got to the back room, Wacamolo sat down on the dingy carpet in the center of the room and produced a wooden board made with many interlocking rings. Gef sat down cross-legged on the carpet across from Wacamolo and sighed. This i'ching stuff was hoodoo as far as he was concerned, but it was all he could get his hands on for the moment.

Wacamolo threw a number of sticks on the carpet and pushed them about. He rubbed his whiskery chin and thought. Then, after a moment he arranged all the rings on

the board so that they all lay flat and he traced his finger across several symbols. Finally, he held the board out over the sticks and the rings began to move, each one rotating until it was at some angle perpendicular to the ground, some of them matching, others rotating until they were at opposite angles. "Hmm," said Wacamolo.

He read symbols off the board. "Southeast of the Horn, there is a... hollow... of tigers. There is a temple in that place. A temple of... water. The wind will show you the way and the entrance will be unlocked by... uh..."

Gef cocks his head. Old Wacamolo had done these kinds of readings before for him and sometimes they lead somewhere and sometimes they didn't, but he never stumbled over the meanings. "Unlocked by?"

"I don't know. This symbol and this pattern... I've never seen it before." He set the board down on the floor and used his hands to lift his backend to handwalk over to some books on the lowest shelf. He picked a book up and slid himself on the floor back over to the board. He flipped through the book looking, tracing pages with his index finger. "Here it is... Hmf."

"And?"

"I don't understand. It says the door will open by mistake."

Gef began quietly laughing.

Wacamolo looked about at the sticks. "I must have missed something. That does not make sense."

"Actually, Waca. That makes perfect sense to me." Gef kept laughing.

"What do you mean? How do you open a door by mistake?"

"I can't do it, but I know a guy."

"Most peculiar," said Wacamolo as Gef laughed and stood up.

Wacamolo followed after Gef as Gef nodded to the young man and left the shop. Out in the open air, the pair walked together towards the market. "I have to know what's going on, Gef! You can't just come here and tell me your suddenly seeking the Ultracircus and solve some mystery of *mine* and then leave me in the dark. You have to tell me what's this all about!"

"Waca, honestly, if I tell you it could put you in as much danger as I think I'm in. Something cam to mom out past Delphine's run. The Lady in Green sent it. Clearly, she means for me to find the Ultracircus. But who knows, it could be as much of a goose chase as the time you told me there were sections of the Cyclo in that old Arsenic mine. You remember that?"

"You can't hold me accountable for that. The winds were wrong and I merely wasn't taking into account—"

Wacamolo stopped talking as he and Gef rounded a corner and Gef came to a sudden halt, holding his hand out to stop Wacamolo. Across the way, Gef could see a crowd of children who were facing a man and a seven foot raptor. The man himself had Able by the hood of his poncho and was swatting at a bright red dodecahedron flitting about in the air and buzzing around his head.

Gef stared and then sighed. "Spawn of a balrik."



Playing ball with the other children was the nicest thing Able had done in ages. It was fun! Sometimes they passed it around in order and sometimes they changed the order. Sometimes they tossed it and sometimes they kicked it. There didn't seem to be any rules. The others asked him lots of questions. He didn't like lying, so most of the time he would just answer with "I don't know." They asked him if he liked living on the Silt Sea and he didn't know, so he just said, "Not really." And when they asked him what he ate, he remembered Cal's warnings and decided he should eat something. He looked at Ka'Rolly across the wide street and said, "dustfish," and all the children moaned and grabbed their stomachs and pretended to be sick. He thought their reaction was really funny.

Able had completely lost track of time playing and talking when a long shadow fell across the group of children. They all looked up to the silhouette of a man on a large lizard with long back legs and short arms and big teeth. The raptor lowered its head toward Able and took in a long sniff and then snorted hot air on Able. The man on the raptor said, "What in the dunes do we have here?"

The little girl who had first approached Able—her name was Rilla—spoke up. "He's a dust kid, sheriff!"

The sheriff adjusted himself in his saddle. "A dust kid? Well that's the first I've ever heard of such a thing."

Able grew worried and stood very still.

"Where's your tribe, dust kid?"

Able pointed to Arthra. The sheriff looked over at the large centipede and the very strange looking character in a cloak standing next to it. "That fella' in the cloak—he a friend o'yours?"

Able nodded.

The sheriff got down off of his raptor, which snarled as he did. "You don't say much, kid." He then squatted down to Able's level. "Now look, I know you raiders like to travel in groups, so where's the rest of ya'." The sheriff looked over his shoulder down the main thoroughfare. "Are they off hiding in the badlands until nightfall." He looked back at Able and poked him, "Huh?"

Just then and without warning, a siren came from the back of Arthra and in a moment had wailed it's bright, glowing red way across the street and into the sheriff's face. Nip had busted out of the nest the moment the sheriff's finger made contact with Able. He buzzed, blared, honked and bumped the sheriff, who quickly stood up while grabbing Able by the back of his poncho. No sooner did the sheriff do that than Nip positioned himself directly between Able and the sheriff's face and let out a massive klaxon sound that made everyone in the group cover their ears.

As the sheriff dropped Able to cover his ears, Gef was already sprinting across the street. He slid to a stop near Able and swept him up. Without hesitating, he turned to Arthra and began running again. He moved like a raptor; even faster. As he and Able were piling on to Arthra and Nip had flown over with them, the sheriff gathered his wits enough to turn and see Ka'Rolly simply up and float onto the

centipedes back. He looked utterly baffled, until with no other option left he reached behind his back and pulled out a long tube connected via a hose to his backpack. He shouted, "You hold it right there!"

As the sheriff scrambled back up onto his raptor and turned it toward the fleeing suspects, two more men on raptors appeared, both with weapons like the sheriff's. "Halt!" one of them yelled. But by then, Arthra was working up to her top speed and just like on Delphine's Run Bridge she was moving fast. The men on raptors gave chase and even went past the edge of Kinton station, but about five hundred meters out into the badlands it was clear they would never catch the pede as she easily danced and wound her way around massive boulders and underbrush.

Chapter 8

In which the crew makes their way into a hollow of tigers.

After Gef is sure they're no longer being followed, the crew finds a butte with lots of crags for them to get down into and make camp for the night. As they are setting up, Nip immediately flies to spot fifty meters over the camp site. Gef looks up at the gold and green glowing spot and shouts, "We really don't need a beacon telling people where we are!" Nip changes color to a very dark purple. "Well, that's... better." Gef looks to Able who is examining Po. "Can you not tell it to stay down here?"

Able looks to the twilight sky and says, "I can't tell *it* to do *anything*." Able was frustrated with Nip, yes, but that was the way the mistakes were made. They had their own wills. They took suggestions, not orders—especially Nip. With that, Able gave Po a hug. Po purred.

Having laid out some large rocks that emit a bright turquoise light, Gef sits on a makeshift stool and says, "Well that did not go as planned back in town, but I did manage to get us some information."

Able was excited at hearing the word information. He had not heard any information in a few days. He sat cross-legged on the ground with Po in his lap. Ka'Rolly flattened its fake body out and set down on the ground next to Able, who pulled the cloak back and pet Ka.

"I had an old friend at the station. He knows stuff. He thinks the only way we can get to the Ultracircus is to find a device that can locate it. Do you know what a texo compass is?"

"I know what a compass is."

"Ok. Well, same principle. A compass is 'attached' to North, right. A texo compass is attached to a thing. You could have a text compass for your house, say." Gef looks to the sky, "You could put a texo compass on that little pest."

"He was only protecting me. He does that."

"I know, I know. Really, it's your fault. You shouldn't have been playing with those kids. I told you to guard Arthra."

Able looked to the ground. "I could see her from where we were playing."

"That's not the point, kid. We need to stay low. We need to not draw attention to ourselves. *Especially* if we go where we might be going."

Able looked up again, "Where's that?"

Gef explained where the city was, what it was like, and the sort of riddle that Wacamolo had told him. "He said the door would be unlocked by mistake. I have to think he was talking about your... uh... your little guys."

Able looked at Po and smiled. "I guess we'll have to find out." Able stared into the middle distance for a while and then said, "What are tigers?"

Gef stroked his chin, "I have part of the cyclo compendium on animals. It says tigers were an ancient animal; organic, very dangerous. They have existed for thousands of years though, so I think we're fine. We'll find this hollow and this wind and voilá, I suppose."

"Gef, where do you keep the cyclopedia? Can I or Po read it?"

"I don't keep hard copies. I've committed it all to memory. One day, I'll write it all down again, but for now, it's safer in my head. There are people who would use it for bad things, Able."

"Can I try something?" Able asked.

"Sure."

"Here. You hold Po."

"Okay." Gef reached out and took the metallic purple ball in his hands.

"Find out what he knows Po."

Suddenly, Gef sat up like a steel beam. The light in his eyes dimmed and Po began generating an electric field whose arcs danced around itself and Gef's hands. This went on for several minutes until Po slowly faded back to normal and Gef fell over on to the ground. Able jumped in shock. "No, Po! What did you do?!"

Po shook and made a sad tootle.

Able got down on the ground and shook Gef. And after several minutes, the light came back into Gef's eyes. He sat

up and looked around. "What in Gaia's name just happened!?"

Able picked up Po and said, "Show me a tiger."

Po's lights sparkled and danced in the air and coalesced into a light model of a giant orange cat with black striped, menacingly prowling though the air.

"I'll be a clock." Gef stared in wonder at the image of the tiger. He knew all the information about them, but had never really seen one. "It copied my brain?"

Able held Po out. "He copies all kinds of stuff."

"How?"

Able shrugged.

Gef cocked his head and kept looking at the tiger. "Amazing." Then after a quiet minute of contemplation, he said, "Show us the city of Horn."

Po obliged and a light model arose of a massive castle build around an enormous tusk of some kind. Windows and walkways had been carved into the horn and all around its base were the scree of buildings. The walls surrounding it looked high and massive.

Able said, "That's where we're going?"

Gef corrected him, "That's where we're *sneaking into*."

"Wow. It looks as big as a mesa."

"It's much bigger actually. And we need to try to get an audience with a man there. His name is Baron Rollo Leocadia and he's a mad scientist." Anticipating Able's next question, Gef said, "A scientist is a person who studies how the world works—like Ghendra. Unlike Ghendra, they're

usually incredibly powerful and you don't mess with them. They're supposed to belong to this guild, a group that they have that has rules, but some of them don't and they're called mad."

"So they're not angry."

"I don't know. He's probably angry about something, but that's not why he's mad, yeah."

"He sounds important."

Gef pointed at the light model of the city. "He runs that whole place. He's real important."

"So why would he see us?"

"He wouldn't. He wouldn't see dust men and I bet he *really* wouldn't see a couple of clockworks."

"You said that name was bad."

"It is. But it's *our* word. We can say it. It's bad when other folks say it."

Able nodded.

"However, I do think the Baron would like to see your little creations. He might even know what they are."

"Really?" Able's eyes widened. He set Po on the ground, who shut off the light model and rolled over next to Ka, bumping it a couple of times. Ka made a cooing sound and the dustfish swam over to look at Po. Able thought about what Ghendra said about only showing his mistakes when the time was right. That had really not gone according to plan. But maybe this time it made sense. "So if we tell him about my mistakes, he might tell us about the text compass?"

"It's not that simple. We need leverage."

"What's—"

"It means we have something he really needs or needs to avoid—it just means we have better control of the situation than he does—which is a difficult proposition." Gef looked at the mistakes, especially Po—how much of him had that little thing copied? How did he get into the middle of this? Why had Ghendra sent Able to him? "But look. We have got to stay low. Horn has a lot of very interesting things in it and you're going to want to check it all out. You have to hold off on that, okay? There will be time for that later."

Able nodded. "I will not be curious!"

Gef laughed. "All right. Let's get some sleep. We'll come up with a plan sooner or later."



Hill behind hill of boulders and lichen reach up into the distance where the tip of the City of Horn can be seen. As the hills come down, there are here and there small indentions that grow in depth and width. These are hollows. Once in them, the light from the dim sun is even dimmer. There are scatterings and smatterings of sound. Sometimes a rock comes tumbling down the hollow walls. Having left Arthra and their supplies back at the butte, Able and Gef make their way down into one hollow and then back up and then down again into another one. Able carries Po, while Nip and Ka'Rolly hover nearby.

Neither Gef nor Able has said much since entering the hollows. They are shadowy and quiet. There is no wind. After

hours of climbing and descending, Gef says to Able, "There is something following us."

Able looks around. All is quiet. "Huh?"

Gef also looks around. "Yeah. I know what being followed feels like. Things should be quiet after we pass, but there are noises. I keep seeing a shadow back there." Gef points at the sky, "And that smoke. It's been moving."

"What do we do?"

"Hope it just follows us."

Down in one of the hollows, the bottom is muddy. "Water," says Gef.

"Is that good?"

"It's different. The other hollows have been bone dry."

Able looks around, "But there's no wind."

"Yup."

Just then, Gef has an idea. "Say, what if ol' Nip here were to carry Po up in the air and let Po have a look around." Gef bends down and looks at Po, "Could you make a map for us?"

Po shivers in Able's hand and looks to Able. Able says, "I think that means he's afraid of heights." He holds Po up to his face, "But that's okay; I'll go with you!" Po makes a sighing noise.

"You'll go with him?"

"Yeah. Watch this! Hey, Nip! Up, up and away!"

Nip floats over Able and grows ribbons that wrap around his waist like a seat. Able leans back and with a sound like gong, the three lift off the ground and fly a hundred meters in

the air. Gef just looks up at them in wonder and amazement. He says to himself, "What the clock else can that bunch do?"

Able has come to love being in the sky. He can see so much. Troubles seem to stay behind on the ground. From his perch, he can see more of the City of Horn—it is magnificent. He can see the hollows spread out down from the hills around the city like great gaps between huge fingers of ridges. He holds Po out and says, "Make a map, please." Po sighs, unfolds two spindly legs and wraps them around Able's wrists, and then makes a sound of concentration, opening its many eyes very wide.

Able is patiently waiting when Po suddenly makes an alarming sound. With its left leg, he pulls on Able's arm and with its right leg points toward a patch of ground just beyond the last ridge they crossed over. Able can just barely see five slender dark silver bodies crawling slowly along, thin trails of black smoke rising from their backs. "Okay, Nip! Let' head back down."

Down on the ground, before Able can even get out of seat, he spits out in a loud whisper, "I saw them!"

"Saw who?"

"I don't know. Tigers."

"Tigers?"

"Not exactly. But they were crawling and like you said—"

Just then, atop a boulder in the wall of the hollow, one of the creatures appeared and screamed. It was on four legs and its mouth full of teeth. Its fur was soaked black with oil and in the center of its body, a brundlex churned out black

smoke. Its tail was like a chain and it whipped about in the air.

Gef didn't hesitate and pushed Able into the hollow, "Run!"

As they scrambled into the hollow, Gef knew that they would get higher and reach a point where they could, if needed, if possible, defend themselves. He looked up long enough to see other creatures—fine, tigers—crawling along the ridge, trying to flank them. "Keep moving," he said to Able, who was running on pure fear.

But to Gef's surprise, the hollow and the muddy creek stayed level. The walls of the hollow were getting higher and they weren't traveling up. Instead, it seemed like they were trapping themselves. He thought hard about what to do. Nip! He looked around and the bold, little entity was red again and knocking himself into one of the tigers on the ridge. Just as he looked, the tiger lifted a front leg and brought it down hard on Nip, smashing it into the rocks. Gef shouted, "Nip!"

As soon as Able heard Gef, he stopped. He looked up the steep hill of rocks and saw Nip, dented and wobbling in his flight. The tiger took another swing at the little flying mistake and Nip went flying into the hollow, over the heads of Able and Gef, smashing into the rocks on the other side. The creature on the ridge screamed and black smoke billowed out of its back.

Able scrambled up the side of the hollow to Nip and knelt down. Nip was in tatters and wheezed when it saw Able. "Oh no! Nip!" Able picked it up.

From down the hill, Gef shouted, "Able! C'mon!"

Able made his way down and saw that one of the creatures was now in the hollow and behind them, crouching low to the ground. As Able and Gef kept running into the deepening hollow, Able shouted, "What do they want?"

"What do you think? Us!"

The hollow came to a stop at a large boulder. Gef muttered, "No, no, no." The five companions came to stand (and float) with their backs to the boulder. The smoking, mechanical tigers crept closer to the group, each in turn screaming and howling at the sky.

Then the whole hollow began to dance with lights. Small spots of color appeared, dancing across the walls of the hollow, the rocks, even the tigers. Able looked down and saw that Po was shaking and emitting all of the light. He held him aloft and Po exploded with light! The dancing dots began to collect together and form the shape of a massive, long, scaly dragon, with billowing hair and a giant maw. It curled up over Able and Po and then Po emitted a deafening roar. It shook Able and shut his hearing down it was do loud.

The tigers all hunched down and slowly backed off their rocks, then turned and ran.

There was a long moment of silence among the crew, and then the dragon slowly faded away and Po shrank in size, turned ashen and fizzled, smoke coming out of cracks in his shell.

Gef took a few steps forward, then said, "What was that!?" He was shocked and laughing at the same time.

Able didn't notice. He knelt down in the muddy pools in front of the boulder and set both Po and Nip down in it. He pushed his hands through the mud, looking for the glint of

electrol. As he did, Gef watched as a kind of wispy blue field surrounded Able. The energy moved around him and down his arms to where he caressed the two little mistakes. The field seeped into Po and Nip and tendrils of new material began to form around them like a cocoon. It seeped into them and they began to form perfect spheres again, Nip losing all his edges, but Po just growing back to his normal size.

Po rolled away and then lifted itself on its three legs. It again shown a light, this time at the boulder and there appeared a light model of Able, digging in the mud. Able looked and walked over to the light model of himself and began digging. He quickly hit stone and began pushing the mud away from it. Seeing what was happened, Gef got down on his hands and knees and started digging at the mud as well. Slowly they revealed what appeared to be a platform of some kind with a hole in it. Once it appeared, Po retracted his legs and rolled over to the hole and fit neatly in it.

The ground of the pool at the end of the hollow shook, the water drained away, and then a gap appeared in the ground, and before they could stand or float, Able, Po, Nip, and Gef disappeared down into the mud.

Ka'Rolly floated in the air watching. Rolly swam around in a circle and then put his face to the bottom of Ka. Ka made a sound like a question.

Chapter 9

In which the crew explores a temple.

Able and Gef sat up in the mud. Nip and Po were covered in it. They all looked around the pitch-black place they were in. Gef had figured that if they found a door, they would find a tunnel and he had traded for some argon light-sticks. He turned two of them on and handed one to Able. Even with the two bright purple lights, it was hard to make out too much of the chamber. Gef looked up at the ceiling, toward the hole that had formed beneath them. Ka'Rolly was peering in.

"We better stick together. C'mon down Ka'Rolly."

Ka'Rolly shook its head. Gef looked to Able, who then said, "It's fine Ka'Rolly. We're safe. Come down. Besides, there's smoketigers up there."

Ka'Rolly let out a loud indecisive sound. It neither wanted to go down nor face the tigers. After a minute, Ka'Rolly floated down through the hole, his scarecrow-like body hanging and lightly swinging from Ka. and peered about. A small floodlight grew in the eye of the makeshift face and

began shining about the chamber. Ka'Rolly let out a low whistle.

From what they could see, the chamber was filled with debris that was covered in soft, green moss. From everywhere on the ceiling, long stone stalactites dripped water. There were many pillars still standing at the edge of the chamber, tens of meters wide and circular. Gef walked the perimeter of the room and found two doors.

Able made his own discovery. There was electrol everywhere! There was even floating electrol clusters in the air—floating about like fireflies! He reached out his hand and caught one of the floating clusters of the stuff. It glowed bright in his hand. He got out a sack and began gathering as much of it as he could sort out. It was in the mud, the water, on the moss and in the air. To Able the whole chamber sparkled. Gef walked over to him and watched as the little synthezoid put dirt into a bag. "What are you collecting?"

"Electrol."

"Um, yeah. That's not a thing."

"Sure it is." Able held up a handful of the stuff. See?"

"No. I don't. That looks like dirt to me."

Able looked disappointed. "That's what my father always said."

Gef studied Able. "You must have some kind of sensory apparatus that I don't."

Able looked up, perplexed.

Gef squatted down and explained. "It's how we 'zoids detect things. It's how we see. It's how we hear. It's how we

know which way is up and how we know where our bodies are when we're not looking at them."

"Oh." Able said.

"It's something you should know Able. Everyone see the world differently. And what we see... well, that's not really the world."

Able looked very confused and Gef chuckled. "Forget that last part. My point is, *you* can see something that no one else can."

"Ghendra could see it."

"Is that right?" Gef said, not surprised.

"She had a metal tube that she used."

"Yeah. She knew what she was doing all right."

Able looked at the cluster of electrol in his hand and walked over to Ka'Rolly. "Here," he said, "Use this."

Ka'Rolly sucked it up into a vent behind its fake face and then began to shake and glow very bright. Tendrils began growing out from the bottom of the orb that was Ka. They laced themselves through the skeletal structure of the faux body that Gef had constructed and attached themselves at various points. Ka'Rolly set himself on the ground and began walking around, flailing its arms in the air and making hooting noises.

Gef put his head in hands. "Good Gaia, I've had about enough of your magic, Able."

Able smiled brightly in the purple light. Magic. He liked that word.



Able used the electrol to continue to fix Nip and Po. Nip had been sitting in the mud sputtering. He was smooth and whole again but he couldn't fly. Po looked the same as usual but he seemed exhausted. After consuming the clusters of electrol, both were back to their more recent selves.

The crew decided to head through the door that lead in the general direction of Horn. Able desperately wanted to know what was behind the other door, but Gef didn't want them to get lost. He had to promise Able that they would come back later just to get him to drop it.

One chamber lead to another which lead to another. There was writing all over much of the walls. Able recognized some of it from the tablets of the Idex Mortex but couldn't read it. Gef also recognized some it and could make out a few symbols. They tried to let Po read it too with no luck.

"How come no one can see the meaning in these symbols? My mother could."

"What? Your mother could read?" Gef saw immediately that Able didn't understand. "Read means finding meaning in the symbols."

"Oh. Then yes. My mother could read. She would read *to* me!"

"Huh. Well, most people can't read these symbols because they're so old. They're really, really old. And the people that

wrote them aren't around anymore. At least... your mother could read this stuff? The tablets?"

"She wouldn't read me the tablets. She could read them, but she would read me other stuff. Nice stories."

"I wonder how old you are?"

"I'm nine."

"You just know that?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember your first day?"

"Yes. I woke up and my mother was smiling at me. She seemed very happy."

"Hold on to that. Memories fade with time. I wish I could remember my first day. Or I wish I'd thought to write it down."

Again, Able looked confused and Gef smiled. "Writing is the opposite of reading." Gef scraped a horizontal line into a blank part of the wall. The ancient stone crumbled easily. "See that symbol? That means the number one."

Able nodded and Gef continued, drawing another longer line beneath that one. "And if I write this, that means the number two."

"But if you can write that, why not read this stuff?" Able gestured to the wall of symbols.

"There's hundreds of ways and things to write Able. Really, there's an infinite number."

"In-fi-nint?"

Gef drew a twisted loop on the wall.



"It means uncountable."

Able stared at the symbol for a long time and thought about things he could not count.

"C'mon. We've got to keep moving."



After making their way through chamber after chamber, and coming around in circles more than a few times, the crew comes to an enormous set of iron double doors. On each side of the doors are giant stone pots. Gef examines the door and the symbols on it. "I can't read most of this, but this one is 'trees'." He points it out to Able.

Gef tries to pull on the doors, but to no end. They are shut—maybe locked—tight. Gef looks around for something he could use as a lever but there's nothing. Gef bows to Able, "Well, use magic then."

Able has no ideas, but then Ka'Rolly steps forward and grabs Nip with his newfound arms. He makes a long string of sounds and Nip waits until Ka'Rolly is through. Then, Nip makes a "bonk" sound and grows out its ring and begins hovering and pulling away from the door. Ka'Rolly grasps one of the handles and squats down as Nip turns bright

orange and pulls. Ka'Rolly's new feet dig into the stone floor and it leans back with all its might.

A teeth-gritting scraping sound comes from the door as it slowly begins to give. Nip glows brighter and lets out a squeal. Ka' Rolly bends down even more and leans back further and then the door bursts open with a cloud of dust and both of the mistakes go rolling backwards into the room.

"Yes!" shouts Gef.

"Yay!" shouts Able. "Way to go, you guys!"

Ka'Rolly pick himself up off the ground. Rolly is doing somersaults and Ka makes a little tune. Ka'Rolly adjusts its cloak and then holds its arms up in a pose of strength.

"No kidding," says Gef. "Wow!"

A strange light is emitting from the chamber and as soon as the crew begins to enter, they can see why. They are standing at the top of a large staircase that descends to the left and right. Out of the center of the landing they are on, below, a torrent of water flows out and across the massive chamber in front of them in a canal. The ceiling of the chamber is filled with large holes, and out of those holes hangs giant mirrors. Daylight streams down through the holes and hits the mirrors, creating beams of light that criss-cross the chamber and land on massive stone pots. And growing from each pot, each one unique, a tree.

Able whispers, "It's like Ghendra's house but bigger."

"Yeah, way bigger." Whispers Gef.

The giant quiet space seems to enforce the quiet with awe. None of the crew wants to disturb what is clearly a very holy place. Carefully, they make their way down the curving

staircase to the lowest level of the chamber. The pots for the trees are tens of meters in diameter, and several times Gef's height, taller than all the buildings Ables has ever seen. Up from each pot, all the way to the ceiling, extends an enormous glass tube. The trees themselves, inside the tubes, vanish into the ceiling of the chamber, which aside from the columns of sunlight that shine on them, is shrouded in shadows. The crew stops in front of the first of the massive pots. There is a large metal box with an assortment of controls; levers, knobs, switches, screens, buttons. Over the control panel is a sign that reads, "Cedrus atlantica." Gef notes that the word is in a modern tongue that he can read.

The machine with the controls is whirring away, lights blinking, one screen showing a perfectly normal sine curve, waving back and forth smoothly. "This may have been ancient once, Able," Gef says quietly, "but I think someone's been here quite recently."

Po, hanging out in Able's belt in a pouch, makes an excited beeping. Able pulls him out of the pouch and Po shines a laser on the control panel. "Okay," says Able. He sets Po down on the control panel and Po extends its legs and crawls to the top.

"Be careful, Po," says Gef. "Don't turn it off."

Po pauses and makes a sound like, "Duh."

"Oh, well, excuse me," says Gef.

Po extends a new fourth sort of leg. It changes in shape until it matches a hole in the control panel and then Po lowers itself until the new appendage slides into the control panel. Po begins chirping away, lights dancing all over his little frame. He forms light model of the tree over himself.

Then the light model becomes surrounded by charts and graphs and equations.

Gef has wandered off to the next tree; this one says, "Cedrus brevifolia." He walks to a third pot where the sign reads, "Cedrus deodara." He makes his way back to the first pot. "I think it's an ark."

"Oh!" Able says a bit too loudly. He covers his mouth and then whispers again, "I know what an ark is."

"You do?"

"Yes. It was one of the stories my mother used to tell me."

"How did your version go?"

"My version?"

"Well, I've heard and read stories like that many times. There's a Nomish version and an Illith version, a Kravath version, on and on."

Able didn't know what these "versions" were, so he continued, "There once was a really big flood, which Jupaeter made, which is when water covers *everything* and Gaia didn't want all the animals to die, so she asked a noman named Nemo to build a really big box and put as many animals as he could in it. And then the box floated for a really long time and when the flood went away, all the animals were safe. The big box was called an ark."

"Yup. That's what I think this is. An ark for trees."

"Trees," Able repeated.

"Yeah. I've only heard of them in the Cyclopedia. I've never seen one."

"A they like Ghendra's plants. Do they grow and make more of themselves?"

"Yup."

"Why not let them grow outside?"

"They would die. The air is wrong. I'm pretty sure that's what these big tubes are doing; keeping the air right for them."

"Oh." Able said and once again craned his neck back toward the top of the huge cedar. It must have been two meters thick. "They're pretty."

Po clicked and removed itself from the control panel. "You done?" Gef said and Po bleeped in response. "Okay then. We need to move on. Let's remember, we're here for a reason."

Ka'Rolly giggled. Rolly swam in a circle as if chasing his tail.

Gef replied, "I don't know what you mean, but if you're saying this is reason enough, you're not wrong."

The group made their way to the edge of the chamber. Gef said it would be better to follow the wall to not get lost. They passed other staircases with signs that Gef could pronounce but didn't know: "Betulaceae" and "Cuouressaceae." As they passed each one, Po would shine out a new tree light model. Gef looked at it at one point and said "Show off." Po made a phbbbt sound.



The crew made their way through chamber after chamber, walking for hours. Not all of the trees were so big. Some were small and covered in flowers that were pink and red and purple. Able could not get enough of the colors. Gef had to practically drag him along to keep him from stopping at every single terrarium.

But then they came to a chamber that had no more doors; only a large arch over the canal. On each side of the canal were large walkways with metal guardrails. "I guess we go this way," said Gef. He knew they were still traveling in the direction of the city—in fact they should be nearly underneath it at this point.

The followed the canal into darkness and lit their argon lamps again, leaving the columns of daylight and trees behind them. There was nothing know bu the purple glow from their lamps dancing on the flowing water, and the sound of it drifting along through the stone tunnel.

After more hours, the tunnel gave way to massive chamber—even more massive than the ones containing the tree—that was just a reservoir, a giant underground lake. The chamber was dark and they could only see out into the lake maybe fifty meters. The walkway continued along the edge of the lake until they came to a metal door, shut with a large wheel in its center. Gef gave the wheel a try and it gave easily. "Well oiled," he said. The door opened to a set of metal spiral stairs. Gef shown his lamp inside the room with the stairs and then looked back to the crew. "I guess we go up."

Chapter 10

In which the crew gets the attention of the Baron.

The stairs led to more stairs hick led to hallways and more doors until Gef was certain, upon examining a certain wall, that they were inside the walls of the city. He found a grate, low to the ground. He told Able to put on his disguise again and he did so himself. Nip and Po tucked themselves away in pouches on Able's belt and Ka'Rolly pulled its cloak back over its head and around its newfound body. Then the crew exited through the grate and a short tunnel into an alleyway between the city walls and the city itself. There was no one around. From where they were, they could see numerous buildings, two and three stories tall, and then lording over all of them, the castle itself—a massive horn with balconies and windows and passageways carved into it, spiraling around its gray, curved mass, pointing at the sky.

"We have to go there?" said Able peering up at the enormous structure.

"Yeah. And it will be heavily guarded."

"I could fly up with Nip." Nip chirped in agreement.

"Yeah. Yeah you could. But we all need to stay together."

"Really," Able said, "You're the only one who can't fly."

Gef looked down at Able, hurt. "You know. You're right. Maybe I should do something about that." He laughed. "For the moment though, let's just scout out the place."

They walked down streets and alleys, generally toward the base of the horn, which was hard to accomplish because none of the streets went in any manner of a straight line. As they moved, more and more people began to emerge. Able noted quickly that things were different than at Kinton Station. The people looked haggard, gray, unhealthy. In many places there were people squatting at the side of the street, holding out bowls and jars, begging for food or water or metal. Able would have given them anything he had, but with the exception of the electrol or his clothes he had nothing. It created a feeling within him that was an awful sorrow.

And why water? They had just come from a place with more water than he had ever seen, but these people had none. He wanted to tell them about the grate and how to go down the stairs and where to get all the water they wanted, but Gef told him no; that they needed to keep to themselves for a while still. Able didn't like this either.

Then there were the guards. There were people in metallic suits, eight feet tall, that hissed and smoked when they walked. They pushed other people out of their way. Once, when walking down a street, Gef had to push Ka'Rolly and Able off to the side just to get out of the way of the mechanomen, or be knocked over.

"I don't like this place, Gef. I don't like this place at all."

"Me neither, kid."

After hours of wandering through streets they came to a wide open square with the gates to the castle on the far side. Lines of the mechanomen stood around the gates. All around the rest of the square were statues that rested in large concrete bowls. They should have been fountains. People milled about the square, gathering in small groups, talking. At the edge of the square, any number of people stood at tables, trading wares.

"You know, kid, besides your great idea of just flying up to the top, I'm starting to think that maybe our best plan of action is to simply announce ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we get Po to do that dragon thing again and have it ask to see the Baron."

"I thought you wanted to be quiet and stay low?"

"Well, that was then. Now we have... different... circumstances. And listen, if they do take us, which I suspect they will. You need to let me do the talking—act like the mistakes are mine, okay?"

"Why?"

"If something goes wrong, I need you to take Nip and get the heck out of here. I don't think we should let the Baron know what you really are. I'll tell him you're my assistant or something."

"What am I really?" Able asked.

Gef chuckled and put a hand on Able's shoulder. "You're unique. And you need to get to the Ultracircus."

Able smiled at this.

"Look, if something goes wrong, take Nip and go back to Kinton Station. Get Arthra if you can. Sneak into town and find Wacamolo. He'll help you."

Able didn't like this at all, the idea of losing Gef. "Okay."

"Don't worry. This is gonna work. Now loan me Po."

"I can't really—"

"I know, I know. Jus let m hold him."

Able took Po out of the pouch on his belt and held the mistake up to his face. "Can you help Gef? I have more than enough electrol for you, okay? We know where to get lots now!" He handed Po to Gef.

The crew walked to the center of the square. Gef held Po up to his face and said, "Do that dragon thing and have it say, 'I demand to see the Baron Rollo Leocadia!' Can you do that?" Po sighed and signaled yes. Gef held Po up in the air.

Just by coincidence, a very thick cloud rolled in over the city and the dim light grew dimmer as Po's lights reached out and danced all over the square. People immediately stopped what they were doing and looked at the sky and around the square for the source of the dancing lights. Their eyes fell on a dustman who was holding up some sort of orb that was growing in size and shining lights everywhere. The lights began to coalesce into a stream of light that slithered in the air, and then grew hair and legs and scales. It formed a long dragon that then coiled into a pile resting above Gef and Po. The dragon looked at the gate and then up the tower, "Bring me Baron Rollo Leocadia!"

Everyone in the square was frozen. The guards rushed to form new lines in between the gate and the dragon. They

drew weapons and stood at the ready. Thunder boomed and Gef smiled at his luck. Able turned to look at the crowds all around them. Some wore faces of amazement, while other looked on with dread. He put his hand in his pouch and clasped Nip who buzzed in agreement with a sound like "Woah."

Gef looked up, past the dragon and saw that another light was forming at the top of the tower, and he realized that's where the thunder was coming from, not the sky. And then a howling came from the top of the tower, and another dragon came swooping down, crying with maniacal laughter. It swooped down to the square and crashed through the shimmering light dragon that Po had created. It swam through the air in a circle around the square and bellowed, "You have called, fools! I am arrived!" The dragon crashed into the square between the lines of guards and Gef and Po and even knocked a few of the guards off their feet, sending them flying. The dragon shoved its face right in front of Gef and bellowed again, "Who dares!?"

Gef held his ground, even though he had no clue what to do next. "I am Draxon the scientist. I wish to parlay and to discuss developments."

The dragon considered this and then began to shrink and transformed into a fat noman covered with cybernetics. "An electric message wouldn't have sufficed?"

Gef said nothing as the large noman approached him.

The Baron's left eye was all machine and the silver lense that was there in the eye's place stared through Gef. "A dustman scientist? How interesting." The eye shifted and changed. "Oh! A synthezoid scientist. How *very* interesting."

The Baron looked at Ka'Rolly and Able. "And what interesting companions as well."

He looked back to Gef. "Fine then. Let us go to my chambers." He turned his hands up toward the sky and a circle of stones from the square shook and then lifted off the ground, carrying the Baron and the crew up into the air. The Baron commented, "Impressive use of the weather I might add." The Baron turned his back to the crew and guided the rock platform up to the top of the tower towards a large balcony. Gef turned to Able and shrugged. Able smiled back.



The Baron's chambers were a massive circular room, lined with bookshelves with ladders on wheels that reached ten meters up. The bookshelves ended where windows began and the windows were just as tall. The floor of the room was marble so polished it gleamed. There was a massive door at one end of the room, guarded by the ominous mechanomen. Opposite the door was a dias with a large chair the the Baron settled his weight into, he poured into he chair. And in the center of the room, reaching up to and through the dome of the ceiling, was a series of tubes, beginning small at the floor and growing in width and length as it reached upward.

"First things first," the Baron said. The acoustics of the room were architected to make his voice appear to be coming from everywhere in the room. "You may remove your disguises. I certainly understand why you would wish to hide your true nature from the dregs, but you need not worry

here. I am appreciative of the fact that a synthezoid could engage in science. There is no requirement regarding species for those who seek knowledge, is there?"

Gef agreed, "Yes." He removed his mask and his hat and poncho. Able and even Ka'Rolly did the same.

"Your programs are impressive," the Baron said. Gef started to reply but the Baron raised his hand and said, "Wait. Let us have a true parlay." He reached for a horn near his chair and shouted something into it. Bookcases along the wall opened, and out came running noman in very nice clothes carrying a long table, chairs and several platters of food. The table was placed in front of the crew, along with chairs for Albe, Gef and Ka'Rolly. The Baron got up from his throne and (with some effort) walked down the stairs to a chair of his own at the table.

Once he was seated, the Baron said, "Now. If you will indulge me, my good colleague, could I pester you with some questions?" He reached for some slices of meat, "And I assume that none of you eat?"

Gef replied, "Ask anything you wish, and no, I and my assistants do not require sustenance."

"Of course, of course. Now, this one," and the Baron pointed at Ka'Rolly, "An organic-programmatic mixture?"

"Yes," said Gef, deciding that agreeing with guesses was a good strategy.

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Why create such a creature?"

Gef thought through what he knew from the Cyclo, some kind of concept to justify Ka'Rolly. "An experiment, if you will."

"Ah yes. Not unlike my mechanomen I suppose."

"Precisely. I am also interested in how you created *them*."

The Baron waved his hand in dismissal. "Primitive really. Noman dregs implanted with circuitry and then programmed thusly. Mere automatons. And stupid to boot." The baron swallowed chunks of meat, a dribble of something running down his chin. "You see, if I had the ability to create—well, no offense—but something like you—synthezoids—I'd have no need for such abominations." The Baron stared at Able, making him uncomfortable. "This little one, you see. Did you create him?"

"Yes." Said Gef. Able gave him a dirty look.

"And where did you come by the knowledge for such a thing? How did *you* even gain your autonomy? I've never met a synthezoid with free will, if you don't mind my saying."

"As for my free will, that is a bit of a secret."

"I see. Yes. Of course."

"And as for any more information, I would be willing to share more for a price."

"A price!?" The Baron laughed, though Gef was not sure at all why. "Very well. What price?"

"I am in search of a Texo compass."

"Really? How droll." The Baron tore apart some bread. "I don't understand. If you can concoct these programs, you don't need my help manufacturing a Texo compass."

"It's not the compass itself I need any help with. It's the thing to which it is attached that is giving me trouble."

"Oh? And what thing is that?"

"The Ultracircus." For emphasis, Po, sitting next to Gef at the table threw up a light model of the ambling city.

Again, the Baron laughed obnoxiously and banged the table. "The Ultracircus! Are you serious!?"

"Quite."

"And when you find it, what sort of wishes are you planning on asking for from those doddering, old idiots?"

"No. I have no wishes. I mean, I'd like to—" Gef thought better of mentioning the cyclopedia. Judging from the books in the library, the Baron knew quite a lot and mentioning that he wanted to complete the cyclopedia might give him away as an imposter. "I simply want to discuss my... programs."

"Hm," said the Baron. "The council doesn't know anymore about manipulating the nanosphere than *I* do, and they certainly can't produce independent programs the likes of yours. Tell me, what do they do?" The Baron leaned forward greedily. "Maybe a texo compass for one of them would be a fair bargain?"

Able kicked Gef under the table as Gef was thinking. "Yes, well, I'm afraid that part of creating them is giving them free will. I couldn't trade one of them unless they wished to go. However, let me ask, does this mean that you have a texo compass attached to the Ultracircus?"

The Baron spread his hands. "We both have cards, I suppose. At this juncture, I am not willing to say if I have such a device."

"An impasse, then."

"Only for the moment, my good Draxon. Let us think on the matter. I insist that you enjoy my abode for as long as you like. Enjoy my library." The Baron gestured with a grand wave to all of his books. "And in the meantime, we shall both think about what we want and what is required for us both to gain it." The Baron smiled broadly, but Able didn't think it was a nice smile—more like the smiles on those smoke tigers.

Chapter 11

In which the Baron assists the crew.

The Baron's people showed the crew to a large bedroom chamber with large windows overlooking the city and all manner of beautifully crafted furniture. The crew settled in, Nip flying to the curving ceiling and meandering about; Able found a large, soft chair; Po joined him in it; Ka'Rolly laid down on a bed for the first time and let out a long whistle; while Gef just paced.

Able spoke first, "I don't like him at all."

Gef replied, "I know, I know, He's off-putting. But he's willing to bargain. Maybe there's something we could come up with that he wants."

"Do you think he has the Texo Compass for the Ultracircus."

"No."

"What makes you think that?"

"We weren't telling him things we didn't know. I think he was not telling us things he didn't know. But he knows *about*

the Ultracircus. He even mentioned people that were part of it, 'doddering, old fools.' What was that about?"

"What is the nanosphere?"

"Yeah. I have no idea."

Gef looked at Po. "But we do have access to his library. What do you say, Po, want to do some reading?"

Po chirped a song of excitement.

"I thought so."

"What should I do?"

"I think we're gonna' need a fast exit at some point. I need you and Nip to scout around and see if you can find a quick way out of the city—not the way we came in."

"Why not leave the way we came?"

"I think that museum belongs to the Baron. He may be able to lock it down. He definitely keeps his own people from getting down there."

"I don't like that he has all that water and food and yet the people of the city are begging for it."

"You're right; it's wrong. But we have to stay focused on what we're here to do. We need the Texo compass."

"Gef, why have you decided it's so important to do that? You used to think that the Ultracircus was a myth."

Gef stopped his pacing and came to stand in front of Able. "Able, you are incredibly important. I have seen you do things that I haven't heard about in history texts. Whoever is at the Ultracircus, Ghendra knew they could help you or help you use this special sight of yours. We need to get you to

them. Maybe I'm just being silly, but some part of me thinks that the balance of this world could be at stake."

"Geez, Gef."

Gef chuckled. "I know, buddy. But look, if there were more Nips and Kas and Pos in the world, don't you think they could help people?" Gef paused in thought. "Come to think of it, why haven't you made more of them?"

"Well... I made them, yes, but in order to do it, there's part that I need. My mother gave me three of them. They're the only three I have."

"What kind of part are we talking about?"

Able searched the ceiling for an answer and his eyes landed on Nip. He looked back to Gef and shrugged, "Cubes."

"Well, that helps."

Able smiled sheepishly.

"Well hey, this is the kind of thing we can find out about at the library maybe. Let's not waste any time. You and Nip scout and me and Po will go learn some stuff."

Able looked to Ka'Rolly on the bed. "What about Ka'Rolly."

Gef smiled. "I think Ka'Rolly should investigate the bed."

Ka'Rolly let out another long whistle of pleasure.



Able and Nip made their way out of the bed chamber and around long corridors through the palace, meandering until

they found a guarded door. Two the mechanomen stood in front of it, large metal halberds clasped in their hands, the shafts resting on the ground. Able tried saying hello and good morning and that they would like to go to the market, but the metal men didn't move and didn't speak a word. Nip floated up to one of their helmets and peered inside. The glassy eyes peering out of the slot in the metal helmet never moved.

Just then, the Baron appeared from around a corner. "Hello, my little friends. Can I be of help?"

"Uh. We would like to go to the market."

"I see. Well, of course. Please, allow me to accompany you."

Albe pondered this. It would be hard to scout with the Baron there, but he definitely didn't want to seem suspicious.

"Um. Okay."

"Excellent. Let's have a look around shall we?"



Gef and Po found the double doors to the library easily enough but they were unfortunately locked. "Sure," Gef said, imitating the Baron, "have my library at your disposal." He looked down at Po in his hand. "Don't suppose you can pick locks?" Po made a disappointed tone.

Just as Gef was about to turn and leave, he could hear the loud clanking of the big lock on the door, and then one of them opened. The Baron was standing there. "Ah! You have

decided to investigate the library. Excellent. I am very proud of my collection. Please let me be of assistance."

Of course the Baron wasn't going to let him in unaccompanied, Gef thought. Still though it was better than nothing. Gef put back on his airs of being a scientist and said to the Baron, "I generally keep my knowledge in a more compact fashion, but I do love the smell of books."

"A more compact fashion, you say," said the Baron as he shut the door behind them.



Ka'Rolly lay on the bed enjoying an amazement sense of comfort, the first they had ever enjoyed. Even burrowing through the wet mud, though familiar and safe, was not nearly as comfortable. Rolly adored the sense of lightness she had gained from being suspended in nothing but water, and she adored all the things to see. And Ka was able to show her what the feeling of walking was like and strength! Ka enjoyed being treated like a person, of sorts.

They were staring at the ceiling and just enjoying the sensation of floating when a face came into their line of site. It was the Baron. "Hello, my unusual friend. Are you enjoying the accouterments?"

Ka'Rolly nodded hesitantly.



Gef, with Po in hand, ran his index finger along the rows of books looking for something familiar. There appeared to be many languages making up the titles. He couldn't discern what order they were in either. He thought maybe a ruse would help him. "It's interesting to me that you keep copies of these books. I destroy the ones I encounter."

"Really? But whatever for? And how do you reference them later?"

Gef looked at the Baron, "I memorize them." He held up Po, "I refer to this program as my eye." Po played along and beeped dutifully.

"Your eye?"

"Yes. Perhaps a demonstration?"

"Please."

Gef picked a compendium he thought might be handy and carried it and Po over to a small table. He set the book down and Po extended his legs and copied the book. He hoped that the Baron wouldn't ask him to repeat anything since he wasn't really getting the information Po was. But then, he thought, if Po could copy him, would it work in reverse? A real experiment for another day.

The Baron watched Po copying the book and his eyes widened; he practically drooled. He had to get rid of this Draxon character and possess these programs for himself. Then, the Baron has a devilish idea: he could rid himself of another enemy, or possibly both! "What if I were to trade you the Texo Compass to the Ultracircus in exchange for a task?"

Gef had walked away from Po and was back scanning the shelves for any sign of a piece of the Cyclopedia. "What manner of task?"

"There is another scientist near here. She bothers me. You've seen how poor my people are. She raids my people's resources, steals crops and water. I would like her eliminated. That seems like a task you could handle. You wouldn't have a problem with killing another scientist, would you—especially one that really has no knowledge to offer."

"No. I wouldn't," Gef lied. He stepped to the Baron with his best poker face. Given that the Baron was clearly lying about the cause of the plight of his people, and given that the enemy of his enemy might prove to be an ally, this scientist might be someone worth meeting. The Baron was probably lying about the compass, too. Maybe this other scientist had more information. "Who is this scientist?"

"Her name is Vivian. She has a tower at the Lake of the Low. The hanging city of Boisenval is there. If you can fly, it's two days Northeast."

Gef scoffed, "Fly? I can think of much faster ways than that." He couldn't really.

The Baron pulled an object out of his robes, a small metal plate with dials and glass in its center. "Please, feel free to use this to stay in touch. I would like some proof that she is dead before I hand over the compass."

Gef took the object and thought to himself that was it. He had all the information he needed and he needed to get out of there and find the others. But then, he had a second thought. He didn't have *all* the information he wanted. The library existed in two places. He walked back over to Po and

picked it up. He turned to the Baron, "Baron, perhaps you might like another demonstration of what my eye can do?" He held Po out.

The Baron barely hid his greed. He reached out and took Po into his hands. "But of course." He turned Po over and over in his hands, looking for any hint of its inner workings.

Gef leaned over and said, "Find out what he knows, Po."



Able and Nip and the Baron had walked around the marketplace, the Baron pestering Able with questions. Able figured the best strategy was just answer "I don't know," which was also the truth for most of the questions. Then Able figured a better strategy was to answer questions with questions. Able started pointing at things and asking, "What's that?" The Baron would answer, "It's a fruit, a mockmelon, I think. Disgusting."

"What's fruit?" Able asked.

The Baron would give some semblance of a definition and then Able would move on to his next, "What's that?" Or "What are those?" or "What's that do?"

The Baron asked, "Did your master have instructions for you?"

"I don't know. What's that do?"

"That's a *door*."

"What's a door for?"

"By Jupaeter, you are an ignorant clockwork."

"What's that?" Able asked of a fountain, genuinely not knowing the answer.

"It's a fountain. At least tell me where your master made you."

"What's a fountain do?"

"It... it's a decoration. Usually it holds water—water flows out of it. Where's your master hail from? Where's his home?"

"I dunno. Where's the water?"

"There is none."

"Why not?"

"There's not enough of it."

"There's a whole big lake of it underground here."

The Baron was stunned. It was the most Able had said in an hour. "How do you know that!?"

Able shrugged, "I dunno."

"Enough! You will tell me how you know about the reservoir or I will destroy you!" The Baron grew in size and the air around him grew dark.

Able grabbed one of Nip's rings. "What's a reservoir?"

The Baron growled in response.

"C'mon, Nip, let's get out of here!" And with that, Nip and Able took off to the air.

The Baron was stunned. "What!?" He shrank back to his regular size and took flight as well, chasing after the pair as they flew toward the city wall. "Now wait, you! Wait! You can't leave. No one can leave my city."

Able wasn't sure what he was doing, but Gef wanted a way out of the city, so maybe the easiest thing to do was to look at it from the outside. He flew past buildings and rooftops, much faster than the Baron could move. The Baron tried hurling stones at them, but Nip dodged them with ease. The pair flew past the wall and Able looked down to see a large encampment all around the road leading to the main doors of the city. And then he saw Arthra! He recognized Gef's flags.

"Nip! We need to go down there." Nip made a warning sound and Able looked back to see the Baron, pounding on something. It was as if a glass wall had been thrown up from the wall. The Baron was hitting it and throwing stones against it, but the air turned purple and absorbed the shocks. It appeared the Baron couldn't go any further than this invisible wall.

Nip and Able floated back over to the Baron, out of curiosity, just ten meters from him. He was having a complete temper tantrum. "You work for her, you useless little pile of gears, don't you! I know it! She sent you just to toy with me! You come back here or I will—" and then the Baron went silent. He stiffened up like a pole, and his eyes rolled back in his head and he vanished—turning into a cloud of colorful lights that slowly dimmed and disapated into the air. It looked, for a moment, like electrol to Able.

Other than that, he had no idea what the Baron was talking about or what had happened, but they seemed safe for the moment. "Let's go check on Arthra," said Able to Nip



The Baron was explaining to Ka'Rolly, "But really, you should get up and then we can take a tour of the palace. I have many amazing things I could show you." This had been taking far too long. The Baron wasn't sure what Ka'Rolly was or what they could do, so he was hesitant to force them to do anything, but he was losing patience.

Ka'Rolly let out a long wheeze. They liked the bed.

"You... the dustfish in you, it likes to eat, doesn't it? I have food for Dustfish."

Rolly didn't understand why, but she wasn't hungry at all. She swam in a quick circle inside Ka, who responded by moving its arms and legs like it was swimming a backstroke. Ka made the sound of bubbles burbling.

"Now, look," the Baron said. "I want you to come with me to my—" And then the Baron did a very odd thing, which made Ka'Rolly sit up. He stiffened, his eyes rolled back in his head and he vanished!—turning into a cloud of colorful lights that slowly dimmed and disappeared.

Ka'Rolly whistled and sat staring at the air. Minutes later Ka'Rolly was shocked again when the door burst open and Gef and Po were there. "C'mon, Ka'Rolly! We gotta' go!" Gef ran over to the bed and tried to drag Ka'Rolly up, but something was different. Ka'Rolly was heavier, and thicker, and when they stood up, they were bigger—at least two meters tall! "Geez," said Gef. "What have you been eating?" All four made for the door and down the hallway.

Before long they came to the same door that Able had tried to leave through. The two metal mechanomen stood with their unpleasant-looking halberds. Gef started to think, but

before he could get anywhere with a thought, Ka'Rolly picked him up, threw him over their shoulder, and jumped and smashed through a window in the hallway. The two mechanomen turned slightly to watch, as Gef screamed, "What are you doiiiiiiiiiiiiing!"

At the base of the castle, Ka'Rolly smashed into the stone plaza, shattering it and forming a crater beneath them. They set Gef on his feet. He took a moment to orient and then put a finger in Ka'Rolly's face. "Never. Ever. Do that to me again!"

Ka'Rolly blooped an apology.

"It's fine." Gef checked that Po was all right. The little mistake beeped with glee. "Yeah. Right. Okay. Let's go," and the four of them made a break for the city doors. "Able better have found us a way out!"

Chapter 12

In which the crew runs into old friends.

"I suggest we make a very hasty retreat!" Gef had said, hopping on Arthra, running along her back, throwing cable ladders down and helping others up. Despite having run in to Wacamolo and Rilla, Gef didn't feel there was any time for a re-union until they were back on the road. Nor did he want to wait around for the Baron's inevitable recovery.

Able, on the other hand, was very excited to see Rilla and hugged her—somewhat to her surprise. He helped her to a seat on Arthra and sat next to her as they trundled off from the City of Horn. "What are you doing here?" He asked.

"Waca was worried about you. The Baron is a very bad man, and he thought you might get trapped or something worse."

"Well, I wish we had figured out how to help the people that the Baron has trapped. I guess that will have to wait." Able looked at Rilla for a long moment, wondering about why she was here still, "Aren't you sad or scared to be away from your town and your parents?"

Rilla shrugged, "I don't have any parents."

"How do you know Waca?"

"He caught me stealing out of his garbage once. Ever since then, he would give me stuff in the market. When I saw he was leaving town, I followed him."

After a few hours, Gef steered Arthra off the road and out into the badlands again. He and Ka'Rolly and Wacamolo covered their tracks from the road for about a hundred meters. "That should throw anyone off who tries to follow us. Although, I don't think the Baron can follow us." They set off again, shadowing the road from the ridges of the hills.

Gef had already explained to Wacamolo about the copies and the deal the Baron had wanted to make and how he had knocked the Baron out for a time with Po. Wacamolo laughed and said, "I should like to try that!" He spoke directly to Po, "I might have some useful stuff in this old gourd that you could use, little one."

Gef held up a hand, "Let's maybe wait on that. I woke up from the copying. We don't know that the Baron did. Maybe organics get... uh... hurt in the process."

"Fair point," Wacamolo agreed. He set Po down.

Gef continued, "We don't need Po to copy you for you to tell us about this Lady Vivian."

Wacamolo scratched his whiskery chin. "I'm afraid I know less about her than the Baron. She lives in or near the hanging city of Boisenva, which is located at one end of the Lake of the Low.

"Well, I got that much out of the Baron already. If you're gonna come with us old man, we're gonna need more than that."

"Oh, oh, oh. I know more, you bucket of bolts! First of all, the Lake of the Low is a very dangerous place. It's inside a crater called, Nuktut Togait, at the edge of the territory of the Durman. Whatever is in the lake keeps the crater filled with gas. It doesn't affect the Durman; or at least they have equipment to deal with it since they dwell underground."

Able had come forward on Arthra and was peering around Wacamolo. "What's a Durman look like, Po."

Po beeped and threw up a light model of a bipedal creature with skinny arms and legs ending in oddly flat claws. Its head had a long snout with many teeth and no eyes.

"Oh my," said Wacamolo, he leaned in toward Po and turned a lever on his glasses to look closer at how it was making the light.

Able marveled at the light model, "They have no eyes?"

Wacamolo looked to Able, "Yes. In fact, they are known in some circles as the 'eyeless ones.' It is said that they descended from the ancestors of the Noman who lived so long underground, they lost their site."

Po abruptly shifted the light model of the Durman to a topographical map of the City of Horn and the crater, the lands between them, and the surrounding area, as well as an arrow that showed where the crew was located.

Wacamolo could no longer resist and picked Po up, "You are highly useful. What manner of object is this, Gef?"

Gef just said, "Ask him."

Wacamolo looked at Able. "You know?"

Able shrugged, "Sort of. I mean, I m-m-made him."

Wacamolo squinted at Able, "You constructed this?"

"Sort of."

"Very pithy, this one," he said to Gef, who chuckled.

Po was still displaying the map and Wacamolo set it down again. "Can you show me more of the Lake?"

Po let the map increase in size, some of it disappearing. The crater became as big as a bucket. Wacamolo pointed to one end of it and Po spun the map so that part of the crater was in front of him. "Thank you. Very helpful," Wacamolo said. "Here is where the Lake of the Low gives way to a deep valley. The hanging city of Boisenvall lay there. The mountains on all sides of the crater belong to the Durman."

"Are they bad?" Asked Able.

"Bad? No. They don't take kindly to surface dwellers, though."

"And this Lady Vivian?" asked Gef.

"She is a scientist, and I believe a much more powerful one than Baron Rollo."

"Maybe that's who the Baron was shouting about," said Able.

Gef interjected, "The Baron was shouting?"

Able explained how the Baron couldn't fly past the wall and how—Able did his best Baron imitation—"You work for her, you useless little pile of gears! She sent you to make toys with me!"

Gef said, "I don't think you have that quite right, but... yeah, maybe it was Vivian he was talking about. He told me

she raided his city and that's why his people were so destitute."

"That's not why," Able said, annoyed.

"I know," replied Gef. "That's how I knew he was lying."

"Well," added Wacamolo, "I doubt she will be any happier to see us than the Baron. Scientists don't generally like company."

"Aren't there any good scientists?" Able asked.

"There is a legend—about the Ultracircus—that it was once governed by a council of scientists. They worked to keep the world in balance. However, one of them, in a grand inquiry, somehow upset the balance. They say he intended to travel to the world above the world."

"Where's that?" Rilla asked. She had come to hear the story.

"I have no idea. But whatever the inquiry or journey or experiment was, it was supposedly the thing that dimmed the sky and took the moons away and changed the world into the Shattered Land."

"What's a moon?" asked Able.

Gef answered, "They were enormous rocks that used to fly around the world. They were so big that at night they would light everything up. One was a big round circle in the sky. One was a big ring." Gef looked up to the twilight sky. "They were beautiful."



At the campfire that night, Gef and Wacamolo were discussing the map. Rilla was piling stones on Able's head. He sat with his legs crossed and as straight and still as he could. Nip caught on to the idea and started adding stones as well. Able sat still, Rilla laughed, and Nip made some version of a laugh as well.

A little later, Wacamolo sat Rilla and Able down to tell them about what the nanosphere was. "Able, I believe, can see it." He then made several strange gestures with his hands before he scooped up some dirt from the ground. He smoothed the dirt into his palm and then threw it at the campfire. It turned into many small orbs of light that changed color and then drifted away from the fire and faded away. "Did you see your electrol in that, Able?"

"Yes! I did!"

Gef, Nip, Po, and Ka'Rolly all watched the trio from the edge of the campfire. Gef was letting Po roll up his arm, over his shoulders and down the other arm. Nip was hovering. Ka'Rolly was looking up at the night sky with its dim, smudged, red stars.

"Can I do it?" asked Rilla.

"Yes. But it will take time," said Wacamolo. "If I can do it, so can you."

Able picked the electrol up without making the gestures that Wacamolo had made, held his hand very near the fire and let many orbs fly up out of his hand. Wacamolo stared at him intensely.

Rilla tried what Wacamolo had done, but failed. "He did it right away! It's not fair; he's clockwork!"

"Rilla, no," said Wacamolo. "We do not call them that."

"But he is!"

"I am," agreed Able.

"No, no, children. A clockwork—it's a thing. Rilla, he is your friend." Wacamolo sat back from the fire. "He is your friend, but also he sees a little differently than us. You'll learn more in time. I promise; I'll teach you both more."

"Show us something else!" Said Rilla.

"Very well." Again, Wacamolo made several gestures in the air and this time clapped his hands together and pressed them in against one another. As he pulled them apart, he twisted his fingers like a fan and began to pull them apart where they formed a small dust devil. He set it on the ground and it spun in place between all of them. Everyone marveled at the miniature cyclone. Po rolled close to it and it lifted Po into the air. Po made several desperate sounds, and everyone laughed but Nip who flew down to pick Po up and set him on the ground again. Po whirred in thanks.

Wacamolo turned to Able and said, "You know that little dust devil seems like such a simple thing, as though maybe it is alive. But look as it fades."

Able watched as the dust devil lost power and size and eventually spun itself into smaller and smaller circles that disappeared into the ground.

Wacamolo spread his hands. "It is gone."

Able stared, everyone in the crew stared. Whatever it was, it had been a something enough to even lift Po and then it was gone.

"I want to show you something, Able," said Wacamolo digging through his bags. He pulled out a wooden board and a sack of stones. He laid the wooden board down on the ground where the dust devil had been. "This is called a board of Go." The wood had lines burned into it in a nineteen by nineteen grid. He poured out a bunch of white stones on to the board. "I want to teach you a simple game that will show you some things about how I made that dust devil and how you made your friends. Would you like to know about that?"

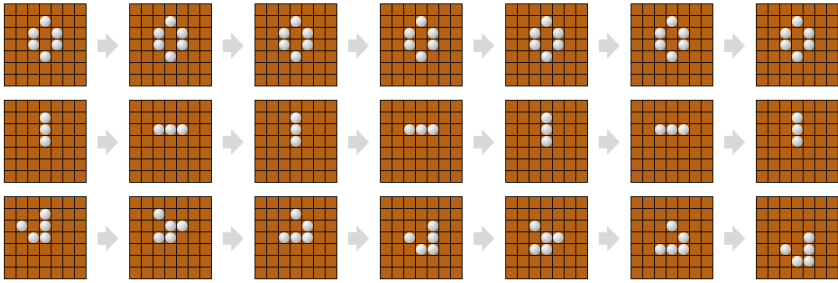
Able was curious about the stones. They were ivory white and perfectly circular. He could see that each had the same diameter—the same curvature. He looked to Wacamolo and nodded.

"Very good. Now," Wacamolo began putting the stones down inside squares on the board. "Normally, we would play this game called Go and the stones would sit on the lines. But for what I want to show you, the stones will sit inside the squares. And the rules... the rules are different from other games. For one, there really are no players. Rather, players can place the stones wherever they like, but rules move the stones."

"So, to begin with, I will set some stones down and tell you the rules: There is On, Off, Evolution and Entropy. A space without a stone is off. A space with a stone is on. A neighbor is anything one space away. A stone with only one or no neighbors will turn off. A stone with more than three neighbors will turn off because of entropy. A stone with two or three neighbors, remains on. A space with exactly three neighbors begins."

"Okay," said Able.

"So, if I show you this," Wacamolo set some stones down.
"What will happen?"



Able looked at the simplest set of stones, a line of three. He pointed to the top and the bottom of the line, "These will turn off—they only have the middle one as their on neighbors. But, These spaces—" he pointed to either side of the line—"have on neighbors, so they will turn on."

Wacamolo and Able went on like this for some time, Wacamolo arranging stones and Able predicting their outcomes. Some of the patterns of stones did nothing. Some of the patterns did the same thing over and over again; like the brundlexes that he'd built his mother. Some of the patterns did unexpected things though. The first one that Able noticed was a pattern that would crawl off the board. "Why?" He asked Wacamolo.

"Simply put, because of the rules," said Wacamolo. "Given the rules, you can find patterns that will do many things. Some patterns will even make more of themselves!"

Able nodded. Maybe that was how the Baron made copies of himself.

Wacamolo began to put the board and the stones away. "That's enough for tonight." Everyone began going to bed and many of them had strange dreams of grids and stones coming to life.

Chapter 13

In which the crew make their way through eerie lands.

Gef and Waca and Po were doing their best to navigate the crew toward the crater, Nuktut Togait. The plan then was to try to use the edge of the crater as a path to get to the side where Boisenval was located. But Po's maps were old and the landscape had changed. The fuzzy fungus-covered hills and vales filled with spores, shifted from where they might have once been. And it wasn't just the ground causing them frequent detours. The entire landscape was covered in a forest of fungus; mushrooms as tall as the mesas back in the Idex Mortez. There were mushrooms growing out of those mushrooms and mushrooms growing in great clusters out of those. The air was thick with spores, some as big as a fist. Waca had decided after a few hours that it might be best if he and Rilla wore the masks that Able and Gef had been using as disguises. "Spores like these could be bad for organic lungs," Wacamolo said.

At Able's suggestion, he and Po and Nip would fly above the canopy and let Po try to redraw it's map. After one such flight, Po alerted Gef to something. He showed the map and

then showed changes and then showed the map altering again, and this time behind them. Gef watched the animated images and said, "I thought so."

"What's happened?" Asked Able.

"We're not just dealing with novel terrain, we're dealing with a moving forest."

"Fascinating," said Wacamolo.

"Well, that just means there's even less point in turning around," Gef said. "We still need to make our way to the edge of the crater. Po can get us there."

Po "sat up" straight and chirped with a sense of duty. Indeed, he could do it.

But, the traveling was slow-going, so Waca supposed he would fill some time with a story, especially for the children, who seemed bored. He turned around on his pillow, tied to Arthra. "You know children, there is not so much difference between you as you might think. Rilla, of course, you are an organic, and Able, you are an inorganic."

"What does that mean?" asked Able.

Wacamolo sat back. He was shocked that Able should not know that. "Well, Able, I will put it this way. If I were to prick Rilla with a thorn, she would bleed. Have you ever seen that before?"

Able thought about his brother back in the desert. He would bleed from time to time. "Yes."

"That's why Rilla and I are wearing masks. We have lungs that collect our air so that we can energize our bodies. You, on the other hand gather air through osmosis—tiny vents all over your body. And even then, were you to submerge in

water—which you would do quite more quickly than we would—you would not need to breath for some time."

Able nodded.

"However, you do consume energy like organics. You do feel things, like organics—"

"Gef says some people think we don't."

"I know. It is an unfortunate fact. One organics are very dumb and have forgotten their history. But in fact, both organics and inorganic think, and with both think with our entire bodies. In organics, there is a great concentration of thinking in our head, but inorganics, less so. Still, both of us think with all of our body."

Able and Rilla nodded.

"In a world before this one, there was a man once who was organic. He was in possession of a great mind and could make a great many things: amazing buildings, contraptions or all kinds, flying machines. Why, he could even make brand new animals out of molecules—"

"What are—"

"No, don't worry about it. Just listen. He was a very smart man, is the point. And he knew all about his heart and his lungs and his stomach and his brain. And he so enjoyed making and inventing things that he decided to try to live longer than he normally might. You see, organics can die while inorganic do not."

"We do too die," said Gef from the front.

"Not *naturally*—only by accident. May I finish my story?"

"Sorry."

"This man—we'll call him Phaistos—studied himself carefully and began a process of replacing parts of himself. He made a new inorganic heart and new inorganic lungs. With these, he could swim underwater for much longer periods of time and could run at top speed for hours. Of course, his muscles would still get sore, so he replaced his limbs, and hands and feet and finger and toes. He had a grip like an eagle and a could leap as high as mountain. But he was still not satisfied. He replaced more of himself with more and more of his inventions.

He even learned how to begin to capture his thoughts and feelings and dreams and store them in machines that would keep them for far longer than any organic could normally remember. He even learned to replace his brain with that machine. And then he could remember everything always and he felt more intelligent than he ever had. And he felt stronger and more aware than he ever had. He found that his new inorganic brain allowed him to perform amazing feats of awareness. He could look around corners or even to far away places and know more than any organic around him.

But here is what I wonder, children. While Phaistos performed these changes on himself, and grew faster and stronger and older—though that did not matter to him so much anymore. Those around him, his family and friends, did grow old. They grew old and—"

"What—"

Wacamolo looked annoyed. "Really?" He sighed. "Go ahead."

"What is growing old?"

Rilla cackled. "You don't know what growing old is?"

Able shrugged and shook his head.

She looked at him seriously, "What about your mean old brother?"

"What about him."

"Didn't he, you know get taller?"

"Yes. He started as a small four-legged person. Then he started walking and then he started talking. At first what he said didn't make any sense at all—"

"That is what organics do, Able. Like plants, we grow. We grow old. Eventually your brother would be as tall as your father and his skin would get wrinkles. That is growing old."

"Which I don't do."

"Well, in a sense you do."

Ka'Rolly had been listening to the story, as well, behind the children. It crawled forward and tapped its head with its finger and made a rising question sound.

"Oh I have no idea," said Wacamolo.

Ka'Rolly made a sound that might have been interpreted as "Gef."

Gef replied, "No idea either, buddy."

Ka'Rolly made a sigh and looked at Able.

"Are you not happy?"

Ka'Rolly swam in fast circles in its head to indicate that, yes, it was happy. Able suspected it was just curious. "We'll find out," and he pat Ka'Rolly on the head.

"Any. Way," said Waca, with some annoyance. "You will be alive for some number of years, and you can count them

and as they go up, you are essentially older. You may even live as many years as this one." Wacamolo gestured to Gef over his shoulder. Wacamolo leaned in close to the children, "You may not realize this, but Gef is much, much older than even me—and I'm ancient!"

"You should replace all your parts!" Said Gef, having heard everything.

Wacamolo sat back up straight, remembering that Gef's hearing was quite good, "Yes. Well, back to my story. Phaistos lived longer than those he knew. His friends and family, even just people he knew in passing, all passed on. He made new friends of course, but they also passed on, and because of his excellent memory he could remember everyone, always. He never forgot a face."

"It made him very sad after a time, children. Very sad. And so, he decided to strengthen his will and feelings the same way he had everything else in him. He replaced his feelings with logic. He made himself so that everything was never something that could make him feel joy or sorrow, but rather a thing to be studied and improved or preserved. And do you know what happened, children?"

Able and Rilla leaned forward.

"He destroyed the world and became a new one. It is said by many that we live in Phaistos."

Rilla and Able spoke at the same time,

"He became the what—"

"How could he be what—"

"Yes, yes. He became everything and nothing at the same time. It is a difficult thing to understand, but it is worth thinking about."

Able and Rilla exchanged glances, puzzled and somewhat terrified. Rilla asked, "Are we living on him now?"

"I think the better way to put it would be that we are living in him. But! Children, not all stories are meant to be entirely true. Some stories are meant to make you think. Don't worry about if the story is true. Ask yourself what it *means*."

With that, Arthra came to a halt in a significant clearing and Gef said, "We should stop here for the night. We'll get our bearings in the morning and keep pushing on."



The morning had very different plans. When the crew awoke, they were surrounded on all sides, even above, by thick spiderwebs. The world was silent as they arose and even Arthra, who rarely, rarely made noise of any kind, let out a low rumble to indicate her nervousness. Gef went to her head and soothed her. In addition to the webs, there were twelve mushrooms, slightly taller than Gef, in various positions around the encircled camp site. The crew gathered in the middle, backs to each other.

"I believe we have been captured," said Wacamolo.

"Thanks," said Gef.

With the webs encircling them, the world felt like it had a blanket pulled over it. There was very little sound and no air moving, but still there was a sound coming from the twelve large mushrooms, a creaking. Just as any of the crew was about to suggest an action, the mushrooms began changing, arms unfolding, their "stems" separating into legs. On their large caps, many glassy, brightly-colored eyes opened. They shuffled toward one another, forming small groups around the perimeter and from them a low, low barely audible rumbling came.

"What are these things?" Gef asked Wacamolo.

"I have no idea. I have never heard of such things."

Po rolled away from the group and scanned one of the creatures.

"Po!" Shouted Gef. "Hang on!"

The creature bent down and picked up Po. The two others near it gathered and surrounded Po.

"Um. Excuse me," said Gef.

The other nine shuffling mushrooms were now forming a circle around the crew.

"Excuse me," said Gef, still talking to the three huddled around Po. "That's our... uh... that's our thing?"

Two of the larger mushrooms encircling the group, leaned in close to Rill and Able and their eyes seemed to look them up and down. Then each stood back up and pulled off a small red mushroom from somewhere on their bodies and each offered it to Rilla and Able. The pair looked around the group for guidance. "Take it," said Wacamolo quietly. "It's probably

some kind of good will." Each of the children took their respective mushrooms and held them and smiled nervously.

The rumbling inside the webs grew to such a level that everyone could feel it in their insides. The three mushrooms that had taken Po now returned to the rest of the group. Po had a cluster of mushrooms growing out of the top of him now. The mushroom holding Po leaned down and handed it to Able. "Thank you," said Able looking at Po's new decoration.

BELLO! Said a voice inside Able's head. Able stood upon straight and froze. He looked around. "Hello?"

BELLO! We be under the ground men who wonder doing here you are. Out lands.

"Um." Able looked to Gef. "I think they're talking to me."

"First things first, Able. Tell them we mean no harm."

Able did just that, he thought it and before he could say it, the rumbling in the webs increased again.

Barm us you can't. Under the ground men we are. Will you leave?

"They said they aren't worried about us barming them, but will we leave?"

"Barm? No. Yeah. Tell them we're going to Boisenva," Gef looked to see if any of them understood, but there was no way of knowing. He did spot something peculiar under the cap of one of them. There was clearly a mouth and it looked familiar. He studied their hands as well.

Able thought about the city of Boisenva, what Po had showed him.

Tbat terrible idea. Terrible. Bad Noman be. Bad science.

"Uh, they say that going to Boisenvall is a bad idea. Bad science?"

"Well, yes," said Wacamolo. "We knew that." With that utterance, one of the closest mushrooms to Wacamolo leaned in very close and scanned him, it's ten unblinking, glossy eyes looking him up and down. "Yes. Uh, Hello." The mushroom rose back to its full height.

That one noman. All of the mushrooms pointed their long flat fingers at Wacamolo. *We no like noman.*

Able replied with just his own thoughts, *Well, he's our friend and we like him.*

Be you a we?

Able stared, unable to think of what that might mean.

Be you many who is one?

"Yes!" Said Able aloud. "Yes. We are."

The mushrooms stopped pointing at Wacamolo. "Thank you for that, son," said Waca.

"Able, be careful what you are telling them. Listen, have Po show them a picture of a Durman."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Po, show a picture of a Durman." Po did as asked and the tall skinny eyeless creature that they had all looked at a few days ago appeared in the air.

The mushrooms threw their hands up over their heads and rumbled and backed away from the group.

AWFULAWFULAWFULPUTAWAYPUTAWAY

"Ow!" Yelled Able. "Turn it off, Po! Turn it off." He fell to his knees as Po turned the image off.

Gef grabbed him and picked him up. "Able, are you all right?"

Able looked woozy and said, "Their thoughts were just so loud."

Gef set Able on the ground again. He turned to the rest of the group. "I think they're Durman. They're using the fungus like a technology. They're talking to each other through mycelium."

Wacamolo nodded, "Fascinating."

"Mycel-i-what?" Asked Rilla.

"I'll explain later. Able, we have to keep talking to them. Ask them why they didn't like the picture you showed them. Ask it exactly like that. Don't change a word."

Able concentrated and thought, *Why didn't you like the picture I showed you.*

Naked, alone is no. WE. We are many and strong, not naked and alone.

Able turned to Gef and said, "Naked, alone is no. *We*. We are many and strong, not naked and alone."

"Even more fascinating," said Wacamolo.

Now the mushrooms had all returned to their circle around the group. *You come see big net. All you come see big net.*

Able looked confused. "Just say what you heard," said Gef.

"You come see big net. All you come see big net."

Gef and Wacamolo exchanged glances. "Big net?" said Gef. "That doesn't sound great."

"You all meet all us," said Able.

"I say we go," said Wacamolo. "They don't seem to care for this Lady Vivian. Maybe they will help us."

"Yeah. I agree. And we don't have too much choice in the matter anyway."

Able nodded. Maybe that was how the Baron made copies of himself.

Wacamolo began to put the board and the stones away. "That's enough for tonight." Everyone began going to bed and many of them had strange dreams of grids and stones coming to life.

Chapter 14

In which the crew meets the Big Net.

The twelve Durman in their fungus armor, used bags of smoke to clear the webs, the strands of the thick structure disintegrating in front of the crews' eyes. Before they knew it, they were back to looking at puffballs growing on mushrooms growing on toadstools growing on bunts and rusts, all the way up to the sky. Twelve more towering creatures emerged from the woods that the Durmans mounted. They looked like piles of twigs crawling around on a eight tiny legs. With six on each side of Arthra, the Durman began to lead the crew through the fungal forest.

Gef advised Wacamolo that at least they were heading in generally the right direction, closer to the crater Nuktut Togait.

Able couldn't take his eyes off of Po's new adornment. "Does it hurt?" Able asked, gingerly touching the small cluster of mushrooms now sprouting out of Po's top. Po let out a sequence of beeps that sounded like nonchalance, as in, "You know it kind of tickles but not enough to bother me." Able closed his eyes and thought, *Hello?* and waited, but nothing happened. There was an eerie silence inside his

head. He looked around. Come to think of it, there was an eerie silence everywhere. The fungal forest was very still, the slightest of breezes pushing soft spores through the air with no sound. The canopy of the forest almost totally obscured the sky, which where you could see it now, was a turquoise green.

They began to travel downward for a time until they came to a rock wall with a massive stone gate. As they approached, the canopy of the forest opened up to reveal more and more of the wall. Gef said to the crew, "I think this is the edge of the crater." Positioned all along the rock wall, many Durman rose from the surroundings like plants at high speed. (High-speed for a plant.) There appeared to be at least a hundred, all on the wall, up and down and around the gate. But all this commotion, still no sound.

The gates were entirely circular, except where at the bottom the circle was flat enough for the road to pass through—if you could call what they were on a road. Stones were stacked in an arch, each one leaning slightly more than the last until they met vertically at the top. All around the stacked stones were carvings of leaves and ivy, toadstools and brackets. Near the top of the gates stood two large statues of spiders, carved into recesses so that they appeared to be coming out of the cliffside.

The low rumbling from the campsite returned to fill the insides of the crew, but much louder this time, like a thousand monks humming the lowest note possible. As it increased in power, the gates began to open.

"Is this really such a good idea? We'll be trapped." asked Wacamolo of Gef.

"I don't think they mean us any harm. They're taking us into their home."

"They weren't all pointing at you."

The gates, despite their size and thickness, made very little sound, lifting as they opened so that they never even touched the ground. The troop, the twelve durman, their prickly mounts, Arthra and the crew, all began to make their way into the gates. As they passed through, many of the durian that had been standing around the gates, melted back into the fungus brush, disappearing from view.

Bello! Able heard a voice in his head again, this one solitary. He looked around and saw the lead durman on his right, turned around in his saddle, looking at Able with the glossy eyes in his mushroom cap. *It be dark here. But you of eyes, so we will light for you. Do not worry.*

As the darkness of the cavernous tunnel began to set in with the gates closing, fungus all along the walls and ceiling began to glow with green and blue light. It was a soft light, but it lit the tunnel well enough for the crew to see one another.

"Wow," said Rilla, muffled behind her mask.

"Yeah," Said Able.

Wacamolo picked up Po, "My little friend, you must endeavor to remember as much of this as you can! I think we are the first to see it in a long time."

Po scanned the walls of the tunnel, the plant life, even the guards and their mounts, who did not seem to take any notice. Wacamolo said to Gef, "I doubt they see in our spectrum of light."

Gef smiled. "No. In fact, I think I'm tuned into the spectrum they're seeing in. It's highly ultraviolet."

"That's no fair," said Wacamolo.

Gef shrugged.

"If we were at my shop, I'd put together a nice pair of goggles."

"Wish I could loan you my eyes, Waca."

The procession moved along for a time, the tunnel growing wider and some traffic coming the other direction. There were side passages and larger doors along the tunnel walls. At times, the main tunnel split in two. At every step of the way, they were traveling down and it began to get warmer, with a light steam forming in the air.

"Do you think they know about the gas in the crater and that perhaps we should not go near it?" asked Wacamolo of Gef.

"Well, whatever they are, they're also organic. It's probably poisonous to them as well. I'd keep that gas mask on though."



After hours of trundling along corridors leading to larger corridors, the tunnel the procession was in opened into a massive cavern, as large as the tree museum beneath Horn. The ceiling was still covered in bioluminescent fungus, but the individual glow of the fungus blended together into something like a sky that was the color of mint.

On the far side of the cavern there were all manner of dancing blue lights, racing at times from the bottom of the cavern to the top and vice versa. Each light would leave an afterglow behind it revealing a massive net structure that consumed an entire side of the cavern.

The big net said a voice inside Able's head. *Approach the stand.* Their escort had stopped and moved away from the crew into the shadows. Ahead of them a hundred meters was a large dias with a spiral ramp that lead to its top another fifty meters off the ground. Able spoke up, "They want us to go to the top of that."

"Okay then," said Gef and gave a flip of the reins. Arthra started forward, but upon reaching the ramp, merely reared up, hooking her front feet across the top and pulling them all up, everyone hanging on to whatever they could on her back. The dias was large enough to hold Arthra with room to spare, so the crew dismounted and came to stand at the edge of the platform, where the net surrounded them.

Greetings they all heard in their heads. The crew exchanged glances to see that each had heard the voice. Gef spoke first, "Greetings, Big Net!"

Laughter permeated their minds. *This is what your small inorganic heard. We are the Magnus Kindui. You are close enough to hear us well now and we are close enough to be more clear. It takes many minds to make ourselves clear and many of your minds to show us the right thoughts to present. The little inorganic among you has a small thought repository.*

Rilla punched Able in the shoulder, "He said you're dumb."

"Rilla," said Waca, placing his hand on her shoulder.
"This is neither the time nor place."

"Well," said Gef, staring at the vast colors and temperatures pouring across the Magnus Kindui—which for all the world looked like a brain—"we did not mean to invade your land or even disturb you. Our intention was to get to the other side of Nuktut Togait, to the hanging city of Boisenal."

Yes. This we know. Word of you and yours has traveled through the firmycelium to all of us. We did not bring you here because we fear you. We are many and we are strong. We fear none but one. Among you there are two inorganics, two noman, one insect, and three we do not understand and have never seen before; cannot see.

Gef had a thought and turned to look at Po and Nip and Ka'Rolly. With his vision set to the spectrum matching the durman's he could not see Po and Nip at all! Of Ka'Rolly, he could only see Rolly. He switched back to his normal vision and saw the three of them right there with the group.

"These are, well, that is part of the reason we wish to go to Boisenal. We seek knowledge about many things and we believe that knowledge may be there."

You seek the Lady Vivian.

"Yes. We do."

A disturbing hum filled the cavern, it felt like fear. *This is the one we fear. Death awaits you in Boisenal.*

"Well, if you could tell us somewhere else to get the knowledge we seek, we would gladly go elsewhere."

*Amontst us once was one counted as Kiokesuimas, who was a scientist like the terror Vivian, but we have not heard

his mind in a long time. He could've have told you much. But his memories are lost to us.*

There was a pause. Gef wasn't sure what to say other than maybe sorry, which seemed out of place.

These non-organic, non-inorganic creatures among you. What are they?

"I made them," offered Able.

But what are they?

"I don't know. I call them mistakes, but I have also heard them called programs."

Program. We do not know this word.

There was another long pause. It seemed the Magnus Kindui was deliberating, the lights on the wall growing in intensity and speed.

What will you do when you meet the terror Vivian?

"Well, technically we were sent to destroy her, but—"

The whole cavern appeared to light up at once.

DESTROY!? YOU! HOW!?!

The whole crew instinctively covered their ears and bent over from the intensity of the thoughts. "Please," shouted Gef, "your thoughts are hurting us!"

The cavern calmed down. *We apologize, but this news is significant to us. We wish to join your cause.*

"Yes, but that isn't really our cause. We just want information. Maybe she will give it to us if we ask."

*The terror Vivian offers nothing without extracting a price. You will get no knowledge unless you destroy her and

take it for yourself. There is a path from here to Boisenval, beneath

Nuktut Togait. We will send many of us to go with you.*

"I must be clear. We do not want to destroy *anyone*."

Even the noman among you? They are so good at it.

"I say," said Wacamolo, "I do not appreciate such statements. All noman are not alike. We think for ourselves, and I, for one, and Rilla as well, do not like fighting."

Rilla said under her breath, "I like fighting."

She likes fighting. We can sense it.

"She is a child. She will grow wiser with age and education."

There is no value in peace for the sake of peace. The terror Vivian is more powerful than us so we do not fight. But she is a threat and we would fight if we could. We have learned patience; we have not lost the will to fight.

"Well, we do not wish to fight. We seek knowledge. That is all."

We will accompany you to Boisenval. We will see if there is merit in your claim that you may seek only knowledge. We will see if you survive the encounter. If you do not, we have lost nothing. If you do, we wish to share in the knowledge. In many ways, the Magnus Kindui is knowledge.

Gef turned to Wacamolo and Rilla and Able. "I don't think we can say no."

Wacamolo shrugged, "I can't see the harm in some guards going with us. I don't think we want to look like an invading army when we get to Boisenval..."

Gef nodded, "Exactly." He turned back to the cavern wall, "How many of you will go with us?"

The same that brought you here. This is the most courageous part of Magnus Kindui. We shall bear new ones should the terror Vivian destroy them. You may call them Minus Gendoku. They will show you to Boisenval and will assist you in any way they can. You will show patience with them. The further from the Magnus Kindui they go, the harder it will be for them to communicate.

"We greatly appreciate this gift—this assistance. And should we gain the knowledge we seek, we will share it with you, Magnus Kindui."

"Very well. We wish you luck. We grant you your loneliness."

Chapter 15

In which the crew and their new entourage make their way into the Hanging City.

The crew was much more jovial after leaving the Big Net. Where they had been somber when being brought by the durmans to an uncertain but possible doom, now that potential doom, in the form of Lady Vivian, was days away! After having spoke to Magnus Kindui, the crew was told they would be given sleeping chambers for the night and that they would leave with the Minus Gendoku in the morning. "How do you tell when its morning in this infernal nest of caves anyway?" asked Wacamolo of no one on the way to their chambers.

"I can't ask them," said Able, examining Po, and unable to hear any voices in his head.

"Oh. No, it was a rhetorical question, Able."

"It danced?"

"What?"

"It was a dancing question?"

"Um. No. I'm not sure what you mean. A rhetorical question is a question that does not need an answer."

Able thought on this. "What kind of question is that?"

"Precisely."

Rilla pushed Able and said, "Like, why are you so dumb?" And she made a silly face at him.

"Oh!" said Able, looking at Rilla, "Like, why do you smell so bad?" He stuck his tongue out.

"Children. You are both correct, but your examples are wanting. And at any rate, asking rhetorical questions is a lazy form of rhetoric. For one, when asking a rhetorical question, you are presuming agreement from your audience and that is an unknown."

"What's rhetoric?" asked Able.

"What's a question?" asked Rilla, then laughing at her joke.

Wacamolo sighed. "I was just remarking on the lack of daylight."

Gef joined in, "Looks like you got your work cut out for you, teacher."

"Ha," Wacamolo replied, giving the children a knowing look, "I could never teach these ninnies anything."

Rilla and Able giggled. But the thought of learning gave Able a different idea and he said to Gef, "How did you see what you saw in the big net's cave?"

"Right. I guess I just thought you did that," replied Gef. "It's a lot like focusing on something. When you do that, can you make the thing you're focused on appear closer?"

"Yes!"

"Well, instead of focusing like that, like pulling, try seeing through something."

"Okay." Able turned and stared at Rilla.

Rilla sat stiff, worried. As Able stared, the colors around her shifted and then he began to see her as a puffy white outline with black shadows of sticks filling her in, making her arms and legs and skull. Able began to cackle.

"What!?" asked Rilla. "What are you doing?"

Through his laughter Able said with a spooky tone, "I can see your b-o-o-o-nes!"

"Stop that, Able! Don't look at my bones!"

Able could not stop laughing.

"This is what we're trying to fix the world for?" said Wacamolo to Gef.

Able and Rilla shouted at the same time, "Rhetorical question!"

Gef just shrugged.



In the "morning," the crew awoke and packed their things on to Arthra. Able had dreamt of the tree museum, but not the tree museum. It was the tree museum but it was open to the sky. The trees loomed over him and in the light they were very green. Everywhere he looked in the dream was green.

There was wind and a smell he could not remember once he woke up.

The journey through the tunnels of the Durman was much like the day before: changing widths and intersections and strange traffic. Since the movement was slow, Rilla and Able made a game of standing on the back of Arthra, holding hands. As her legs moved, each pair at a time, the segments of her body would lift, creating a wave of motion that ran down her. When the segment beneath them was about to rise, they would bend their knees and then jump as it came up underneath them, causing them to rise higher than usual. Ka'Rolly joined in too. There was just the briefest feeling in their stomachs (or for Rolly, her whole body in the water) of there being no gravity, of freely floating.

Wacamolo had approached Gef and sat beside him at the front of Arthra. Po was with them, while Nip scouted ahead (as usual). "It's nice to see joy," Waca said, speaking of the children laughing.

"Yes. It is," replied Gef. After a few more rounds of counting and jumping and giggling, Gef said, "I can't help thinking... why didn't Able know he could see different wavelengths of energy? I mean, who builds one of my kind and makes them like a child and makes them so that they don't know things?"

"It is an odd experiment," agreed Wacamolo. "Perhaps it was a fantasy?"

"A fantasy?"

"Well, when an organic woman cannot have a child, sometimes there is a sense of loss, or a sense of longing.

Speaking as an old man, I really do not know. But perhaps someone built Able to quell that feeling."

"Maybe. He says he had a brother and a mother and a father. And for all the world, it sounds like they were all organic."

"Where did he say he came from?"

"The Idex Morte." "

"Oh my. Fascinating. Very few choose to live in that dead land. Do you know any of his family members' names?"

"You know, it's never occurred to me to ask."

"We should politely inquire some time. It could give us a clue to his abilities." Waca turned and picked up Po, "And it might tell us a bit about you, oh one who is invisible to the Magnus Kindui." Po chirped and puffed up. "You know, I should really like to give that copying business a try," Waca said to Gef.

"I don't like it. But do as you like, old man. Just don't do it while we're moving or you'll fall off Arthra.



They came out of the Durmans' tunnels at another massive gate, but this time there was no fungal forest to greet them. There was nothing but rock. As they exited the gate, Wacamolo turned around and looked up the giant cliffside. "Fascinating. We went underneath the crater."

They began an ascent down the side of the crater wall, the trail taking many switchbacks and thinning enough that the

durman could no longer walk on either side of Arthra. Instead, six walked in front and six walked in back. Wacamolo and Gef and Able looked at Po's map. Gef said, "This part still looks the same as the map." He pointed down the hill to where a valley opened up at the base of the crater. Structures could be seen, but not what they were. "That's Boisenval. We'll be there by this afternoon."

Nip sat himself on Able's head and tugged. "Nip wants to scout," said Able to the others.

"I don't like it," said Gef. "Sorry Nip, but we don't know anything about this Vivian person. What if she's got some kind of protective barrier over the whole place? No, we should all approach together."

Nip fussed but relented. "It's all right, Nip," said Able, patting his friend.

As the afternoon passed, the clouds relented enough to let the far away, dim star appear as a bright circle in the sky. The structures became more clear. The valley continued down into a canyon. From the top of the canyon there were vines and ropes and nets and anchors. They draped over the edge, so that the valley and the canyon itself came to look like a massive, haphazard knitting experiment.

As they continued to descend and came to the bottom of the beginning of the canyon, they found it to be filled with a large calm lake. The Lake of the Low. The procession had to edge along the shore of the lake on one side. Able could sense that there was something strange about the lake. Someone had built rails all along it. He tried to use his new vision to sense anything about the water, but to no avail. He said to Gef, "There's something strange about the water."

Gef said, "Yeah there is." He picked up a small hunk of metal, some lugnut he didn't need and threw it into the lake. Or rather, *on to* the lake. It landed on top of the water, almost as if the water was solid and then it began to sizzle and smoke and slowly it melted into a small puddle of metal on the surface and dissipated.

"Oh," said Able.

"Yeah," said Gef.

"A slurry of acid of some kind?" asked Wacamolo.

"I think so. Some kind of run off from whatever is in the crater I think."

Wacamolo looked closely at the reflective surface of the lake. "This does not bode well."



When they arrived at Boisenal; crawled and walked into the city, no one wanted to see them. Everyone in the city saw them and closed their doors and windows. There was not a single welcome, only fear.

The procession, six durman in front, Arthra, the crew, then six more durman, walked into Boisenal and through the hanging buildings and vines that made the canyon walls.

Then, Vivian appeared in front of them. Instantaneously. With no fanfare or smoke or lights. She was simply before them, dressed in gossamer white satin. She waved her hand at the durman soldiers and turned them to stone. She waved her other hand and turned Arthra to stone. She looked to

everyone on Arthra, cocked her head to the left, her eyes glowing deep blue, and said, "You obey me now."

She looked at Nip, Po and Ka'Rolly and with a gesture of pulling something apart she unraveled them. Nip's lights were taken apart and it became a square of metal and wires and light hanging in the air, at first letting out a low moan and then silence. She turned her attention to Po and the same thing happened. Po was turned into a flat square of parts and light in the air. And Ka'Rolly... she pondered it.

She turned to Able again, "Do you not obey?"

Able was terrified. His friends had dismounted from Arthra and now stood next to Vivian, their eyes devoid of life. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Everything obeys me, child."

"Sorry. I—why are you making everyone obey?"

"Everything obeys me, child."

"Okay then. I guess I don't."

"Who are you?"

"I am Able."

"You are an abomination. If you do not obey me, I will destroy your friends and pets one at a time while you watch."

Able had no idea what to do. Her silent terror and cruel, beautiful face made him want to cry. He slowly let himself down off of Arthra and walked through the rows of frozen durian soldiers over to Vivian.

She placed a hand on his head and again her eyes glowed blue. "Come." Then she turned and walked away. Able stood still. The others all followed her like stiff scarecrows. The

formerly Po and Nip shapes glided through the air just behind her.

Ka'Rolly came up behind Able and put a hand on his shoulder and burred what seemed like a question.

"I don't know," replied Able. "But we can't fight her." They both began walking after Vivian the terror as well.

Chapter 16

In which Vivian meets Able.

Vivian made everyone go to rooms she had made for them out of the walls of her tower—small alcoves where each of Able's friends went and stood like a toy on display. Able was unexpected. Vivian had seen the future, seen this rabble coming. But not Able. She calmly sat herself in a large chair before a massive window that looked out over even the Idex Mortez it was so high up.

Able wasn't even sure how high up they were. They had walked up stairs for what seemed hours. He didn't understand why Vivian hadn't used her powers to get them there. But then, she didn't seem tired at all. Instead she lounged in her chair and came to rest her head on her hand. Able and Ka'Rolly stood before her. She stared at them for long minutes before she spoke.

"You will obey me." She said to Able.

"Okay! What would you like?"

Her eyes glowed deep blue again. Able stared into them as they swirled and almost seemed to reach out for him. "No!" Her voice echoed through the room as loud as an avalanche.

Able put his hands over his ears. Her hair raised up around her hair and crackled with electricity. "Obey me!"

"Let my friends go!" Able shouted back over the din.

"NO!"

Able fell to his knees. "Please. We mean no harm. We came to find—"

"What are you?"

"I don't know. I've been told many things. Some people tell me I'm a child. Some people tell me I'm an abomination. Some people tell me—"

"Enough!" Vivian leaned toward Able from her chair, "Obey me."

Able stared.

"OBEY. ME."

Able smiled.

Vivian leaned back. Her hair fell down around her shoulders and turned white. Her eyes faded and turned to normal glassy light blue eyes. Able could suddenly see an immense sadness in them. She frowned.

"What is... what are you made of?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know? You are an automaton."

"Sorry."

"You were made. Who made you?"

"Evo."

"What!?" screamed Vivian. She sat up straight in her chair and light poured out of her body, up into the giant chamber. "How dare you speak the name of a council member?"

"Evo was my mother."

"You virulent garbage nonsense—how dare you!?"

"I dare what?"

"How dare you name a member of the council, you insolent wretch."

"Council?"

"The council! THE council!"

"I don't know what a council is!"

"Evo! You knew Evo!"

"Yes. She was my mother."

"Evo was not your mother, you little wretch."

"Um, she used to tell me that I could see colors where no one else could."

Again, Vivian seemed to catch her breath and lean back in the chair. She breathed in deep. "Evo told you What?"

"She used to tell me that I could see colors that no one else could—would ever be able to."

Vivian's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Evo. My Evo." She put her faced in her hands and sobbed.

Able stood up from the ground and placed his hands behind his back, feeling sad for this woman.

"You said 'was'—she is gone?"

"Yes."

Vivian stood and glided without footsteps to where Able was. She put her hands around his cheeks, tears still drying on her own. "She is gone and she left you in her stead."

"She also gave me some cubes that I used to make some of my friends." Able looked down. "You took them apart."

She turned away from Able and walked back to her chair. "If you are a creation of Evo, you will tell me about her and how you came to be here. Even if Evo made you, why in the world would she let you wander free?"

"My mother always told me I was free."

Vivian scoffed, "That's not the Evo I know."

"My mother—"

"She is not your mother! She is your maker!"

Able surprised himself by straightening up and saying with conviction, "My *mother* always told me I could change this world."

"Again, not the Evo I know."

"Would you like me to show you her grave!?" shouted Able. "Because I would very much like to go back there and quit this stupid business where people I meet get hurt and suffer and you're just trapping my only friends and if you really know my mother then I don't understand any of this! Let my friends go!" Now Able began to cry.

"No."

Again she looked to Ka'Rolly, who had backed away from the whole scene. She waved with her hand and pulled its head off, floating the dustfish in its little chamber over to herself. It sat in the air next to her. She pointed at the body of what was Ka'Rolly and split her fingers apart and it also

unravel into a simple square; like a diagram of its former self. She pointed and it floated to where the remains of Po and Nip hung on the wall as well.

She leaned at Able and sneered, "I don't know yet what manner of illusion or trap you are—sent by Evo or Gabriel or any one of them—but you will never leave my tower. And if you want your friends to ever go free, you will tell me everything I want to know."

Able stood hopeless, helpless. He could feel the floor changing around him, and a table formed out of it, gently rising up behind him, and lifting him off the ground. His arms and legs extended outward without his wanting them to and he felt frozen to the table's surface, staring at the ceiling of the chamber.

Vivian's face appeared over him. "You will tell me everything I want to know and then I will find out what you are really made of."



Able talked. He talked more than he thought he ever had in his life. He talked about the Idex MorteZ, about Evo, about learning to make automations and mistake, about his father and brother, why he left home, about meeting Ghendra, about Gef. He went on about giant centipedes and the Delphine meteor, about the Dustfish, understanding the world and how big it was. And on and on.

Vivian walked in a slow circle around him like those tigers outside of Horn had done. She listened carefully, he could

see it, but she never said a word until he came to the Baron. At first all she said, "Really?" And at that, she shifted the platform that Able was laying on, so that it rotated until he was right side up. "Go on." He took a breath and kept talking about the Baron appearing as a monster and all. But mostly how sad he was that the people seemed to have nothing while right underneath them were magnificent trees and more than enough water.

"That little wretch," said Vivian. She stared at Able long and hard. They were at eye level with one another, he, restrained by the platform but floating in the air. "I'm going to show you something, Able." She said it like a threat and so Able said nothing in reply. She raised her arms slowly up from her side and as she did, it looked for all the world to him like the world was burning in a small straight line that surrounded them both. The line raised up from the ground with her arms and it crackled with a blue energy. The whole room seemed to transform following the line, until when it was gone, they were not even in the room anymore, but in the city square in the City of Horn.

Vivian turned to stand next to Able and called out, as loud as a thunder clap, "Baron!"

Able and Vivian waited together for a few moments in silence. The doors to the Baron's tower opened and out marched row after row of metal mechanomen, their heavy feet slamming on the stone of the square and sending any curious onlooker running. Able looked to Vivian, frightened about what they would do in the face of this onslaught.

Vivian meanwhile seemed to grow a foot at least in height. She looked at the mechanomen like they were nothing and whispered, "Silly, little fool." It looked to Able like she

performed some sort of calculation in the air. Then she slammed her hands together in front of herself in a clasp and slowly pulled them apart. As she pulled them apart, each mechnoman also came apart, there hundreds of parts separating into the air; the people inside of them hanging in the air limp and sleeping.

"Don't hurt them!" shouted Able. Vivian seemed to lose her focus and whipped her head around at Able. When she did, all the metal parts and people fell to the ground with cacophony. "What!?" She shouted at Able.

Able said meekly, "Don't hurt them."

She sneered at Able, but turned her attention to the top of the tower, at the platform leading to the Baron's throne room. Just over the edge, Able could make out the Baron's head, peering over the side of the platform. Vivian reached up and seemed to grab the platform, like a trick of perspective that Able couldn't understand, and she ripped it off the tower and slammed it into the ground in front of her, sending chunks of rock everywhere.

The Baron lay face down on the ground in front of Vivian. He peered up from the ground and began to pick himself up. "Don't get up, wretch."

The baron obeyed and stayed on the ground on his stomach and elbows, face down. "Do you know what this lost little creature has told me about your activities?"

"Uh... uh..." Stammered the Baron.

"Speak!"

"If... if you know him, then you know him to be a fool. He doesn't know what he speaks of, my lady."

"Your lady? I think not. Today call me master."

"Yes, master."

"There was balance and energy here enough to let all of these people live in comfort. What are these stories he tells me of duplication and turning yourself into monsters?"

"Parlor tricks, my la—master."

"You lie!"

"I merely wanted to protect—"

"Quiet! I know your heart." She folded her arms in front of her. "And what of the museum?"

"It is perfectly safe and totally cared for. I would never dare—"

"You **did** dare. You dared used my knowledge of the nanosphere for yourself, you little tinkerer. What of these awful creations of yours? This is how you care for those I put under your watch?"

"I thought it was reasonable—um—in the name of Science —"

"You know **nothing** of Science. Nothing!" She turned her palm outwards and the Baron was brought to his feet, off his feet in the air and held there. Seemingly taller than even before, Vivian bent over to meet the Baron face to face. "You know technology," she uttered with contempt. She reached out and ripped a machine off of his belt and held in front of the baron's face. "You should not utter the word Science."

The baron's face was frozen in fear. "Yes, master."

"Stop this!" Shouted Able again.

Vivian spun around to glare at him. "You again? Silence."

"No. I do not need your permission to speak."

Vivian gestured and tried to manipulate the space around Able but nothing happened. She screamed in rage.

"Oh my," whispered the Baron.

"Just fix it," said Able calmly.

Vivian looked puzzled. "What?"

"Just fix it. I know you can. Just fix it."

Suddenly, Vivian's face became worn and tired. "No, Able. There is no fixing it. You don't understand."

"I do understand. I understand that he is cruel and broke this place and that you don't need to be like him and that you can fix it."

Vivian placed a hand on Able's face. He floated down to the ground. The platform he had been on melted into the ground and disappeared. Vivian knelt down in front of him. "I see you, sister."

Able couldn't understand this. Her sadness was palpable as she held her hand on his cheek. Then she whispered, "Very well, Evo."

The world seemed to shake and then many things happened at once.

Chapter 17

In which Vivian repairs the land.

In an instant, water erupted from the ground. Buildings made of stone appeared to repair themselves. The people who had been in the mechanomen suits woke and looked at their hands in amazement and then hugged one another and laughed and cried. The baron simply vanished. Where the main city tower had been covered in bent spires, it grew smooth and the stone changed from ochre to turquoise, causing the entire city to be brighter. People stepped out of their homes and smiled smiles that had not been seen in years.

With that, Vivian turned and put her hand on Able's head. "Let's go home, little Able." The world seemed to catch on fire again with that blue electricity and they were back in her chambers. Vivian left Able's side to return to her chair. Able watched as she sat and the Dustfish left her side to rejoin its newly formed body, and Po and Nip appeared in Able's view and nuzzled his head.

Able turned and watch Gef and Wacomolo and Rilla come from out of their stares. Rilla raced to hug Able, and shouted his name. Vivian smiled and tears streamed down her

cheeks. "Child," she said to Rilla, her voice almost appearing in Rilla's head. Rilla looked in fear. "Do you love him?"

Rilla stood up and held Able's hand, "Sorta'."

Vivian laughed. Then she said, "But you know what he is?"

"My friend."

At this Vivian laughed again.

Gef and Wacamolo had walked up behind the children. Gef bent down to Able's ear and whispered, "What in Gaea's name is going on, little buddy?"

Able turned to face him, "I think it's going to be okay." He turned back to Vivian. "What happened to the Baron?"

"Only you could care about that filth."

Able stared.

"He will stay with his books—his stolen knowledge—in his tower for the rest of his days."

"Able made a face."

"It's necessary, little one. It's necessary."

"Did you fix the soldiers too?"

"The Durman? Yes. And in good time, I will remove the smog from the crater, too. That will be more difficult, Able, because it is not my realm."

Able looked out the window, past the new, bright blue city of Horn, to the Idex Mortez. It remained barren and gray.

"And the Idex Mortez?"

"It belonged and continues to belong to your mother, Able. I'm afraid there's not much I can do about that either."

"Well," said Able unsure of what to say for a moment. "These are my friends. This is Rilla," and Able swung their hands in the air. With his other hand he gestured behind him, "This is Gef. He's the one looking for the Cyclo. And that's Wacamolo—he's very wise."

Vivian nodded and smiled. "Hello all."

Everyone gestured their greetings.

Vivian leaned forward, putting her elbows on her knees, a curiosity in her eyes, as the whole room brightened with her. "Well then, little Able. What's next?"



Able mostly wanted to know who Vivian was and how she knew his mother, so she made comfortable chairs for all of them and told them a story.

"Many, many eons ago, this world was created by the makers. We know the names of some of them, but not all. We know they do not exist in this universe. You could travel through all of space and time and never find them, and yet we know they used to watch us. They do not watch us anymore.

The world was very balanced. There was more than enough for everyone to have whatever they needed. We, scientists, learned a great deal about how the world worked. Through trial and error, we were able to understand the underlying rules of the world." She lifted her hand and bade Nip to come near her. When she held out her hand, Nip settled into it. She looked at Able, "This is a—"

"Nip," said Able.

Vivian smiled, "Nip is a program." She grasped it and turned it over and it made a "woah" kind of sound. "Relax little one, I mean you no harm." She looked to Able again, "How you are able to create this intuitively without understanding first principles, I do not know. However, with the right knowledge and with the use of energy, programs can be made and tasked and even copied." She tossed Nip in the air where it vibrated and split into three Nips! Able gasped. The others were merely amused. Nip 1 and Nip 2 and Nip 3 all began investigating each other, hovering in circles around one another, all three in a swirl moving around the air up towards the high ceiling.

"These are wondrous programs you've made, but you all should know—" she looked around the room at each person and held their gaze for a moment before she said, "We are all programs."

Wacamolo jumped out of his seat, Gef put his head in his hands, Rilla looks perplexed and Able stared in wonder. Ka'Rolly jumped and down raising its arms in the air. "Yes," said Vivian, "you are the strangest one of all." She stood up from her chair and walked over to where Ka'Rolly was jumping. It stopped and began to back away.

"It's all right Ka'rolly. She's okay now."

Vivian looked at Able with a mocking look, and then said, "Yes, Ka'rolly is it? I won't hurt you. I am merely curious. You are the first new thing I have seen in a long, long time."

Ka'Rolly stood still as Vivian brought her face very close to the glass sphere where the dustfish floated. It did a small somersault and Vivian chuckled. "Curious."

Vivian began walking slowly in a circle around the room, each bare foot leaving behind a briefly glowing footprint. "There were twelve scientists from around the world that found each other. I was one. Your mother, Able, was another. We formed a council. I met my husband Gabriel through the council. Together we began to create new things, new vistas. And we had rules by which to operate; a way to keep things in balance."

"But Gabriel believed there was no need to conserve energy. He believed it could be found elsewhere; an infinite amount of energy somewhere else. He believed he could take it from the world of the makers. He is gone now, where I do not know, but in truth, I lost him then, to his work. He was obsessed. He would do nothing but research and write and build machines. He built the Ultracircus. Truly, it was a beautiful machine and home to for council, but... Evo, who had become by sister by then, never cared for it. She would come to us for council meetings, but she stayed far out in the wildernesses."

Vivian came to stand in front of the group, in front of Able. "She created a device called a Texo Compass. She created more than one, but only one was ever tied to the Ultracircus. Vivian knelt down in front of Able. "You, Able, are that Texo Compass." She smiled.

Able's eyes grew very wide. "But I... but I don't even know..." Able looked at Gef who just laughed out loud. He looked at Wacamolo who said, "Fascinating." He looked at Rilla who made her eyes wide and said, "I can see your b-o-o-ones, Able!" and cackled. He looked at Vivian and just said, "How?"

"I'm not sure about that." She stood up and walked away back to her chair. "I know this: Gabriel created something in his lab in the Grimoire Mountain that, rather than as he desired, began stealing energy from this world. He built a kind of gate and it swallowed him and has since been draining this world, this universe, of all of its energy. You see Able, I cannot just fix it. This universe is dying and I do not understand what Gabriel did. None of who is left of the council does."

"Without the council united, with Evo having gone missing, with others trying to stave off the destruction, all balance was lost. We have staked our claims and we do what we can to maintain existence but eventually, we will all fail."

"I cannot leave my domain. Without me here to protect it, it will only fade faster. I do believe I can find Horr'of, the council member in whose domain the Durman live. Or, if I can prove that he is gone, I can take over his domain and help the people there. I am not so sure about the Idex MorteZ. I will try, but Evo's science was always so strange to me. I mean, just look at you," she looked at Able and smiled a smile of sheer joy. "Amazing."

Wacamolo raised his hand, "If I may ask, m'lady—"

"Please. Just Vivian."

"Um. Yes. Vivian. I am a student of science myself—to no such degree as yourself—but is it possible to learn more?"

"It is possible. The members of the council were all self-taught. But for reasons that are my own, I will not help you."

"I see."

"And Gef," she said.

Gef sat up straight and looked worried.

"Able has told me that you seek answers from the Cyclopedia."

"Yes."

"You will find it at the Ultracircus. It will have the answers you're looking for."

"I'm sorry, but if you know that, do you not also know the answer to the question I seek."

"I made a bargain. To break that bargain would have grave consequences, so I cannot tell you the answers. But, look, you found Able—"

"Heh. Able found me."

"Yes. Either way, the two of you together, I am certain, will find what you seek."

Wacamolo asked, "Is it possible for you to tell us who there other members of the council are? Perhaps we might seek there help?"

Vivian held her hand up by her head and pinched all her fingers together. A book materialized out of the air. She took hold of it and walked it over to Wacamolo. "Here, curious master. This is a guide to the world written by Remory, one of the council of Twelve. It will tell you a great deal."

Wacamolo took the book with grave respect, his mouth wide open in wonder.

Just then, Po bumped up against Vivian's ankle. She bent down and picked it up. "And what can I do for you, little one?"

Po glowed and began trying to copy Vivian. She winced and gasped and held it away from her, but she couldn't let it go. "No!" She shouted as Po tried to wind its way into her mind. "No!"

Able jumped up and grabbed Po and yanked him out of her hands. Vivian stepped back, a hand to her head, gasping for breath. "No," she whispered.

"I'm sorry. Po does that. I don't think it means anything by it; it's just his purpose."

"That..." Vivian stammered, "That program is dangerous, Able. That program is dangerous!" She gathered herself and stood again, once again visibly angry, but also frightened. "If it were not your creation I would destroy it. Beware of that creation, Able. It is *dangerous*. Keep it close."

"I'm sorry."

"It is all right, but after that, I must go. These memories... I want to see my sister's grave. It has been too long. I have things to let go of."

"I thought you couldn't leave your domain?"

"When I leave this domain, I will be almost powerless. But it doesn't matter. There is something I must see for myself." She again knelt before Able. "Goodbye, Able. I do hope our paths cross again, but I do not know if they will. Find the Ultracircus. Become what your mother intended you to become." She stood and looked at Able's friends. "Take good care of him. The future of everything may depend on it."

"Goodbye," and with that she faded into nothing.

Part 2

The Ultracircus

Chapter 18

In which the party has a moment to rest.

As if coming out of a long sleep, the crew began to talk to each other and gather their thoughts. Able told them everything that had happened with Vivian, how they had got where they were, and the City of Horn. They all gathered at the window at the top of Vivian's tower and looked out and saw how the city had changed. But they also saw the limits of Vivian's power. The land had not grown suddenly bushy and green, merely a little brighter, a little more blue.

"Well," said Gef. "We came a long way to get here and she didn't tell us to leave. I say we rest and gather our thoughts, maybe explore this place."

Wacamolo added, "Some of us could eat."

"Of course," said Gef. We'll start by looking for a kitchen. Then Gef looked to the Nips, who were still chasing themselves in circles, "And what about that?"

Able looked up in wonder. "Hey, Nip!" All three Nips stopped and then came down to Able and began chirping at him all at once with apparent questions. Able put his hands up. "I don't know."

Rilla prodded Able, "You can't all them all Nip. They need new names."

Able considered this. "Would you all like your own names?"

The Nips all seemed to say no.

Able looked at Rilla and shrugged. "It was a good idea, but they seem to just want to be called Nip."

"That's weird," said Rilla.

The nips spun in a circle and approached Rilla's face. Then they quickly stopped in place, turned purple and made farting sounds. They seemed to agree this was funny and flew away. "Rude!" said Rilla loudly.

"C'mon, kids. Let's find some eats. Nip is still—whatever it was in the first place."



It turned out there was a beautiful kitchen, which the group thought was strange because it didn't seem like Vivian would have eaten. They gathered around a large wooden table and Rilla and Wacamolo tore apart bread and picked out strange fruit. Able told them all about how when Vivian had hugged him, she felt like a skeleton.

Rilla said, "That's sad."

Able replied, "I think she was sad. I think she was very sad."

Wacamolo added, "I think she has lost a great many things." He turned the page in his book while chewing on

bread, "Now that we know more about how the world has changed, I can see why she would be so broken-hearted."

There was fruit and bread to eat, but other than that, only ingredients. Only Wacamolo knew how to cook, so he set about making a soup for Rilla, but that's when they appeared. From doors around the kitchen, nomans appeared. There were men and women and they looked noman, but they were of a very thin, slight build, in many ways having an appearance like Vivian, but smaller.

"Greetings," said Gef.

"Greetings, lord," said one of the new people.

"Lord? Oh no, we are just—"

"You are here Lady Vivian's guests. We have been instructed to look after you by her until such a time as you are ready to leave." And with that, the group of eight nomans bowed.

"Oh please," waved Gef, "Don't do that."

The eight nomans stood, but did not seem to acknowledge Gef. The one who had spoken before spoke again, "My name is Rayfe. These people, my family, have helped Lady Vivian and watched over her tower for many generations. We are eternally grateful to you for what you have accomplished. For many, many years, she has sat in her room, bereft, and only wishing to be left alone. Our land, her domain, as you could see from the lake, deteriorated without her care. But come," Rayfe waved them over to a window in the kitchen. "Look at the lake now!"

The lake of Boisenvall was beautiful again, shining blue under a blue sky. The people of the Hanging City had

gathered around its edges and were playing and splashing and swimming. Rayfe continued, "It hasn't been like that in a very long time. So we thank you. If there is anything you desire, we will do our best to provide it."

"Well," said Gef, "I sure would like to know where my Pede is."

"Of course!" said a woman. "She is well and in the stables at the base of the tower. I myself—I am Cara—have seen to it that she was fed a healthy diet of rotting leaves and fungus. I have never cared for such a one, but I've cared for many other animals, and I believe she is quite content."

"That's a relief," said Gef. He looked to the others, "We don't know where we're going, but I have a good idea of some supplies we're going to need. Why don't we all put together a list?"

Wacamolo raised his hand, "Is any among you a chef?"

Another man stepped forward, "Indeed! I am Aron and I cook for the staff. Would you perhaps like me to prepare something?"

"Please!" Said Wacamolo. "Thank you, my good man. While I know how to cook, it is but a trifle I am sure compared to your abilities. I and my—" he looked at Rilla, "my very good friend, will greatly appreciate it."

This seemed to make Aron very happy and he set about the kitchen banging doors and pans and pots and plates. One of the woman with the new group curtsied in front of the crew and said "I'm Gerta," and then immediately set about cleaning the table and putting out dishes and silverware.

Rilla and Able had taken to each grabbing a Nip and hiding it somewhere in the kitchen while the third Nip raced about the room searching. Able wasn't sure if this was fun or if they didn't like being separated. He considered an experiment for a moment to see what they would do. And each time one of the Nips found another they sang a song at each other as though they hadn't seen each other in ages. Then they would orbit each other and seek out the third.

Rayfe, standing next to Gef, said, "What fantastic creatures."

Gef smiled, "You've no idea." Gef perked up and looked around the room suddenly, having remembered something. He began looking all around the kitchen, underneath and in things, until he found Po, off in a corner of a pantry, sitting in the shadows, glowing a dark purple color. "Hey, buddy."

Po turned slowly back and forth and sighed.

Gef picked it up and held it. Po sighed again. "I don't care what she said. You're certainly no danger to me. You already copied me, remember?"

Po made a light illusion of Gef planting a garden.

Gef looked on, puzzled. "What's this, then?"

Po blooped.

"Is this a dream, Po? Did this happen and I can't remember it?"

Po sighed.

"Well, you stick with me. We'll figure out together what's going on. Whatever she said, she also said you were important. Don't lose sight of that, ok."

Po blooped.

"All right."

Gef carried Po back to the table and set him down. Ka'Rolly, who had been sitting at the table the whole time, reached out and pat Po gently. Po rolled over to Ka'Rolly and turned a brighter shade of purple. Po projected a light model of a dustfish up to Ka'Rolly's "face" and the two swam about in unison.

Gef went back to Rayfe who was talking with the rest of his people. "Do any of you know how to write?"

Rayfe looked surprised—all of his people did. "Of course. We all do."

"Would it be much trouble to ask one of you to take minutes for a bit, while my crew and I try to figure some thing out?"

"I will do it," said a young, female noman, in a long, leather coat, stepping forward. She had short, spiky blonde hair and blue eyes the color of which Gef could not remember seeing before.

"Yes, Rayfe," said. "This is Nicolle. She is the brightest among us. She can take your minutes and also answer any questions that might come up. The Lady Vivian took a special interest in her and she even knows much science."

Gef raised his eyebrows and held out his hand, "It is a pleasure, Nicolle. Thank you."

Nicolle hesitated to take Gef's hand. He was a machine, after all. But she decided she wanted to know more and shook it. "I hope I can help."

With that, and with Aron presenting Wacamolo and Rilla with beautiful plates of leafy vegetables and tubers, drizzled

in some sauce and seasoned with a crumbled cheese, the crew all sat down to the table and began to discuss plans while Nicolle took down the time and noted questions they came up with and answered the ones she could. Wacamolo, with Remory's guide, tried to add thoughts about where they could go and what council members they might seek out.

Rilla noticed that Able seemed very lost in thought, adding little to the conversation. "Are you okay, Able?" She whispered while the others conversed.

"I don't know how to be a Texo Compass." Able said.

"Ask one of the adults. Maybe Ms. Nicolle knows. She seems to know a lot. And I like her hair," she said, while tugging on her own dusty dreadlocks.

"I don't think so, Rilla. I think it's like my eyesight, or speaking with the Durman hive. It's something I—it's something I don't know about myself."

"Well, if we aren't going to find out from them and I don't care about where we're going, let's just go explore the tower. We can find Arthra!" She whispered with excitement.

Wacamolo spied the two whispering fervently. He leaned over to them. "Children, you don't have to stay for this if you don't want to. Rilla, have you had enough to eat?"

Rilla nodded.

"Then go play."

They both smiled and Able said, "Can we go find Arthra?"

"Yes."

Wacamolo wrapped the table and said, "Could someone please show the children where Arthra is? And please corral them back here by sunset?"

Cara volunteered. "I would like to check on the—what did you call it? Pete?"

"Rilla laughed. "Pede!"

"Yes," said Cara and showed the children out.

Nicolle watched them leave. She turned to Gef, "He is a machine child?"

Gef said, "I know, right?"

"Is he your child?"

"Oh no. No. I don't—I wouldn't know—"

Nicolle nodded. "I understand."

Gef shook his head. "We found out today that a council member created him. But beyond that, and his ability to make these programs"—Gef pointed at Nip and Po and Ka' Rolly—" we don't know much else about him."

Nicolle looks wistful. "A machine child. I'd never thought or heard of such a thing."

"Yeah. No one has. Not even Vivian."

Chapter 19

In which the crew makes a plan and a discovery.

"Of course, if we head North, our travels will be blocked by the Silt Sea," Wacamolo said, running his finger across a map. "Gef, I just think that if this machine city had been anywhere here in the south, I would have heard of it. You also. You've been from the Idex Mortez to Monte Gamberel. One of us would have heard a report."

Gef stared at the huge gap in the map that was the Silt Sea. He had never dreamed of attempting a crossing. He rolled Po back and forth on the table, Po enjoying the attention and purring. "I don't know Waca. On the one hand, I want that cyclo. On the other, people don't come back from that trip."

"Dust men," agreed Waca.

"Dust men and Gaea knows what else."

Nicolle looked up from her piles of notes. "You believe in Gaea?"

Gef looked at her. "Yes." He cocked his head. "Is that strange?"

"No, no. I know enough about machines—"

"Synthezoid, please."

Nicolle blinked and blushed. "Um. Yes. Sorry. Synthezoid. I know enough to know you can make up your own mind. It's just that Gaea is the maker of growth and organic things. I mean, didn't your kind... um..."

"Just say it."

Having never spoke to an automan, Nicolle found the legend hard to say. "Didn't your people destroy nature?"

Gef sighed. "That's a lie. I don't know who fabricated and spread it, but no. We synthezoids did not do that. Our legends tell us that we were created to protect, to curate. Clearly, we failed, but even Lady Vivian said the destruction is due to her husband Gabriel."

Nicolle's eyes grew wide. "She spoke to you of him?"

"Yes."

Her face lost its color. "She has never spoken to us of him. We know of him, but she's never uttered his name in our presence. What did you—how did you convince her to..." She trailed off.

"Wasn't me. It was Able."

"So strange." She paused in thought, looking out the window at the now rejuvenated, beautiful countryside. "Really, she had not said much of anything in the last four hundred years or so."

Wacamolo interjected. "Excuse me, ma'lady. How would you know that?"

"I've been Vivian's protege for at least three hundred years."

Wacamolo's jaw dropped and Gef looked stunned. Wacamolo said, "I'm sorry—I know it can be rude to ask—but you are how old?"

"I am five hundred or so. We don't really keep track," she flashed a brilliant smile.

Gef and Wacamolo looked at each other. Gef said, "You need to take better care of yourself, old man."

"Unbelievable."

Nicolle looked perplexed. "I don't understand."

Gef pointed at Waca and said, "He's eighty!"

Furrowing her brow, Nicolle said, "You look to be at least a thousand."

Wacamolo just shook his head. "Should I ever be so lucky."

"Living in the desert must be very hard."

"Ha!" sniffed Wacamolo. Gef was laughing.

"And how old are you, Gef?"

Gef stopped laughing and shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't known for a long time."

"Curious. You are both very curious," and she began writing a number of things down in her notes.

"Well," said Wacamolo, "at least I'm a novelty."

Gef stared at Nicolle as she scribbled, and the others of Boisenvall in the room. Were they even noman by any definition he could think of? Surely not. Lady Vivian must have done something to the valley, something to change the air or maybe use the nanosphere—then, for reasons he couldn't fathom—Gef had an idea.



Able and Rilla scratched Arthra on her nose and she made a pleasant and quiet chittering sound. Cara watched in amazement and the Nips swirled around one another while searching the ceiling of the stable.

"So, you children rode this creature in from the desert?"

"Yeah. She's fast," said Rilla. "She even outran a meteor—tell her, Able."

Able looked to Cara, "She outran a meteor."

Cara had no idea what the children were talking about. She just said, "For such young eyes, you have seen so many things."

"Yeah," said Able.

Then, without prompt, Rilla said, "Able can see your b-o-o-o-nes."

"Oh," said Cara with a start. "No thank you."

Able pushed Rilla lightly, "Don't tell people that. It makes them think I'm weird."

"You are weird," replied Rilla with a shove back.

"Please, children, don't shove."

"Why not?" Asked Rilla.

"It's not calmly."

"What's that?"

"Oh. Well. Um. It just mean that one's goal should not be to create a lot of excitement. Things turn out better if you approach them with open eyes and a calm heart."

Able nodded. "I do that."

"Except around me," said Rilla.

"Cause you're a meat lamp."

"Hey! Shut up, bolts for brains!"

"Children! Please! This language is terrible."

But it was too late Able was chasing Rilla around the stable with the Nips right behind him. They performed a hop and blocked Rilla's path, where Able caught up to her and then didn't know what to do. Rilla tackled him into the hay and they rolled around on the ground tussling.

"Children! Stop! We don't do that here. Please!" Cara tried to separate them but she felt wrong grabbing either of them, she hovered over them while the Nips got in her way and blinked in different colors. "My word! What chaos!"

But Rilla and Able stopped on their own, Rilla to catch her breath. She threw hay at Able, "Metal pants."

Able laughed and threw hay back, "Tuber for brains."

Rilla sighed hard and rolled her eyes, "I'm not a vegetable, Able."

"I know you are, but what am I?"

"That's stupid, Able."

"I know you are, but what am I?"

"Shut. Up."

"Children, I am begging you. Please stop this kind of talk —it is so offensive."

"What's that mean?" Asked Able looking up.

"It means it's very hard to hear without getting upset. You are upsetting me."

"Oh." Able looked sorry and he and Rilla got up and brushed each other off. "We're sorry. We were just playing."

Cara stared in wonder. "Such terrible behavior, but it is also so odd to see you both even be friends."

"Why?" asked Rilla.

"Because Able is a machine."

"No," said Rilla, "a machine is like a lever or a wheel or something. Able is a synthemazoid?" She looked to Able for help.

Able said, "Synthezoid." He looked at Cara. "But I don't care. Rilla is my best friend."

"Oh, Able!" Rilla shouted and hugged him.

Just then, Gef and Nicolle and Ka'Rolly, eventually followed by Wacamolo and a few other Boisenva nomans, ran into the stable, Gef holding Po. "Able! We've got to try something! Right now! C'mon! Outside!"

Everyone moved out of the stable. Arthra turned as much as she could to watch. Once outside in the courtyard around the tower, Gef handed Po to Able. "Po, show us the Ultracircus." Po did as requested and a light model of the walking machine city appeared. "Now, Able, like you have with other things, I want you to concentrate very hard and ask 'Where is the ultra circus?' In your mind. Don't think of

anything else but where it is. Maybe even try to feel it—reach out for it."

Able did as requested and concentrated very hard, but nothing seemed to be happening. He closed his eyes. Then, without request, the Nips began orbiting around Po and Able. They flew faster and faster and faster until they became glowing blurs of lines around him like electrons around a nucleus. Po began to vibrate and the image of the Ultracircus grew in size and brightness, even in the daylight. Any of the nomans had to look away or block their eyes, but Gef kept staring.

A massive laser fired from Po and shot off North over the mountains. Gef jumped up, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" Able opened his eyes and looked at the blue beam emitting from his little friend with a very quiet hum. He moved a little to one side, and the beam seems to shift as though it were anchored to something somewhere else. The Nips all slowed and then dropped to the ground. "Uh oh," said Able.

Able handed Po to Gef and attended to the Nips. Gef held Po and smiled, "I told you," he said to Po, patting it. "You can stop now. We can do that again later."

The nomans all mumbled to each other in amazement, with Waca crossing his arms in pride. They had never seen such science without Vivian present. Able picked up the Nips and cradled them. "They'll be okay. We need to find electrol."

The boisneval nomans discussed this and Rayfe said, "We don't know what this electrol is."

Wacamolo said, "It won't look like much to you; just dust."

"Yes," said Nicolle. "There is a chamber in the vaults filled with a glassy, dust substance. Vivian would never explain it."

"Please," said Able. "Take us there?"

Chapter 20

In which the crew heads into the Cullen Mountains.

There was more than enough electrol to supercharge all the mistakes. And with the supercharging, generating the guidance system that was Po, the Nips and Able became even easier. The crew tested it again from the top of Vivian's tower and it shot off to the horizon north again. All of Boiserval came out to look at the bright blue beam steadily shining out of Vivian's tower off in to the evening sky as the sun set. Rumors were everywhere about what was happening; mostly that new scientists had arrived to help Lady Vivian.

As Gef saw it, they had two problems now. One, how much electrol to transport with them. Arthra could carry a lot, but could they count on it being in whatever new place they were going? And then, the more obvious problem was that if they had to head north past the Cullen Mountains, would they have to cross the Silt Sea and how? They would need a silt glider and those were very difficult to come by. One problem at a time.

That same evening, there was a very strange funnel cloud in the distance, coming from out of Nuktut Togait. It was almost as if the gas that had been there was being vacuumed

out. The crew stood at the window and Nicolle put her hand to the glass. "Vivian," she whispered.

Gef was next to her and heard. "She is amazing."

Nicolle brought her hand down to her side and turned to Gef with a look of determination. "I want to come with you."

Gef was not really surprised. All of her questions—so many unanswered—all her investment in the notes, the thinking. She had illustrated things as well and Gef thought she was an exceptional artist. "I certainly don't have a problem with that."

And even though she did not have to, she explained, "Without Vivian here, there's not much for me—nothing new anyway. She did not say goodbye, but she left me this letter."

"Have you read it?"

"No. I can't."

"I understand. Saying goodbye can be difficult."

"Yes," she said and put the letter to her heart. "But, I can help you and Able and everyone. I've never been outside of the valley, but I'm a quick study."

"I believe you," said Gef. "And, uh," he looked at Rilla who had her face pressed against the glass making her nose press up like a pig. "I'm pretty sure you have an admirer."

Nicolle looked and then smiled. "She is a wild child."

"That she is. But she saved Able's life, I think."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Back in Kinton Station. We had a run-in with some folks who don't care much for synthezoids."

"I'm sorry. That's terrible—that kind of close-mindedness."

Gef smiled. "I'm used to it."

Nicolle looked him in the eyes, "You shouldn't have to be."

"Thank you."

Vivian's staff had already gathered everything the crew had decided they would need in their planning session. It was all packed away in sacks and trunks in the stable with lots of sturdy ribbons to hang it off Arthra.

That evening, the crew gathered in the kitchen once more to a meal, now with some maps laid out and the laser's trajectory nicely filled in by Wacamolo with the use of one of his mechanical devices. "The laser does not travel through an easy pass, unfortunately," he said. "We will have to pass through the Cullen to the West. And then, on the other side, we can head North-Northeast to pick up where the laser was. I suggest we fire it again at that spot." He measured with a straightedge and marked an x.

Gef said "Equally unfortunate is that neither Waca nor I nor anyone else knows what is there. We need to be ready for anything. And I mean, anything. Kids, I had Rayfe and his people make adjustments to a special cabinet that you can use to hide, if need be. It is ab-so-lute-ly important that if we tell you to hide, you do it and you stay quiet. Do you understand?"

Rilla and Able nodded with plenty of apprehension.

"Good. And it's also important that you obey other members of the crew. When Waca or Ms. Nicolle or I tell you

to do something, you need to listen, whether you like it to not."

Rilla and Able smiled—not the reaction Gef was hoping for.

"All right," Gef said. "Let's enjoy ourselves for a bit and get to bed early. We leave at sunrise."

As the group chatted and some dessert was brought out, Nicolle approached Ka'Rolly who was sitting on a stool in the corner, staring at its hands.

"Hello," said Nicolle. "I'm Nicolle." She held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Ka'Rolly straightened up and Rolly put its face near the glass, but it did not put its hand out.

Nicolle bent over and took Ka'Rolly's hand in both of hers and shook it up and down. To her, it felt like turning a crank. Ka'Rolly made a whistle and Rolly did a summersault in its bowl.

Gef saw what was happening and stepped over. "I know what you're thinking," he said.

"Do you?" She replied.

"What's it thinking?"

Ka'Rolly still sat straight up but did nothing more than look at Gef.

Nicolle smiled, "Actually, yes."

"He saved my life once."

"Bunch of life-savers you lot are."

"Yeah. It picked me up in the Baron's tower and jumped out a window when the baron's mechanomen were after us.

It must have been a forty story fall, but he landed like he was landing on a pillow."

Nicolle looked at Ka'Rolly, "Amazing." She paused. "Why do you say 'it'?"

"Oh. Uh, well. Yeah. That's a difficult one. I mean, my people, we don't have genders. But when we get older, we often pick one. I doubt you could tell the difference between a she or he synthezoid. Ka'Rolly here... I mean, I suppose the fish has a gender, but Ka doesn't."

"This fish isn't Ka'Rolly?"

"No. The fish is Rolly. The body is Ka, one of Able's programs. They've been... working together for a while... look, I really don't know."

Ka'Rolly suddenly made a motion with its arms, undulating like they were waves and Rolly sank to the bottom of the head and swam in circles while Ka made zooming sounds.

"See?" Said Gef.

"Not really," said Nicolle, shaking her head in wonder.



In the morning, the crew awoke and made their way to the stable. Gef led Arthra out to the square in front of Vivian's tower. The crew and Vivian's staff began packing things onto the centipede, who was anxious to get moving, chittering with pleasure. They tied a large net across Athra's back and began attaching seats, corked vases, trucks large

and small. Gef pet Arthra on the face above her mouth, "Quite a hall we managed to get, huh girl?" Gef looked around at everyone busying themselves and sighed, "Quite a crew."

As everyone worked to get Arthra ready, the villagers began to make their way into the square. Gradually, as the crowd gathered, they began to talk and many did not seem entirely pleased. Several had pulled Rafye aside and were asking many questions. Gef watched with discomfort. He had a bad feeling. Maybe another hurried exit might be called for? He found and gathered Waca, Nicolle, Rilla and Able. "I want you all to get in your placed on Arthra now. Let the staff and Ka'Rolly and I finish the packing."

"Is something the matter, Gef?" Able asked.

"Not yet."

"No," said Nicolle. "I'll handle this." She was wearing her best exploration gear: leather coveralls with padded knees and elbows, a belt with various items, and a pack. Her hair was smooth back by a band of leather and feathered in the back. She went over to Rayfe and the other boisenvalians in their discussion.

"Is something wrong, Rayfe?"

"People are concerned that Lady Vivian is not here."

Nicolle turned to the gathered villagers. "Look around. Look at what Lady Vivian has repaired. Look to the East. Lady Vivian has removed the poison from Nuktut Togait. She is also helping the Durman, a people who, unlike us, lost the protection of their scientist. Believe me, my friends, Lady Vivian is with us."

"What of these strangers?" asked one villager. "What are they here for?"

"They were here to help Lady Vivian and now they must travel on to find the Ultracircus."

Many in the crowd gasped. "That's a myth!" Shouted one woman.

"I think the laser beam you all saw last night should tell you otherwise. That is to be a beacon for us, so that we can find it."

"Lady Nicolle," said an old man, "You must leave too?"

Nicolle was shocked. She had never been referred to as 'Lady' before. She spoke calmly through her nerves, "Yes. I feel I can best serve all of us by going with these travelers."

"But what will finding the mythical city accomplish?"

"If we find it, we may—we *may*— be able to stop the wound at the center of the world—stop the Shattering."

People cried out, in awe, in disbelief, joy and dismay.

"Lady Vivian will return. We will return. I promise. Remain steadfast. Take care of each other. You can see. The world is already getting better."

The old man who had referred to Nicolle as Lady, approached. "My good Lady," he bowed and Nicolle blushed. "I am but a humble jeweler by the name of Toban."

"Toban," Nicolle said in a low tone, "You have made many wondrous things for Lady Vivian. I know who you are. Please stop bowing."

"Of course. But here. I wish for you to have this." He held out a ring in his shaky hand. It was a silver band, encasing a

small shining, blue orb. The orb looked as though it had shifting smoke inside of it. "It carries with it some of Lady Vivian's nanosphere. I can not be sure, but I hope it will help keep you safe."

Nicolle took the ring. "Thank you, Toban. Thank you very much," and she hugged him. After that, she walked away from the crowd to a smattering of applause and some cheering. "Goodbye, friends! We won't be long!" though she was sure that couldn't be true. She climbed aboard Arthra and sat on the padded platform that Gef and Waca occupied toward the front. "Well, that's settled."

Gef looked back over his shoulder. "Thanks. That's a much improved exit from our last two."

Waca pat Nicolle on the back, "Very true. You are a born leader. But I guess you must take a journey first. All great leaders do, you know."

Nicolle smiled at them both.

Gef shook the reigns and Arthra trundled off towards the Cullen mountains.

Chapter 21

In which the crew heads into the Cullen Mountains.

The early morning passed fast as Arthra wound her way up the hills leading to the mountains. As the crew approached the peaks of the Cullens, life began to dwindle. Any color faded. The change in the landscape had an effect on the adults whose mood went from one of leisure to one of glum fortitude. There were going to be hard days ahead again. Rilla and Able hardly seemed to notice. Rilla was busy practicing her cantrips, simple actions and manipulations of the nanosphere to make small lights appear above her hands. Able and Ka'Rolly were there to cheer her on with "Ohs" and "Ahs." She had learned from what Waca knew and one of Vivian's staff had shown her some new gestures that seemed to help.

The morning gave way to noon and then afternoon and then evening. With Arthra's speed, the Cullen Mountains no longer appeared in a distant haze, but rather seemed to loom over them. The crew stopped and slept and ate without much incident, setting off in the morning again. Wacamolo told the crew of things he had learned from his new book. He knew new council member names like Sirius, Hanna, Aziz, Turab,

Soare, and Duri—who Waca noted, did not seem to be one person, referred to in the book as "they," but also "she." Still though, the lands past Vivian's domain, ending on the other side of the Cullen Mountains had no name or scientist associated with it. Between the Cullen Mountains and the Silt Sea there was simply little information. "Odd that," said Waca.

Gef shrugged, "Maybe it's new."

Waca and Nicolle gave Gef puzzled looks but Gef just shrugged again not even sure what he meant himself.

In the morning they ate, packed up and set off again. Now as they began to get into the mountains they had to tighten the pack ropes and even belt themselves into their seats as Arthra began to ascend steeper and steeper planes of rock and even cliffsides. Her hundred feet clung to the rock with tiny hairs that worked like velcro. And more than once, Ka'Rolly fell off. Of course, it landed without harm, but the crew would have to stop and retreat to retrieve it. Ka'Rolly seemed to have no conception of the change in their pitch. Able remarked that maybe it was because Rolly was in water. Eventually they just tied Ka'Rolly down with the rest of the luggage and it didn't seem to mind at all.

By the second evening, the peaks of the Cullen mountains were in view. Any sign of life was gone. There was no even lichen. There was a mist and it was cold. The crew had to dawn more clothing. And there was no sound. From the distance, there would come some sound of a rock bouncing down a rock face, but unseen. There was nothing to burn for a fire, so Waca and Nicolle worked together to make a glowing, warming cube out of a metal box that she had

brought. The crew huddled around it and the nomans ate the rations that didn't need to be cooked.

"This place is quiet," said Nicolle. "It should be peaceful, but instead it feels eerie."

Gef had been on high alert since they had entered the mists, saying little the entire time. But now he spoke, "I detect nothing. There really is nothing but wind and rock."

Waca asked, "What of this vapor? It's not moisture. Look, nothing dews."

Then, as night truly fell, there came low booming from up near the peaks, each boom accompanied by a flicker of blue that would appear where the boom occurred, expand out like ripples on a puddle and then vanish. At the first occurrence, everyone jerked their heads in the direction of the deep sound and the light. No one said anything. Then, minutes of silence would pass and just when it seemed like a fluke, it would happen again. The crew stared off into the darkness until a boom would happen, followed by a blue haze that would cause the silhouette of one of the Cullen peaks to jump out of the night. Still, no one said anything until after an hour or so, Gef said, "Bedtime, crew. I'm sure we'll find out what it is in the morning."



When they arrived at the peak of a mountain that Waca said was called Contra they paused. With the help of Po,

Waca had laid out a path that would take them from this peak to the next, Bax, along a path called the Knife's Edge. The path was one of the last landmarks discussed in Remory's Guide. The only other two were a series of spikes called Helipor and a Lake called Vux. Still, Waca said that they should cross the Knife's edge and there they would find an easier path for Arthra to use to descend.

As for the boomings and the blue haze, they could see nothing. Gef could see from Po's map that the Knife's Edge would take them to a trail that would then turn and bring them back under the very peak they were standing on. He stared at the spot he suspected the trail would take. "We should stop past the next peak, find a lee and wait for nightfall."

"What do you suspect, Gef?" asked Waca.

"I don't know. I just don't think whatever was happening last night was a random event. And judging from the sound and lights, I think it was coming from down there."

Meanwhile, Nicolle had grabbed both children by the collars and was holding them as they had gotten too close to the peak's edge for her comfort. "This ground is not trustworthy, children. At least hold on to a rope secured to Arthra before you go peering over the edge."

The children rushed off to Arthra to do just that.

Nicolle looked at Waca and Gef with exasperation. "These children know no bounds. Children in Boiserval play, of course, but... they have some sense of their mortality."

Gef watched as Rilla and Able, with ropes tied around their middles, laid on their stomachs and looked over the edge again. Nicolle huffed, "Children, those are not even

good knots!" She rushed to help secure them better, showing them a knot called a bowline that was good for holding a weight, such as themselves.

Gef and Waca stared past the lower hills trying to discern what might be next. The landscape past the lower hills of the Cullen was a strange color. "You see it?" Asked Gef.

"My eyes are not nearly as good as yours, old friend. But I do detect an odd color down there."

"It's metallic."

"Fascinating."

The crew moved on once more, Arthra nimbly twisting over the Knife's Edge. The trail was thin, perhaps five or six feet wide, made up mostly of piles of boulders that Arthra crawled along like a monorail. On either side of the trail was a five thousand foot drop. The view was breathtaking, literally, with Waca and Nicolle breathing heavily, both because of the thin air and a persistent gnaw of fear.

In a couple of hours, Arthra reached the second peak and began to wind her way down the north side of the Cullen mountains. An hour in, Gef spotted a good place to stop. "We'll stay here for the rest of the day—see what's up."



Once again, mists rolled in, night came, Waca and Nicolle set up a warming cube and the crew sat and waited. Gef and Nicolle had traveled down the trail away, leaving Waca to

teach Rilla and Able a new game with the Go board. Po watched. The Nips were busying themselves with a game of chase glowing orange in the night. Ka'Rolly watched them. Away from the camp, Gef stared into the dark, while Nicolle had a device called binoculars that allowed her to see like Gef could, even a little bit in the dark. For a long time both saw nothing.

Then, large lights the size of lanterns began to appear out in the dark. They revealed themselves in pairs and were yellow. At first, they appeared below a tree line. Then, one by one, the pairs of lights rose above the scattered shadows of something angular and fractal. Each pair of lights was accompanied by a silhouette, and by the black shadow against the black night sky Nicolle and Gef could see that they were giants, perhaps 40 meters tall.

They moved slowly and with a strange grinding sound and an ultrasonic hum. Finally, Nicolle and Gef could see for themselves what the booming the night before had been. The giants were picking up massive boulders and hurling them up the mountain, trying to throw them over the peak and over the Knife's Edge. But as soon as a boulder reached the edge of the Cullen, it would slam into an invisible wall that would light up blue and ripple in the dark as the boulders would crash back down the hill.

Gef and Nicolle turned and sat with their backs against the rock they were hiding behind and then looked at each other, and Nicolle spoke first, "That wall must be Vivian's doing, but she's never mentioned it."

"Look at your ring," said Gef.

They both watched and as a boom sounded out from one of the boulders smashing into the wall, and the wall lit up, Nicolle's ring also brightened. Gef said, "Definitely Vivian's work."

"What are those creatures?" Asked Nicolle.

"I'm not entirely sure—not what their purpose is. I can tell you this: given their heat signatures—or lack thereof—they aren't organic."

"They're synthezoids?"

Gef smiled, "No. Synthezoids would never be so dumb as to do this over and over, night after night. No, these are robots."

Nicolle looked puzzled.

"Yeah, I know. We'll get to the difference later. The good news is I think we're safe. Robots can be pretty single-minded and these look like they've got their marching orders."

"Why wouldn't Vivian have said anything about this threat right here on our borders?"

"Why frighten people? They're clearly no threat. They might have been doing this for decades... longer even."

"So we just wait until morning and sneak past?"

"If you look at all the energy they're expending, I have a feeling that they go dormant in the morning, spend the day re-charging. Yeah, we can probably just sneak past."

"But who sent them?"

"That's the question. Once we're past them, what are we walking into?"

Chapter 23

In which escapes from the synthetic simians.

The mists continued to grow as the hills continued to flatten. Now objects loomed out of the mist here and there, sometimes taking on the appearance of walking creatures, sometimes just floating. At one point Athra had to stop in her tracks as a massive cube appeared out of the mist and stood in her way. It was easily three times her size and when Gef bade her to go around, the cube just moved to keep blocking her way.

She stopped again making an inquisitive sound for Gef. Before Gef could say anything, the cube moved off and away into the mist. And it didn't even move off into the mist as must as it appeared to just move away and become mist.

The sun now, because of the mist, appeared more like a lamp in the sky, its outline visible, its color almost blue. There were masses of cables, some a meter in diameter, like the ones near the Cullen Mountains, that were wound together and reached up toward the dim sun. Some outgrowths of cables grew upward like columns, others slumped over, others had found each other and wound

together and formed massive arches over bending over the crew like bridges.

In the mist, aside from the objects appearing and disappearing, and the crops of cables, there was a constant blinking of tiny lights. And the mist had a roiling quality to it like static on a screen. Able had climbed to the front of Athra to sit next to Gef. "Gef?"

"Yeah, buddy?"

"Um, you know that looky-thing you taught me to do?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I've been doing it and I think this mist..." Able felt the need to lean in and whisper, "I think it's *alive*."

"Yeah. Me too."

"And what's maybe worse—um—it's sticking to all the organics."

"What?" Gef looked around at Arthra who, sure enough, was developing spots. He brought her to a halt and turned around to find Wacamolo, Nicolle, and Rilla examining each other's skin, where also, spots were forming. He headed back to the second saddle and took Waca's arm. He stared at it closely. "More wires."

"Um, what do you mean *more* wires, Gef?" Wacamolo asked.

"Able," Gef said, squinting at the mist, "does it look like electrol to you?"

"Not really. Kind of. But also, look at our hands."

Gef looked at his own hands. There was a clear outline around his fingers, perhaps a few millimeters in thickness

where the mist simply was not. He looked at Able, too. He looked at the mistakes Nip, Po and Ka'Rolly. Nip and Po had the same effect—a kind of field around them that the mist could not or would not cross. Ka'Rolly, as usual, was affected entirely differently. It's head was encased in mist, but it's body had the field effect.

Then, out of the mist, they all heard laughing, many voices, with a strange timbre, laughing. Blue eyes began to appear in the mist.

"We've got, company. Able, Rilla, time to hide." Gef bent and picked up Po, unsure as to even why.

"But," said Rilla.

"No," said Wacamolo sternly, "We discussed this. We said it was important you obey. Take Able and hide."

Able and Rilla made their way to their hideout, but Rilla still protested, "They're jut laughing."

Gef and Wacamolo and Nicolle stood and formed a triangle looking out into the mist. Nip came down and one of each of him came to light up in front of each of them.

"Well, that's nice," said Nicolle. "Still, I think we should just get moving?"

"I hear you. I think you might even be right, but let's just take a second."

"Come play with us," said several voices coming from the mist. And there was more laughing; not hearty laughing just quiet and playful.

"Sure," said Gef, "We like to play. Why don't you show yourselves so we can figure out a game?"

Crawling up onto Arthra—who shook and objected—came a number of differently sized creatures. They were all bipedal although they used their hands to knuckle-walk and then when they got to a spot they liked, they sat back on their hips. Gef noticed that several were already investigating the chest with Rilla and Able now in it. In fact, they were everywhere and getting into everything. "Come play," said one of the larger ones, two meters high, and it took Gef's hand gently, but its strength was abundantly clear, and it also did not really touch him, but was grabbing the field around him.

Gef laughed nervously with the cackling all around them now. "Sure, and what would you like to play?"

"Be like us!" The creature said and tugged on him. "You. Be like us!"

One of the smaller creatures, a gray metallic color like the mist, grabbed on to Nicolle's arm and clung to it. "No thank you," she said and shook it gently, then tried to pry it off. It just gradually lost its shape and began to encase her arm. Nip began to buzz orange and banged against the creature.

The larger creature that had a grip on Gef said, "See? They be like us. They come play with us. YOU. You be like us."

The creatures at the chest with Rilla and Able had opened and were leading Rilla and Able over to the rest of the crew, pairs of the creatures holding them by their arms. "Waca!" Rilla shouted. Their hands weren't just holding her arms but twisting and turning into cuffs, slowly stretching up along her arms.

"Okay! Okay!" said Gef to the biggest of the creatures. "You have to tell us the rules. If you want us to play with you—we'll play, but you have to tell us the rules."

"Be like us."

"Yes. Yes. I would like to. But I must know the rules and if you make my friends here like you, they won't be able to tell me the rules anymore and then I won't be able to play, and Able there—" Gef pointed, "He won't be Able to play. See? The ones you can't touch? We can't play without the rules."

This caused all of the chatter and laughing to cease to a dull hum. Wacamolo spoke up and said to Gef, "I believe I know the rules, Gef."

"Okay?"

"It's called catch," and Waca looked at Po who was in Gef's hand.

Gef looked at Po and then looked at the big creature. "We'll play with you. We'll teach you a game."

The moment that Gef threw Po—who blooped loudly—to Wacamolo, the synthetic simians became wildly distracted. They had not just let Wacamolo go in order to see the game played, even the mist that had collected on Wacamolo's skin came off and he too, like Able and Gef, now had a field around him. Wacamolo immediately tossed Po back to Gef (Po protested a little less this time) and Gef caught Po. He held Po close and whispered, "Some pretty lights might help here, little buddy." Po beeped in acknowledgement.

Gef tossed Po back to Wacamolo and in midair Po lit up several various colored birds that flew around him in circles. The creatures all but lost their minds. They let go of Nicolle

and Rilla and Able, the particles of mist came off of them, and they all began jumping up and down shouting. Wacamolo caught Po and shrugged, "Sorry," he said to Po with a wince and tossed Po to one of the creatures.

In the meantime, Able had called the Nips to himself and told them fiercely, "It's time to fly! Get Waca and Nicolle and Rilla out of here. Fly them high!" The Nips obeyed and formed slings and flew over to the nomans. "Jump on!" shouted Able over the din of the creatures playing catch. "They'll get you out of here!"

"What about you, Able!" Rilla said, reaching out.

"We're fine for some reason. Get out of the mist. We'll be okay. We'll come find you."

"Hold on!" Shouted Nicolle and ran over to Ka'Rolly who had freed itself from its seatbelts, but whose head was still covered in the mist particles. Nicolle grabbed it and dragged it over to one of the Nips. "You're with me!" she said to it.

All of the nomans climbed into the swings of the Nips, with Nicolle holding Ka'Rolly who had folded its body into a smaller shape, like a suitcase, and no sooner had they grasped the swings, then they were whisked off into the sky above the mist.

"Nice job, Able!" shouted Gef. "That's one problem solved!" Gef looked out to the chaos of the synthetic simians, whose game of catch had entirely devolved into a game of chase, tackle and steal. Po, in a panic, was throwing out light models of dragons, mechanical tigers, even Vivian at one point, but all to no avail. The creatures just wanted to possess it. Able began to worry about his little creation. They might tear it apart.

The creatures continued to chase and tackle, but now many of them were smashing into each other and forming themselves into larger versions so that they could more easily wrestle Po free from one another. Even then, two more larger ones would mash together into yet a larger one. Some were four and five meters tall now; as easily as tall as Able and Gef standing on the back of Arthra. Gef had an idea, "Po!" He could barely keep track of the little ball among the giant wrestling creatures. "Let them mash into each other until there's just a few and then do your copy thing!" He turned to Able. "One of us has to get down there and grab him and one of us has to be ready to tell Arthra to book it. You're driving, got it?"

Able looked to Po and Gef put his hands on Able's shoulders. "I got him. Don't worry. Just get to the front of Able and soon as I say so, give her the single to run. Trust me, she's raring to go!"

Able took a deep breath. "Okay." And he began making his way to the steerage saddle.

Gef climbed down off Arthra and into the throb of the four monsters left, each barely able to hold Po in their massive hands, but also unable to hide it for all its fireworks. He danced among their crashing feet, himself trying to keep track of Po. Two more of the creatures hugged each other into one larger massive creature and began prying at the smaller one's hand to get Po out. "Do it, Po! Do the thing!"

A bright light exploded from Po and it rippled across the two wrestling creatures who disintegrated into dust. As the dust fell across the floor of the automatic jungle, Gef ran to catch Po, huddle it to his body and ran for Arthra. With two creatures left, running and reaching for him, Gef shouted to

Able, "Go! Go! Go!" and jumped and with his free arm grabbed a belt attached to Arthra, who barreled off into the jungle immediately and at top speed.

The mist swirled around them, attempting to cling to Arthra but she was moving so fast and shaking and bucking that it couldn't see to get ahold. Behind them, the two creatures were howling and giving chase but could not keep up. Gef managed to pull himself and Po up into the third saddle and laid flat, clinging to both Po and the centipede.

Without warning, the world turned on its side as Arthra hit a cliff wall and ran ninety degrees upward from the ground, bursting out of the mist after a minute climbing higher and higher until again, the world turned another ninety degrees and they were level again and Arthra stopped dead in her tracks, flinging Gef and Po and Able to the ground in front of her. She shook her entire body in a massive convulsion, a ripple from one end to the other, flinging a large amount of gear off of herself and then stood still.

Gef set Po down and looked around. Able picked himself up and did the same. They found themselves on a dry plateau, far above the jungle. There in front of them were Wacamolo, Nicolle, and Rilla with their hands on their heads, surrounded by Dust Men.

Chapter 24

Into the Frying Pan.

The Dustmyn were covered in cloaks, heavy goggles, equipment, and wrapped entirely in bandages. The only part of them that gave any indication that they might be nomex was their wild, dark, shaggy hair that formed like bushes but then ran down their backs and in some cases even over their faces. Rilla noticed their hair right away. Their coifs were so full of silt that they seemed to each possess their own individual cloud as every time they moved dust would shake put of their hair and float around, sometimes right back into their hair!

Nip had landed the nomex of the crew in front of the Dustmyn in the hopes that the group might be able to offer some assistance to Able, Gef, Arthra, Ka'Rolly and Po. But those hopes were quickly dashed as no sooner had Nip helicoptered everyone down to the ground than the Dustmyn had cast nets over them and proceeded to pull apart and tie them all up. They had placed Nip in several clay jars, which despite its best efforts, it could not break out of it. Nip was nimble, Nip was quick, but Nip was not that strong.

The more decorated Dustmyn had been conferring about what to do about these invaders to their plateau. To Nicolle and Wacamolo it appeared that there were two groups that had already been meeting when they arrived. Each group had its own sigil decorating their clothing and weapons—which appeared to be mostly anchors and ropes and chains with spikes. Nicolle noted some carried crossbow-like implements. The two groups were having a dispute about either what to do with the interlopers or who got to decide what to do with them. Their language was soft and whispery, almost like they were hissing at each other.

They had been their, bound at the wrists, for what felt like a very long time at the edge of a cliff overlooking the nightmare of the automatic jungle, it's dark staticky mist swirling and sparkling, when Arthra came barreling up the cliff to come in front of them, standing on end like a tower, only to immediately come crashing down in front of all of them like a tree falling, and with as much noise, mere meters away. The Dustmyn immediately ran away. Whether it was simply the sight of a massive centipede, or the commotion, or both, wasn't clear, but they were having none of it.

Gef and Able and Ka'Rolly (who had barely hung on for the ride up the cliffside) all dismounted and ran to Rilla, Nicolle and Wacamolo, untying them and helping them up. There was a lot of talking, Rilla and Able especially chasing each other and talking about the flight, the game, the escape, barely hearing one another as they shouted details with very little narrative. Nicolle and Gef and Wacamolo stood in a small circle, hugging one another (a little to Gef's surprise) and then Gef spoke first, "Who was that?"

"Dustmyn!" shouted Wacamolo. "Not the bandit kind! My word. Real, actual Dustmyn. Fascinating!"

"Fascinating until it seemed like they were going to eat us," said Nicolle rubbing her own hair to get dirt out of it.

"Really?" Said Gef.

"No not really. But who knows what they were arguing about. But you! You escaped those menacingly little- whatever-they were."

Gef shrugged, "We tricked them and then Po did its thing."

Nicolle laughed, "Its 'thing'."

"What?" Gef asked, unsure what she found funny.

"Nothing. I just want to see it for myself. What happened?"

"Well, we go the... whatever-they-were to merge into larger and larger versions by getting them to play, and then when Po copied their intelligence, they just... disintegrated."

"Oh my," said Wacamolo.

Gef took off his hat off and scratched his head. "Yeah. What *was* that, Waca?"

"I've some speculation, but no knowledge."

"There's nothing like that in the guide?"

"Nothing."

Gef walked away from the group, back to the edge of the plateau and looked down at the jungle. Nicolle and Wacamolo joined him. "I almost want to go back."

"What!" Said Nicolle.

Gef shrugged. "It's been a long, long time since I've seen anything new. And that was new."

"We need to focus on the task at hand," said Nicolle. "Able should fire the Texo Compass again."

Gef took one last longing look at the jungle. "You're right."

They all heard the children shouting madly behind them and turned with fright again only to see that Ka'Rolly had picked up each one of them with one arm each. They were clinging to its fishbowl head as it spun them like a carousel.

Nicolle smiled with relief, "Well, that looks like fun."



That was the last of the fun that anyone was going to have for a time. Able (with Po and Nip) had fired the Texo Compass and the beam shot out to the Northwest across the immense flatness of the Cache Steppes. The whole terrain was devoid of anything. There was nothing to look at and nothing to see for miles. No growth, no water, barely even hills or rocks. The sun, covered and dimmed by the mist in the automatic jungle, was now absolutely punishing. Everyone but the mistakes covered themselves in everything they had just to escape the barrage of heat, but even the mistakes seemed drained by it. Nip had taken the unusual position of sitting with Po and Able and Rilla. Ka'Rolly had climbed into the hiding chest. Arthra was moving at slow pace.

The creatures of the jungle had ruined, broken or stolen many of their supplies. Gef was very worried about the

amount of water they had left. He called Po up to the front of Arthra and he and Wacamolo consulted both Po's light models of the area and Remory's Guidebook. The only thing that was clear was that there was nothing ahead of them for kilometers and kilometers. If they veered west, there looked to be a small structure of some kind called Kvet. "That's likely to be Dustmyn outpost. I'm not sure we should go."

"I'm not sure how many days we can do this. By my calculations, it could be another five days before we reach the Silt Sea and we have no idea what we'll find there anyway and no idea how to cross."

"What do we know about Dustmyn?" Asked Nicolle.

"They have a bad reputation," said Wacamolo. "But then, the ones around Kinton Station and _____ badlands weren't necessarily real Dustmyn. They may have been pretenders posing as such when they were really just bandits. The people we saw yesterday were quite different from what I've seen of Dustmyn."

Gef added, "Even Able and I disguised ourselves as Dustmyn to keep people from bothering us."

Nicolle said, "You mean lynching you."

"Well... yeah."

"Horrifying. Brutish. I still can't believe it, Gef." She reached out and grabbed his hand.

Gef looked at her hand, then said, "Thank you." He moved his hands over to the guidebook in front of Wacamolo and picked it up.

"I'm not too worried about Arthra getting water. She can go for weeks. But we can't. If we ration carefully, we have six to seven days for ourselves."

"Pardon me for asking, but you and Able don't need water, correct?"

Gef looked up from the guide book, "We don't need to drink it like you, but we can overheat like anything. We need some sort of coolant. Water will do in a pinch."

"And other than water?"

"Oil supplements. Fat's pretty ideal."

Wacamolo pat his belly, "You can't have mine." He said with a smile.

Nicolle laughed. "How do you manage to have that weight given where you're from?"

"A lovely little thing called Brew." He looked wistfully into the distance, "Although I haven't had any in weeks and may never have any again!"

Gef chuckled and said to Nicolle, "You would like him when he's got a few brews in him. He gets real mystic."

Wacamolo crossed his arms, "Drinking Brew and being one with the land is long tradition for my people. It is not a laughing matter."

"What's it like?" asked Nicolle.

"He gets all one-with-everything," said Gef and made a spooky gesture.

"If we ever get the chance, Nicolle, it would be my honor to guide you on a psychoquest. You and Rilla when she comes of age."

"I think I would like that," said Nicolle.

Gef rolled his eyes, "Anyway, I think we need to head to this Kvet, Dustmyn or not. If there's a structure there, there's likely supplies. We have things we can trade."

"Or," said Wacamolo, holding up one finger, "we could put on quite a show."

Both Nicolle and Gef looked puzzled.

"Between myself, Nicolle and Able's mistakes—especially Po's light works, we could put on quite a show. We should consider that. It is both diplomatic and a way to gain respect."

"That's interesting thinking, old man."

"What would I do?" asked Nicolle.

"Well, let's discuss that as we veer West, shall we?"



They traveled for a day or so further before stopping and covering Arthra in as many covers and tarps as they could to give her a break from the heat. The crew took water-soaked rags and rubbed her down underneath the covering. She rocked back and forth with glee. Afterwards, the crew gathered underneath her and the coverings like a tent and continued to discuss their plans to create a show for the people of Kvet—if there were any people to be found at all.

Chapter 25

The City of Kvet.

Unfortunately, the plan was not to be of much use (at first) as the city was disturbingly empty. As they came to the perimeter of it, it was remarkably quiet for a city. And more strange, was a structure that the crew had been able to see for miles back—a massive misshapen tower with holes all over it. As they moved through the low (very low) buildings in the city, It occurred to Nicolle that the architecture of the building did not match the main tower at all. Gef agreed and it gave him a bad feeling. He was fairly sure he had seen such a structure before, and it didn't belong here in the steppes of Hargala.

If the tower at the center of the city and the lack of commotion of any kind were not disturbing enough, there were the shadows that seemed to be moving all about in dark parts of the city. Gef and Able had adjusted their extravision to primarily look for movement of any kind and whenever they passed a darkened archway or a shadowy alley, there was something—someone—waiting. "I don't like this," said Gef.

"I wouldn't normally council being brigands," said Wacamolo, "but I do think we should find what supplies we can and leave quickly."

"We can't do that," said Nicolle. "Besides, there could be people in trouble we could help."

Wacamolo argued, "Yes. That could very well be us."

But the argument was moot. The crew had traveled a dozen blocks in to the city when out of the shadows stepped ten or so tall insectoid creatures. They had large spherical eyes covered in tiles, stood on two legs and had four arms, in which they carried multiple nasty looking spears and axes. Get recognized them as chimexapods, and just as suddenly knew that the tower in the center of Kvet wasn't a tower, but a hive.

"This makes no sense," said Gef to Wacamolo. "These chimexapods shouldn't be here."

"Tell them," said Wacamolo.

The children had been stowed away in their secret chest, guarded by Ka'Rolly, but still they peered out a crack in the lid to watch what was happening, their eyes wide at seeing such alien creatures.

Several of the chimexapods raised various arms, with their pincer hands in a position clearly meaning "halt." They spoke in loud chuffs and chittering. No one on board Arthra could understand a word, but then, it seemed they didn't have to as Arthra herself sounded like she was speaking.

"Um, I didn't know Arthra could talk," said Nicolle.

A the same time, Gef and Wacamolo spoke, "Neither did we."

"Can anyone understand what she is saying?" Asked Nicolle.

"Bits and pieces," said Gef. "They're definitely asking what she's doing here and they seem to want to know what her cargo is."

"Ha! I never," said Wacamolo.

Most of the chimexapods lined up in front of Arthra as two took hold of her reigns and jerked them away from the saddle and Gef. "Okay. Wait a minute," said Gef. The column of soldiers began leading Arthra down the street, toward the center of town.

"Is Arthra going along with this?" Asked Wacamolo.

"I can't tell, but I'm going to have my say in the matter." Gef hopped down of the saddle to the street, strode at a fast clip past all the soldiers to the front of the group where they immediately brandished all of their angular and toothy weapons. Gef held his hands up in a gesture of peace and spoke a few sputtering clicks that he hoped meant "Hold" and "Peace".

The soldiers looked at one another but other than that had no immediate response. Gef looked to Arthra and said, "Tell them we don't want to stay, Arthra. Please."

Arthra made several noises and the soldiers turned to listen to her but then turned back to Gef and one of the chimexapods closest to him shook its head. Gef thought to himself that this was going nowhere so he shouted back to the crew, "Nip! Bring me Po, will ya'?"

The chimexapods raised their weapons to the air as all the parts of Nip dutifully carried Po over to Gef and dropped it in his hands. Once delivered, Nip began hovering among the chimexapods, investigating, but possibly taunting them. When one of the chimexapods took a swing at part of Nip, it hovered far above in the air and made a "blat" sound.

"Po, I'm hoping you can help me make them understand me."

Po shivered and then cast a glowing light all around Gef that shaped itself into the form of a chimexapod surrounding Gef's own body, like a suit of armor made of light. The chimexapods were clearly stunned and backed up. Now, as Gef spoke, a string of chimexapodian sounds came from the light sculpture. "[We mean you no harm but we do not wish to go with you without more explanation]."

Again, the chimexapod closest to Gef spoke, but this time Gef understood it clearly. "[You will come to hive to see queen. Sentence for trespassing is food.]"

Gef wasn't sure what to make of the last part, but he knew well that people who entered chimexapod hives tended not to leave or be heard from ever again.

"[We will stay here. Your queen can come see us. Or, we can leave and stop trespassing. We thought this was a city of the Dustmyn.]"

"[Queen does not leave hive. Dustmyn all gone. You will cease speaking and come with us.]"

Gef looked to Arthra's saddle where Wacamolo and Nicolle were straining on their hands and knees to see what was going on. This was not good. The chimexapods were large—the shortest was still a half a meter taller than Gef—

and they were armed and dangerous and there were a million re-enforcements waiting in the hive. Still, before Gef could strategize further, the chimexapod nearest him raised its voice and said, "[Cease this sacrilegious science!]" and grabbed Po out of Gef's hand.

Gef froze. That did it. Things were literally out of his hands now. The Nips swooped into action in a maddening display of chirps, sirens, and lights. Po immediately interacted with the chimexapod, likely draining it of any memories and causing it to fall to the ground in a pile. The other chimexapods immediately sprang into action, taking swings at both Nip and Gef, al of whom managed to dodge. Wacamolo and Nicolle had stood and were ready to join in the fray.

Then something even stranger happened. The chimexapods were, without warning or even sound, dismembered. Their arms came off their bodies. Their legs were cut and caused them to fall over. All of this caused them to emit high pitched sounds screeches indicating pain or cries for help. Gef turned to the hive. There were already groups of chimexapods flying over the low the buildings of the city in groups, but also there was smoke beginning to emanate from the holes in the hive tower. Only Gef knew it wasn't smoke. The distance made it look like that. It was many, many more chimexapods.

"Curse Enubys," said gef. He made to run back to Arthra. Whatever was happening, it would allow for a hasty retreat, but even as he stepped to run, from out of thin air, a dustmyn appeared!

The dustmyn held his hand out, "You and your friends must come with me if you are to survive, Daemon!"

That word, daemon, shocked Gef. He'd not heard it in a hundred years or more. It was more than enough for him to shout to the crew that they were moving. Picking Arthra's reign from up off the ground, he turned to the Dustmyn, "Lead the way!"

They began running down a side street as more Dustmyn seemingly appeared from out of nowhere. The chimexapods that had confronted them were entirely destroyed. Gef regretted the violence, but he also felt he'd had no choice. Luckily, Ka'Rolly had sealed the chest with Rilla and Able in it, and kept them from looking, so there was the small victory that the children had not seen the fight.

After moving down a maze of side streets and alleyways, with chimexapods buzzing overhead, the whole crowd of the crew and dustmyn came to a kind of warehouse with a hole in its side. "In here!" said the dustmyn. Gef turned to the crew, "Everyone follow—" he turned to the Dustmyn. "Name?"

"I am Alaharih."

"Okay, crew, everyone follow Alaharih here."

As the crew dismounted and ducked to get in the small hole, Wacamolo asked Gef, "What about Arthra?"

"I'll stay with her. We'll find another way to wherever this is going."

"No!" Shouted Alaharih above the buzzing. "Your companions are of no matter to me, daemon. We need you!"

"I'm not leaving Arhtra behind."

"She will be fine. The chimex worship creatures like her."

Gef turned to Arthra and put his hand on her face. Then, he realized, "Po!" The Nips had already retrieved Po and again brought it to Gef. "Help me speak to Arthra."

The others had made their way into the tunnel. The Dustmyn had strange orbs that glowed and lit the small room. In it there was a single set of stairs. Alhirah told the crew. "Please. I must wait for your master. Follow my men down into the city."

Nicolle and Wacamolo scoffed at the word master, but there was no time to debate. The noise outside the building had grown to a hurricane wind. Rilla and Able were mesmerized by the sound and the sounds of chimaexapods and dustmyn fighting. Nicolle saw this and gathered them up. "Come, children. We have to go!" The crew made their way down the stairs into the depths with the dustmyn.

Chapter 26

Escape from the Hoard.

For the third time in their adventures Able and the crew found themselves deep underground in a cavern and surrounded. (Once by a tree museum, once by mushroom men, and now by dustmyn.) At this time, since they had been lead down to this place, they could maybe assume that the dustmyn were allies. The chamber appeared to be much more than a hideout, with large hexagonal hallways leading away in all four directions. They had entered from a large staircase in the corner. Their entrance may have been impromptu, but nothing else about the stone, decorated walls seemed that way.

Some of the small people with their giant, bushy hair, had begun lighting globes, glass orbs that could shift from being opaque to being transparent and once see-through it could be seen that the orbs were filled with purple glowing grubs. As more of these globes lit up the chamber took on a cool lavender color. Nip decided to add to the fun and positioned himself equidistant around the space, glowing to match the hue of the grubs and the room grew even brighter. The

dustmyn whispered in a hushed tone in awe. No one had seen anything like Nip.

“As I said above, I am Alharih. Welcome to the city of Kvet.” With that, he bowed and many in the crowd sank to one knee.

Gef spoke, “I am Gef, and these are my companions: Able, Po, Ka’Rolly, Nicolle of the Evershem, Wacamolo of the Idex Mortez, and Little Rilla. That one up there is known as Nip.”

Gef decided to stick with their original plan, because why not? “We are a traveling group of entertainers.”

Alharih looked skeptical. “I see.” He turned to his people and whispered. Each dustmyn who heard him turned to others and whispered the news as well and on like that until the chamber filled and emptied with an undulating hiss. Alharih continued, “As you have seen, our city has been infested by a hoard. We have been familiar with the K’t’h’K’t that but they were individuals—scouts—merely looking to trade. We have never considered them enemies. Then one day, without any warning, their swarm appeared and covered the sky. They built their hive in a matter of erns.”

Nicolle looked shocked. “Erns!?”

Wacamolo leaned over to Nicolle, “What’s an ern?”

“Less than a day.”

Gef replied to Alharih, “I have encountered these people before. My people call them cimexapods. In all my years, I have never seen them invade a territory beyond their own. This—“

Alharih interrupted, “You are a Keeper?”

Gef couldn't see the point in lying now and removed his hood. "Um. We prefer the term synthezoid."

There were cries and gasps from the crowd. Alharih waved to quiet them down. I apologize, Keeper. We have not seen one of your kind in generations."

Keeper. Gef smiled as he had not heard that name in a long, long time. It was good though—very nearly a term of endearment. It was certainly a term of respect. "You know of my kind"—a rhetorical question.

"Yes. Our legends speak of your caretaking; that when you disappeared, our green valleys disappeared as well."

Nicolle whispered to Wacamolo, "Green valleys?"

Wacamolo just stroked his beard.

Alharih continued, "Many of our covens don't even believe in you or that the valleys ever existed."

"Covens?" Asked Able.

Alharih looked at the child synthezoid with great curiosity, even kneeling down to his level. "Our people live in enclaves together mostly underground all throughout the Asyk peninsula." He stood again and faced Gef. "Entertainer or not, you are a Keeper. You must help us rid ourselves of the K'th'K'that. You have an oath."

"You do?" Asked Able.

Gef rolled his eyes and rubbed his head, "Yeah. Yeah I do."

Nicolle laughed.

Gef shot her a look and she covered her mouth. Looking to Alharih he said, "If there were more of my kind, we might

be able to help, but there's only me and Able. I'm not sure what we can do."

"You're a keeper. They don't want your flesh. That must be useful for something. And what of these devices of yours?" He gestured to Nip and Po and Ka'Rolly.

"No," Able stepped forward. "They're not devices; they're our friends." Able picked up Po, who, without prompting, played a quick song and made a light sculpture of a flock of doves flying away—not that anyone knew what doves were.

The crowd again reacted with shock, some with glee and some in fear. "Po," Able chastised, "don't show off." Po chirped, pleased with itself.



Since it was apparent that the dustmyn were not in need of entertainment, Gef conferred with the group and decided they should switch tactics. With the crew off away from Alharih and his soldiers, Gef told them, "I do have to help them, but none of you do. We can still ask them for passage across the Silt Sea and we can exchange me for it."

"What!" shouted Nicolle.

"Never," said Wacamolo.

"No!" said Able.

Even little Po booed the idea.

Ka'Rolly crossed its arms in front of itself in an X.

"Why would you stay anyway?" Asked Able.

Wacamolo concurred, “What would you do against that insect hoard?”

Gef could see that the crew had made up their minds to stick together and saw no point in arguing. “I do actually have a plan, but it requires Arthra.”

Nicolle asked, “Do we know where she is?”

Gef smiled, “I know where she is going to be and that’s precisely why we need her. All we have to do is wait. They have a hoard, but we have one too. One that little Po here can help us with.”

About the Author



R. E. Warner is a brain in a jar. We keep him in our book warehouse where he is allowed to read at his leisure and freely dictate, via computer, stories that are for all practical purposes are rip-offs of a lot of other stories and movies (he can access screenplays, too). As a brain in a jar, he complains A LOT about not being able to eat pizza.