

Matthew J. Mimnaugh
3410 SW 13 Ct.
Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33312
954-881-2544
MJM@MatthewJMimnaugh.com

approximately 185,000 words (total)

THE LAW OF SEVEN
BOOK I: BLOOD WALKER
4 CHAPTER EXCERPT

By

Matthew J. Mimnaugh

THE OVERTURE



*A Prelude
In the Perspective of:*

DJORD

*Summer 297i, Week 1, Day 5, Morning
Blitz-Gipfel, Stormwatch, Miana, The Eltheiri Empire*

What is the threshold of assassination? To clarify: how important need a victim be to merit the term—when is simple “murder” no longer sufficient? The death of the man beside me will unquestionably and regrettably qualify, and I suppose the semantics merely serve to distract me from the more important issue: I am to be the culprit.

I sorely wish for another option, but a man such as Gashradel... no, the man is not the prevailing issue—the man is a side note, calloused as that sounds. The fact that he wields not one, but *two*, Blades is the matter of concern. The fact is that this man—*any* man—who wields a Blade for any significant length of time will become a side note to the weapon itself. Although, how could the rest of a man’s life compare to the fact that he was blessed enough to grasp a handful of heaven?

Yet, holy though they are, the weapons have been appropriated for his personal use. This issue is my concern, and I must confront him. Future Emperor or no, who might hope to be so spectacular as to disarm an offended demigod and retrieve the Blades whilst sparing his life? Indeed, this murder will be the first distasteful task of many I must undertake for the sake of my people. It is a weight most heavy... a loathsome lodestone, as it were.

When my late father requested Gashradel relinquish but one of the Blades, the man’s refusal had made it clear that both would need to be removed, though no action had been taken. My father’s recent death offers a new opportunity to retrieve the weapons, at least, and I am fortunate in that my intentions yet remain unknown. But this is no place for decrees or orders.

Indeed, the moment such a clumsy, inappropriate request might surface, my intention to strip the man of his god-like power will be known, and his defenses will muster.

Thunder rumbles overhead.

I wish I could steal the Blades, but, bound to the man's very spirit, they must be freely relinquished or recovered from a corpse. I had toyed with the idea of getting the man drunk or high or otherwise stripped of his inhibitions and playing out one of a hundred well-tinkered scenarios, but the stakes are unforgivingly high. This, regrettably, is one of those detestably categorical issues where one must—.

Losing our focus, are we? The Hand asks in my mind; I clutch the creature's talisman body hanging on its chain around my neck. The spirit's psychic words were once quite foreign—another's thoughts in my mind, as they are. Yet the alien influence has become indigenous over a decade's time, its words, feelings, and images now comfortable amidst my own.

Reiterating, I think pointedly.

Diminutive term for repeating one's self, it chides. *Pay heed, young Emperor, or you shall lose yourself in idle philosophy.*

Need it be like this? I ask. *Truly, must I spill blood?*

This man is a coin in the boot of your empire, it says coolly, *an asset not only worthless for spending where it remains, but also a hindrance to your steps. I—.*

“I was adopted, you know,” Gashradel says, garnering my attention. “Gashradel isn't even my real name—or at least not the one my mother gave me.”

“Oh?” I ask reflexively.

“Recovered by chance from a fire when I was but an infant,” he says, thought-soaked gaze staring out on the gaggle of nobles and royals congregated down beyond the flight of stairs. Now would be a perfect time to strike, but I do not.

“What has brought you to tell me this?” I ask, my actions deferred as I find myself powerless before the warm spot of curious mystery nestling itself in the man’s admission.

He chuckles, looking over. His hazel eyes regard me warmly as they squint with his smile. “I have always felt allegiance with the common folk, as I’m sure you can relate, your past being what it is.”

“While I concur, I am afraid I still do not follow.”

He looks back at the crowd. “I merely wish to say I find their actions so completely baffling,” he says, gesturing to the royals and nobles below. “Endowed with the prim of the world, yet out here, tempting the wrath of Ifelar for a couple minutes’ bloodrush.”

It is my turn to chuckle. “*We* are out here as well.”

“Yes, true,” he says, amused concession warming his voice. “But I suspect our purposes differ.” He grins, looking up as thunder rumbles once more; I hear someone in the crowd exclaim something, excitement pitching their tone, but I fail to hear the words. “I can witness Ifelar’s lightning, you know; the Blades afford me that privilege.”

He says something else, but I do not hear, the feeling of my hand on its dagger coming to the center of my mind; The Hand, in its impatience, has called my attention to it. The grip feels absolute in my fingers, the leather-wrapped handle doing nothing to mitigate the density of the hilt’s steel core. I pull it from its oiled sheath in silence, The Hand using its magicks to hide my intentions from the thought-piercing power of the Blades.

“No? If the people had any idea how beautiful it is... hmm.”

I freeze within myself, recrystallizing my purpose for being here in my mind. In an instant, I thrust the long, straight blade into the man. Guided by The Hand's preternatural steadiness, my hand, wrist, and arm move uncomfortably, but in such a way as to send the weapon up and between the ribs at an absurdly specific angle. It pierces the heart and both lungs with calm efficiency, blood pulsing through the hollow tunnels of the specialty knife. I release the weapon and step away, both calm and tense in an odd tangle of unclear emotion; it will not be long.

He stares at me, eyes wide. Stance betraying his weakness—the instantaneous assault brutal in its lethality—he already looks moments from collapse. The red staining his clothing spreads, creeping around his side to greet me, beginning to drip behind him. He coughs once, takes a moment to stare at me, a “why” in his eyes, and then staggers to his side, a reaction I do not expect.

Even with his godlike powers, he now lacks the strength to leap the stairs' balustrade; he tumbles over instead. I look beyond the stone barrier, down to the water below, but the darkness swallows his body. He hits the canal below with a weighty sploosh. The Hand maintains focus on the fallen warrior as the gurgling waters take him and I turn, collapsing—leaning my back against the balustrade behind me as reality reacquaints itself with me. Try though I do, I find myself unable to stop the shaking. I can feel the life leaking out of Gashradel through The Hand, it a morose, inevitable sensation laced with guilt and heaviness... lead powder gradually filling pockets sewn into my skin.

Then... then *he is gone*.

This is the first person I have killed outside of self-defense.

His body and the Blades can be recovered once the storm has passed, The Hand says as rain begins to fall; the weather seems almost emblematic, necessity of doing this during a storm notwithstanding. I hear droves of umbrellas below fwoop open, the crowd's din of excitement growing beneath their protective canopies; they will try to outlast each other, seeing who dares brave this storm the longest.

He's gone.... A life... a person every bit as complex and important as myself. He will no longer be. His perspective, his values, his purposes have all lost their weight on this world, only to be considered as they affect others, relegated to afterthoughts, *memories*. And I... *I did this*. I am the one who deemed him unworthy to continue and... *I did this*. I have an empire to consider and he... everything he was and would ever be... could not outweigh the threat he posed and... and I ended him.

I....

—I shudder, detecting something. Gashradel alive?

No, not *him*.

Could it be Ifelar, Goddess of Storms? Have my actions offended her?

No, somehow that does not feel right either.

What has your mind so stirred? The Hand asks, but I am too distracted to heed the words.

Something is *here*—something *watches*.... *Yes*, some entity peers down between the stairways and I sense *it*... not moving—not even *doing*, but... *watching*. Yet, even in this strange sensation, it pays me no heed, I detecting it only as it spills over... not full winter, but a chill from under the doorway's gap, as it were.

What concerns you?

“You... you do not sense this?”

No. What have you detected?

“I... I do not know. It... it *watches*, whatever it is.”

[Illustration] Lower Residential Block Model C

- 4 technical cutaway renderings of the floors
- 1 artistic rendering of a side
- Labels in script

*A Prelude
In the Perspective of:*

KADIR

*Summer 297i, Week 6, Day 5, Midday
A vacant Eitis Core street residence, Stormwatch, Miana, The Eltheiri Empire*

Tenseness thickens air as I approach scene of murder. Eye contact sparse, knuckles white, and brows furrowed, stressed guardsmen loiter. I wish to encourage these men, but there are no words to salve burnt spirit, even when self-effacing shame of failure is not merited. Indeed, these men do all they can to uncover source of these killings, but lack required insight to succeed. It is I who should feel this shame, as providing insight is prelude of inquisitors like me. But we too have problem: there is not enough to discover—not enough evidence to form verdict.

I am reminded of time spent attempting to solve puzzle when I was young. We had come to end of lesson and Tazu-Sama presented us with pieces of carved wood that he said would fit into place to form sphere; when we could assemble them, next lesson would be given. We pondered unceasingly and attempted to assemble sphere, but our minds grew languid with overburdened thought and we found no answers. Finally, when we all had admitted defeat—a lesson all its own—Tazu-Sama produced many more pieces and we saw truth: our pieces belonged to each other's spheres. What was more, nothing he had said was false and all things erroneous came from our own assumptions. After this, lesson taught itself.

Situation now feels same way and as I look at flesh-stripped skeleton. I suspect this is aspect of some greater whole I and others have not yet properly grasped. It is sentences taken from book or strokes isolated from painting: deliberate and undeniable in their logic, but without context and therefore inscrutable. Who or what murders these scarlets? What end does it seek?

Murders are always like jigsaw puzzles: one must find corners first. Yet how can one determine what corner *is* when nature of puzzle is still mystery.

I close my eyes and focus on *sphaera veneficia*, the spherical manifestation of magic in play. It appears in my mind, not unlike how one might picture three dimensional renditions of some blueprint using only one's own imagination. Yet this has distinctly alien texture to it, injected directly into my mind, rather than created there. Translucent, crystalline spheres swirl within one another, logical and precise as timepiece, but twisted and gnarled as malformed tree.

The *sphaera veneficia* has degraded and much of what it was has become unreadable. Yet it has fulfilled its purpose, having stripped victim before me of flesh and spirit, leaving only skeleton. What remains of spiritual orb is artifact shell. Yet this is deliberate also; what purpose has grenade of its own springs and casing after charge has blown?

I regard what I can, however, stripping dying spell of what information can be gleaned. Only time stands between me and my goal, information bringing me ever closer to clarity and this murderer will pay.

Opening eyes, I transcribe new symbols into notebook and flip through reference notes, finding one I want: circle with two perpendicular, bisecting lines, one horizontal and other vertical. "*Earth*," I say, not having seen this symbol in while; this word tastes old.

“Valconeir is no mere performer! I witnessed his dark powers! I swear it—he is a sorcerer! Moreover, a scoundrel, a rake, a shameless whoremonger, though most damnably a sorcerer!”

- *Manset, a lesser noble in Summer 297i after being arrested in Stormwatch on counts of slander against Valconeir, an illusionist, performer with Vivanda’s Guild, and alleged “sorcerer.” Subject’s words were taken with suspicion, the speaker having discovered his wife with Valconeir during the morning in question.*

*A Prelude
In the Perspective of:*

LEESE

*Autumn 297i, Week 1, Day 5, Twilight
A Talcorad Core street, Stormwatch, Miana, The Eltheiri Empire*

I lunge back into me doorway, havin' just taken a step out and felt somethin'. There's an odd texture in the air. I can't feel it in me home, even when standing in the open doorway. Yet the moment I step out.... I look 'round, tryin' t' catch a glimpse of somethin'—anythin' different, but there nuthin' amiss, no clues as t'what this sensations be.

It's just beyond me of description—at least in any'a my words... like a thought lost on the tongue, I know the general idea, but the whole of it's just outside my grasp. It's not a comfortable feelin', though—not'n the least. No, it's more like the lifeless stillness before a storm... or, mayhaps, when a predator's near as sometime's ye sense when some thugs are 'bout to start a stir.

I hate goin' out after Eyen and En set; the streets feel such much more dangerous, even if they arn't. The night itself isn't the problem, mind, but dusk—the time when it should still be light enough for things to feel safe, but ain't. It's like once Eyen an' En crosses the horizon, all the lurkers and rampsmen crawl out of their holes, even if the evenin' sky's still bright.

Yet I need to go out. Rent's due. I leave.

The sensation—that damned *sensation*—washes over almost immediately; even feelin' it once more, I can't describe it. Me skin turns goosey. Mad May's warned that it'll be a bad night for walkin', but Captain Lare'll be at The Screaming Cat—a terrible name, I always thought, but that's besides a point—and I need his fire burnin'. Feelin' the chill about me again, I focus on the captain, tryin' to distract meself.

He's in good favor with His Grace Djord, who's soon to be Emperor of all Eltheiri, peoples all say. Yet Captain Lare's a dark one, he is—not his skin or hair, but his soul, mind; all the girls agree. He's asked things of us scarlets that, well... shouldn't be mentioned, let alone done, and his men are rough and stingy, even if he himself's generous with coin. But the strange thing is Captain Lare just watches. He'll drink and perhaps have one of us on his lap at times, but he never has a girl to bed or choke or stroke. Come to think of it, I've never seen him with Thomas at all.

For all this, though, the scarlets in me group know it's well within his power to get any or all of us't the next mark in the Scarlets with a word—"got the Future Emperor's ear, he does," they say. For that, we tolerate his men—even *Mister Roger*, as the girls' been callin' him.

The feelin' in the air catches me again, pullin' me from my thoughts. It's thicker now—like stares piercin' out of some shadows. I continue walkin', takin' notice if an unconscious tremble that's taken my step and stoppin' it; doin' what I do, ye never ever look scared.

Then I hear somethin'... or I think I hear somethin'. A whisper—a whisper on the wind... but there isn't no wind. I walk faster.

A subtle somethin' catches me and I turn. A half dozen or so people stand in an alcove. They's'a all starin' my way and I get's a shiver. Taking in a moment's details, I shiver some more. A sorta smoke rises from them. It's weird and almost makes it look like they's got no faces, 'cept impressions where things might be—like a clayman's been made by some sculptor who asn't 'ad time to do the details yet.

Then somethin' else catches my eye and I freeze; I take in all the details in a frozen instant.

The thing stands further down in the alley, a body made from nothin'ness, a place where the fog don't show. Its silhouette's human-like, but taller and muscled all bull-like. Horns sick out. The nothin'ness-skin glistens. There's a twinkle where the eyes'd be. All of it is made of an... I don't know—*emptiness*.

I run.

I don't want to believe the whispers about dead scarlets, even less the hysterical rumormongerin' of Mad May. After Emperor Eilt died, things've been more difficult for us scarlets, certainly, but the rumors're just about them desperate enough to take what they want—randy drunks wantin' a free trip up the alley, surely, and those girls too stupid to let'em have a freebee when they's got no place to turn. Whatever people say—however bad the stories are—the city of Stormwatch, *capital* of Miana and greater Eltheiri is a civilized place—the *center* of sophistication an' whatnot—not a haven for... *monsters*, 'cept maybe the deepest bits of Undercity near where the waters are. But what'd I just seen? I've heard eerie tales on multiple tongues—horrible things 'bout blood, bone, and death.

I sprint, the reservation of propriety bowin' before natural terror. People make eye contact with me, only to slip behind doors or walls. Even a group of loud drunks—one with a half-uttered catcall'n his lips—grows wide-eyed and scurries into a tavern, slammin' the door behind 'em. What're they seeing around me? *In* me?

I make for the bar; I need a place with people—with *help*. Yet as I'm runnin', somethin' catches my periphery. It moves alongside me. Despite myself, I turn. Its face shows for half an instant 'nd vanishes, a horrid, hungry smile burnt into me vision, rictus grin too large for the face. I turn back to the tavern and catch myself in a stagger. The tavern's gone. No—it's there—t'my right it is, on the other side of the street—they *moved* me.

It's too late to turn back; I need another haven.

I make for a different door. I see another face and unconsciously look to it. I turn back. A second face burned 'n my mind and me direction's changed again. Me legs shake—one step nearly twists me ankle.

Finally—*finally*—I come to a door. I bang me fist against it. The franticness makes the poundin' deep and somehow alive... like laughter. It hurts t'hit somethin' this hard, but I don't care; bruises're better than death. "Please!" I scream. I hear tears 'n my voice—ones I don't realize I'm cryin'—and then all remnants of self-conscious propriety fall away. "Please! Let me in!"

"What?" an old voice croaks, the word barely recognizable.

"Please! Please! I need t'come inside!"

"You need to *what*?"

A confused mix of terror and hope riots me. My heartbeats make my arms 'n legs pulse. The slammin' in my chest's almost painful. "*Come in!*" I scream. "I said *I need t'come in!*"

With that... the door evaporates. Smoke and ash take its place, catchin' 'n the small breeze. I just stand. A brick wall is all that's there. I'm frozen.

A violent shiver catches me 'n I snap back, terror makin' me move. Me skin's cold 'n clammy. Every bit of me shakes.

I stagger back a couple 'a steps. I'm 'n a wide alleyway, the place all yellowy with starlight, gas lamps, and fog.

"*Did somebody say...?*" a nothingness voice asks from down the alley. It fades almost as suddenly as it 'rives and I back away, eyes rovin' across the haze, trying t' find it. It returns once more—behind me—a delicious, savorin' lust 'n the velvet words. "*Come in?*" I gasp and

turn. Every part of my frantic body screams at me. “*That sounds like an invitation to me.*” The voice’s behind me again. I turn. Nothin’.

Heartbeats pass—too rapid to count. Somethin’ takes shape in the shadowy haze as it approaches. I back away. As I do, two more appear ‘n the fringes of my sight. I turn. There’re six. I see a gap ‘n the formation an’ make for it, forcin’ my overexcited legs to listen. Yet, as I do, one more appears, filling the hole; this one’s larger, somehow—truer... *nearer*.

I take in the seven again, turnin’ slowly, painfully aware of my shakin’ body. I see what I think might be a gap in the circle and dash toward it. Breakin’ through, though, I find I’m ‘n the circle again. Did they move? Or... did *they move me*?

I fall, the ground hard and real beneath my knees. “Please!” I hear tears in me voice—I see ‘em in me eyes. “I have children! Rin and San! Please, for them, please!”

The largest—the leader—reaches down as I plead. A smile grows on its face. That smile bores into me—a malicious, hungry thing. With a talon, it lifts me chin, the sensation like cold, dense air. I close me eyes, feelin’ the tears as they press out, runnin’ down my cheeks.

“...*please.*”

THE FIRST CYCLE



*The First Movement
In the Perspective of:*

RHONE

*Autumn 297i, Week 1, Day 6, Morning
Stormwatch Thoroughfares, Stormwatch, Miana, The Eltheiri Empire*

Illeara slumbers, evading the vague nightmare that gradually digests the city.

I hope it lasts—the slumber, I should say.

Crowds wane, thinner and noticeably less clamorous. The air has stilled, cool, empty and dry. Even the echoes of our agitopede's thick legs sound hollow as its lumbering, rhythmic gate draws us away from the markets. Yet the quiet does not offer peace. It is a wonder that she sleeps.

No, that isn't quite right.

She has not been getting enough rest as of late. I expect exhaustion has finally subdued her, enforcing some terse approximation of sleep. That seems logical enough, sensitive mind that she has.

War in the deserts honed my latent sensitivity to spirits—a necessity when one fights the unholy monsters the Shen Leim shamans conjure. But *by chrome and silver*, Illeara *speaks to gon* professionally, and Stormwatch is practically a gallows' field for its gloom as of late. If this undefinable haunting keeps me awake at night, what must it do to her?

Indeed, something *here*, something within the city—or even the world grander, perhaps—feels... *wrong*: an invisible groping that constricts the soul—a haze that seeps into the lungs, deepening paranoia with every breath.

Worst of all, no one has the faintest notion as to what it is—or at least not with any certainty.

I am reminded of the sensation of catching something in the corner of my eye, only to look and see nothing. Something looms, the mind promises, and the subconscious awareness demands a conscious rush of panic. It *demand*s the eyes to twitch—to turn and scrutinize—only to... *nothing*. Whatever it is *disappears* without ever really being there.

But it is there.

Everyone knows it's there.

This feeling is not one of sight, however, though I cannot discern the *how* or *why* that constitutes this ambiguous sensation... this *something* less a feeling and more... an instinct, perhaps?

The soldier in me wants nothing more than to join the night patrols and assist in determining what in the hells is going on. Yet Stormwatch has an entire division of guardsmen to draw upon and nothing has been found; how is one meant to chase shadows in the darkness? I doubt an additional man will help—if anything, I suspect I will be more of an asset during the day. An Emperor's Own is best seen among the people, not hiding behind walls. Morale demands that much of me, at least. In any case, both Illeara and I have made ourselves available to Inquisitor Kadir, should he need our assistance.

“Gon’Kar?” I ask on a whim, wondering if discussing the matter might help.

“Yes,” the agitopede’s spirit operator responds, the gon’s voice coming through the speaker with a slight tinny burr.

“Do you sense anything... *amiss*? —anything *singular*?”

“Hmm,” he ponders with his unusually human-like way. “Considering this city’s present state, I suggest a more specific query.”

“I suppose,” I reply, recognizing the point. Whatever the case, the answer is affirmation enough; the spirit senses the oddness as well. I let the conversation pass, the opportunity to politely continue lapsing, and my mind travels back to the markets.

Only three or so weeks have passed since the rumors began, but the city feels like it teeters on the edge of hysterics. Strange people lurk in the streets, clothing not quite right and behavior abnormal. Details vary. Some say they have queer voices and vernaculars. Others swear to a smell of dust laced with a foul twinge of excrement. The faces, though... what few rumormongers that have witnessed these people’s faces speak of a visage both mangled and haunting.

Then there is the talk of the rituals. Wholly abnormal and vile, one indeed hears of such things... but never *here*—never *so close*. But the rumors and their frequency—the strange pink blood, the occult symbols, the stripped bones—*are* here... *are* close. Talk of that sort is supposed to die out... not grow more predominant.

We people with our walls and guns take a justifiable comfort in the security they offer, but when something comes along that finds these unimpressive—not some dumb thing, but rather an entity intelligent enough to understand who and what we are, yet find us unimposing—well... we become like animals... like prey.

But is that the case? Is some leftover abomination from the Era of Mantles stirring? Has some new horror found purchase in our world? ...our city?

Perhaps.

Perhaps not.

Or perhaps it *is* just the city's indigestion as a new emperor prepares to take the throne—better yet, some Purple's idea of publicity for an upcoming theatrical production. But, can we afford to believe that fancy? —that *hope*, when our every instinct knows it is a lie?

Still, it might be something more sinister, but not quite as damning as reemerging scions or something of that sort. Maybe some aspiring chemist has developed a new narcotic? Perhaps a contagion has begun spreading? If only it is something that simple. Even so, drugs and diseases do not lead to ritualistic killings... or at least not inherently.

Illeara shivers.

I drape a thin blanket over her; the early autumn day will be warm soon, but the morning and shade yet preserve vestiges of the night's chill. Her mouth moves with silent words, and I can only assume some iteration of the reoccurring dream affecting her has come again.

At least it isn't a nightmare.

I have repeatedly asked—lightheartedly pestered her, even—but she pointedly refuses to reveal the nature of these dreams, undoubtedly certain that I will find these fantastical visions as amusing as the books in which she so often buries her nose. Unfortunately, she assumes my jests are serious. The reality of it is I find her whimsical spirit nothing if not positively charming.

She looks so very alone there, sleeping. The feeling defies explanation most flagrantly, but the sense of vulnerable fragility—the way she tucks her legs—the way she holds herself... Her bodyguard I might be, but I am powerless against dreams. Sometimes I just want to hold her... to....

I turn away, having found myself entertaining dangerous ponderings yet again.

It is better to not get caught up in the thought of her—at least not as anything other than a charge. I must not indulge feelings for her... but *oh*, that I could....

Love is a cruel price to demand for freedom; I would curse the name of my temptress... that damned desert goddess... if only I didn't fear that the mere utterance of it might summon her in some way. I divert my mind. If indeed the city is in danger, the last thing I need worry about is *her*. I...

No.

The thought of her still tempts something deep within me, it seems, lingering on the mind and luring like a song on the morning when the stupor of dreams has yet to wither away, undeposed by waking logic.

I let the thought dissolve with deliberate care, not willing even to complete it.

And, sitting here, forfeiting the distraction I found in watching Illeara sleep, my mind returns to the gloom of the city. Warmth at the thought of Illeara evaporates. Sighing, some of the tension in my muscles dissolves. I try to calm myself, mentally running through one of my saber cadences, a distraction not unlike intentionally getting a tune stuck in one's mind. I suppose it proves effective enough.

Yet, even as I lose my conscious in the fluidly logical cadence, my unconscious renews itself and keys onto something, pestering my mind. I find myself stricken with an uncomfortable alertness, panic lacing the sensation. I look around in futility. My eyes prove as useless to me in tracking this mystery as my ears might be in locating the source of a smell.

The sensation resonates with irksome familiarity—like a *déjà vécu* of the spirit—and mental buzzing begins to bloom into annoyance as it evades classification. It is as if someone has struck a tuning fork within a noisy crowd: the hum proves undeniable, yet beyond the ability to be traced as the speakers' voices momentarily and repeatedly match the tone and disorient the ear.

“Gon’Kar,” I say, renewing the conversation. I reason that, if nothing else, I can use him as a screening board to deconstruct my ideas. “It feels familiar—whatever *it* is.”

“Ah, *very specific*,” he says, keying back into my implied topic seamlessly.

“I find it hard to describe,” I reply, ignoring his sarcasm. I pause, grinding the gears in my mind, attempting, yet again and with similar futility, to manufacture an explanation. “I do not think we have the words for what I am feeling—or perhaps my vocabulary is insufficient.”

“Verbose as you are, I doubt that most sincerely.”

I laugh, unable to help myself. “I—.” It comes to me in a snap instant, something triggering the memory, and I shiver. The desert. Blood. Bodies. Haven in a dilapidated temple.

I know what it is now.

I sense an *Ellestra Allmy* nearby.

“It is not ours to question the storm if we are not prepared for a
loud answer.”

- *An Eltheiri proverb*

*The Second Movement
In the Perspective of:*

ILLEARA

*Autumn 297i, Week 1, Day 6, Morning
A World of Dreams*

I stand on warm, grainy stone, bare skin catching the rough texture as I scrunch my toes. Wind tussles my hair, smelling of fresh rain; the scent holds the loamy richness of sodden rocks and new growth. I hear rushing waters, the deep rumble powerful and distant, like the waterfalls pouring into the sea from the Mianian delta.

Yet something gentle hides in that noise... a song.

I open my eyes, blinded by the brightest of days, and find myself standing in the midst of thousands. Seeing them separates the voices, allowing me to isolate the individuals behind them. Each holds his or her mouth open and sings solitary notes, their protracted, intimate sound contributing to a harmony of the collective.

They do not stop for breath.

I approach one—a man—and my nearness gives his voice crisp definition. He sings *himself*. I know that much, odd as the notion is. The tone manages to define him in some indescribable way.

They... they *all* sing like this.

He wears a blindfold. I remove it... but the man has no eyes. Well, they *do*, but... the sockets are not empty, yet the skin has no openings for lids. No lashes—no break—just bulges of flesh. I remove another blindfold—and another.

None have eyes.

Looking around more intently, I find myself standing near the beveled edge of a cliff.

But no. It is no normal cliff; I see the background—the *context*.

Statues—almost unfathomably large statues—stand, haze and distance blending them with the sky. They have chains in their left hands, but hold out their right hands, palm out in a forbidding gesture. The cliff upon which I stand is a hand of one of the statues... a *finger*.
...and thousands... *tens or hundreds of thousands* stand with me.

The statues stand in a circular pattern, though I cannot see them all, far ones fading almost completely into the miasmic distance. But the formation is clear, and something stands at its center—these statues bind it with their chains.

A grander statue—this figure too large for me to see all of it from here—makes even the statues seem small by comparison. Yet that is not right. The great one in the center is no sculpture, or at least not like the ones encircling it. The ones around it are stone; this one is light bound in crystal.

It stares at me, aware of me beholding it, beautiful. It just wants to be free, but they bind it.

I see the ages in its—*his*—eyes.

The glowing one's surface moves subtly, like the light beams refracted by a gem when its position shifts. The chains binding it—massive chains with individual links comparable in size to that of Stormwatch's blocks—barely even register as glimmers from so far away. Six bound wings of white fire issue from the captive's back and a halo of rainbow and lightning-infused storm clouds encircle his head. I sense his torment, a boiling pain that radiates from him in waves. Even so far away, they sway me. Surely such a being—a god, if ever something could be called one—could break chains even that large. But he doesn't. He can't?

He... *struggles*.

As I stare, a prick of shadow obscures the light from the statue behind. It approaches, gaining definition. The figure appears manlike in size and structure, yet walks on a path that forms from flame that constantly emanates from its mouth. Two beings of light move with the being, brilliant and powerful, but somehow fractured and unaware. A blindfold binds the main one's eyes, but it moves as though it sees me.

It reaches out to me.

I wake with a start, drawing in a sharp breath.

Someone nearby gasps, startled. "My lady?"

I recognize the voice. "Rhone?"

"Yes."

Sense of hearing stimulated by the words, I begin recognizing other sounds. The vibrating booms of an agitopede's metal legs thumping on cobblestone punctuate the quiet, as does the softer din of pedestrians walking and conversing, further distinguished by an errant cry or yell here and there. A vaguely familiar voice advertises a fresh batch of bread, the gold-clad Osarno woman's words taken as a license for those in a small crowd to bustle into the bakery. An Illoken's guildsman of some lower mark proclaims the day's news in rolling speech patterns common to more experienced heralds—he'll rise in the ranks, certainly; I catch the ending details regarding Future Emperor Djord's coronation tonight as the herald's words melt into the ear catch for a newly published Dilokon study pertaining to the odd relicts known as "movers."

"Another of your dreams has come upon you, I suspect?" Rhone asks, retrieving my attention.

“They are always the same,” I reply, the irritating quandary still lingering in my mind.

“Meaning and context elude me when I dream, but when I wake, the whole matter becomes clear—well, *relatively* speaking. They fit together like torn fragments of a painting—” *damn, but I can’t put it into words* “—or some confounding puzzle aimed to perplex the mind.”

“I suppose it would be not unlike... hmm... feeling as though you read a specific book, *say*, for the first time each occasion you open it, despite having read it already.” He chuckles. “Then, more confounding still, you remember everything when you put it down.”

“The notion of reliving that novel thrill of my favorite stories appeals to me, though this is a fair degree more exasperating,” I say peering over at him, an eyebrow raised. “A truly apt comparison, in either case. You took time with that metaphor, didn’t you?”

“I have been known to mix Illoken’s craft with Vivanda’s art from time to time.”

“Oh, *certainly*,” I jest as I roll my eyes. “Where are we?”

“Well. Critic that you presently are, *my lady*, I expect a good look around should serve as well as any of my words.”

I glare at him through a grin as I stand, surveying my surroundings. We travel down one of the iconic Stormwatch thoroughfares—that much should have been immediately obvious from the bakery and herald—my agitopede wading through the crowd like a skiff in water. An agitopede thumps past in the opposite direction, a man in a ragged top hat bowing in greeting almost as deeply as his teetering tower of wares; I return with a curtsy.

In the distance, I catch the glimmer from an Agar tree, the morning light refracting in the diamond-encrusted bark. These diamonds diffuse the heat of great storms’ lightning, or so the Dilokon’s guildlords explain, while the silver catches the storms’ attention. Roads connect these

Agar trees in a triangular grid, giving the city a logical sense and providing easy navigation. The designers were unquestionably wise.

The interconnecting faces of three and four-story buildings loom around me, iron-stained limestone walls be-smudged by coal dust or enlivened with window gardens of flowers or herbs. Trees and greens decorate the thoroughfare's mediums, the plants a welcome splash of color, though somewhat drab compared to the gorgeous be-flowered topiaries in the wealthy districts southward.

I detect the smell of baking bread as we pass another bakery—the newer, gon-operated furnaces leave each loaf light and fluffy, rather than burnt or uncooked in odd places; I, for one, am fond of the specialty bread with the green flakes—the type with cheese added atop it to be crisped toward the end of the baking cycle. I also detect the smell of fresh fruit, early autumn harvests coming in as the winter months encroach. Yet beneath that comes the smell of dust and unbathed people, it a subtle onion-sourness that makes the mouth dry and the stomach less eager for food.

Attuning to this, I take notice of individual people plodding about in their crowds, brightening the masses with guild attire or what little colorfully dyed clothing can be afforded. Five Itheran limes—one a higher mark and four trainees—meander, the lesser marks maneuvering to get a better position to hear the older one's instructions over the crowd's din. Seven Sheshana amethysts shepherd two scores of young children, evidently on some sort of recess or learning trip. Three Sashiri Sapphires—my guild—collect banners from tree limbs as they often do before storms; they go about their work, aided by a larger female gerteir spider who unfastens spider-silk knots.

Seeing the arachnid, I think of Goot and look over to Rhone. Sure enough, Goot has noticed the female and begins his peculiar dance, attempting to garner her attention. He waves his brightly colored abdomen and waving arms, skittering about on a bare spot of my agitopede with high pitched tinks of claw on brass. The female ignores him and Goot looks a little crestfallen as we amble away. Poor little one.

But my smile fades. I wonder why for a moment, but then recognize the....

It hasn't lifted—whatever haunts Stormwatch, I mean. It reminds me of a storm that looms far too long, forcing everyone into a state of protracted worry. I am normally one to relish storms—the special rations, the protection, the reprieve it brings—but the collective's tension has a contagious quality to it and there always is that worry—that time spent huddled in shelters, waiting. When it comes, though, a storm can only last so long. The waiting though....

We have been waiting for weeks. We all know—instinctively know—whatever looms will be worse than what leads up to it; that is the way of storms. Nevertheless, the waiting... the damned *waiting*.

I sigh.

I suppose I should at least cherish my nap. I feel refreshed.

No, not refreshed. I feel *less exhausted*. There's a distinction in there somewhere.

“I must have fallen asleep on the way back from the markets,” I muse aloud, trying to distract myself with conversation.

“Very astute,” Rhone replies with the unsubtle sarcasm he so erringly fancies. “With deductive engines such as those whirring in your mind, I suspect—.”

“Oh hush, you!”

He laughs, but it sounds disingenuous... forced.

A wariness haunts him whenever we tour in the city, the purview of any good bodyguard, I suppose—especially one guarding a person who refuses to have an entourage of armed escorts and opts for a single, capable defender. This usually manifests in what he calls “relaxed ready,” a tactically advantageous posture whereby he remains prepared for action without promoting it, or so he explained.

Yet he differs this time. The polished armor conceals the subtleties of his body language, though not the overt tenseness. It reminds me of the enduring cringe of a cat that has heard something potentially dangerous, but cannot place its source.

It would seem I cannot escape the city’s new, dreary reality, even in conversation. If I cannot achieve distraction, perhaps Rhone might have learned something, and I can pierce the veil of mystique.

Nothing is ever as frightening when one knows more about it.

“Something has beset you with an altogether too uncomfortable disquiet, I dare say,” I remark, trying to imbue the statement with inconsequential innocence, though failing and finding my voice betraying worry.

“A feeling.” He looks to me. His grey eyes swim with concern of an undefinable, contagious sort. Windows to the soul they may be, but circumstance makes glass a mirror, reflecting my own abrupt worry.

I fan myself and turn away, flustered. “Oh?”

“Probably unworthy of concern.”

Seeing another distraction, I pounce upon it. “Oh, look!”

A crowd gathers at the boundary wall of an Agar tree’s hollow. People often meet at the borders of the great trees’ gardens, though usually at night when the glowing brightfruit need not

compete with the daylight. A brass sign proclaims we are at Enbarrow, it but two blocks from my château.

Enbarrow's canopy shades the plaza, though its silver-veined, diamond-encrusted bark catches the morning's blue-white light in places and scatters vibrant washes of prismatic color. Nevertheless, the brightfruit have become dim and motionless... *hungry*. The sky will storm soon, and the tree will drink in its life-giving lightning, protecting the city's inhabitants in the process.

"Someone has entered the garden," Rhone says, a burr thrumming in his voice and chilling what might have been a simple statement with cold, deliberate... something. Worry? *Offense?* He is, after all, a religious man, though I have never sought after the particulars. Could he be an Agar worshiper?

Extending and looking through my spyglass, I see a man in the garden, lying with lifeless abandon. Hardened leather garments cover him completely, eyes bespectacled by tinted goggles; not a bit of skin shows. Despite myself, I cannot help considering the Shadow Guild, that mysteriously notorious group of rogues tasked with illicit operations. Allegedly, these include covert and untraceable conveyances the Irdaret's deliverers refuse, and, of course, those can as likely be sensitive documents as illegal paraphernalia. Some even claim the Shadows have a hand in delivering death, their more sinister members turning their skills to notorious and profitable ends, adding poison in an untended drink or blade to an unguarded heart... for the correct price. Most consider them a superstition, but *I* see no harm in minding *my* teacup.

Nevertheless, such rumors always come several degrees detached from their purported witnesses—a tale of one's brother's friend's neighbor and so on. I often overhear such titter in the powder rooms—along with conquests of Espeiro and other gossip. Said titterers have

consumed their fill of amber or dark by then, of course, and, if the occasion and location are correct, *scales of the dragon*.

Even so, I see no sheathed throwing daggers or vials of ominous liquid. Indeed, his outfit seems altogether devoid of amenities, be it even something as innocuous as a coin purse. If anything, he looks like the victim of a mugging rather than the would-be perpetrator thereof. *Of course*, my mind chides, *how might an assassin work effectively if he looks the part?*

I turn to Rhone. He stands and a subtlety in his posture—a wary furtiveness in his otherwise professionally controlled mien—worries me further. *Nothing* unsettles Rhone.

“Gon’Kar,” I say, “please sojourn near that crowd so we might disembark.”

“Certainly,” Gon’Kar replies, the spirit’s voice a tinny squawk from within the vehicle; I must have Den repair that amplifier.

The agitopede alters its course and, after finding stable purchase with its eight legs, lowers the main body, deploying a brass stairway. I descend the stairs, but a hand touches my shoulder. Kod’s rotten-toothed grin comes to mind and I recoil, tugging my arm away. Rhone staggers as well, releasing me. He will think he has offended my propriety and that apologetic, wide-eyed expression almost compels me to... no. *Damn.... Damn, damn, damn, but he’d never understand.*

“My lady, I...”

“What concerns you, Master Rhone?” I say, making my voice professional—*too* professional... *cold*.

He looks down, ashamed—my reaction, I—. “I am reminded of something.”

The seriousness in the words overpowers my regret, replacing it and renewing my worry.

“A-are we in danger?”

He does not answer for several moments, scanning the crowd. “I do not know.” He moves his head, seeming to notice something in the masses, but then dismisses it. “I must ensure that the man in the garden remains alive.” He pauses. “My desert accounts... I believe this may concern one of those I have chosen to withhold.”

The words rock me. A sudden awareness of myself washes over me—the briefest moment of isolated, smallness reminding me just how—. No. *Focus*. “Rhone, y-you’re worrying me.”

“Do not be concerned, my lady.”

He reaches out to take my hand, but stops, pausing for an uncomfortable second. He pulls back and I want to reach out—want to be *normal* about this, but... I... *can't*. *Sometimes a touch can soothe*, I chide myself.

“Please, I ask that you stay here—for the sake of your own well-being.” He stomps on the deck of the agitopede twice with his steel-plated boot. “Gon’Kar?”

“Rhone?”

“If anything worthy of concern transpires, hurry Lady Illeara and Master Den to the vault. Have the men evacuate and fortify the château as well—and make certain to stock the kitchen and fill the water reserves. Do not let anyone else gain entry. Even...” He pauses; the way his mouth opens slightly and his eyes flit away from me sends a quiver through my spine. “Even if it looks like me.” He grows unnaturally still. “You will be able to sense the difference, I trust.”

Before I can ask, he descends the stairs, boots clinking on the agitopede’s plating. Once amidst the crowd, he arms his rifle and fires into the air. People turn, some of the more nefarious-looking ones fleeing outright.

“Make way!” he proclaims, moving some mechanism on the side of the weapon.

“Emperor’s Own! Sworn Protector and Knight of the Imperium!”

The crowd parts.

To see a law broken might be titillating, but witnessing the apprehension and perhaps even the punishment of a criminal might be the most interesting—or dare I say *entertaining*—thing these people will see in a long while. Many consider the Agar trees sacred, after all; one does not simply cross into a tree’s garden. Furthermore, an Emperor’s Own stands above the law and beholden to The Emperor alone, able to enact any justice he sees fit with imperial authority; anything could happen next.

Rhone strides through the parted crowd, shouldering his rifle. Goot, his white-striped gerteir spider a bit larger than a man’s spread hand, occupies Rhone’s helmet like a watchman atop a tower, monitoring the crowd. He points at people with furry black and white arms, chattering unintelligible commands.

I have always found the little spider’s ostentatious presumption positively adorable, it made all the more entertaining when compared with his master’s austere air. A little girl sitting atop her father’s shoulders points and laughs, causing Goot to abandon his authoritative performance in a moment of indignity. Nevertheless, bewitched by the attention he so obviously craves, he begins dancing, shifting left and right in bouncing bobs.

The girl claps, ecstatic.

I smile. I—.

Rhone stops short of Enbarrow’s Hallow. Rearing on his back four legs now, Goot, frozen, holds his forelegs splayed in a sign of aggression. I look at the figure in Enbarrow’s Hollow—he’s... he’s standing!

My hand covers my mouth reflexively. By the gods, he's so gaunt—*emaciated*.

I look at him with my spyglass once more, I—

Someone in the crowd cries out.

The spyglass slips from my hand, I kneeling to pick it up again.

Surely, I hadn't... I hadn't seen that.

More sounds of fear erupt, a din of bustle and stampeding feet rising.

I scramble to get my hands on the cylindrical spyglass, but it slides on the satin of my gloves.

The cries surge into full panic, one person's yelling and shouting indistinguishable over that of a score of others.

Finally getting my hands on the spyglass, I center on the figure and slide the focus.

It stares right at me, shadowy mist seeping out like smoke from gaps in the wrappings.

Then the fabric falls, revealing a skull, its empty eyes boring into me.

“Gon’Kar! Get her out of here!” Rhone yells, and the agitopede jerks forward.

I stumble, thrown off my feet. Gon’Kar spares no haste. I scramble for the railing. The agitopede gallops. I pull myself over the lip. I see the thing standing, black smoke chugging from its clothing as Rhone unsheathes his saber.

“Gon’Kar!” I yell. “Wait!”

“Apologies, Illeara,” he replies, cool and beyond argument. “We *are* leaving.”

“Rhone!” I yell, but Gon’Kar has already begun retracting the armored carriage.

[Illustration] The Hand

- 1 full page background silhouette rendering of Architectum
- 1 large rendering of The Hand

*The Third Movement
In the Perspective of:*

DJORD

*Autumn 297i, Week 1, Day 6, Morning
Blitz-Gipfel, Stormwatch, Miana, The Eltheiri Empire*

I depart the royal grounds casually, taking notice of the pall of disquieted reservation hanging over the people. I suspect this is but a fraction of what affects those in the city proper, a hazardous—if understandable—state of thought, given that no one has been murdered in the wealthier districts yet; I suppose the heavier presence of guardsmen and clockwork soldiers helps aid the mind as well. Nevertheless, I find the anemic level of concern... *disconcerting*.

I enter the shadow cast by the Arch-Gate of Stormwatch on my way, the non-submerged half—some three-hundred-foot-high and six hundred-foot-wide half circle of stone—looming over the city and visible for miles beyond. I suppose it made sense to form a city in its shadow... like living in a god's crown.

Passing through the district checkpoint, I finally reach Blitz Square—a name I always found amusing, given The Square is, in fact, a large triangle. I look about as I attempt to hail a coachman.

Gardens, small plazas, and venders decorate the shaded places, as do people with more money in forgotten purses than some small towns keep in their coffers. Several agitopede operators ignore me, mistaking my simple clothing for an indicator of a small purse, the garb almost too effective for an imperial center of wealth.

Waiting for a conveyor, I begin to notice subtle indicators. Worry is not absent, after all. Finally spying the signs, the collective's inability to hide the edge of fear soliciting them proves difficult to ignore.

They move with stiffness, like dancers attempting a ballet in tight clothing. No couples sit beneath trees, nor do lines of patrons form before the kiosks selling their specialty wares—which are themselves arranged in small bunches, rather than isolated. Indeed, no individuals loiter about, everybody a part of some group, their laughs tinny and artificial. It puts me in mind of that one production about the merchant whose accounts are under investigation—Vindo, I think was the character’s name. No matter.

The paranoid mood picks at me and I raise a noble sixth over my head.

I finally manage to garner an agitopede operator’s attention with the unmistakable glint of platinum, the triangular segment of the incomplete hexagonal coin like a beacon. The first to stop—a ninth mark Irdaret operating a lower-class model with eight legs and weather spots—speaks with a lowtown drawl. “May I have the privilege of conveying ye’ sir and, if so, whereto?”

“For a noble sixth, I will expect passage to Musagren, your layover there while I conduct my business, and return passage to The Square.”

“For that, sir, you’d have my service for the whole day,” he says with a nervous chuckle. In truth, it is probably worth more than a coach of this quality would make in a week. Brandishing a noble sixth is not the stealthiest approach, perhaps, but nobles’ spoiled progeny lack perspective on money in droves and the gesture will be forgotten by all but the driver and his family a week from now.

I grin, rewarding the man’s amiability. “Just the journey and discretion will do fine.”

“Very good sir,” he says as I embark. The agitopede thumps its way forward on thick, stumpy legs, and we exit Blitz Square. As we enter less wealthy blocks, the ominous gloom thickens like fog. The pretense of happiness and forced bustle thins, as those of a more furtive

sort appear in greater numbers. The normal warmth of morning conversation has vacated, in its place the hushed din of a hundred pairs of scuttling feet. The complete absence of laughter proves the most telling sign, however, the sound common in the morning hours before work begins to drain one's fresh waking verve. I try to shut it out, reexamining the letter from Inquisitor Kadir.

Someone—or, given an inquisitor's involvement, *something*—murders a subset of scarlets in the city of Stormwatch and Kadir has located another victim.

From what I have gathered, a group of brigands holds responsibility for most of the violence, evidently taking advantage of the rapidly polarizing view concerning the virtues of prostitution. Apparently, the late emperor's—my *father's*—fondness for whores gave them a bit of a swagger and some among the less savory folk have begun taking it upon themselves to remind Endara's more forward scarlets of their alleged place... often brutally. From what I have gathered, the harassment only follows the group into which the courtesans fall—companions, I believe is still the catchall—though not those who offer romantic advice, proscribe aphrodisiacs and aids, or belong to the guilds' other subgroups.

I do not favor the Endarans more than any other guild, though I do not care less for them either; the twelve grand guilds are reasonably balanced and the system works. That said, I do understand them far more fully, my mother being one; as a youth, I witnessed them in all aspects of their lives.

I will bring those abusing the scarlets to justice—personally, if I have the option.

I could make a statement on this and quash most of the violence with an edict, but I think it will be in the Empire's best interest to endure the violence just a while longer as my spies root

out the offenders. The last thing I want to do is pretty the garden by cutting the weeds and leave the roots to fester.

Yet—these disturbingly frequent offences aside—something else dwells beneath the surface, using the assaults and murders as a smokescreen. Another bit of subtext that hides in the shadow of the greater story, as it were. Other reports—ones of a far more vicious sort—recount savagery and animalistic disregard for humanity. Rumors say “spirits” hunt the companions, tearing them flesh from bone. Gon abound in Eltheiri, after all, and countless records from the Desert Campaigns describe the spirits encountered there, so why should not spirits inhabit The Empire as well?

Most dismiss this “scapegoat spirit” as delusory tripe and I might have agreed; common folk are notoriously superstitious and incapable of believing a fellow person can be responsible for such overwhelming and visceral carnage, when, in fact, people *do* have a tendency to make the most adept monsters.

Nevertheless, this circumstance is special.

Indeed, the common folk have the right of it in this instance, though in only a general sense. Inquisitor Kadir’s investigation into the matter—he an expert in subjects of spirit and magic—has already yielded information of a more specific sort and he claims he nears the heart of the matter.

I believe him unreservedly.

Kadir is unaware, but I am something of an admirer, I having first witnessed him about his work a long time ago. A child then, I peeped out my window on the inquisitor as he boldly confronted a man dripping shadowy ooze from his skin. Even then, Kadir had been so

controlled—so... *unaffected*. Seeing a man stand up to danger for others' sakes—facing a veritable *nightmare*—changed me. I aspired to that—*still* aspire to that.

The agitopede comes to a stop. “We’ve arrived, sir,” the coachman says, handing me a patience slip, the writ to ensure the agitopede’s layover.

“Very good. I will be returning forthwith—no more than two hours or so.”

“Certainly, sir. I will be parked at that there café—ask for Tib when ya needs me. If you like, I can have a cold drink waiting for ye, sir?”

“No, thank you. That will not be necessary.”

“Very good, sir,” he says with a nod. “May Lienscranchen bless ya’ business.”

“Likewise.”

“A-and sir...,” he says in a wavering tone as I depart the agitopede.

I pause, turning. “Yes?”

“Be safe. The streets’a... they’re not... eh... *safe* as they once were, pains me te say.”

“I will.... This whole mess will be sorted soon enough,” I say beginning away again.

“You sound pretty certain,” he says and when I look back, I see him turned away, eyes closed, stress furrowing his brow. “To tell the truth, mind, all the coachmen that were too a’feard to work now opened up the opportunity fer me to try my hand at Blitz Square. I’ll be taking this piece,” he says holding up the platinum, “an’ be taking me wife and little ones outa’ Stormwatch till this mess’s sorted.”

“Oh, stealth be damned,” I mutter, moved by the man’s confession, and feel The Hand more or less rolling its eyes in my mind. “Look at me, coachman.” I slip off my goggles, meet the man’s gaze, and hold up my hand, displaying my signet ring. His eyes go wide as I put a finger to my lips. “It is almost over, do you understand?” He nods. “When I get back, I’ll tell

you what I can and after we get back to Blitz Gipfel I want you to spread the word. Until then, I wasn't here. Sound acceptable?"

"Yes sir! But then... so the rumors're true, then? —the skeletons, spirits, an' all that?"

"Some are, some have parts right, and some are tosh, as you might expect." He says nothing, still a bit dumbstruck. "I must be off."

"I won't say a word of you being here, I won't," he promises.

I smile and nod. "Lienscranchen's blessings."

"You too, Your Majesty."

The warmth of the conversation invigorates me as I head down the southward thoroughfare. *You are far too cavalier*, The Hand says, irritable.

"Really, what are the odds he is a spy?" I ask, equally annoyed. "What force might be mustered in the course of an hour?"

Nothing we could not overcome, it replies, growing more serious in its disapproval, *but should I be forced to protect you from an assailant in some spectacular fashion, that is one less secret ready to catch an enemy off guard in the future*. It pauses for a moment. *An unexpected attack only works once on a worthy foe*.

It is my turn to roll my eyes; The Hand knows very little of the importance of keeping a peoples' morale healthy and how such a simple reassurance can affect matters. My spirit friend knows much, but its knowledge is often lacking on the subject of human thought dynamics.

I continue walking.

Arriving in short order, I see a tall, gangly clockwork man loom above a gathering of onlookers—independants, mostly. Three times the height of any of them, it hunches, preventing its head from scraping the arched overhang beneath the third floor. Most of these automatons

were built for a war that ended a half generation ago and have since been repurposed for other uses—construction, security, or any field that benefits from brutish strength, an unerring mind, or lasting durability. This one’s head—about the size of a man’s torso and roughly the shape of an almond—scans the crowd. The four eyes focus and move independently, a brass rim around the largest making it look as though it wears a monocle.

Scores, hundreds, sometimes even thousands of gon live in these constructs, each governing some component, be it a whirring gear, regulated valve, or any of another several dozen things. Sometimes more potent gon work particularly delicate components, but more often they act as a sort of centralizing officer, responsible for coordinating and synchronizing the lesser beings—a managing mind, of sorts.

Inspecting the clockwork man through The Hand’s perception, I see several hundred gon of the seventh, lowest order, saturating the simplest parts of the machine. Gon of the sixth order manage small groups of sevenths, while gon of the fifth manage the sixths. The construct operator, a third order gon, acts as the central consciousness; a large blue orb of glowing light shines in the body’s core and all the others connect to it along a hierarchy of nodes and channels—like a network of gradually thinning roads extending from some important locale.

My, my, look at those, The Hand says, directing my attention downward.

With its help, my sight pierces the crowd as if the people are vapor and I see two dense clusters of Gon. They inhabit mechana, a distinction given to Eltheirin machines of the highest-grade. As an independent, hobbyist mechanic, the sale of various doodads and widgets have funded much of my exploits over the years. I have designed two machines worthy of the title *mechana*: my own prosthetic hand and a body-augmenting apparatus that allows one to better

climb, jump higher, lift more, and otherwise perform tasks more effectively. Yet those are nothing like the masterpieces before me.

Lerideth designs?

“What else can they be?” I answer, in absolute, uncompressed awe.

The twin mechana glow through the crowd, but the translucent bodies of the people obscure the details. Nevertheless, a sleek, predator’s litheness gives them a decidedly feline aura. The way these rest, laying on the cobbles like hunting cats with that lazy heaviness, still somehow promotes their nonchalant confidence—always an instant from violence—*complete slaughter*, even. Retractable claws and blades hide beneath armor plates, while sensory mechanisms for reconnaissance sit where innards might in an animal—even what appears to be a small casting works for affecting repairs in the field rests at the core.

“Lerideth for certain,” I say, mostly to myself. I have never met the master engineer of the Mokano Guild—few have, reclusive creature that he is—but his work is tomorrow’s legend.

A gon of the first order governs each—what else could, really? They represent the most powerful and intelligent of their kind, as well; two in one place serves as a statement in and of itself—not unlike two kings, really. The mechana’s gon networks look like a most complex spider’s web, woven in the likeness of an animal in translucent, luminous blue-white silk. The nodes of power blaze with energy and the intricacy might have been staggering in the implications if I had not already seen others of impressive, though lesser, quality; as it stands, however, the specific designs fascinate me. How many months—*years*—had these taken?

As I observe the constructs, they notice my attention and come to alert—an impressive display of detection on their part. The Hand immediately retracts its senses and I frown.

Looking so closely had been foolish. Nevertheless, the mechana will not be able to detect The

Hand if it wishes to remain hidden; it is of an altogether different sort of spirt, one for which gon designers are not equipped to create detection methods, let alone think to do so. The mechana will be able to sense *me*, of course, but I am just another person in a crowd of several hundred.

Whatever the case, the time for dawdling has passed. A monster—one responsible for the deaths of dozens—begs hunting.

I sit on a bench and open my leather-bound book, trying to focus, despite the clamor of the crowd and the two tantalizing mechana just begging to be examined; I need to get back to work. Flipping through the pages, I come to the right section.

Each above ground block in the city of Stormwatch can be thought of as a huge, self-contained triangular hive of fused buildings. Three equidistant Agar trees defines each block's boundaries, the city a neat, triangular grid. To further simplify things, building over or otherwise occupying the large thoroughfares is illegal and the result is long, city-spanning causeways that streamline civic logistics. While some complain about this—especially those who wish to clog the streets with their sales carts and peddle wares more aggressively—it serves to ensure efficient transportation and distribution of supplies, utilities, and citizens. It also has the additional advantage of making the triangular blocks easy to secure and quarantine in the case of illness, fire, the apprehension of a criminal, or any number of other things.

Official record classifies the one before me as “Talcorad’s Block,” though my notes indicate most shorten it to “Talc’s.” The thoroughfares connecting the Agar trees Musagren, Alrevar, and Consugen define it, creating the triangular block common to much of Eltheiri. I study the pages, The Hand creating diorama of the place in my mind as I do.

I still have trouble comprehending the workings of this ethereal image that only I can see, but I can understand its purpose and often make use of it. The layout of the block presents itself

like a vision to me, a free-floating, translucent representative of the whole superimposed on my sight. The sorcery proved utterly disorienting when The Hand first enacted it, but now when navigating I rarely go without the indispensable aid.

Stowing the book, I backtrack to an alley with direct access to the upper levels and ascend a set of stairs. The guards' blockade bars entry only to a part of the block, making infiltration an easy affair. While other inquisitors might cordon off a whole block, Kadir only closes a minimal area, disinclined toward displacing people from their homes or sources of income.

I traverse Talc's levels, the blockades' locations helping me to deduce the center of their protection. Finally deciding on a point of entry, I examine my surroundings. The stonework has an older, weather-stained ivory color and a short hedge of greenish-blue ivy festoons the top of a fourth story compartment along my path. It might indicate a garden. An apothecary, perhaps?

The property in question grows herbs for sale, The Hand informs, and the ivy—malcoon—serves as a common, cheap additive to tea.

I nod, never having seen malcoon still on the bud, the dried derivative a much darker color.

I turn, regarding the vacated walkway. In a sudden wave of sensation—standing here without any others nearby—a chill wave of thinly diffused aloneness sends a shiver running through my bones. This... *this* is what they feel... *this sensation*. No wonder.

What? The Hand asks.

"You don't sense it?" I ask through a whisper, finding my voice shaking.

Oh, that. You play tricks on yourself.

"It is like an odium woven into the wind—a subtle wrongness. I—."

It sighs in my head. *You play fancily worded tricks on yourself.*

I try to find a distraction and check my diorama again, focusing on red points patrolling corridors or occupying choke points. The Hand senses gon in the guards' various pieces of equipment—probably their own gon-detection units used to prevent snooping. The very tools the guardsmen use to detect intruders are what The Hand uses to locate them. Almost farcical.

Given the layout and expert dispersal pattern of the guards, I decide to begin on the roof. Once I reach a specific point a layer of properties over, I will have a reasonable route the rest of the way. After a minute or two spent searching, I find an optimal place to reach the rooftop, away from ladders, stairs, and other obvious positions. Jumping and springing off a wall with one foot, I grab the roof's ledge and hang, careful to steady myself before pulling up my body; an unnecessary precaution, probably, but a dynamic load can prove unpredictable and this block begs repair. I will have to call attention to this area when I meet with the Mokano engineers.

The Hand senses a number of guards on the roof, but, based on the architecture, I will only be visible to two of them. I lift myself just high enough to peek through a gap in the wood paneling and hold myself there, ensuring there are not any other guards The Hand overlooks for whatever reason.

I resent that.

Not now, I think deliberately.

I can throw a stone to distract them, but I want to reserve that tactic for an emergency, should one arise. Pure stealth always proves the best strategy for infiltration and gimmicks rarely work twice, often having the side effect of raising general alertness. Two minutes pass before the guards both look away.

I pull myself up with a jolt, thrusting up into the air. It gains me enough momentum to direct the impetus into a roll, which I come out of on my feet, running. After closing the distance in four rapid, silent steps, I drop into a feet-first slide, the smooth, rain-battered stone of the roof and silty dust minimizing the friction and a roll of my hips displacing the impact. I shoot from the roof into a wide, unoccupied walkway, landing atop what The Hand designates as the panel least likely to creak. Shifting the momentum of the fall into a shoulder roll, I end the maneuver on my side, beneath a wooden bench, back pressed against the wall, motionless and hidden in shadow. The thumping noise of the wood could not be helped as I landed, however, and the guards investigate, but ultimately lose interest when some nearby cats begin a quarrel. I remain still for several minutes nonetheless, willing to exchange time for security.

Ultimately it is unnecessary, of course, as I can just “Future Emperor” my way out of every scenario I can conceive of, but practice will keep me sharp. Furthermore, there is often a great advantage in mystery, and gathering my information—personally and undetected—leads to that.

I could just....

My subconscious alerts me to its sensations, forcing them to the forefront of my mind.

I feel darkness enveloping me.

I can *feel* it teasing my skin... *probing*.

It has a strange texture to it—a *thickness*. I try to steady my breathing, but the urge to squirm—to *get out*—draws at me. It is like standing just beneath a large spider spinning its web or like the feeling of soap left on one’s back after a bath. Some illogical, indefinable wrongness permeates—.

Nothing... is the matter, The Hand says with the smallest hint of genuine annoyance. It sighs. *You mortals can sense spirits and their energies but, ill-practiced, you do a remarkably poor job at interpreting these sensations.*

“*But you can interpret what I am feeling,*” I whisper, deliberate.

Yes.

“*Well?*”

You sense death.

“*People die often enough. I—.*”

Not like this.

I go rigid, muscles tensing, bones contracting at the ominousness of the words. *Its words.*
I—.

Not at all like this.

I take a controlled breath. Stress mounds. Fear, like a—

It's quite fascinating, really.

I blink a couple times.

“*Fascinating?*” I demand through gritted teeth.

Indeed. It pauses, unaffected by my irritation. *Why do you think I wanted to come here?*

I close my eyes, breathing once more, worry fading.

Why do you delay?

When I rise, I make for the first available stairway down to the third floor. The light will be dimmer, paneling's shadows enshrouding me. I navigate the paths, ducking into a shallow nook just before a guardsman passes on a perpendicular walkway. *Hurried and silent walking.*
A right turn. Pausing as a guard passes. Descent. A left.

After traversing a final suspended walkway, only a layer of compartments remains between me and my goal. I do not want to get to the site proper, but rather to a position where I can observe it. Peering through windows, I find what appears to be a storage warehouse for a tavern, kegs of various sizes standing about in functional order and sacks sitting in piles on knobby wooden shelves. I pick the lock and enter, closing the door.

Not how a proprietor wishes the Future Emperor to patronize his tavern, I would imagine.

“I expect not, no,” I say, smirking.

Creeping close to the ground, I catch a whiff of flour and aging beer. My stomach begins churning, excited by the familiar smells. Insides almost mutinous with spontaneous hunger, I come to a window at the opposite end and rise, shifting slowly so that any movements will be too gradual to discern by anyone who happens to have said window in view. It matters not, however, a thin pink viscera coating the glass.

I peer through a gap the slime chooses not to cover—an arcane symbol of some sort.

Nothing moves in the alleyway, Kadir not wanting the scene contaminated, I expect. Below, a skeleton kneels, stripped of its flesh, its hands balled beneath the chin... as if begging. Arcane sigils enclose the victim, accompanied by circles and a seven-pointed star with curved arms; they are not carved in the stone, but rather present as distinct absences of that revolting red-pink viscera coating everything—something I now realize is the liquified flesh. I look away as my confused stomach rolls, smells of the tavern mixing with the implications bombarding my mind.

Even having seen men slain—throats cut and intestines spilled—I am unprepared for this.

*Now **that** is interesting!*

“Horrible, I would say,” I reply, tone weary.

Yes, yes—that too—but my, my, do you see those symbols?

“What do they mean?”

I would have to take a closer look, but...

“But?”

A summoning, perhaps—ooh no, a manifestation! Exciting!

“No, *no!* Someone *died* to make that happen—this is nothing, if not *disgusting*,” I hiss, having to check myself.

*Yes, yes, but she would have perished anyway at some point. **Measures to reap justice must be heavy-handed and so on**—but look at the **broader** scope! A manifestation! I have not seen one of those in quite some time, tied up with your affairs as I have been.*

“What is a manifestation?”

A spirit taking physical form, most often.

I stiffen, eyes going wide and blood running cold.

“We... we have to stop that.”

I know, it says, almost moaning as its pathetically thin ethical inclination clashes with pure curiosity, *but I yearn to see one—you know, **in attendance**.*

“A horribly imprudent idea.” I look up over the window ledge again, my own curiosity sparking. “What? Would you want to learn how? Would you want to manifest?”

Oh, I already know how, it replies, definite tone of nonchalance in the thought.

“You—*what?*”

The Hand focuses on me for a moment. *I made **The Hand**, if you recall?*

I ponder this for a moment, losing myself in it. “Oh. Yes, well...”

Each being has a different way of doing things, you must understand. Imagine how much we could learn! it says and continues on with its thoughts.

I ignore it, a particularly difficult endeavor seeing as its words are *in my mind*. Nevertheless, a sensation catching my attention aids the job. I sense *something*—like a soft whisper lost in the wind or a phantom touch as one wakes. I try to pierce it with my mind. Like The Hand said, trying to *interpret*—.

It notices me.

Something beyond that window besets me with a sense of feral, incomprehensible suspension. I feel it like the impulse of a cannon's shockwave—the first instant of falling—but protracted into endlessness. Some great horror leers through the glass, though its scrutiny accosts me from all sides, enveloping me in an omniscient inspection that pierces to the bone. A winnowing, corrosive stare burrows into me, abrading me with pitiless indifference and a mere fleeting glimmer of curiosity.

Its sight—its *sight*—devastates me.

Yet I fail to merit the unfocused thing's attention—this—this *watcher*. It merely passes an instant with the idle activity of observing my presence, but, in doing so, knows me utterly—purees my mind by apathetic proximity.

If this thing wants—if this thing *cares*—it can take hold and savage me. It can twist me apart—but not like a saber slices or a machine quarters a convict. It can flay me to the bone, layer by layer pulling me in uncountable directions—a tag of skin forms on my lip, my imagination promises, one to be pulled with the teeth. Yet the skin would refuse to tear, going into the deep, sensitive flesh where the pain comes like lightning.

It contents itself not with a moment, either—will not stay for a moment and relent.

This otherwise instantaneous escalation of volatile trauma will distend into moments—to heartbeats—to a fledgling, isolated eternity. The skin will peel to my chin and onward down my neck. It will split into uncountable ribbons of flesh—thin like hairs—unspooling from my body toward countless looms, refusing to concede and break, each a scorching trail of excruciation.

It... it...

Then, a single heartbeat later, the gaze vanishes.

The *watcher... stops... watching.*

I fall back. I kick the floor for purchase and the window slams shut. The Hand screams for my attention, confused; I cannot make sense of its thoughts. My thumping feet propel me across the wood. I reach the solid back of a large keg. I press hard against it, each spike of my spine bearing at my skin. My arms clutch my knees before I know what I am doing, and I rock, feeble. My body shakes. My lungs gasp for air. Light floods into my dilated pupils. The world ignites in a brilliant glare.

What has happened!

“I—I—.”

Speak to me! What have you seen!

My eyes go wider. “Y-you—you—*didn't* sense it?”

The Hand becomes silent. *I didn't sense... I didn't sense **what?***

I try to explain, but cannot find the words. “It reminds me of... wine... *wine*—the experience like *wine*. It makes no sense, but.... No, no—not *wine... aftertaste!* This thing—this *watcher*—has an *aftertaste*—an aftertaste in my soul. Something I have sensed before. But when? What?”

I do not know. I did not sense a thing.

Ransacking my memory, I shiver.

I know this thing.

I know this watcher.

“The day I killed Gashradel. . . .you didn’t sense it then, either.”

I recall you sensing something, yes.

“I murdered Gashradel, Blademaster of not one, but *two* Blades of The Seven,” I say, the rhetorical exercise of regurgitating the memories grounding me a little. “I managed a surprise attack on him—it the best chance of victory—and it, coupled with a bit of poor luck, sent the Blademaster over the balcony ledge.”

Yes. I do recall. I was there.

“The fall alone wouldn’t have killed a Blademaster.”

Of course not.

“Yet we waited and Gashradel never reemerged.” I curl in tighter as I remember. “That *shiver*—that shiver than ran down my spine as I turned away from where Gashradel fell. I convinced myself it was just the fear of turning my back to a predator, but I’m changing my mind. That shiver—its *texture* The being on the other side of the window was at Blitz-Gipfel that day.” I shiver again. “Did *it* kill Gashradel?”

Why would it do so?

“There are too many questions. I need to leave.”

*You wish to dismiss **this**?*

“Any more thought will paralyze me.” The Hand begins to form more ideas in my head, but I interrupt my own mind, a bit manic. “No, I will return to Blitz-Gipfel. I will select a hat from among the fashioners’ abominations. I will lock this experience away and hope—*hope*—

that I am right in thinking that that *thing* considers me a passing curiosity. If I am right, I'll never have to worry about—.”

But if you are wrong?

“If I am wrong, I might soon be an emperor, but can an imperium stand before a god?”

It pauses, and the weight of its impending thought begins to buckle my mind, my attention locking onto it wholly. *What if **it** manifests?*

“No... *no, no, no.* That can't be—it can't—.”

*Why else would it be here? Why else would it hide itself from me—from **me**?*

My mind calms, the correctness of The Hand's statement giving my mind a much-needed focus—a *lodestone* of thought. “I need to find Kadir.”

[Illustration] Agar Trees

- 1 Main of full tree
- 3 Details: silver veins, diamond clusters, brightfruit pods.
- Notes

*The Fourth Movement
In the Perspective of:*

RHONE

*Autumn 297i, Week 1, Day 6, Morning
Enbarrow, Stormwatch, Miana, The Eltheiri Empire*

The crowd flees as I draw my silver treated blade. The thing—the *Ellestra Allmy*—chugs black smoke from gaps in the ragged leather it wears. Perhaps the monster has run low on flesh to burn, lying in wait in an agar grove, hoping it would be a good place to ambush someone. I will make myself its only option, forcing a confrontation and slaying it before it can flee.

It tilts its head as it stares at me, a strikingly human expression, and I approach, saber ready.

I continue advancing with caution, each step to my nerves like a spanner turn to an already over-tightened bolt. I am but a score of feet away, yet it does not react. My heart speaks to me, pumping worry into my mind. Yet as the thing begins to adopt a more offensive stance, I strike, letting the weight of the potential consequences go. The moment of judgment crystalizes, a ward against any future self-judgment. The blade whirs, strike set to cleave through the collarbone and set holy fire to the inner—.

I stop.

No.

Something is wrong here. Something is *very* wrong here.

“*Help,*” the thing says in a thin, raspy voice, the vulnerability in it enough to give me pause.

What transpires? I feel as though I am an observer, pulled from the reality of my own presence. Instincts clamor, insistent, but speaking in gibberish.

That voice... like a thousand tiny whispers speaking as one. I felt the words—felt them like worms under my skin.

Confusion takes me, like the tooth-rattling ringing of a city bell when too near; this is far beyond the realm of my expectations.

“Who are you? —*what* are you?”

“*I...*,” it replies, voice faint. “*Weak.*”

Then, in an unexpected action that startles me, I feel a gentle, springy push. Goot leaps through the air and lands on the thing’s face, attempting to sink his fangs into the skull. He fails, having no more success than a person attempting to disprove the trueness of a dense osmium imperial with his or her teeth. The spider bites the skull frenziedly several times and, failing, looks up at me, glistening eyes apologetic.

“*Your friend...*,” the skeleton says, its thousand-tongued laughter making my skin crawl.

Goot, suddenly terrified by all the voices around him, jumps off the skull, retreats up my chest, and hides behind my shoulder, proceeding to hisses in a most frantic fashion.

“***Courage,***” the... the *skeleton* adds with a warmth I would not have imagined possible.

The spider partially advances from behind my shoulder, pulling my hair and making a sort of “kill that” gesture with emphatic fervor.

The skeleton laughs weakly—laughs long and genuine like one on his last breath—the sound horrifying in its gravely texture, yet oddly heartwarming in its genuine joy.

What is...? *What?*

I am lost.

“*Fleshthing*,” a voice behind me says in a tone of address. I turn, somehow less threatened now by the Ellestra Allmy; something in me trusts this... *thing*—this Ellestra Allmy that laughs with... *joy*.

I inspect the newcomer—*newcomers*. Two scores of them stand where the crowd had been, no particular organization to their ranks. Most wear bedraggled clothes of a decidedly common sort in various states of disrepair. The clothing looks as if it was assembled with little to no understanding of fashion, a pair of trousers obviously on backwards worn by one along with multiple pairings of mismatched shoes on the lot. One thing is certain, however: the attire is definitely aimed at concealment, if not stealth. A passerby might see one of the fully covered ones and just think they had seen a vagrant madman, but all of them here, assembled....

The rumors, it seems, had some merit.

I look closer. A smoke-like darkness issues from their bodies like steam from a warm body in winter. It shows far more prominently on some than others and in varying degrees of intensity, the norm being a faint—almost indiscernible—miasma, while a select few release as much as a newly dead hearth fire. In all cases, however, the smoke disappears, rather than diffuses, almost into the æther—for all I know, that is precisely where it goes.

Examining their form, I see they have a liveness to them not strictly human—skin wrapped too tightly around muscles. The strangest thing—an altogether disquieting sensation of weird—comes from their heads. The whole face looks as though skin has been stretched over a skull—no eyes, nostrils, ears, or hair. One moves its jaw and I see impressions of bone behind the malleable skin; I suppress an involuntary shudder.

They must have kept their faces downcast to go unnoticed in the crowds.

They do, however, have mouths—hideous things. It is as if the nose was melted away to make room for its grotesque maw, one far too tall for a human face, lacking any discernable lips, and filled with talon-sharp implements more like bone shards than teeth.

Lastly, they all have this peculiar symbol on their foreheads—like a lesser “t” and greater “T” superimposed upon one another, but upside down and enclosed within an “O”; perhaps Kadir will know what that means.

“*Fllleshthing?*” the leader, a naked one, asks. I notice its mouth does not move with the words. Taking a quick look around, I see its “smoke” is the densest among the group. “*Can the fleshthing heeaaar ussss?*” it adds, almost crooning. Several of the others chuckle—a discomfoting noise.

“What are these things?” I whisper to the Ellestra Allmy, surprising myself.

“*Hunt... me.*”

“They are hunting you?”

It nods.

I address the group’s presumed leader. “What are you?”

“*What are we?*” it replies, a sinister amusement to its voice. It looks around to the others.

“*What are we?*”

“*What are we?*” another asks.

“*What are we?*” a third responds.

“*Are we?*” a fourth—a dim-smoked one—adds, this specimen sounding genuinely confused.

I exhale through clenched teeth, frustration beginning to mingle with annoyance.

“*Machines strength—yes,*” the leader says. “*But we think there is fear beneath.*”

“*Fear*,” another, female-bodied one, agrees.

“*Feeear*,” a male adds.

“What do you want?” I ask, keeping my voice level.

“*What does we want?*”

“*What **does** we want? What does **we** want?*” others echo, emphasizing odd words and syllables.

“*We wants*,” their leader answers. “*We **wants**—! We **wants** the fleshtings to stop their interfearings! —we **wants**! —the fleshthings to stop being so greedy with their skins and bones and muscles!*”

“What in the bloody hell is this thing going on about?” I demand, glancing back to the Ellestra Allmy.

It does not respond.

Frustration boils more aggressively, pressure and heat beneath my skin. “What—?”

“*Shut its mouth, **fighty one**! Shut its mouth **now**!*” one says.

“*Yes, the **fighty one** is stupid and ugly! It smells!*” another says.

“***Silence!***” the leader booms and the others grow very still. “*Give us the **bonething**, **fighty one**, and we will not take you.*”

I glance to the, well, *bonething*. Keeping an eye on the crowd of... *things*... I turn a little more. “This is last chance I afford... uh, *guy*. What is going on?”

Nothing.

I sigh in confused frustration, fuming a little. I reach. “Can I trust you?”

“*Yes*,” it finally says with a hiss, the strain in his voice palpable.

“I need more than that,” I add, craving some kind of nudge—something to—.

“*Pr-promise*,” it says, and I feel the word hit me like warhammer.

Kadir once told Illeara and I about the binding nature of a spirit’s promise, the vow tying directly into the life force of the pledge giver. I cannot quantify the exactly details of what I just felt, but a powerful sense of trust permeates my mind; what is more, and suspicious though I would like to be, I cannot discount the genuineness of the sensation, it carrying a crystalline feeling of truth I myself have seen verified repeatedly.

Something in my mind clicks and cobwebbed gears start whirring. Strange people in the streets. Scarlet murders. ...*Skeletons*.

I grasp at the fragment of sense.

Whatever has been going on, this person in leathers is surely too weak to be an aggressor—perhaps he might be a...

A survivor?

Can he shed some light on what has been happening? I cannot really know anything for certain, but my instincts have been screaming at me that this—this—this *bonething*—posed me no harm. But why—.

The tree, Rhone! my mind screams at me, and I look up at Enbarrow; I can almost feel the immense plant glaring at the dark dead things beyond its hollow, animosity in its wood. In the old days, people of Eltheiri called these trees *arbor sancta*... holy trees—*sanctuary* trees.

Pieces begin assembling out of my vague confusion, locking into place.

A scenario.

A logic.

“*Flessshhhthing?*” the dead unknown beyond the border of Enbarrow’s Hollow trills, amusement and impatience in its voice.

“You cannot cross Enbarrow’s boundary, can you?” I ask, mind now positively whirring with thought’s impetus.

“*Clever!*” it croons. “*Such a clever—yes—oh, such a **clever** fleshing. Let us... **bargain.***” With those words, all my worries evaporate. If this tree—a holy being—allowed access to one and prevented access to another. My decision seems clear.

“What do you need from me?” I ask the leather-clad skeleton man.

“*Her,*” it says, grave strength in its weak voice like the strain of a fraying rope.

“Who?” I ask, shaking my head.

With an obviously enormous effort, the Ellestra Allmy holds up its arms, looking though curled fingers like... like a *spyglass*.

“Illeara...?” I say, my body giving an involuntary shudder.

It nods.

“W-why.”

“*She... she **shines** in darkness,*” it replies with a burst of energy, stringing together more words than any before.

What does that even mean?

I try to think of a response, but am interrupted by the shrill screech of a whistle. I look around and see a cadre of guardsmen approaching from the north, the lieutenant lowering the whistle from his lips. “This is Lieutenant Trendera! I demand to know whav—.”

A dead husk, evidently leaping from the roofs, hits Lieutenant Trendera from above with the fleshy solidness of a leaping frog, pinioning him against the ground; its gnarled, too-big-to-be-human hands deftly grasp head and shoulder in a horrifying instant, forcing them apart while

the bone-toothed maw clamps onto the man's neck. Blood spurts and gurgles, but the bone teeth dig too deep for him to scream.

My attention snaps upward I see a hundred or more others at the ledges of the rooftop, a score of them already leaping onto the guardsmen. Nine manage to get themselves out of the way, brandishing saber and pistol or scattergun, but three more fail, set on and mauled by attackers. The survivors cover one another as they gather around the clockwork man. The gon shining within the machine's eyes and other places around the body change from blue to red and the deep thumping booms of war begin emanating from its chest.

The very gravel shakes with the sound.

A moderately armed and armored sort mobilized to augment guardsman patrols in wake of the rumors, the ember class clockwork man goes to work. Blue lightning issues from the shoulder-mounted energy spike, connecting with and detonating one of the things midair; with a crack, the dead thing disintegrates, pluming down in slurry and chunks. It fires off several of its eight small-caliber scatterguns with spectacular effect as it moves, the recently issued silver coated shot tearing into the things as if the metal were molten; they immediately begin burning from the inside, thrashing in the air like madmen caught ablaze. Deftly plucking two of the leaping husks from the air, the clockwork man triggers spring-loaded kinetic spikes built into its forearms, hitting them with ten thousand pounds of force; lacking any sort of armor, the spikes impale the husks effortlessly, yet, also recently coated with silver, the spikes begin immolating from within, white fire and smoke spurting from the creatures.

I too take aim, but feel a tug on my hair. Goot directs me toward the leather-clad figure, who reaches toward me in desperation, too weak to get up. "*Sanctuary*," it says emphatically,

voice too soft to be heard and impossible to be read on his missing lips, but somehow felt in the spirit and mind.

“Sanctuary,” I mutter to myself, thinking. I look at the skeleton. “If I fire from here, I void sanctuary, I assume?” The skeleton nods weakly and I turn. “Very well, I will return.”

The remaining guardsmen have formed a tight circle by now, the second rank sergeant taking charge and directing fire. Yet as I approach the border of the hollow, I recognize the unarguable signs of retreat among the—*the*—*husks*. Some scurry up walls, while others jump through windows. Some simply run.

The dead—*truly dead*—husks issue smoke from their wounds, the flesh burning a brilliant white where it made contact with silver, but also with the smoke itself, which gives off this odd sensation.... It feels like the things within are clinging to the bodies ferociously, but are being pulled out somehow; it is like air in a punctured ballast futilely attempting to stay. Kadir had said something about daylight and how it affects certain spirits, though at the moment all I remember is that day is supposedly an anathema to the darker things of the spirit world. It would seem that is the case with these husks.

Yes. *Husks*. Good a term as any, I suppose.

“I-identify yourself!” one of the guardsmen yells, having noticed me. Others level their rifles at me, though the clockwork man continues scanning.

“Trin, ya’ idit! Look at ‘is armor!” the second rank sergeant says. “Resume perimeta’! Move twart the tree, mates!” he says as he trots my way, the others moving as well, though keeping their fields of fire covered.

The booming herald of the clockwork man finally subsides, red lights reverting to blue. Everyone calms a little, this a universal sign that the gon no longer detects foes. “Second Rank

Sergeant Goy o'da 'Fiths, sir," he says saluting me, an air of collected casualness to him, though I can tell he's barely keeping it together, much as I would have done at his age and rank.

I return the salute. "At ease."

"All pleasan'rees and such sir, but any idea's as t'what in chrome's fuck those thin's were?"

"I am not certain," I say, looking toward the roof line. "I suspect they are tied to the rumors that have been floating about."

Beyond the guardsman, the clockwork man has begun a soft, yowling whine. "I hate it when they do tha'," Goy says, the hardened man fighting emotion and trying not to show it. The clockwork man lifts one of the dead soldiers—the lieutenant—and delicately tries to reconnect the man's head to the neck, only a thick stretch of skin remaining.

"They don't really understand death," I say, finding myself suddenly pained over the loss of the strangers; it reminds me of the ones I have lost that are not so unfamiliar. As the clockwork man realizes its gesture is futile, another warbling sob echoes from the machine's core. "I work closely with a Gon'sar," I reply as an explanation and Goy looks at me, nodding after a moment.

Silence reigns for a moment before the clockwork man begins placing the dead guardsman at the foot of Enbarrow, undeterred by the tree's perimeter wall. The sanctuary holds quarter for gon as well, it would seem.

"They—those things—those *husks*—were after this fellow," I say, motioning to the figure in leather.

"Thin man, that." He squints. "That a... skeleton?"

"He's ...*alive*."

“Well, shi’—that e’ is.” He shakes his head, whistling. Others lean in, trying to get a closer look.

I open my mouth to respond, but one of the guardsman points. “Looks like he’s trying to say something.”

I lean in, putting my ear close to his mouth—*jaw*.

“*F-fading*,” he says and my adrenaline begins flowing again. I need to get him to Illeara.

“Sergeant, I need your assistance,” I say, worry infecting my voice.

“Sir?”

“We need to get to Château Illeara—the old treasury building. We don’t have time to wait for reinforcements.”

“E’s an ally, then?”

I think for a moment, coming to a decision. “Yes,” I reply.

“Understood, sir.” Goy turns around. “Men! We’re moving—two blocks west by northwest!” He shakes his head, blinking. “Got a skeleton to deliver, us!”

He then shakes his head, blowing out his breath. “*This day, mate*,” he mutters.

I cherish the moment of confusion, having only just left it behind.

“The only thing keeping them off me was this tree,” I say, Goy turning to me again, “and I suspect they tried attacking you to trick me into breaking ‘sanctuary’—which binds them, evidently,” I add as I gently hoist the leather-clad man over my shoulder. “They will probably attack again once this fellow and I are clear.”

“Fuckin’ let ‘em try it,” Goy says, a stern, cold smile curling his lips. “We’ll plug the bastards—right men?”

“Fuck yeah, we will!” yells a private, words mixing with more of a similar sort from the others.

“Unlike some of the otha’ shits ‘round, we didn’ sell off the silver we was issued,” he says, eying some of the others, killing the time as I get the leather-clad man into a safe carry. Goy nods repeatedly, getting himself into the right frame of thought. He’ll make a good officer.

One particularly brazen looking private rolls his eyes. “Alright, Sarge, we ge’et! You told us so.”

Goy points, still nodding. “Tha’ I did, Priva’ Thow, tha’ I fucken’ did.”

He’s almost ready.

“Specialist gon,” I say, looking up the mechanical soldier, the skeleton man secure. It stares down, blue eyes glowing. “Enact code Red Seven on my authority as an Emperor’s Own.”

It pauses for half a second, but then the lights fade to a deep red, a deep note resonating. Gears whirr, pistons pump, and metal begins to give off a deep red shine. The clockwork man hunches steam whistle ripping into the air, a clarion dare to face the challenge, while a deeper, sub-audible call shakes the ground, tumbling the stray pebbles about.

After a couple moments, another far-off whistle blares.

Another joins it.

And another still.

The pack has been alerted, The Wolves called to the hunt.