

AMBYSSUS

By Cássio Ferreira

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To mom

Thank you for your order.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first had the idea for AMBYSSUS after reading Galactic Pot Healer by Phillip K. Dick. Hopefully, you enjoy my efforts to create a creature like Glimmung in PKD's book, but one that is entirely different.

I have always been fascinated by underwater giant creatures. My favorite animal, for example, is the blue whale. It was so much fun creating a hidden presence lurking underwater.

I want to leave a word of thanks to my dear wife, who supports my writing. I also want to thank Tiago Xavier, my good friend, who was the one who gave me the idea for this book. I'm also very grateful to my brothers, sister-in-law, parents, and grandparents.

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Prologue

Joey woke with a blunt blow to his chest. His training kicked in, and his muscles tensed. Before he could fight back, another hit squeezed the air out of his lungs, and he heard his daughter calling out to him.

“Daddy! Wake up! Mom says it's time for dinner.”

“Molly, why are you jumping on me like that?”

“You didn't wake up when I called nicely.” So that's what it was. Joey relaxed. It wasn't surprising that his daughter had struggled to wake him up. His biological clock was in complete disarray. He was getting too old to be running this kind of operation. Perhaps his wife was right; he should be behind a desk. He couldn't say that out loud, though. It would set a dangerous precedent in his marriage.

“Come on, Daddy! I'm hungry!” Joey dragged himself out of bed and reached for the oil lamp on his nightstand. Molly had already run out of the bedroom, and he could hear his wife congratulating her on a successful mission. Now that the pain in his chest had abated and his head cleared from the night haze, he could finally find the humor in his daughter's violent wake-up call. How could something be so infuriating and adorable at the same time? His mind went to when he was Molly's age. He remembered the lazy weekends when he would storm into his parents' room and wake them up like this.

He went to the bathroom and washed his face with chilled water. The temperature shock dispelled more of the drowsiness. As he washed his face in front of the mirror, Joey saw a tired middle-aged

man with bags under his eyes. He looked like his father, even though he was slightly shorter than his old man had been. He was now as old as his father had been when he'd passed. He brought up hands filled with cool water to his face again. This time he did so to dispel the gloom in his thoughts.

Feeling refreshed, he exited the bedroom in his pajamas and smelt the powerful alluring smell of his wife's cooking.

“Hi, honey.”

“Hello, dear. How are you feeling today? Were you able to get some rest?”

“Kind of. I'm getting too old for this...” She spared him a judgmental look. “I know, I know. You warned me.” His tongue had slipped. She wouldn't let this go the next time he wanted to do something crazy.

“Good thing you admit I'm right. Now sit down and eat.”

His wife had made something that served as dinner to her and Molly and breakfast to him. It was a colorful casserole with more ingredients than Joey could name. He could see some sausage and eggs. As his wife dug into the casserole, he could also see the strings of half-melted cheese. The sweet smell of onions, spice, and garlic was in the air.

He had always admired his wife's creativity in the kitchen. He couldn't say that was the main reason he'd married her, but it sure scored her some points when they were dating.

“It's delicious.”

“There's coffee in the pot too.”

“Why don't you tell me about your day, girls? What were you up to today, Molly?”

“Mommy took me to the park, and then we had some candied apples together.” Joey felt a pang of panic and distress punch him in the gut. Had they eaten outside? How many times had he... As his eyes met his wife's, his anger instantly quenched, and he tried to focus on the sweet aroma from the plate. Marie often told him he couldn't force his traumas on his daughter.

“That's... wonderful. What else?”

“Hmmm... There was this boy in the park who invited me to play hide-and-seek with him and his cousin, and I hid behind Mommy,” the little girl giggled at her genius. “They couldn’t find me.”

“That’s amazing, Molly.”

“What about you, Joey? Will you be out all night?” Joey could see how Marie was trying hard to control her concern for him, just as he had fought earlier not to panic over his daughter having a toffee apple outside.

“I have some great news! I think I found what I was looking for. I sent word to the commissioner, and if all goes well, I can stop working at night for some time.” His wife smiled radiantly.

“That’s great. Will you get some days off?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Molly! Did you hear that? What do you want to do now that we’ll have your daddy to ourselves?” When the girls talked in this tone, it caused shivers to run down Joey’s spine. He wasn’t looking forward to seeing his little Molly become a teenager and their feminine conspiracies gain momentum.

“Daddy can take us to the zoo!”

“OK! That’s a deal,” he agreed. “We should probably visit Grandma too,” Joey added between bites.

“And my parents,” Marie chimed in.

“Yes, of course, honey. We can even stay the night with them if they want us.”

“I’ll send them a telegram first thing in the morning.” Joey smiled, seeing his family so happy at the chance to spend time with him. He’d also felt like that every time his father had taken time from his business to be with them. Every little outing had been an adventure back then, and he felt happy that he could do the same for Molly.

Molly kept sharing tales of her afternoon exploits. Sometimes, Marie would prompt her and remind her to add one more detail or exciting part of the story. Sometimes, she interrupted Molly to straighten her story. The little girl had a habit of painting herself in the best possible light while omitting all her mischief, but her mom wouldn’t have it.

After what was to Joey a perfect breakfast, he cleaned his mouth on a napkin and stood up.

“Well, this was delicious. I’m going to get ready to go out.”

“Daddy, will you tell me a story before you leave?”

“Of course! Go ahead. I’ll be with you shortly.”

“Yey!” Molly ran off to her bedroom. Joey went to get ready.

“Remember, no stories from the force!” warned his wife.

“I know, Marie. I know.”

Joey put on his clothes. Tonight was probably going to be chilly. He ignored the uniform and chose a more sensible option for a stake-out. He stuck to darker colors and worn-down clothes. He left his hair slightly disheveled to match his scruffy beard. He hadn’t shaved in a few days to have a more rugged look and blend in more easily. Happy with his appearance, he went upstairs and found his little princess in bed, hugging her teddy bear and waiting for her bedtime story. Joey entered the room and sat in the bed next to her.

“What story will you tell me tonight? Will you tell me the story of the bear general again?” Joey chuckled. He prayed that Fabius never found out that Joey portrayed him as the *bear general* in these bedtime stories.

“No! Tonight, I’ll tell you a story about your grandpa!” Molly’s moving legs and restless hands showed her excitement about hearing one of her grandpa’s stories. “Did you know that your grandfather built a school in the city?”

“What? Was it a small school or a big school?”

“It was a giant school!”

“Wow! Grandpa was rich!” Joey laughed.

“Yes, he was. He called it the Opportunity School. He built it out of the finest materials that could be found and hired the most talented faculty that money could buy. He even got one of the scientists from the Science Academy to serve as the school’s dean!”

“Wow!”

“The school was so good that everyone in the city, including the children of rich families, wanted to be part of it. But your grandpa was no ordinary man. He made it so that half of the school was made

of children of wealthy families, whereas the other half was made of orphans and kids from poor families.”

“Hmmm... Why?”

“Your grandpa said there was wealth in diversity and that it was supposed to be an opportunity for everyone to learn something. Rich children learned that the world wasn’t only made of wealthy people. Your grandpa hoped meeting children from families with big problems would help them be kinder. Poor children also saw that money made no difference in people’s happiness. Teachers, too, were reminded that there were geniuses everywhere, even in the most unlikely and poor places.”

“It sounds like Grandpa was a nice person.”

“He was kind of crazy too.” Molly laughed. “Remember your grandfather’s example, Molly. Always look at what’s inside a person’s heart. It’s more important than what’s in their wallets.”

“How did Grandpa die?” Joey felt a catch in his throat. He wasn’t expecting that to be his daughter’s follow-up question. “I-I’ll tell you another day. OK?”

“OK.”

“Sleep tight, my princess.”

“Good night, Daddy.”

Joey turned off the lamp and, sparing one last look at his baby, went downstairs again. He found his wife carefully packing a sandwich, snacks, and a flask of hot coffee into his rucksack.

“What would I do without you?” asked Joey as he embraced her from behind, catching her by surprise and causing her to yelp.

“What story did you tell your daughter, constable?”

“I told her about when Dad had the school built.”

Marie turned to face him with an adorable pout on her lips. “Aaw. You told her about our school!”

“Sure thing, I did.”

“Your dad was such a good man.”

“Yes, he was.”

“And so are you.”

“I try.”

She passed him the rucksack. “Now, go get some bad guys so you can come spend some days with your wife and daughter!”

“Will do.”

Joey went to the door and left the house. He found his mare, tied to the post in the back of his house, and unlocked the gate. As he jumped on his horse, he felt the lungs of his steed fill and her muscles brimming with power. He spurred Luna and galloped downtown.

The sky was cloudy tonight, covering the moon and stars, but the lampposts illuminated the streets enough for Joey to see where he was going. Every single one of these lamps played its part in fighting crime. When the world had gone dark in the Whale Wars, thefts, rapes, and murders had skyrocketed. It was impressive how much power these lampposts had. The light they shone on the night stopped more crimes than the whole police.

New Lisbon was a big city, one of the biggest. Even though his mare was an incredible animal, it would still take her one hour in full gallop to cross the city in breadth. Luckily for him and Luna, his destination was only ten minutes away. There weren't many trams or trains running, nor horses. A few passersby looked curiously as he passed, but the streets were mostly deserted.

When he reached a public stable, he parked his mare and let her out to graze on straw as she kept other horses company. He left a crown with the stable guard and took off. He would walk from here.

With each step, the scenery around him descended further into deterioration. The walls went from pristine to having paint flaking off to being bare brick. The smooth stone roads became a muddy smelly mess. The few who walked the streets smartly dressed slowly became rowdy and rugged troublemakers. Joey kept walking, always confident, always relaxed. Criminals preyed on fear, and Joey's confidence was an invisible shield that protected him as much as the light from the lampposts.

After twenty minutes, he finally made it to his destination. Here was one of the streets with the abandoned warehouses, back when bone carvers and tanners had populated this neighborhood. Now, it was just a collection of empty buildings falling to pieces. For the past few weeks, Joey had been coming here to spy on the one building in

better shape. All the windows had been shut with wooden boards, but in the darkness of a moonless night, slivers of escaping light revealed activity inside.

Joey looked at his pocket watch. It was one in the morning. He told Fabius to come here at three. He searched his rucksack for the flask of hot coffee he had prepared and tried to make himself comfortable. He would do his best so that the operation tonight would be successful.

*

Geoffrey looked around him. It was sometime in the afternoon, and the school day had just ended. Something was hurting, although he could not figure out what it was. It felt like a hole somewhere between his chest and his belly. He opened his shirt and found there was no blood or any bruising. Of course, there wasn't. He was just hungry.

He felt the impact of something hit him on his cheek, knocking him to the ground and adding to the pain he felt in his stomach. Adrenaline kicked in, bringing blood and strength to every inch of his body and dissipating the pain of hunger that had bothered him just a few moments ago.

Just as he stood up again, another impact, this time in his stomach. Someone had kicked him. He tried to make sense of the situation. He couldn't remember how he had gotten here or who might be attacking him. He tried to look up, to make up the identity of his attackers, and saw that it was two well-dressed children. They looked respectable, but Geoffrey knew that beneath those fancy clothes, dark hearts loved seeing black bruises. On the one hand, he had plenty of experience in taking beatings and running away from beatings, but they had full stomachs and the element of surprise on their side.

“Just cuz you come to the same school we do, don't you dare think you're the same as us!”

“Yeah! You'll go to the dean and tell her you're dropping out. Now, beg. That's all you're good for.”

Geoffrey curled up into a ball to protect his vital organs. There was no point in fighting back or arguing with them. He was not giving up on the one hope he had to get out of the streets, and he would certainly not beg. He'd play dead until they got tired or disgusted with what they were doing. Someday. Someday he'd be someone important, and no one would dare to speak to him like this. There had to be more to life than being mocked and beaten just for what part of town he happened to be born in.

“Stop! Stop!” shouted a distant voice in a judgmental, angry tone.

“Darn, it. It's Joey. He'll get us in trouble.”

“This isn't over, Jeff.” Their hurried footsteps became faint sounds.

There was someone else here. Another well-dressed boy lowered himself to his knees and helped him. It was Joey.

“Thanks, Joey.”

“Are you there?!” the boy screamed into his ears. The sudden scream startled him and hurt him almost as much as one of his hunger pangs.

“What? I'm right here, Joey.” Couldn't he see that he was there, right in front of him? What was going on?

“Mr. Geoffrey! Are you there?”

Geoffrey woke up with sweat running down his forehead. Looking at his paneled bedroom and the comfortable sheets covering him, he realized he had been dreaming again. It had been a long time since he had this dream. He heard the sonorous knocks of someone downstairs. Who was making this much noise in the middle of the night? He checked the clock. It was three in the morning.

“Mr. Geoffrey?! It's urgent!” Consciousness and reasoning returning to him, he finally recognized one of his foremen's familiar accents and shrill tones. It was old Red. What in God's green Earth had brought Red here? As soon as he answered the question in his mind, he jolted upright and went for his wardrobe, quickly selecting an outfit appropriate to go to his estate lakeside. “Coming!” he shouted, silencing the old man's screams. He picked up a pair of boots in case he had to walk into the water.

For Red to come here this early, something had happened to his herd. He hoped it wasn't pirates again. He couldn't afford it to be so. As he hurried to get dressed and buttoned up his shirt, for a moment, he dazedly wondered how Joey was doing. He hadn't seen his old friend in years, and their busy lives had made them drift apart. He should invite his family to dinner one of these days; after all, he owed the man too much.

Now fully dressed, Jeff stormed out of his bedroom. The house was dark, but he didn't bother lighting an oil lamp. He was about to leave home anyway. Supporting himself on the handrail and relying on the intimate knowledge of every nook and cranny of his home, he rushed down the stairs, crossed the vestibule, and opened the door.

Red looked like a haunted man. His usually cheerful and light disposition was twisted into a heavy frown, and his face looked creased and dark. The light of the oil lamp he held in his left-hand cast eerie shadows that only accentuated the gloomy lines on his face.

“Goodness gracious, Red. What's gotten into you? You look like you've seen a ghost!”

“Ain't such a thing as ghosts, sir. I wished I'd seen a ghost, though. That would be easier to explain than what brings me here.”

“Is it pirates, Red?”

“No, sir. It's something different. I'm not even sure how to explain it. There's something wrong with the lake, sir.”

“With the lake?”

“Yes. It...” The man was stammering and stuttering. He wasn't making any sense. Jeff tried to smell the old man's breath discreetly but could not detect any alcohol. What had this man seen?

“How did you get here?”

“Came on my horse, sir.”

“Leave it here. I'll have it taken to the estate later. Let's take my locomotive. I want to see what's gotten you all riled up like this.”

Ch. 1 – The Lake

Fabius had arrived at the promised time, punctual as always. Now, he crouched next to Joey, making his massive body look smaller. Joey imagined this is what a bear about to pounce on prey looked like.

“Are you sure they are in there, Joey?” whispered Fabius.

“Yes, commissioner.”

Joey had made sure that there were people inside the warehouse and had seen some known members of the dark scientists unloading crates to the warehouse earlier. But even so, there was a lot at stake here, and Joey betrayed his nervousness by peeking over the brick wall that concealed them. The wall was battered and crumbling, a sign of the poverty of the neighborhood that was the center of this operation.

“How sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

Joey felt the commissioner examining him with a long, hard look. He knew he wasn't infallible, but he was sure about this. Even though he wasn't the most methodic or organized constable out there, he had done his homework on this one. Besides, he had a feeling about this place. His mom had always said he had an eye for people and a nose for trouble. He knew that the commissioner agreed with at least the second part of that statement.

“You know that if I use this warrant,” tested Commissioner Fabius while unrolling an official-looking scroll, “and there is nothing there....”

“Thousands of hours of the work of my colleagues are going to go down the drain,” completed Joey. He regretted it as soon as he’d done it. The commissioner didn’t take interruptions well, so he gave him *the look*. It was a bone-chilling gut-wrenching gaze that hurt as much as a punch to the gut. Joey had never understood how the man did it.

“Trust me, chief. I know that there is a dark sciences lab there.”

The commissioner sighed.

“Let us hope you are right, Joey. Otherwise, I have much explaining to do to the mayor. Have I told you that you’re the constable giving me the most paperwork to fill?”

“Yes, sir. Several times. But you’ve also told me that I’m worth the trouble.”

The commissioner harrumphed. “Don’t get cheeky. Pride doesn’t look good on a Constable.”

“Yes, sir.”

The commissioner held up his bioluminescent lamp. The tactical lamp’s firefly light was so faint that one would miss it if they weren’t looking directly at it. He closed and opened the blinds of the lamp, signaling to the tactical team that lay in ambush. The task force signaled back. They got the message.

Like a band of hyenas closing in on prey, the officers wearing bulletproof vests took their positions around the warehouse. Four of them held a battering ram with which they brought the door down.

As the door was rammed in, panicked men in lab coats screamed in surprise and tried to escape. But it was no use. All exits had been cut off by strategically placed officers who secured the building, much like a silent constrictor that envelops its prey. There was nothing left for them to do but choke.

Even though there were a few punches and swings of the staff, no shots were ever fired. The task force hadn’t dared bring guns. An explosion in such a place could have been disastrous. The element of surprise had been enough, much more so than the power of gunpowder-propelled bullets. The raid was over before it even began.

“Clear!” signaled the raid team.

After getting confirmation that all had gone well, the commissioner came inside, followed by Joey. Both sighed in relief. It was indeed a dark sciences lab. The ungodly stench of petroleum was unmistakable. Bits of coal residue darkened the ground and crackled as Joey stepped on it. To the left, he saw the pens of unlicensed cows mooing and displaying signs of stress at the shouting and appearance of unknown visitors.

“I am sorry I doubted you, Joey. You were right. They were running a clandestine operation here. There are residues of coal on the ground. The cows too. It’s a huge bust. I think we might make the first page tomorrow.” The commissioner’s voice dripped with enthusiasm. Lately, the newspaper had heavily criticized him for the steep climb in the number of crimes in New Lisbon. He used every chance he could to clear the name of the force.

“Chief,” Sergeant Morris gestured urgently from across the room, “You gotta see this.”

The commissioner and Joey exchanged looks and headed toward the door where the sergeant stood. Inside a side office was a geological survey map hanging on the wall with several pins on it. Diagrams and blueprints for petroleum extractors were scattered on the table.

“What do you make of this, Joey?”

“I think they were trying to put together a petroleum extraction operation. Maybe what we found at the entrance,” said Joey pointing to the big warehouse from where they had just entered, “Was just to amass funds to enter the next step in their operation. That, or they would put a proposal together to sell to an investor in the black market. In any case, this was their endgame.”

“Won’t they ever learn?” sighed the commissioner.

“You troglodytes!” screamed one of the captives as the raid team dragged him out of the warehouse. “You should be the ones in chains! You scoff at progress! Technology must advance, no matter the cost! There is no way on Earth that what those preachers from the Science Academy say is true.”

The commissioner calmly walked toward the man like a lion nearing a mouse. Joey could almost hear the impact of the full force

of the commissioner's deadening petrifying gaze hitting the man. The indignation and shouts were cooled as if a bucket of ice had been thrown on him.

“I always find it amusing how you mask immoral profit under the guise of progress.” The man gulped. The commissioner was a beast of a man. He was two meters tall but wasn't slender by any means. His well-built, hairy solid arms and thick beard made one think of a bear standing on his hind legs, ready to strike. His voice had the particularity of, while not being overly loud, carrying across any space he was in.

“Now, here is what is going to happen. I will personally spend several pleasant hours with you in the interrogation room. By the time we finish our little chat, you'll have told me where the black market is and who runs these dark science labs in my city.” The man looked terrified. Joey guessed that he was more scared about the certainty of having to speak again to this man face-to-face soon than he was of being caught.

“Take him away.” The commissioner turned to the rest of his team in a more benign voice. “Good job, gentlemen. You have earned yourself a good night's sleep. Go back home and take today's and tomorrow's day off. Rest. That's an order. Worry about the reports once you're back in the office.”

As the commissioner turned to ignore the command he had given to his team, he noticed Joey following him.

“I suppose there's no point in telling you not to follow me.”

“Sir, I won't be able to enjoy my vacation if I don't see this through to the end.”

“You're the most stubborn man in the whole force. Did you know that?”

“The second most stubborn, sir.”

The commissioner let out a sound between a grunt and a chuckle at the jab from Joey, and both took off toward the precinct.

*

The locomotive ran on the polished tracks that blemished the virgin green woods. The orange twilight of dawn prophesied the coming of sunlight. Light danced through the leaves and bounced off the golden 'G' letters that marked the side of the blue vehicle. Even though personal locomotives weren't nearly as big as trains, the heavy clickety-clack that echoed in the woods was more than enough to disturb sleeping squirrels and wake up terrified woodpeckers. Inside the cab sat two men. Both were visibly nervous. One of them, more elegantly dressed, glanced at his silver pocket. He didn't register what time it was. It was a gesture done not out of practicality but out of the necessity to exhaust some of the nervous energy that had been building up in him since his foreman had woken him in the middle of the night.

"Are you sure that's what you saw, Red? This isn't another one of the town kids' silly pranks is it?"

"Good Lord, how could they pull off a prank on this scale?" protested Red. "When did I ever lie to you, Mr. Geoffrey? I saw what I saw."

"When, indeed?" Geoffrey trusted Red, which only aggravated his anxiety. He had known the stockman for years and had complete faith in him. Otherwise, he would have never trusted him with his precious herds. "I just don't understand how something like you described is possible."

"I don't have the faintest idea either, Mr. Geoffrey. All I know is that when I came to the pen to take the herd out to graze, I found what I told you."

"We'll know it soon enough. We're almost there." Geoffrey was glad he had gone through the trouble and expense of setting these tracks. Having a personal locomotive was something out of reach of the general populace's pockets. In addition to buying the vehicle itself, getting insurance, and paying taxes and fuel, one also had to invest in the tracks. The never-ending bureaucracy of getting rails crossing other people's properties had created an industry of its own. They were called *railtors*; realtors specialized in acquiring the rights of rich folk and companies to set up tracks where convenient for them. Geoffrey had spent almost as

much money on his Mercury 3000 as he had in paying for the railroad circuit connecting his estates to town.

Geoffrey sat on the cushioned passenger seat. Opposite him, Red nervously fidgeted with his fingers. What he had seen earlier in the morning visibly haunted him.

“How is the herd doing, Red?” asked Geoffrey in an effort to get both their minds off their worries.

Rescued from his dark thoughts, Red promptly answered, pride in his animals showing in his recovered, confident tone.

“All plump and healthy, sir. We have several sea cows in heat. We will have some new calves in the coming month if all goes well.”

“How many, would you say?”

“I am expecting at least thirty, sir.”

“Thirty? It’s a good year. Well done, Red. How about production?”

“Sir, you know I just take care of the animals. You must go to your bone carvers, tanners, and those cursed oil makers to know about your dollars.”

Geoffrey moved uncomfortably in his seat. He wasn’t used to being talked to in this tone by his underlings. Nevertheless, he chose to overlook the short-tempered outburst of the old man. No one knew sea cows like Red; he hadn’t lost any on his watch. The herder had served him well over the years and had earned some slack. His mood was understandable if what he related to him earlier was true.

The boss and employee pair chatted about the livestock and soon, they had reached their destination. A good conversation sped a trip more than the fastest of engines. As the brakes were engaged, the locomotive screeched until they came to a stop. They exited the cab.

As Geoffrey left the solidness of the cabin’s custom-made wooden floors and stepped onto muddy mushy soil, he decided that his choice of wear for the day was correct. He had brought along his boots made from the hide of one of his prized sea bulls. The waterproof material allowed him to walk around on the soft, damp ground confidently. Smelling the air, Geoffrey realized that something seemed out of place. He took another deep breath.

“Aye. That’s the first thing I noticed too. No smell.” Due to the lake’s high salinity, it was natural to smell the edgy saltiness of the air as you neared it. But the smell wasn’t as strong as what Geoffrey was used to. Sweat started to run down Geoffrey’s forehead.

“Lead the way, Red.”

Red grunted in agreement and started marching toward the pen where he had left the herd. Both men were quite familiar with the terrain of these woods. They had worked here for many years and knew the estate like the back of their hands. They promptly found the shore. Sooner than Geoffrey expected.

“Impossible.” Exclaimed Geoffrey.

Geoffrey stared, puzzled, at his legs. He was knee-deep in the clean, transparent water of the lake. This should have been dry ground. The shore was much further ahead. Looking around, he saw trees emerging from the water. He wasn’t lost. The lake had grown larger.

“Taste the water, sir.”

Red took his canteen, dumped it, and refilled it with water from the lake. He handed it to Geoffrey. He momentarily hesitated. New Lisbonites always drank water from the river Aurum, never from the lake. Something in Geoffrey’s mind screamed alarm but was ignored. Geoffrey sipped it, tasted it, and swallowed it.

“It’s fresh. No salt.”

Geoffrey was left with a funny taste in his mouth.

“Not as salty as it usually is, at least.”

“Red, how is this possible? This is the largest brackish water lake on the planet. What force could desalinate the whole lake?” It was unthinkable. The taste in Geoffrey’s mouth wasn’t getting any better. A headache was brewing in his mind. Strange... He rarely suffered from headaches. Was it the stress of the situation? Was he coming down with a cold? The cool air before dawn was quite chilly. He felt the urge to rinse the strange taste out of his mouth. Unfortunately, the canteen they had brought was now filled with water from the lake.

The headache receded. Concerns became smaller. Worrisome thoughts were put to the side and minimized until one concern was expanded and broadened. One thought filled Geoffrey’s mind until

there was no space left for anything else. His possessions. “What about the herd? Are all the animals accounted for?” desperately asked Geoffrey.

“Yes, sir. We built the pens with more than enough margin to deal with a rise like this. Even though the shore has advanced this much, it only rose by a meter or so in terms of water level.”

“I want to see the herd.” Red nodded and headed deep into the flooded area. Walking in the flooded area with all the floating branches and leaves and the trees emerging from the water felt surreal to Geoffrey. He had played on the shores of the lake more than he could remember in his childhood. He often came down to the estate of Joey's dad to play with him there. He couldn't remember seeing a flood like this in his whole life. He had read past flooding records, but there had never been any like this.

They reached his estate's pier after walking for a few more moments. They were a series of wooden planks placed over air pockets made from his sea cows' goldbeater's skin to give it more buoyancy. They were all tied to poles hammered deep into the lake bed with chains that had a generous safety margin. Even with the tides and waves of the lake, the pier remained intact. It was much more expensive to build it like this, but Geoffrey had thought that the investment was worth it in case of any eventuality. Boy, was he proven right. Even with the flood, his piers remained intact.

He managed to climb on the first wooden board and helped old Red climb on it. From there, they headed deeper and deeper into the lake until they came across a series of buoys that marked the boundaries of the paddock. Blocks of hollow wood marked the perimeter where his herd spent the night. Down to the lake bed were nets strong enough to ensure nothing could go in or out. His dugongs happily came to the surface to breathe, placidly swimming, waiting for old Red to take them grazing. Geoffrey observed them for a few moments and found nothing odd about their behavior.

“They seem OK,” said Geoffrey, relieved.

“They are alright. I checked them all before I came to meet you.”

“Will the change in water conditions mean any trouble for the herd?”

“Dugongs do just as well in freshwater as in brackish water, sir. Many species in the lake do. They will be fine. Can’t say the same thing about the shepherd pod or the seagrass prairies. But they should hold, at least for a few days.”

“What about our facilities? Any flooding?” Geoffrey tried to squint and see through the morning mist. But the light wasn't very bright yet, and he couldn't see the buildings of his estate from here.

“They’re all on high ground. We’re safe.”

Geoffrey nodded. Another good investment he had made. He imagined that Wilson and Willis would be biting their nails off right now with regret. His nearest neighbors hadn’t wanted to waste any money on the prevention of something as rare as lake floods, which happened once a century. As far as Geoffrey knew, all but one of the producers kept their facilities as close to the lake as possible.

“What baffles me is that it didn’t even rain last night.”

“I don’t know what to say, sir. By Ambyssus’ eye, I have never seen anything like this in all my life.”

Geoffrey frowned at the new word. He didn’t recall hearing the expression before, although it sounded strangely pleasant and familiar. Red was an old timer. Perhaps it was something people of his generation said. But there was a certain comfortable ring to it. Something soothing and natural, as if the expression evoked thoughts of an old acquaintance one hadn’t met in decades.

“I want the safety margin of all our pens doubled. Talk to Wilkinson. Since we don’t know how this change in the lake will affect the sea cow’s pastures, I want to make sure we have enough forage to last us for a year.”

“Sir, they can spend 7 months without any food. Rest easy. They are in no immediate danger.” Geoffrey frowned at the easy tone in which Red said it.

“That’s all fine, but I don’t want production nor reproduction to suffer because they feel food is scarce. Get to it, Red.”

“Aye, Boss.”

“I must go back to town to ascertain the situation.” Now that the worries about his possessions had been quenched, Geoffrey’s good nature and concern for his fellow men were allowed to resurface. “I

doubt other cattle owners were as well prepared as we were. Perhaps we can lend some of our facilities to them. Will you be alright?”

“Rest assured, sir. I'll be fine.”

Geoffrey turned and made his way to the locomotive.

“By Ambyssus' eye,” thought Geoffrey. “What a day!”

Geoffrey didn't realize how strange it was for such an unfamiliar word to sound so familiar to him so quickly, nor the suddenness with which the driving force of his thoughts was changing direction. He felt no weird taste in his mouth anymore, only sweetness.

Ch. 2 – The Switch

The dawn became increasingly brighter, announcing the warmth of the morning. The light hurt Geoffrey's eyes. Since he went to the lake he'd been suffering from a persistent migraine. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd had a headache.

As his locomotive neared one of the town's entry terminals, he searched the compartment conveniently built into his seat's arms. Geoffrey carefully selected the red flag from the bunch and waved it out of the window while blowing the train whistle. The switchmen crew noted the intended destination and swiftly switched the railways so Geoffrey's locomotive could enter the red circuit.

Even through his headache, Geoffrey still took the time to admire the work these men did. They manned the terminals, always at the ready. The crew worked around the clock, under scorching heat, pouring rain, or freezing cold. It was a deceptively complex and dangerous job. One moment of distraction when crossing a line could cost their passengers hours of their time, or worse, it could make a switchman lose their life.

When one of the members of the switchmen's union had knocked at Geoffrey's office to ask for his support, he hadn't hesitated to give them a donation and sign their petition to get the city to add bridges and tunnels to help switchmen move over or under the tracks without getting themselves into danger. Even though the initiative had been approved, Geoffrey hadn't seen a sign of the construction work starting.

The terminal Geoffrey was entering right now was used mainly by ranchers and workers coming from the lakeside and was one of the busiest ones in New Lisbon. Most were communal lines, and only a few private ones, such as Geoffrey's, made it out here.

As was his habit, addiction, and tic, he consulted his pocket watch again. It was six-thirty in the morning. Although some traffic could be seen, the tracks were relatively empty.

The switches were operated, and Geoffrey's locomotive joined local traffic. Different circuits of rails zigzagged through town, sometimes over a bridge or under a tunnel. There were twenty such circuits, and each took about one hour to complete. After consideration, Geoffrey had concluded that the red circuit was the best choice for today. It was one of the railroad routes that traversed the center and passed by the city hall.

Once inside the red circuit, Geoffrey waited for a curve that could afford him a good look at the other vehicles behind him, trying to see if there was anyone he recognized.

Truth be told, even if it wasn't a day as monumental as this, Geoffrey would have still looked over his shoulder. It was one among many survival skills he had been forced to develop when he was a street urchin. When one lives on the streets, it's better to have eyes behind one's back.

He didn't see any of his fellow ranchers or their personal locomotives. If he guessed correctly, most ranchers still hadn't heard about what had happened at the lakeside. They would undoubtedly head to the mayor's office as soon as they found out. He should go too.

As far as he knew, most ranchers carelessly built all their facilities as close to the shore of the lake as possible to avoid wasting time in transportation and maximize profit. Geoffrey was among the few who prized precaution enough not to spare expenses in building his processing facilities on higher ground, even if that cut his earnings. Much of his fellow ranchers' equipment had most likely been decommissioned.

Large lake floods were an exceedingly rare event. Most ranchers didn't bother preparing for the possibility. Nevertheless, Geoffrey

hadn't gone from a beggar to a businessman by skimping on planning. He favored long-term planning over short-term gains. Slow and steady wins the race.

Geoffrey's headache was receding, and his thoughts were gaining their usual nimbleness and dexterity. He couldn't fathom how devastating the flood would be on the local economy. Most of the world's fuel came from the sirenian oil harvested in the lake, and demand constantly chased after supply. If production halted because of the flood, it could ruin the city. Worse, it could collapse the world economy.

He glanced at the dial showing him how much fuel was left in the tank of his locomotive and sighed. Transportation would be one of the things that would be compromised. Lighting and heating too would all be affected. He sighed. The least he could do was offer his fellow businessmen a helping hand and be neighborly. He was one of the ranchers closest to the city. He was also one of the few that had gone through the trouble of setting rails between the city and his ranch. Most likely, on a day when each second counted, he would be the first to get to the mayor's office and sound the warning. Yes. That was the right thing to do.

Geoffrey picked another flag. It had a chess-patterned field, signaling that he wanted to park his locomotive at the next stop. The switchman serving the parking lot noted the flag and activated the switch rail that led the locomotive to a railroad parking yard. As he pulled the lever, the tracks slightly changed, allowing the locomotive to leave the circuit and enter. The switchman quickly reset the switch so other trams or trains could go past unimpeded.

As Geoffrey climbed out of the cab of the locomotive, he looked around in confusion. By Ambyssus' ambition, why was he in the city market? How had he gotten here? It was across town from the city hall. Hadn't he come to the red circuit? Geoffrey looked up at the signs in the yard and saw blue plaques all over. Strange. He had come to the blue line.

Dazed, Geoffrey tried to gather his thoughts. He was sure he hadn't picked this circuit; nevertheless, he stood here. Could it have been a mistake done by the switchmen crew? It would take him more

than an hour to take his locomotive from here to the city hall. Should he get a taxi? Should he walk?

Gently, smoothly, he felt his attention being persuasively drawn to the market across the road from the railroad yard. The taste in his mouth became sweeter, and a numbing sensation flashed across his temples. His thoughts were gently nudged toward an idea. It was Geoffrey's idea, of course, but he had dismissed it as soon as it had formed. Although it was quite lucrative, it wasn't pretty or kind.

Geoffrey stood indecisively, trying to decide on his course of action. He stood at a proverbial switch terminal. It was time to determine where to take his train. If he did decide to go down this path, it's true that he wouldn't be doing anything unlawful. His plan was a legitimate way of expanding his business. There might be some damage to his competitors, but wasn't the business world one of war and struggle? Had his competitors gotten the chance to gain this opportunity, they wouldn't hesitate to seize it.

Flashes of painful memories as a street urchin came to his mind. The pangs of hunger. The sweaty grime that stuck to his skin and the hair lice that made him itchy. The cold nights. The threats of other street gangs who wanted him out of their lucrative turf.

Then there was a flood of pleasant, marvelous memories of success. His first business. The elation of lucrative endeavors. The comforts of wealth. The esteem and respect of others. Yes, yes. Perhaps there was an honest opportunity to be gained here. And if he was indeed correct, time was of the essence.

Finally convinced, Geoffrey marched toward the market. Balaena Market was renowned throughout the world. New Lisbon was the city with the best access on the planet. The airport, port, and train stations were all the biggest in the globe, strategically placed across the street from the market.

Even from his relatively low vantage point, Geoffrey could see cranes unloading containers from vessels coasted on Port Aurum, Zeppelins taking off from the Aquilae Airport, and train whistles signaling the arrival or departure of cargo. All these three gigantic structures were as close as it was logistically possible to the market.

Wagons bringing merchandise in and out of the market to the three transportation hubs reminded Geoffrey of a busy tireless ant colony.

This was one of the few markets in the world open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. All worthwhile commercial routes stopped, started, or ended in New Lisbon. With routes came the merchants and variety, and with that wealth. Geoffrey remembered reading in his economics class how an interesting study done by Bowhead University revealed that half of the world's products, or at least one of their components, were at some point sold or bought here.

Even though this was a colossal enterprise, Balaena Market was kept well-organized. The market was divided into five districts: husbandry, agricultural, industrial, imports, and finally, at the center of it all, there was the fifth district, the legendary oil market.

Geoffrey came here every week and worked in many different establishments throughout the years when making his way up to his current fortune and capital. As he made his way toward the building, Geoffrey reminisced about his professional experience here. He had once bought unappreciated wares from an ignorant merchant in one stall, only to sell to an appreciative salesman next, making a quick buck. Before that, he had baked apple pies and sold them to the workers and salesmen entering and leaving the market.

Without much thought, he used the nearest entrance to his parking yard. This was the North Market District, where the husbandry trading section was located. There were streets with stores set up in an organized fashion. Stalls of all different colors and sizes made the environment festive and eye-catching.

As Geoffrey entered the sirenian section within the district, screams of merchants that had already set up their merchandise competed for his attention. This part of the market smelled like sea cow, grass, leather, and salt. Geoffrey was so used to the smell that he almost immediately grew accustomed to it and dismissed it.

“Get yourself some of our balatees’ springs. Exceptional yield. Good for any industry!”

“Steller’s Sea Cow stellar leather! We kill none of the animals following the Science Academy’s environmental regulations. All animals died from old age!”

“Fine sir, why don’t you take this carved chess set of dugong bones?”

“Good morning, chief; those boots have seen better days. Why not try one of our manatee leather boots?”

Geoffrey ignored all the sales pitches thrown at him. Looking at the time, he took a small detour and, from afar, glanced at one of the booths hawking wares made of sea cow materials. The tablet read in elaborate golden letters, “Geoffrey Inc.” After assessing the effort of his hired sales staff that attempted to sell some of the products manufactured at his estate, satisfied, Geoffrey made his way to the oil auction house—still closed. Geoffrey looked at the market’s clock. It would only open at 7:30. A line of people waited at the door. Trying to make sure they could get their hands on the precious fuel.

Seeing that the door for buyers remained closed, Geoffrey made his way around the back of the building and entered through the door destined for producers. The security guard recognized him and invited him in.

“Good morning, Martha. I would like to see Master Gulliver, please.”

“Certainly, Mr. Geoffrey,” answered the receptionist, “I’ll call him immediately.” The receptionist entered the office space and located the old clerk, whom she towed toward the reception. Master Gulliver was a man in formal attire. He wore slacks and a vest made of dugong hide and had a nose that was shapeless and flat.

The hunch in his back and the glasses told the story of an office worker who had spent many nights reviewing paperwork at a desk. He looked at his long-time supplier, lowering his gaze so that his spectacles wouldn’t hinder his line of sight.

“Jeff. Long time no see.”

“Master Gulliver, it is a pleasure. Always a pleasure. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“What can I do for you today?” as he asked the question, Master Gulliver checked his wristwatch. “The next auction will begin soon.”

“How many of my estates’ casks do we have stored here?”

“Well, I don’t know the precise number.” After some thought, he added. “About two hundred?”

Excellent, it was better than he was expecting.

“Alright. Do you think you can hold on to them for the moment? Please don’t release them to the market.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” said Master Gulliver, with a puzzled look, on his face, “Any specific reason?”

“None I have the time to discuss right now. We can talk later. I’m sorry, I must go; I don’t want to miss the market opening. We’ll catch up sometime soon. Yes, soon.”

By Ambyssus’ ambition, it was time to become rich.

*

Joey was almost done with his reports. He refused to go home before he could finish up all the paperwork. He was obsessed with closure, a trait he’d inherited from his father. He had spent the last months of his life working on this case. It was time to wrap it up, turn it in, go home, and spend time with his family. He rubbed his chest, feeling a small bruise where Molly had jumped him earlier, and smiled. Looking out the window, Joey realized it was morning. His wife and daughter would wake up soon. If he hurried, he might still be able to bring them breakfast.

Looking at his desk, Joey saw a picture of him as a child, sitting on his father’s lap. He had placed it here to remind him why he had forsaken a life of luxury and entrepreneurship and had joined law enforcement instead. Looking at the picture was a two-edged sword. It motivated him to get his work done, but at the same time reminded him of what he disliked the most about his job: It was hard to maintain a good balance between work and family.

Even though Joey loved to serve his city and lock away bad guys, nothing was more important than family. His father had always been good with that. No matter how busy he was, he always had found the time to let little Joey run into his office in the middle of a meeting with politicians, businessmen, and merchants and let him tell

everyone about the big disgusting bug he had captured in the backyard.

The commissioner stomped through the bullpen. Like a star that drew debris, asteroids, and planets into its orbit, the man drew respectful looks and countenance from everyone nearby. His eyes rested on Joey, and the subtlest nod commanded that he discreetly follow him.

Joey had seen the commissioner with this look on his face before. There was something big going on. Joey rose from his seat, stretched, trying to dissolve the knots of tension from spending hours typing away at his desk, and discreetly followed the commissioner.

Coming into the office, the commissioner readily closed the door and the shutters. “I think that you and I will regret not going home to sleep when we had the chance,” announced the commissioner.

“What do you mean, Chief? Is there anything wrong with the dark sciences lab we busted? Don’t tell me they’ve lawyered up. Oh, man! Those leeches. How can they find so many loopholes to exploit?”

“No, no. None of that. It’s something entirely different. Listen. Mr. Wilkinson, from one of the Estates in the lake, did me the favor of coming here to let me know that something big has happened there. He’s already gone to talk to the mayor, and I imagine he will call for us anytime soon.”

“Are there pirates active again?”

“No, Joey. The lake has changed somehow. There’s a flood.”

“A flood?”

“Yes, and it seems that it has changed the water.” Joey gulped. Grassum Lake was the lifeline of both the city and the world! “We don’t know what we’re looking at here, Joey. We must be ready to deal with riots, looting, and protests. The Whale Oil War began with something as simple as this. If this impacts oil production, we might have the whole world at our throats. “

Joey took a moment to register the seriousness and the dimension of this.

“Boss, what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to run point on this. It is of paramount importance that we keep this quiet for as long as possible. We want to avoid panic.

Let's first try to ascertain what has happened to the lake and think of solutions. Only then do we want the populace to know about what's going on. OK?

"Yes, sir."

"Now, go home, get cleaned up, and meet me at the mayor's office. You know the kind of pressure I've been under, Joey. We can't afford to fail here. And, if anything, tonight, you've proved to be a reliable and trusted employee. I'm counting on you."

This seldom-said compliment meant a lot to Joey. After his late father had passed, the commissioner became Joey's rock. Despite anything Joey might say or how tough he acted around the commissioner, he deeply respected the man and would be there for him through thick and thin.

"Thank you, sir."

"Joey," the commissioner threw him a key. "Take the rhino."

"Sir?"

"Go!"

Following Fabius' advice, Joey calmly stepped out of the office. As he crossed the bullpen, all he could think of was explaining to his wife that he wasn't getting a holiday. She was going to be so mad. As Joey left the precinct, he squinted at the sudden change in brightness. The dark bags under Joey's eyes probably made him look like a panda. He should have gone home when the commissioner had told him to.

Joey took the keychain out of his pocket. The police's tactical tank was a powerful machine only taken out in extreme cases. Unlike the personal locomotives that required railroads, the rhino locotanks moved on caterpillar tracks and could move in any terrain. The bestial tanks were exceedingly expensive and could only be owned by the government.

He had seldom driven one except when time could make or break the operation. The fact that the commissioner had given the keys to Joey showed how important he considered this operation.

Joey drove the rhino through the streets. Riding a locotank was significantly different from riding a locomotive. With the latter, one just had to worry about speeding up, pulling the break, blowing the whistle, and waving flags to switchmen. With the tank, however, one

had also to steer the thing. It was like having a horse and a train in one vehicle. This added a significant layer of complexity and danger to traveling.

As Joey steered the metallic juggernaut over tracks and barely out of the way of passing horses or people, he finally parked it clumsily in front of his home. He rushed into the building without forgetting to take the keys from the ignition. The last thing he needed was for some kid to railjack him.

Despite the rhino's many virtues, the vehicle was exceedingly noisy. His wife had been drawn to the sound and was already at the door, waiting for Joey. She seemed refreshed and energized after a sound night of sleep.

“Joey, my love. You're back.”

“Honey, something has happened.”

“What's wrong, Joey? You look like you've seen a ghost!”

“There's no time to explain!” Joey ran past her and dashed toward the bathroom.

“Joey, you're scaring me. Are you OK? What's going on?”

“I need to get to the city hall. Please, get my official uniform ready. Also, something to eat and drink, please.” Joey gratefully saw his wife going to the wardrobe, taking the official uniform, and laying it neatly over the bed. She then disappeared into the kitchen.

In record time, Joey had shaved, bathed, and put on his official uniform as the commissioner had instructed.

“Thank you. I'm sorry about this.”

“I guess your time off has gone out the window?” she asked, disappointed. Joey felt a rush of guilt and sadness going through him. “I'm so sorry, honey. I'll explain to you later. I have to go to the city hall. I promise I'll make it up to you. Deal?”

“Make sure Fabius promises me that too.”

“Will do.” Joey stormed out the door.

Ch. 3 – The City Hall

Joey gauged passersby's looks and facial expressions while waiting for the commissioner to appear. He imprinted the faces of those who showed fear at the sight of his uniform or the locotank he had parked in front of the city hall.

Some people looked scared but didn't evoke any feelings of alertness in Joey. Others tried to discreetly look away, embarrassed by seeing an official's studying gaze. Others passed by and ignored him as if he were invisible. He picked out those from among the crowd that made him feel alert and imprinted their faces in his memory. If he saw them again, he would recognize them.

This wasn't a game or a distraction to pass the time. It was more of a curse. He wished he could flip a switch to turn his hypervigilance on and off. He couldn't help it. Since his father died his nerves were stretched taut, and his senses were always on alert. It was exhausting.

He looked at his wristwatch. It had taken him less than an hour to get here. He spared a look at the large building with white marble imperial-looking columns. It screamed wealth and prosperity.

A gurgling noise could be heard from around the corner. It was a rumbling, mechanical sound. Joey could swear that it sounded as if the whole city had just burped from indigestion. That wasn't too far-fetched of a concept, thought Joey. The problems that would result from this catastrophe would turn everyone's stomach.

As the neighing of horses and the curious glances from transients provided further hints at the commissioner's arrival, Joey performed his final checks to ensure his uniform was impeccable. Around the

corner came Rhino II with the commissioner's expressionless face behind the wheel.

As he neatly parked behind Rhino I, Joey stood at attention. Even though the environment inside the office was not overly formal, looks mattered here. The buzz that both Rhinos would cause was probably reason enough to attract the curiosity of journalists who would converge to the city hall as sharks drawn by blood in the water.

Joey saluted, and the commissioner saluted back.

"Constable."

"Commissioner."

Both walked side by side.

"Commissioner, was deploying both rhinos wise? The journalists will figure out something is wrong."

"Although our goal is discretion, here speed was more important." After a few seconds, he added, "Or maybe you're right. I panicked. We shouldn't have brought the rhinos."

Joey gulped. He'd never seen his commissioner so nervous. They silently climbed up the steps. It was time to see how bad things were.

*

Merchants from all industries and from all over the world traveled here to the oil market of New Lisbon to secure fuel they could bring to their businesses and towns.

Once upon a time, the auctions had been public and undisclosed. Everyone could see who was bidding and how much oil they were buying. They would stand before the auctioneer's podium as they screamed their bids. Criminals had seen an opportunity here. By tracking how much each merchant was buying, they could plan accordingly.

Pirates spread like the plague. They would block railroads, intercept zeppelins, and sink ships. There was no way for commerce to prosper without security. Therefore, a series of safety measures had been put into place. Many of them had been set right here, in the auction house.

It all started in the lobby. At the entrance, credentials were checked. No one could enter if they hadn't gone through a painstaking background check and been issued a license by the city. Once admitted into the building, all participants were searched, then shown into a cloakroom, where they left their jackets and were given a standard hooded cloak. With it, facial features could be hidden in shadow, and everyone looked the same, thus making it very hard to track who was going where. Geoffrey had always felt that coming to buy oil was almost like attending an eerie funeral.

After being assigned an escort, merchants followed one auction guard through a complex labyrinth of corridors. The corridors felt endless, and it was impossible not to get lost. Geoffrey had always marveled at how the guards knew where they were going. Occasionally another merchant following a guard could be seen at an intersection to their sides or beyond them.

Many times, he had nightmares about the specters of the auction house. Geoffrey wondered whose idea was to make the oil market so scary. Buying oil was such a terrifying experience that any criminal would undoubtedly shy away from unnecessarily coming here.

The guard finally made it to the boxed chamber door. Other guests were going into the neighboring chambers, but Geoffrey was clueless as to the identity of the bidders. He saw the number 265 on the door, and he went in. He had been assigned the boxed seat on the structure's third floor. The sound of steps above him hinted at another occupant's arrival. Looking down, he had a clear view of the podium and the gigantic board.

The auction house was built as if it were an opera house or a theater, with one difference. All seats were boxed. All could see the auctioneer, but none could see their neighbor. Geoffrey searched the notice board for the average prices of the previous auction. The price of apple seed oil had lowered, but sunflower oil was rising.

Sunflower farmers were having many problems with aphids and other plagues of insects this year. Searching the information board, Geoffrey soon found what he was looking for. Sirenian oil prices hadn't changed much in the past few weeks.

Dugong oil was priced at 100 crowns a barrel. Manatee oil was priced at 98 crowns a barrel. Steller's sea cow oil was 123 crowns a barrel, and balatee oil was 93 crowns a barrel.

As Steller's sea cow ranches could only be located in cold seas, the added cost of transportation made the oil more expensive. All other species of sirenians could be raised closer to town, in Lake Grassum.

The auctioneer soon came to the podium and gathered his notes of the listings for the day. Geoffrey selected one of the cushioned seats in the box and patiently waited. This was the only place where oil was sold in the city. Producers in the whole country brought their oil here to be traded and sold by the market.

The auction house took a percentage, of course. Even if a small one, the red velvet seats and the luxury of the box where Geoffrey sat attested to the profit they generated. The city also took a cut in the form of taxes on the sale. Taxes on the sales of sirenian oil alone were enough to cover the expenses of the whole city.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the oil market." The amphitheater was utterly silent, and the auctioneer's voice resounded pleasantly and clearly in the structure. "We have a fine lot to present to you today, a wonderful lot indeed. We have over three thousand apple seed oil barrels, a thousand and three hundred sunflower oil barrels, and two thousand sirenian oil barrels. Don't be shy. Don't be shy! Let's start with the first lot. Apple seed oil from the Smith & Sons orchards. Fifty barrels. We will start with sixty crowns a barrel. Who wants to give sixty crowns a barrel? The gentlemen over there on the red coat. Does anyone give sixty-one? The lady in that fine saffron dress. Who gives sixty-two? Going once? Going twice? Sold to the lady over there."

The auctioneer sped things along efficiently and swiftly. The producer determined the size of the lot, and if one wanted to participate, they had to raise a small plaque with the number assigned to them at the beginning of the auction. Geoffrey's leg moved nervously with a will of its own. They always started by auctioning whatever they had most in stock and progressed to the rarer lots of the day. Due to the problems with the sunflower oil this year, it would be sold last.

The timing was essential to Geoffrey right now. It was vital that he could achieve his goal for the day if things were to go according to his plan. After one hour, everyone stopped bidding on the lots of apple seed oil. The auction kept going for as long as there was a demand. If the auction grew cold, they stopped listing the product and saved it for the next auction. There wasn't much interest in the apple seed oil today. After all, apple trees were having a good year and weren't uncommon. Many countries raised their orchards to reduce the price of fuel.

"Now, let us move on to the next lot. We will start auctioning sirenian oil. Let us start with thirty barrels of dugong oil, raised right here, in our Grassum Lake by Wilson & Wilson. We will start at the price of ninety-five crowns per barrel. Who gives ninety-five? The sir right there." Even though the auctioneer could clearly see who a man or a woman among the bidders was, to not give any clues to the bidder's identity, he referred to everyone using 'mister,' 'gentleman,' or 'sir.' "Who gives ninety-six? Can I get ninety-six? Thank you kindly, mister. Who gives ninety-seven? Ninety-seven anyone? Going once. Going twice."

Geoffrey raised his plaque.

"The gentlemen right there. Going once. Going twice. Sold! Sold to the gentleman with number 265. The next lot is for a hundred barrels of manatee oil from the Silver Ranch. We will start this lot with ninety-five crowns as well. Who gives ninety-five? The gentleman right there. Who gives ninety-six? The gentleman down here. Who gives ninety-seven? Going once, going twice."

Geoffrey raised his plaque again.

"Ninety-seven to the gentleman again. Going once. Going twice. Sold! Sold to Mr. 265."

The auction went on. Geoffrey kept buying lot after lot. The competition became fiercer, but Geoffrey didn't even blink as he kept bidding. Soon, the other merchants just gave up on competing altogether. Geoffrey's buying frenzy was driving up the price of the barrel for the day.

Geoffrey was sure that some more sensitive investors could feel something was off. They were probably wondering whether they

should try to buy the oil despite the ludicrous inflation. Still, he doubted that anyone had the imagination required even to begin to suspect what was happening lakeside.

New Lisbon had maintained a steady supply of sirenian oil for two centuries. There were always more than enough barrels. No one wanted to buy oil at an above-market price. There would be more oil the next day. There always was. It was far cheaper to wait.

A big part of the business was understanding what the competition was thinking. From what Geoffrey knew, most buyers today had probably come here to secure the rarer sunflower oil. It had surpassed the price of sirenian oil a couple of weeks prior.

“Mr. 265 is unstoppable. 100 barrels of Balatee oil sold at 130 crowns apiece. Oh my. This has never happened before,” said the auctioneer. A mix of disbelief and something Geoffrey thought was embarrassment could be heard in his voice. “We are sold out. This is a fine day for the house! Thank you, Mr. 265.”

Geoffrey stood corrected. He had mistaken the auctioneer's emotion for embarrassment, but it was somewhat regret at not having more sirenian oil in stock to sell. After all, the more sales, the better. Perhaps this auctioneer received a commission on the sales. “Now, let's move on to the star of the show, ladies and gentlemen. The sunflower oil.”

Geoffrey stood up and left toward the door. He knocked twice, signaling the guardsman that he wanted to leave. He pulled the hood over his head, darkening his face. The door was open shortly after, and turning into an anonymous specter again, he followed the guard toward the cashier.

*

“It's a disaster! A catastrophe!” the mayor paced in the office as he spoke in a nervous tone, uncharacteristic of someone serving in his capacity. Whenever Joey had seen him speaking in public, he had seemed so sure of himself, but now he looked like a frantic child. Fabius, however, showed his worth as a police commissioner and managed to remain still and unperturbed as a statue. Even though

Joey tried to follow his good example, he couldn't stop tapping his foot nervously or fidgeting with his hands.

“The ranchers are panicking! The city hall guards have their hands full. Fabius, please send some officers here to assist us.”

“Yes, Mr. Mayor.”

“Sir,” interrupted a secretary who knocked at the door, “Dr. Link and Professor Norris are here.”

“Good! Finally, someone who can explain to me what's happening! Have them come in, please.”

“Should we leave, Mr. Mayor?” asked the commissioner.

“No. Stay here. I want you here with me to understand how bad the situation is. Let's see what they have to say.” The secretary came back with two aged men. One was tall, and his hair was a mix of grey and golden. He wore a dark brown shirt and a pair of beige trousers. He had well-defined features and was almost as tall as Fabius. Even though he was an academic, he still had tanned skin, looked lean and outdoorsy.

His companion was almost half as tall. He looked even more scholarly with his plaid blazer and thick glasses. His bald head somehow gave Joey the impression that his brain was bigger and made the man look intelligent.

“Gentlemen, please have a seat. This is Commissioner Fabius and Constable Joey. These are Dr. Link, a biologist specializing in Lake Grassum, and Professor Norris, a well-respected economy professor at Orca University. They are both Science Academy nominees.”

“Good morning, Mr. Mayor. Commissioner. Constable.”

“Good morning.”

“Gentlemen, my aides have briefed you on what's happening in the lake. Dr. Link, what do you make of this?”

“Well, your honor, I have very little data to work with. All I know is what your aide has told me. The lake has flooded, and the water has somehow lost, at least, some of its salinity. Are you sure this information is correct? Are there water samples? Any measurements? Has any team been deployed?”

“No, Dr. Link. There isn't. We haven't had any time. Please, gather a team and take them to the lake. I want answers.”

“Of course. We're very much interested in this unprecedented phenomenon.”

“What's the worst-case scenario? Imagine that the lake becomes a freshwater lake permanently. What would happen to the herds of sirenians?”

Dr. Link scratched his chin, briefly simulating possible outcomes in his mind.

“We don't have to worry about the manatees or the balatees for now, and the Steller's Sea Cows are out in the ocean. Our greatest liability right now is the dugongs. They can only live in brackish and seawater. They won't take well to this change. Has there been any reports of dugong deaths or them getting sick?”

Joey gulped. His family's estates owned a herd of dugongs. He had hired a foreman to run the ranch and maintain the estate and got a monthly check, which mostly went toward paying his mother's medical bills. Even though he hardly went there, the animals were still his in name. He wondered if they were doing alright.

“No, not to my knowledge,” answered the mayor. “Susan!” shouted the mayor, almost knocking Dr. Link off his chair.

“You called, sir?”

“Go downstairs and ask the producers if their dugongs or animals have fallen ill.”

“Right away, sir.” Joey didn't miss the small appreciative grunt from the commissioner beside him. It seemed that the mayor and the commissioner had a similar approach to managing their employees. Their calls were similar in violence, even though Fabius' voice was significantly deeper and louder. Sometimes, the glass in the precinct shook when he was particularly furious.

“So, if only the dugongs will be affected by the disaster, then we're safe. Right?”

“Hardly. Animals can be very sensitive to changes like this. Sea cows can avoid reproduction and even suffer miscarriages if they feel that the conditions to bring their calves into the world are wrong. Additionally, oil production is intrinsically connected to the welfare of the animals. If they're stressed and feeding on forage, they can't put on the weight you need so you can harvest their oil.

The unique conditions that make Lake Grassum the best place on the planet to raise sirenians are very delicate. We can be looking at a total disrupture of the food chain and irreversible damage to the ecology of their habitat.”

“Mr. Mayor?” all eyes turned to Joey, who'd decided to intervene. The commissioner frowned questioningly at Joey.

“What is it, son?” asked the mayor.

“Even if the animals are safe, you must consider how the vacuuming parlors will be affected. After all, it's very sensitive equipment.”

“Constable Joey is the son of the late Mr. Jebediah Jones, sir. He knows a thing or two about ranches,” added the commissioner. Joey saw how frowns turned into looks of respect from scholars and the mayor.

“Of course, of course! You have the same eyes. That's where I recognized you from. Your father was a great man.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Some producers mentioned that their parlors had been ruined. It's a good observation. We have two things to worry about. Your comment, Constable Jones, makes me think it'd be a good idea to have one discreet producer sitting with us to give us insights like this. I'll make a note here to call someone specialized in the repair of the parlors. It's a vital factor to consider. I also need to get a rancher who won't panic by my side.” The mayor took notes as the conversation progressed. “Let's keep hearing Dr. Link about the biology side of things for now. Please, doctor.”

Dr. Link continued, “I suggest studying the possibility of temporarily relocating the dugongs to the Steller Sea Cow ranches in the ocean.”

“Very well. What else?” the mayor never stopped writing as the doctor spoke.

“An ecosystem is both a fragile and a robust thing. Even though many species will die if this sudden change has indeed occurred, others can survive and adapt. However, the lake's habitat will take very long to regain its vitality. We should ensure plenty of forage is available to get the manatees and the balatees through this change.”

“Susan!” roared the mayor, and his secretary popped her head back in. Even though she was smiling, Joey could tell by her heavy breathing and disheveled hair that she had run at full speed to find the answer to the mayor's questions. “What did the producers say?”

“No reports of any animals getting sick, sir.”

“Most intriguing,” let out Dr. Link.

“Good job, Susan. Take this piece of paper. I want the finest mechanical engineer in town stat. Get me one of the calmer ranchers here too. Take Dr. Link and give him everything he needs so that he can do what I asked him. Hurry!” The mayor stood up, politely prompting the biologist's dismissal. “We're in your hands, Dr. Link. Regardless of how much or how little you discover, send a missive with all the information you collect by sundown.”

“You can count on me, Mayor.” The man hurried off with a vitality that didn't match his age. The mayor sat back down and focused his eyes on the remaining scholar.

“What about the economy, Professor Norris? What are your predictions?”

“It depends on how badly this catastrophe affects sirenia production. Even though apple seed oil and sunflower oil can be secured from many different locations, we can't make sirenia without sea cow blubber; over a third of it is harvested here in the city. If the world suddenly loses a third of its oil...” the doctor trailed off.

“What?”

“Well, the best comparison we have in history is what happened in 1843. When the number of whales started to dwindle, and the supply couldn't meet demand, there was a market crash, looting, widespread panic, and finally war.” Joey shuddered at hearing this prophecy of doom. “Of course, this is a different situation; we're not speaking of an extinction of the sirenians, merely a localized ecological catastrophe. But if we extrapolate what happened then to the world and apply it to the smaller reality of the city, I wouldn't be surprised if the whole city descended into chaos. After all, no city depends more on the production of the lake than New Lisbon.”

“What do you suggest?”

“First thing is to stockpile. Assess how much oil is in stock and ensure you can maintain supply during this crisis. Contact the oil market and ask them to limit the sale of oil immediately to avoid hoarding. Given the urgency, they might accept. Reach out to producers, warehouses, and anyone with a stockpile. We need to know how much we have and how long we can keep the light on.”

“Professor, I would like to ask you to stay here for the day and have you manage this inquiry. As we hear more news, I want your opinion on navigating this crisis first-hand.”

“Finleeey!” roared the Mayor. This time a young man in a suit came in through the door.

“You called, Mr. Mayor?”

“Take the constable here and go to the auction house. Ask them to halt oil sales immediately until we can better grasp the situation. Be polite. We can't afford to offend them.”

Even though the mayor had given an order to Joey, the constable still spared a glance at Fabius to make sure his superior was OK with it. Fabius gave him a nod, and Joey walked briskly toward the mayor's aide.

Now outside the office, Joey slightly relaxed and cracked his neck and knuckles.

“My name is Finley. Nice to meet you, constable.”

“Call me Joey. Follow me. I have a tank parked outside. It'll get us there faster.”

Ch. 4 – Herald

“Please, keep half of the lots of 265 right here in the auction house. The rest, ship here as per my instructions.” Geoffrey sent batches of different quantities to different storehouses he owned throughout the city—an added layer of security to keep his anonymity.

“Yes, sir. How do you plan to pay for all of this?”

“I’ll write a check.”

This was probably the biggest check this woman had ever seen—a check for two hundred and three thousand crowns. Geoffrey picked up his pen and scribbled a signature. He felt strangely calm despite the considerable risk he was taking here. He’d always been collected and confident, but he felt that he should be feeling something different from what he was now.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Can I count on the auction house's discretion?”

“Of course, sir,” the cashier seemed offended at the notion that the auction house would fail to deliver things in the utmost secrecy.

“Very well. Have a good day.”

Geoffrey smiled as he left one of the many private offices where buyers could discreetly make arrangements to deliver their purchased merchandise. Everything was going according to plan.

For things to succeed, anonymity was essential, but he knew he could count on the oil market to keep a tight lid on his identity. Soon, people would come sniffing around, trying to find who had bought out the stock of sirenia.

Since he'd been a small child, the oil market had been at the center of many tales and legends. One of the most famous was the story of a corrupt auctioneer.

Legend had it that, a hundred and fifty years ago, it was discovered that an auctioneer was bribed into passing information on the oil purchases under the table to one of the pirate lords. The punishment had been extremely severe. According to rumor, the auction master had a conversation with the man that destroyed him. No one knows what the corrupt auctioneer heard that day, but he was a broken rag of a man who rotted the rest of his life in jail.

The city's folk must have embellished the story, but one thing was sure, no one could mess with the oil market. It was sacred ground, similar to an embassy. Even if the mayor's office or the president knocked at the door, they wouldn't get anything out of it without risking a huge international accident.

Geoffrey's next stop was the New Lisbon Bank. For convenience, it was situated right next to the market. Unlike the golden bright look of the market, the bank was a greyer building. It had multiple lions sculpted in rock, standing watch over the passersby walking the street below. They were so well made that Geoffrey ensured he walked on the other side of the road until he could cross the street and head straight into the door.

Before he crossed the street, his attention was momentarily diverted by the newsboy's shouts. The boy was entering puberty, and his voice had started to change. His voice was cracked and would sometimes change in tone. He shouted as if he was a grown, fierce adult, though.

"Extra! Extra! Green comet sighted last night! Read all about it!"

Out of curiosity and because he already had gone through the time-critical stage of his plan, Geoffrey took one of the newspapers from the boy and handed him a quarter. He briefly skimmed through the front page article.

LISBON HERALD

New Lisbon's Celestial Spectacle

New Lisbon's night sky was graced with a visit from the heavens last night. The observatory spotted a cosmic wonder never witnessed before. The telescope spotted a long-tailed giant green comet. In an exclusive interview, Dr. Ludwig, a distinguished astronomer working at the observatory, explains the latest theories about the nature of comets.

"Comets are celestial bodies composed of dust, rock, and volatile compounds, often called 'dirty snowballs.' As they journey through the cosmos, they can become visible to the naked eye when they approach the Sun, and the solar heat causes the release of gases and dust, forming their characteristic glowing tails."

Regarding the recently sighted comet, Dr. Ludwig revealed, "Last night's discovery is extraordinary because it appears to be a new comet, never cataloged before. We are tracking its trajectory and analyzing its composition to understand its origins and characteristics better."

Comets have been admired throughout history, and some cultures treated their sightings as omens and harbingers of significant events. "Comets have held cultural and scientific significance for civilizations across the globe. Like our ancestors, we study these celestial visitors to expand our knowledge of the universe and connect us to the stars," he added.

Astronomers and enthusiasts are eagerly awaiting further revelations about this newfound interstellar wanderer. Dr. Ludwig's research team remains vigilant, tirelessly analyzing data to unravel the mysteries of this cosmic traveler and, in doing so, bring us one step closer to understanding the mysteries of the universe."

There was also a featured article in which one of the major producers of wine in the region talked about comet vintages. An enologist explained how some of the best wine in history was associated with a cosmic event such as last night's. He was pleased with the sighting of the comet and was confident that a great vintage would be coming this year.

No, it won't, thought Geoffrey. *Not from this 'comet.'* Geoffrey paused and searched his feelings. How was he so sure? He was no expert in enology. In fact, he was more of an apple cider kind of guy. Although he had some working knowledge of astronomy, he was not as knowledgeable as these two fine gentlemen. He just knew. He dismissed the strangeness of this foreign certainty and made his way into the bank.

*

The city had woken up, and the increased traffic made driving the tank more daunting. Mr. Finley was doing a good job at looking unperturbed, but Joey didn't miss how tightly he hung to his seat.

"So... you are the son of the great Jebediah?" Finley asked in a voice loud enough to pierce through the noise of the tank.

"Yes," answered Joey, proud that his father was still so well-known after being dead for 20 years.

"It must have been difficult for you. I remember reading the article in the Herald. I was shocked."

The semi-shouted words took Joey's thoughts to the lake estate. Playing in his room, he heard things breaking and falling in his father's studio. As he arrived to check what had happened, he found his father lying lifeless on his desk chair with foam in his mouth. Joey also found his mother convulsing on the floor. His screams had alerted the staff at the house, but he could still remember the panic, the broken shards of glass on the floor, and the warm tears rolling down his cheek.

A tram came around the corner, and Joey had to swerve abruptly to dodge it. His breathing was heavy, and he felt the blood drained from his face. Finley's shouts brought him back.

"...attention! That was close."

"Sorry."

For the rest of the ride, Mr. Finley did him the favor of not disturbing him anymore with tragic news from his troubled past. Joey didn't care if it was out of consideration or fear of having an accident, but he was grateful nonetheless.

As he drove the locotank, he felt like he was in a fencing match with his mind. The exhaustion and stress of the day were making it harder to keep his inner demons away. Every time he looked at the rearview mirror of the tank, it was as if he were looking into his past. Flashbacks of hours of investigation, trips to his mom's doctor and his therapist.

*

Geoffrey entered the large building under the studying gaze of the guards at the door and headed toward the atrium. The atrium of New Lisbon Bank had high vaulted ceilings that reminded Geoffrey of a cathedral. It didn't seem so long ago that he had come here for the first time and had been kicked out of the bank because he didn't look *presentable*. It was only when old Mr. Jebediah returned with him and told the bank he'd be the guarantor that they treated him with respect. He'd come a long way since then, and no one looked down on him now.

The tellers were impeccably dressed in waistcoats made of sirenian leather, as was custom and culture in the city. Everyone wore the material proudly as if it was the city's uniform. Everyone worked around sirenians or had family who did, and wearing the home team's colors showed support for the city's economy. The fad had caught on, and many cities in this part of the globe had succumbed to the New Lisbonite fashion.

The echoes of the conversations between tellers and customers, the occasional typewriter, or whooshes and clangs of the pneumatic tubes produced a unique melody characteristic of the bank.

Geoffrey joined a short line of people and soon was called on. He didn't recognize this employee.

“Welcome to New Lisbon Bank. How can I help you today, sir.”

“I'd like to see my account manager, Ms. Shirley. Is she in?”

“Sure. You can go to meeting room number 3. I'll send her a pneumessage and she'll join you shortly. Geoffrey left the teller area as he inspected the network of brass pneumatic tubes crisscrossing the ceilings. He tried to imagine which would be transporting the message to his account manager. He had looked into how much it'd cost to set up this type of system in his estate, but the price was abysmal. He reckoned that the bank used it more to flaunt its wealth than to save time.

As Geoffrey stepped into the meeting room, he spotted a kettle and went to pour himself some tea. As the freshly brewed tea aroma flooded the room, the door opened, and Shirley stepped in.

*

It had taken thirty minutes from the city hall to Balaena Market. It would have probably taken twice as long on horse or public transportation. Joey managed to get his emotions under control and was again focused on their mission. He helped Finley exit the vehicle, and both rushed toward the oil market.

“Do you think they'll agree?”

“I don't know, constable. The oil market is an entity regulated by over two hundred countries. The auction master can be quite inflexible.”

“Do you think he has to ask for permission from every single member of the Energy Union?”

“Let's hope not.”

“The first auction of the day ended a while ago. How much do you think they'll have in stock?”

“Hard to say. A thousand, maybe?”

At the market door, the constable flaunted his badge to be allowed entry, and when that didn't work to call the auction master, Finley respectfully showed his credentials and the mayor's signet. They sat down in a waiting room.

“Would any of you gentlemen like to have some coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“I'll take it. Two sugars, please.”

Even though Joey desperately wanted a coffee, he refused to have anything to drink. Memories of his dead father fought to resurface, but he quieted them down. As Finley drank, Joey tapped his foot nervously. He tried to keep his mind off his memories and started conversing again.

“When did the producers start arriving at the city hall?”

“At around nine-thirty. It's still a long way from the lake to the city.”

“This is crazy.”

“Oh, yes. I've never seen the mayor like this.”

“Good morning.”

Joey and Finley stood up at once and respectfully greeted the auction master. Master Ulysses was a man in his fifties with thin ginger hair and a stocky belly. His suit was made of silk and not sirenian leather. Joey didn't miss the meaning of the choice of wardrobe. The auction master did not want to seem like a citizen of New Lisbon, but as what he was, a foreign emissary in control of a commercial embassy.

“Gentlemen, what seems to be the matter that requires the attention of the oil market.”

Mr. Finley took the stage.

“Master Ulysses, there's been a problem at the lake. The lake has flooded, which will likely negatively impact the extraction of sirenian oil. We were hoping that until we conduct further studies on the subject, you'd be willing to hold on to the sirenian barrels in your possession. What do you say?”

“A lake flood? That hasn't happened in over 100 years.”

“Yes, many of the extraction facilities have been ruined and will require extensive maintenance before they can be used again,” Finley added.

The auction master grunted and stared into the distance, lost in his thoughts. “That explains it,” he whispered.

“What is it, Master Gulliver?”

“We sold out our stock of sirenian oil today.” Joey and Finley exchanged panicked looks.

“What do you mean? It sold out?” Asked Joey.

“Who bought it?” Asked Finley, evoking an angry stare from the auction master.

“You know better than to ask that question, Mr. Finley. You know that the identity of buyers is sacred and inviolable. I can not; I will not disclose a buyer's identity. So, I've sworn.”

“But master, you can surely understand the repercussions of the oil being sold out. We're talking about prices skyrocketing, hysteria, panic, a market crash.”

“I understand, but I'm afraid I can't do anything. There have been crises before. Things always sort themselves out. The oil market has

a reputation to maintain. Do you think we would have a good reputation if we'd go about sharing secrets?"

"But, sir..."

"Enough! You have the oil market's support in capping the sales of barrels until the situation sorts itself out. However, I've done nothing unlawful; neither has the buyer. And that's that. You'll have to contact the Energy Union if you want anything more than that. If you'll excuse me, I have important work to do."

Joey watched helplessly as Mr. Finley stood up, and he followed. There was little they could do against the oil house. It was an organization similar to the Science Academy. It was under the direct control of the World Senate. They marched gloomily toward the locotank. They had to bring back the bad news to the city hall.

*

"You did what? A check for two hundred thousand crowns? Are you insane, Jeff?"

Shirley had been his liaison with the bank since he started his business. She was a careful conservative investor who appreciated order and despised uncertainty.

"That's precisely why I came here, Shirley. I want to make sure the check won't bounce. How much money do I have in my account?"

Shirley took out a ledger and consulted Geoffrey's account information. "Jeff, you only have thirty thousand crowns. There's no way you can afford this expenditure."

"I would like to ask for a loan, then."

"I seriously doubt that the bank will loan you this much money. Unless you bring forward some serious collateral."

"So be it. I'll send you all the documents later today. It's of paramount importance that you can guarantee this loan, Shirley. I'm willing to put up my personal locomotive, house, shops, and herd for collateral. Everything, except for my estate on the lake, do you hear me?"

Shirley nodded in agreement. “Jeff, this is not like you. You're always such a cautious investor. Why are you in such a rush? You don't look like the same man I know. Is everything OK?”

Ambyssus' grief. “Yes, Shirley. Everything is alright. Just having a very eventful day, that's all.”

*

Joey hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. Others would have collapsed, but Joey stood tall next to Commissioner Fabius all day. They had accompanied the mayor as geologists, weathermen, biologists, economists, ranchers, and city officials came in and out of the office. The mayor had tried to understand the reason for this catastrophe and the possible implications for the city and the district.

New Lisbon was the district's capital and had a duty toward its satellite cities and towns. High-speed couriers and even zeppelins were all deployed to ascertain the situation of all coastal towns scattered throughout the lake shores and islands.

Joey had missed most of the technical and eloquent jargon thrown around the office, but he understood one thing. The situation was dire. Eighty percent of the world's sirenian oil production was in Lake Grassum. Nowhere else did the sea cows gain weight and breed so quickly. Naturally, other countries had gone high and low to develop oil operations of their own, but none could beat the conditions of Lake Grassum.

After all the experts were heard and a plan had been drafted, the mayor called all the lake ranchers and asked them to attend an emergency briefing meeting at City Hall. Even though ranchers' estates and wealth came from the lake, most of them lived in the city, so it hadn't been difficult to gather so many of them here on such short notice. Those who hadn't been in the city had traveled here as fast as they could once they heard the news.

Several other police officers now stood at attention inside the city hall's biggest conference room. As businessmen came, a buzz of disquiet, murmuring, and complaining filled the place. The fashion this year was manatee leather capes dyed in dark purple. Amid the

waving purple fabric stood Joey. The commissioner had told them to stand still like a stoic statue and look as official and angry as possible. Whenever people gathered, individual minds quickly became a herd mentality, and it was essential to keep this crowd in check.

Businessmen nodded respectfully as they entered the room and saw Joey greeting them. Joey made an effort not to smile as he saw that the fire of complaint in some of these men's eyes was immediately cooled at the sight of a police officer eyeing them menacingly.

Joey recognized many of them. They probably didn't recognize him because they had met him as a child, a toddler who played in his father's office. Those had been different days, however. It wasn't tricky for Joey to look mad and menacing. The circumstances around his father's death pointed toward one of these men being involved in his father's murder. He had no clue who had done it, but he felt furious at the notion that one of these wealthy men could be his father's killer.

"Joey? Is that you?" asked a familiar voice.

Greeting Joey was a man his age, early thirties. He was taller than Joey, and the enlarged belly and slumped shoulders gave him away as a white-collar worker who spent many hours hunching over a desk. His attire suggested prosperity but not luxury. The boots he wore still had some spots of silt and a line showing that they had been submerged today and then dried as the day went on. The untamed yellow curls of Geoffrey's hair and the scruffy shadow of an unshaven beard contrasted with what was meant to be a professional look. The man seemed not to have slept for as long as Joey.

"Jeff! Long time no see!" Joey stopped himself from going for a hug when he recalled where he was and what kind of image he was trying to pass. He caught himself in time to only reach his hand to shake Geoffrey's.

"Look at you. You look fantastic in a uniform. Fantastic, indeed. Your old man would have been proud. Yes, very proud," sincerely complimented Geoffrey.

"Thank you, Jeff. And look at you, all businesslike. It's quite an upgrade from wearing shoes with more holes than Swiss cheese."

Both laughed at the joke and the comfort of familiarity from speaking to an acquaintance.

“This is quite the situation, hey? Who would have thought that we’d have to all get together like this,” happily said Geoffrey. Joey felt something was off about his friend. He couldn’t tell what it was.

“You almost seem happy about it,” protested the constable.

“Now, now, Joey. Why would I be happy about a disaster? If there is any joy in my remark is because we could all get together here so soon. Yes, very quickly, indeed. The good mayor did a good job getting us all here tonight. We all have to stick together, no matter what.” After some thought, Geoffrey added, “What about your father’s estate? The one near the lake?”

“It should all be OK over there. You know that Pop always played it safe, and he was the only one back in his day who built all his estate on high ground just in case something like this happened. But you know I can’t bear to go there. And I just can’t come down to sell it either,” sadly remarked Joey.

“Of course. Of course. What about your Pop’s pens or his parlor? Are any of them still active?”

Again, Joey felt something was off. Why the sudden interest in his father's old estate? “No. Getting it all up and running again would take some serious work. You know how sensitive the equipment in the parlors is. That and the lake's salty water gets in the equipment no matter how much you clean it. After being abandoned for so many years, I think pops would have just wanted to sell what it’s left for scraps and buy a new one.” Joey said this with some embarrassment. His father’s estate was always a soft spot for him. He knew how careful his old man was with the facilities. Joey realized with sadness that his father would have scolded him for letting the estate fall into such disrepair.

“I see. I see,” Joey shied at the giddiness in Geoffrey’s voice. He first thought that maybe Geoffrey was looking for a place to vacuum his herd, but he seemed thrilled instead of sad at the news. “Well, my friend, it was good catching up with you. I will find a seat. Why don’t you come down to my estate one of these days? We could have a drink or something?”

“I think I will take you up on that offer. Marie and I talked the other day about how long it's been since we last got together.”

“Good. Good. Let's arrange it once this dreadful storm blows over. See you around, Joey.”

“See you, Jeff.”

Geoffrey walked away. Joey felt that something was wrong with his old classmate. Several warning bells were ringing in Joey's mind. Perhaps it was how relaxed and happy he seemed during such a tragedy. Or maybe it was the weird interest in the condition of his father's estate. Joey quieted down his instincts. His wife had repeatedly told him to turn off his investigative mode when he talked to friends. Joey had more than once upset his in-laws because of his obsessive hypervigilance.

Maybe he is just as tired as I feel, thought Joey. He went back to staring down the arrivals.

Ch. 5 – The Meeting

“Order! Gentlemen, please.”

The mayor was having a hard time getting this emergency meeting started. As soon as he appeared on the stage, all the ranchers stood up and started shouting, like a group of starved animals who get a glimpse of a farmer carrying a bucket of corn.

Although everyone knew the mayor, it was Geoffrey's first time seeing the man in person. Peter 'Eagle' Meyer was a man in his sixties with small hands kept in constant motion, either fastening and unfastening one of the buttons on his vest, changing his watch from one pocket to another, or slightly adjusting his monocle. They shared a similarity in that regard.

The mayor's most distinctive feature was his long nose, which seemed more like a beak. Since he was a child, Geoffrey had heard people call him Mr. Eagle because of it. Seeing the man up close, he could see that the nickname was well-deserved. Word on the street was that the mayor himself encouraged it. The politician probably figured that Mayor Meyer was a mouthful and decided that Mayor Eagle was something voters could more easily remember.

Other than the nervous tics and his beak-like nose, Geoffrey had learned nothing else about the politician who led the city. The mayor's voice couldn't pierce through the wall of sound caused by the producers' uproar.

This was one of the most powerful men in the city. He controlled the police and ruled over a city that, while part of a nation in name, was more of an international hub. Governments and tycoons constantly tried currying favor with the man in the search for a piece of the biggest slice of the pie of the energy market. Geoffrey felt an emotion he wasn't expecting at the sight of the mayor. It was a burning sensation in his chest and his eyes. It was a mix of anger and longing. Geoffrey felt a sweet taste in his mouth, a mix of honey and peppermint.

A flash of memories came uninvited into Geoffrey's mind. There was the memory of when he hadn't eaten in six days and finally found a garbage can with something edible. The joy he had felt after eating something repulsive twisted his stomach.

Then, images of when he was sent to beg, only to give all the money he'd made to the pirates. Then, there was the pain of when he was beaten after the pirates discovered that he was keeping some of the money for himself.

When Geoffrey had been a street urchin, he'd been beaten, robbed, beaten again, and exploited by the scum of the slums. He'd fought with all his might to climb out of the quagmire until he could earn the respect of any passersby. But looking at the mayor, he was reminded that he wasn't at the top of the mountain. He was nothing but an ant that the mayor's boot could squash.

An old fire was being stoked in Geoffrey's heart, the fire of discontent. The flames of uncertainty and the desire for more power were being built into a powerful inferno that ignited the desire that had made him go from a poor orphan to a wealthy businessman. The voices in his heart were becoming so powerful that they crowded out the choir of complaints around him.

The mayor discreetly signaled toward the police commissioner in a cry for help. Commissioner Fabius clapped his hands a few times. Geoffrey snapped out of his dreamy daze. The man was so large, and his gestures so wide and broad that it was impossible not to look at him. Of course, the thunderous clap of his bear-like hands did some of the work.

The mayor managed to use the moments of silence created by the commissioner's help to take the reins of the meeting.

"Ladies and gentlemen," his voice was persuasive and wheezy, "I know everyone is concerned about what happened today at the lake. I spent the whole day consulting with several experts and even hearing some of you out. Rest assured that we'll help you. As I'm sure you can appreciate, it's in everyone's interest that we resume oil production as soon as possible."

Everyone had sat down. Hearing the mayor's assuaging words, they seemed to slightly relax.

"I've asked Dr. Link, one of the foremost experts in the lake's ecology, to gather a team and ascertain the situation in more detail. According to the last missive we received from him, all animals seem fine for the moment. This is excellent news." The audience relaxed a little more. The mayor was indeed a masterful politician. Once he started talking, these wealthy men seemed like well-behaved children in the classroom.

"Time will be needed before we can verify how this event has impacted the lake's ecology, but according to what Dr. Link has told me, this event is only temporary, and most of the lake's wildlife can temporarily deal with the new conditions." Geoffrey smiled. The human called Link had not even scratched the surface of what had happened in the lake, and they were already so sure it was *temporary*.

"From what I've gathered, the biggest concern right now is the machines. According to what some of you have told me, the lipovacuum machines, especially, are very sensitive equipment, and they are essential in extracting the blubber from the sirenians. Additionally, they are kept on the shores, near the water, which means they are all underwater right now."

The mayor discreetly consulted some notes he'd written down and continued his speech. "It appears that to get them working again, we'll have to disassemble them, clean them, and reassemble them before we can use them again. We also have to install them in facilities that are on higher ground and dig canals to bring the animals to the vacuuming parlor."

A murmur of protest started going around the crowd. Before the noise was allowed to grow any louder, the mayor continued.

“Gentlemen, I can appreciate your concerns. The operation I've just described is a very costly endeavor. I want you to know that the city is ready to help you however we can. We have a fund for natural disasters and are ready to tap into that to help you get through these hard times.

“After consulting with the companies that manufacture this equipment and reaching out to the Engineering Department of the Orca University, it seems that this change will take some weeks. But that is too long. The whole world depends on the production done in our city. May I ask if there is anyone among you whose facilities were unaffected by the flood?”

This is it, thought Geoffrey. The chamber was all silent. Everyone around him was desperate enough. Some part of him felt ashamed at what he was about to do. His eyes focused on Joey. His friend had become so similar to his benefactor. It almost felt like Mr. Jebediah was next to the mayor. If Mr. Jebediah were in his shoes, he would have already extended a hand to his fellow ranchers. He would honor the memory of his mentor. Joey would also be proud of his willingness to help. As for all the barrels he'd bought, he would just say that he'd bought it so that no one else could get to it, before he gave it to the city. Yes, that was the right thing to do.

Just as Geoffrey was about to give up, a cascade of thoughts flashed through his mind. Yes, Jebediah had been kind. But hadn't he been too kind? Hadn't that gotten him dead? In business, ruthlessness is kindness. Jebediah had also been the richest. It was easier to help others when there was no one above you. But there are so many people out there more important than you. Look at the mayor. You're nothing to him. He's just like the pirates who exploited you as a kid. Yes. You're not doing anything unlawful, Geoffrey; you're just seizing an opportunity. Your mentor would be proud to see you become such a fine businessman. Go for it. Go for it.

While everyone remained seated, Geoffrey stood up.

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Joey did his best to remain statue-like, but it had been a long day. Whenever he felt he couldn't take anymore, he focused on the ranchers. His prevailing theory was that his father had been taken out by a competitor who wanted him out of the picture. It wasn't farfetched to assume that, hidden in the crowd of producers, was his father's killer. The fury this thought generated invigorated him.

With the stock of the market depleted the mayor's office had already concluded that there was no way that the existing stock would be enough to keep up with supply. It was all the fault of the greedy idiot that had swept up the oil market clean. What kind of monster preyed on the weakness of others like that? This was a whole city they were talking about, potentially the whole world. If there were enough extraction facilities still operational, they could perhaps offset things, but no one was stepping forward. Too bad that his old man's facilities weren't well-maintained either.

His father had always been vocal about the danger of keeping the parlors ashore. But it was easier to get to the animals if the parlors were closer to the shore, and, more importantly, it was much cheaper. Geoffrey sighed. His father had tried to warn them. This was what happened when one kept all their eggs in one basket.

“Mayor, my facilities are fully operational.”

Everyone turned toward the voice. Geoffrey stood up, facing the mayor. Of course! Geoffrey! He'd learned from his father. How could Joey forget about him?

“Alright, Mister...”

“Geoffrey,” Geoffrey prompted.

“That is excellent news, Mr. Geoffrey. How come your facilities were unaffected by the flood?”

“I studied the historical records when I set up my ranch. There was some mention of a great lake flood a hundred years ago. The one who showed me how to do business also always taught me that it was smart to play it safe. I opened canals leading to my processing and vacuuming facilities on higher ground.”

All other participants were green with regret. They had thrown caution out the window to increase profit, only to be helpless before such an event. Geoffrey confidently continued.

“Your mentor... who was it?”

“Jebediah Jones, sir. I was a student at his school.”

“Of course, of course.” The mayor sighed, disappointed. If the man's teacher had been adamant about keeping the facilities safe, there was a small chance that there would be two functioning vacuuming parlors. The mayor spared a look at Joey, who shook his head helplessly. Geoffrey continued.

“My vacuuming facilities are intact. We also designed them with some extra capacity, just in case. Our vacuuming parlor can work on thirty animals an hour. If we work around the clock, we could work on seven hundred animals daily. We can vacuum ten thousand in the following two weeks until my fellow producers are back on their feet.”

“Mr. Geoffrey, you're very kind to assist the town in this time of need. We're all counting on you,” hearing the numbers, the mayor's voice had gained more confidence.”

“Of course, Mr. Mayor.” Joey felt all his tiredness wash away. He was so proud of Jeff, and more importantly, he was so proud of his father. Who would have known that his father would be saving the city even after his death by nurturing a young orphan such as Jeff? His father was a great man. Joey gave Jeff a radiant smile, but his friend's eyes remained focused on the mayor.

“Now, as my fellow producers can certainly imagine, building my facilities on higher ground was a very costly endeavor. I am more than willing to let everyone use my facilities if you just pay a small rental fee.”

What? Joey's shoulders sank. What was Jeff doing? He caught the flashes of concern passing through the eyes of the other ranchers. The mayor gulped. Joey was not enjoying the direction that this conversation was taking.

“Of course, Mr. Geoffrey. Provided it is a reasonable fee,” suggested the mayor. He tried to sound as amiable as possible.

“Certainly, Mayor. I can understand that my colleagues are going through a hard time. Fortunately, there is this fund you were talking about, and I am sure we can come to an agreement.”

The mayor’s eyes grew colder. “Mr. Geoffrey, would you be so kind as to state your conditions clearly?”

“Of course. I’ll rent my facilities for the cost of 10% of my colleagues’ total herds.” Everyone stood up in an uproar, and Joey felt disgust in his mouth. What was his friend doing? Some of the other ranchers started shouting accusingly.

“Mr. Geoffrey, you’re being unreasonable. This is preposterous!”

“Mr. Geoffrey, why would we exchange our animals for this service? We should be able to pay in another currency.”

“What else could you expect of a rat from the slums!” one of the producers screamed.

Geoffrey signaled he wanted to say something. The commissioner had to clap his hands again to quiet the room. Everyone reluctantly allowed Geoffrey to announce what they hoped was a sharp reduction to the price asked.

“Gentlemen, I am afraid you’re being unreasonable. As you know, the other alternative to this would be to resort to the unlawful and barbaric act of killing the herds to harvest their blubber. That would be an economic suicide. I have run some numbers. If you were to do that, you gentlemen would have to sacrifice twenty percent of your herds to keep up with the market’s demand. I am accepting half of that. How is that unreasonable?”

Joey thought for a few moments. His friend was making some sense. He was, after all, doing them a favor. He still was upset with him, though.

“Besides, our good mayor has already vowed to provide us with economic support to get us through these hard times. In the name of fairness, I am willing to forfeit being part of this financial help package.” Added Geoffrey magnanimously. The mayor softened his expression somewhat. Geoffrey wasn’t asking for the city to give him money.

“Additionally, don’t you need all the cash you can have right now to move your facilities to higher ground? Let me tell you. I know from

experience how expensive it is to do it. Here I was, trying to do right by you, finding some way of letting you get back to your feet, and still, I'm showered with ingratitude. What use is there going to be to me to have all these animals if I'm going to be too busy vacuuming yours, anyway?"

Joey caught some of the merchants exchanging guilty looks. The deal wasn't too bad. They would indeed need every penny they had to change their operations to such a degree. They would all have to do it at the same time, too. The increase in demand was going to make the workforce's price inflate. Although Joey's disgust had abated, he still couldn't understand why his friend would ask for a price from the other ranchers. Couldn't he just let them use it for free?

"Finally, I know that some of you might be thinking I'm taking advantage of you and should let you use my facilities for free. But let me ask you something, what do you think will become of my vacuuming parlor if I use it 24/7? Do you know how much wear it will cause my facilities to give it this kind of usage? Who's going to pay for that?"

"Now, now... Mr. Geoffrey. No one doubts that your motivation is noble. We apologize if we made you feel that way. I think the agreement is reasonable. Do you agree?"

One hand in the audience slowly raised. Then another. Soon, everyone raised their hand. There was no other way. He could later sue them penniless if they tried to appropriate Geoffrey's estate. Killing and trying their animals out, as in the old days of the whalers, was also considered an abominable practice. Doing that was killing the chicken to get the eggs.

Joey regarded his friend. That was why he'd asked about his father's estate. He wanted to know if the ranchers would have any other choice. He needed the confidence that he owned the only functioning vacuuming parlors to negotiate this assertively. He had coated his words in sugar and benevolence, but there was something fishy about him. His instincts were screaming alert at Joey.

"Thanks to Mr. Geoffrey, we'll be able to keep up with demand until we stabilize things again.

Now let us get to the next order of business. As you know, we control a third of the worldwide energy market. We sell an average of two thousand barrels a week. Only our city uses about fifty barrels of sirenium a month. After checking the city's coffers, I realized that we only have one hundred barrels stored up. But there is more than our city to worry about. We have the rest of the world to worry about.

I was hoping I could ascertain from you how many barrels you have left in your refineries and deposited for sale in the auction house. We don't want to crash the market, gentlemen. We all remember what happened in 1845 when the whales went extinct. The whole world was set ablaze. Can we pool together our resources for the greater good and make sure that the planet doesn't go dark again?" the mayor let the question hang in the air so that it could sync in.

"Mr. Finley, please take note of how many barrels each of the producers can spare in this time of need. Anyone?"

Joey looked at the ranchers. They looked hesitant and unsure. His friend Geoffrey had stood up again.

"Mr. Geoffrey?"

"I have at least 30 barrels of sirenium in my estate. I'll gladly give them to the city as a show of goodwill."

Joey's heart softened. That was more like the friend he knew. Seeing Geoffrey standing up so quickly and giving the oil so generously, the other ranchers gave him a look of respect. Another rancher had stood up as well.

"Wilson & Wilson has 20 barrels we can spare. Unfortunately, we can't give them away, but..."

"No worries, Mr. Wilson. The city will purchase it from you at market price. The same for your barrels, Mr. Geoffrey. You all have businesses to run, and the city can afford it."

Motivated by their colleague's examples, other ranchers started standing up, one at a time, and volunteering caskets they had stored in their estates. After thirty minutes, the mayor exchanged words with his aide and had a brilliant smile.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your generosity. With this, we've managed to secure more than a thousand barrels, which will go a long way in helping us navigate through this crisis.

Let us now discuss the next order of business. Dr. Link told me it would be a good idea to ask you all if you have any suspicions about how it could be possible for the lake to rise overnight. After all, you know the lake better than anyone. Any thoughts?"

"Is it possible that a big storm in some other part of the lake caused the flood?"

"Mr. Finley, please note this theory. All theories are welcome at this point. Anyone else?"

"What about some sort of underwater volcanic eruption?"

"What about some moon tide phenomenon? Perhaps Jupiter and the Moon aligned or something."

"Maybe an iceberg came floating in from the ocean, and it caused the water volume to rise."

"Good, good. Any other theories?" No one else raised their hand. "Very good. These theories will be attached to a report we're sending to the Science Academy."

Joey was surprised at hearing this. The Science Academy had only a handful of members. It was the cream of the intellectual crop of the world. To even qualify to become a member, it required degrees in three different fields. The fact that they were bringing in someone from the Science Academy really showed how big of a crisis this was.

"Mr. Mayor, could you please include in the report that it's necessary to study how the change in water conditions, if permanent, will affect the lake's ecosystem? The cows eat grass, kelp, and other vegetation. I worry that the cattle will starve."

"That request has already been included. Rest assured; we'll get to the bottom of this and take precautions so this won't happen again."

I think everything has been adequately discussed. We will talk more about the details regarding the package of financial assistance that will be provided, and we'll reconvene tomorrow to fine-tune the details if it suits you, gentlemen. Additionally... yes, Mr. Geoffrey?"

"Mayor, for the sake of transparency and good business practice, if you find it appropriate, I will ask my lawyer to draft the lease of my facilities to discuss with the city hall's legal office."

Joey nodded approvingly. His father had always taught them that it was good practice to always leave things down in writing. He could

see that everyone else looked pleased at Jeff's words. Having a contract would ensure their rights. Maybe some of them were also thinking they might even be able to find some loophole to explore. They were all seasoned entrepreneurs who appreciated the importance of a good loophole. Joey felt a knot in his stomach. These weasels. It was one of the reasons he had chosen not to be a rancher like his father was.

Additionally, Geoffrey was one of the newest among their ranks. He was green and inexperienced. Perhaps there was something from their old bag of tricks that would serve them and help them soften the blow. The mayor also seemed pleased. He could protect the city hall from any accusation if things went south. He liked the idea of everyone signing an agreement.

“Most certainly, Mr. Geoffrey. We will be expecting news from your counselor. Meeting dismissed.”

Ch. 6 – The Tavern

Joey woke up. As he climbed out of bed, he ran his fingers through his hair. What a headache. He hardly remembered making it to bed yesterday. He only vaguely recalled his wife's disheveled and worried look as she saw him arriving sad, confused, and exhausted. He felt like he'd been run over by a train. He looked at the clock; it was 10 o'clock. He should get ready to go back to work.

The house was silent, which let him know that his daughter was not there, or if she was, she was asleep. There was never a quiet moment with Molly. He walked toward the kitchen, thirsty and starved. The snacks his wife prepared for him yesterday were depleted by mid-afternoon, and he refused to have anything to eat or drink that he wasn't sure was prepared by someone he trusted: himself or his wife.

When he arrived home, he was so tired that he only gulped down a few glasses of water and collapsed in bed. He found his wife sitting alone in the kitchen, holding the newspaper. She hadn't heard him come in, so he just stood there momentarily admiring his wife's beauty. There was this tranquility to her. Whenever he saw her, he felt like he was looking at a flowing river. The way the brown curls of her hair fell perfectly over her shoulders made him smile.

His eyes were then drawn to a cover on the table, covering what he guessed was his breakfast. He stepped forward, clearing his throat beforehand to let Marie know he was there. He didn't want to frighten her. She put down the newspaper and looked at him, worried. His

arrival shattered the calm and tranquility he had admired moments ago.

“Good morning, Marie.”

“Morning.”

“Where is Molly?”

“I left her with Abigail. She was going to take her kids to the zoo, and I thought Molly could go along.”

“I see.” Joey felt terrible. His family had been looking forward to some family time, and once again, he'd failed them. Going to the zoo was supposed to be a family outing. “I'm sorry, Marie. I know you and Molly must be disappointed. Thank you for arranging that with Abigail. Letting her go to the zoo was a good way of softening the blow.”

“She was pretty disappointed.” Joey was pretty sure that Marie didn't mean *she* but *we*.

“I know. I know. Sorry. But no one could know that this would happen to the city.”

“I can't stay mad at you even if I want to.” She grabbed the newspaper again. “I was reading about what happened. You had to go.” Putting down the newspaper, she eyed him squarely. “You know, you'll have to take your daughter to the zoo once this storm blows over. Right?”

He nodded. She sighed.

“You scared me yesterday, Joey. The look on your face and the way you rushed out of here...”

“Yeah. It was a crazy day.”

“Should I be worried about all this?” she said, pointing at the newspaper's front page.

“There's no need to panic, sweetheart. It's going to be OK. Things should go back to normal soon.”

“Does anyone know why this happened?”

“Not yet. They're still investigating.”

“Everyone is talking about it. People wonder whether it will be like the Whale Wars all over again.”

“No. No, honey. Of course not. This is not about the animals being extinct this time. It's just a localized catastrophe.”

“Animals? That's right...Isn't there still a herd of dugongs in our estate? Shouldn't you go check on them?” Joey remained silent.

On the one hand, he couldn't bear parting with his father's herd. His father had cared for some of those dugongs who lived until now. On the other hand, he hated going to the place where his father had been killed.

“I know it's hard for you to go there, dear. Do you want me to go there?”

“No, it's OK. I'll make the time.”

“OK, then.”

“Guess who I ran into yesterday?” asked Joey. At the scent of gossip, his wife's attention was instantly captured.

“Who?”

“Geoffrey.”

“Oh, my goodness. It's been forever since we spent time with him. How is he doing? Is he still single?” She regarded her husband and then looked back at the newspaper. “Oh... of course. He has a ranch now, doesn't he? The poor thing.”

“I wouldn't worry about him. He's doing well. A little too well, actually.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you know how Joey and I go way back.”

“Of course. Your dad took him under his wing, didn't he?”

“Ever since I met Geoffrey that there was this purity in him. He had this light to him, kind of like dad used to have, you know? But yesterday, something was off about him. He looked like one of *them*.”

“Like one of the other ranchers?”

Joey clenched his teeth. “Yeah, like one of those weasels.”

Marie sighed audibly. How many times had they talked about this? The conversation was almost always the same. Joey would go on about how the most likely culprit to his father's murder was another rancher, and his wife would say that he couldn't be sure and that it was unfair for him to treat all ranchers poorly based on one very shaky theory. Today, however, she didn't say anything. He squeezed her hand, and she smiled.

“First, he came to ask me about my father's estate and whether the extraction facilities were working. I was a bit confused. It looked like he was almost enjoying the disaster!”

“Are you sure?”

“You should have seen it. It was a creepy smile.” His wife rolled her eyes, causing Joey to feel annoyed, but he pressed on.

“Then, halfway through a meeting between the mayor and the ranchers, he reveals that his parlor is up and running, and he is willing to lease it to other producers if they give him a fifth of all their herds.”

His wife looked at him, confused.

“What does that mean?”

“He's taking advantage of the situation! He's bleeding the other producers dry!”

“Are you sure that's what's happening, dear?”

“Yes! A fifth! 20% of the animals, Marie! That's a lot!”

“Did he explain why he was asking for that price.”

“He sugarcoated his reasons, but there's something off about him. I don't like it.”

“Honey, we've talked about this. You have to be careful not to look at your friends through the eyes of an investigator.” Joey sighed. There had been multiple instances in which his wife's advice had proven wise. “You know what? Perhaps, it's just him standing his ground. You know how those ranchers are. He started running his ranch not long ago. Perhaps, they don't respect him, and this is his way of making a point.”

“I don't know. It's true that he gave some oil he had to the city and said he was willing to help the other ranchers.”

“You see? Give your friends the benefit of the doubt. Wasn't he the one who helped you when your dad died?”

Joey's mind went back to the day of his dad's funeral. The only person that had cried as much as Joey was Jeff. He hadn't left his side for a second. In a sense, when his father mentored Jeff, they'd become brothers. His wife was right.

“You're right. Perhaps I was just tired. He must be under a lot of stress too, and he does deserve the benefit of the doubt.”

The kettle started trembling and hissing as if a volcano was about to erupt. "Your coffee's ready."

"I'll change, and you can drop me off at the city market."

Joey sat and uncovered the plate. There was some fruit and a few finger sandwiches. He put one in his mouth. Maple syrup and peanut butter. Delicious. He reached out to the newspaper to look at what was happening. He began reading the news as he sipped on the hot coffee and had apple slices. News of the flood had made the front page.

LISBON HERALD

The Flood That Dried the Market

On the night of the 16th, the tranquil waters of Lake Grassum surged, causing a one-meter rise in water levels, leading to potential economic and environmental consequences. The flood has inundated crucial facilities used to extract sirenian fat and produce fuel. Mayor Eagle is working in close proximity with the authorities to address the situation and alleviate the impacts on the economy.

The vacuum parlors utilized in the extraction of sirenian fat, are a vital component in sirenia production. They are extremely sensitive equipment that can take weeks or even months to repair. However, Mayor Eagle assures the public that recovery efforts are already underway, and there is a substantial reserve of fuel to sustain the markets during this trying period.

"Despite this unforeseen catastrophe, I want to assure our residents that we are fully prepared to handle the aftermath of this flood and restore normalcy as soon as possible," Mayor Eagle stated in a press conference. "Our fuel reserves are well-stocked, and we are able to continuously supply the demands of the oil market. I encourage everyone to remain calm as we navigate through this challenging situation."

Besides the economic implications, the flood's impact on the lake's ecosystem has raised environmental concerns. Sources report that the lake's water has experienced a noticeable decrease in salinity, which could have far-reaching effects on the local wildlife and the delicate balance of the lake's ecosystem.

"Wildlife experts and environmentalists are already closely monitoring the situation. We've already sent word to the Science Academy, and we're confident that one of their experts will arrive in the city soon to help us understand this phenomenon," assured the mayor's office.

Despite the mayor's assurances, the unprecedented natural disaster has already made the sirenian oil spike to historical highs. Before the authorities got to the market, it had already been swept clean, and the auction house has refused to divulge the buyer's identity.

Despite the city hall's assistance in providing barrels for the oil market, the prices have still skyrocketed. During the last oil market auction, Dugong oil was sold at 210 dollars a barrel."

It seemed that the mayor's office had handled the media impressively. Despite the overtones of doom and disaster, the article still managed to transmit some of the mayor's assurances to the public, and there was nothing on the paper about protests or looting.

His wife was humming as she got ready. He grabbed another sandwich as he searched the newspaper for any references to the police's raid of the Dark Sciences lab. He found only a small piece on the operation they'd completed two nights ago.

Successful Police Raid on Dark Sciences Lab

In a daring operation led by Constable Joseph Jones and Commissioner Fabius himself, the police achieved a significant breakthrough by raiding a clandestine Dark Sciences lab in the heart of the Western District.

"Today is a proud day for the force," commented Commisionier Fabius. "The operation led by Constable Joseph Jones is a resounding success. We'll not let these ecological terrorists pollute the clean waters of our rivers and lakes and will keep doing whatever it takes to stop them from doing their illegal activities. They try to disguise immoral profit under the guise of advancement, but the police are determined to continue fighting against these illegal practices."

The targeted Dark Sciences lab was discovered after months of meticulous investigation by law enforcement agencies. The police uncovered a cache of forbidden items, including cows and coal.

"The arrest of cows may raise eyebrows, but this ban is rooted in a critical ecological concern," explained the commissioner. "Cows are prohibited from unrestricted sale and commerce."

The Herald asked one of the city's leading experts in Fossil Fuel history for some insight on the seriousness of unrestricted commerce of cows. "The Science Academy has produced a fascinating study. The study's findings indicated that

uncontrolled breeding and commercialization of these animals could lead to an ecological apocalypse. The crux of the issue lies in cows' digestive systems, which produce copious amounts of methane gas.

"The environmental danger posed by the immense methane output of cows is too grave to overlook," explains Dr. Barry Brown. "Methane is a potent greenhouse gas; if left unchecked, it can significantly contribute to global warming and climate change. The Science Academy's report famously coined the phrase, 'Cow's farts can destroy planets,' for a reason."

The article went on to describe the dangers of using petroleum and coal. It then talked about all the apprehensions and listed the number of arrests. It was well-written and painted the force in a positive light. Too bad that it was drowned under the news of the flood. Munching on another finger sandwich, he leafed through the newspaper and found another interesting article. The reason why it caught Joey's eye was because it mentioned the Science Academy.

Science Academy versus Farmer

A man's life took an unexpected turn when the Science Academy, under the Environment Protection Act, appropriated a plot of land he owned. The sunflower oil harvester used the land for his crops. He contacted the Herald to express his dissatisfaction with the forceful transaction, "This land has been in my family for generations. This was my bread and butter. They had no right to take it from me."

The appropriation was due to the rediscovery of an insect presumed to be extinct, the weaverbee. "When I saw the hive in the tree of one of my properties, I thought the bees acted strangely and sent word to the local university. How was I repaid for fulfilling my duty as a contentious citizen? By being robbed of my land."

The man, preferring to remain anonymous, expressed his grievances, contending that the market value attributed to his land was grossly unfair. "No matter how frustrated I am about this, it's useless to go against the Science Academy."

When contacted by the Herald, one of the spokespersons for the Science Academy commented on this episode, "We are fully aware of the impact our actions can have on individuals, and we do our best to ensure a fair compensation process."

However, valuing land for conservation is a complex task, and sometimes it may not align with the owner's expectations.

The Science Academy's ability to mobilize funds and resources for the cause of environmental conservation is unparalleled. This begs the question: are they too powerful?

The powers that the world had granted the academy were incredible. Not even the oil market dared to question any commands the academy gave. To think that he was the one who was going to chaperone their envoy made Joey shudder.

His wife appeared neatly dressed in a yellow dress.

“Ready, dear?”

“Ready.”

*

The inn was empty. The room smelled like someone had halfheartedly tried to clean off the scent of sweat and beer of the previous day. The fire in the hearth was dying out, but the tavern keeper nonchalantly ignored it as he absentmindedly wiped the same glass again and again and again. Although the establishment seemed run down and worn out, all the glasses were pristinely cleaned. They all glittered in the sunlight that came in through the half-closed blinders.

There was something hypnotic and ritualistic about how this man cleaned the glasses. The glass was already spotless, so there was no practical reason for continuing to do it. Geoffrey wondered if the man was cleaning his mind now instead. Perhaps the rhythmic ritualistic cleansing of the glass opened the mind to some mental state where considerations or meditations could be made, thus allowing one to experience personal growth. Another possible explanation for it was that it was some sort of therapy or an object lesson on how even the simplest and most menial of jobs can grow to become a pleasant task.

Geoffrey resisted the urge to check his pocket watch. After all, he hadn't brought it along. Today he wore a ragged jacket with so many patches that it would take an extensive study to ascertain the original

fabric that made the garment. His shoes had holes, and his trousers had tears. He looked like a beggar or perhaps a destitute worker who hadn't been able to find a job at the docks after many months.

Geoffrey would put his hand over the counter every other minute or so and perform a series of seemingly random taps with his fingers. Although seemingly random, it was always the same sequence. Thumb and pinky, thumb, and ring finger. Index and middle. Index and ring finger. Thumb and index finger. The sequence lasted a few seconds and would easily be dismissed as a nervous tic. Geoffrey had been waiting here for several hours but patiently performed the rhythmic tap while silently sipping his cider. He signaled that he wanted a refill, and a mug glided over the counter to arrive precisely at his location. It was an uncanny skill, this one of perfectly placing a glass from afar. Geoffrey took a flask from his pocket and poured some of its contents into the apple cider. It was lake water. Since he had a taste two days ago, he couldn't stop drinking it.

He poured a bit of it into every beverage he consumed. Geoffrey despised addictions. Opium, tobacco, and overindulgence in alcohol were a waste of time and money for someone as frugal as himself. But this was just water. What harm could there be in drinking it? After sipping the liquid, Geoffrey found himself calmer, connected, and grounded. Plans and thoughts became clear, and remorse and guilt were washed away.

Another patron entered the room. Geoffrey's back was vulnerably facing the door, but he didn't move. The only hint of someone coming in had been the sound of the door opening and the breath of fresh air that had accompanied the newcomer. This was the hardest part of the process. Never look back. Some obscure part of his mind begged him to look over his shoulder just to take a quick peek, but he kept facing his glass and tried to sip his cider once again calmly. Once he drank it in, the lake water again soothed his nerves.

The newcomer took a seat somewhere behind Geoffrey. Geoffrey could only feel the distant presence. The air had become so thick and tense that Geoffrey felt that if a knife was sharp enough, it might be able to cut a slice off it. He had no idea how a simple rhythmic tap of

his fingers on a counter of a forsaken tavern could summon this ruler of New Lisbon's underworld.

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey," the voice was hoarse as if it had a wheezing whistle hidden beneath its bass quality. "What brings you home?" Geoffrey gulped. He had not expected the voice to come not from his back but from the tavern keeper that had kept him company over the last couple of hours. Part of the rules he had been taught as a street urchin was to never speak to the tavern keeper except to order. If the tavern keeper spoke to you before the lord arrived, then the meeting wouldn't happen. How had the glass cleaner known who he was or where he had come from? Geoffrey had even gone through the trouble of wearing a disguise.

Nevertheless, Geoffrey was now unafraid. The dangerous part of summoning a meeting with the pirate lord was over. The fact that they were speaking meant that he was safe, at least for now.

"Thank you for seeing me. How did you know who I was?" The question was asked out of pure curiosity, with no defiance or offense. The tavern keeper spared a look at his boss, requesting guidance as to whether he should explain the trick or not.

"The sign you used. We change the code every year, but remember all previous ones. We also teach different codes to different neighborhoods. This allows us to know where and when someone is from."

That was impressive. The apparatus that the pirates had assembled in the slums was nothing to scoff at.

Silence. Geoffrey knew the pirate lord was waiting for him to go first and state his business. He tried to get a look at the man by looking at the reflections in the glasses and bottles lining up the counter. It was pointless. The glasses were so clean and transparent that one saw right through them without finding any reflection. All darker liquid bottles were tagged and faced him at such an angle that he couldn't see anything behind them. He wondered if this was the reason behind the tavern keeper's religious cleaning habit.

"I have three thousand casks of sirenia that I want discreetly sold without it being traced back to me." Geoffrey knew he had the men's attention. The slightest raising of the brow of the bald tavern keeper

had been the most significant facial expression he had seen in the man after two hours.

Geoffrey had just revealed the piece of information that everyone was trying to uncover. Everyone wanted to know who had wiped the storehouses of the oil market clean before anyone else could get to it. The auction house's ironclad confidentiality policy had resisted every attack and attempt. Even the mayor hadn't been able to get an iota of information on the mysterious buyer from the auctioneers. Word of the scarcity and inflation of oil prices buzzed in every corner of the city. The slums were no different. After all, if the wealthy blokes had no bread, they would have no crumbs to hunt for.

"That seems simple enough even to begin to require a pirate lord's expertise."

"Here is the tricky part. I want it all to be done legally."

"Baffling. You came looking for a criminal mastermind to have him do something legal for you?"

"The best bandits get away with it, even if caught. You have channels, informants, lawyers, and connections I cannot imagine. I'll give you the addresses of the storehouses where the casks are and the respective passwords that will let you in. You just have to sell them for maximum profit."

The tavern keeper awaited a signal from his employer. The pirate lord seemed interested because the tavern keeper went on to talk business.

"And what's in it for the pirates?"

"Two percent."

"Ten," said the tavern keeper with a tone of finality after exchanging looks with the pirate lord.

"Three."

"Eight."

"Five, then?" said Geoffrey. "After all, I can still look for the black merchant in search of alternative sales channels."

Silence. Geoffrey had grown up on the pirate lord's turf and had known how to summon him. It was part of the code of the slums. All had the right to see the big boss who owned the place. Most never risked it, though. The lord had the reputation of getting rid of anyone

who summoned him unnecessarily. He had no idea how to seek out the rumored black merchant, the auctioneer of New Lisbon's black market. It was a bluff that he hoped the pirate lord wouldn't call.

The business was tough for pirates. There were layers upon layers of security that doubled and tripled after oil became the most sought commodity on the planet following the great lake flood. He hoped the promise of easy profit would be enough to entice the pirate.

"Aye. You have a deal."

Geoffrey heard the chair scratching the wooden floor behind him and felt the door open and then close again.

"Finish the cider. Pace yourself. Then you can go," explained the tavern keeper.

Geoffrey went back to drinking. A foreign thought entertained his mind. He had liked this pirate lord's style. He always remained in the shadow, only pulling the strings on his puppets and instructing his minions. Geoffrey couldn't even be sure if he had just been in the presence of a pirate lieutenant and not the lord himself. Even the tavern keeper could have been the pirate lord. Ambyssus' ambition... this was the best type of criminal. One that doesn't break the law but sucks it dry. One that you can't even be sure exists—someone who plays the game's rules from the shadows and still wins it every time. By Ambyssus' eye, this was so much fun.

Geoffrey calmly finished his cider. He then left some money to cover his bill and left. Guests would soon start coming to his estate. He'd better prepare.

Ch. 7 – The Loophole

“I know what'cha did!”

“I-I'm sorry?”

“Yeah, you think that no one knew, but I was there. Saw everything.”

“I-I don't follow, sir.”

“Know wha? I'm gonna tell her. How will she feel once she finds out?”

“Please, sir, I beg you. Stop this. Don't tell her.”

“Very well. I won't. But you gotta pay the appropriate price.”

“That's blackmailing! Extortion!”

“It's not that different from what you did. Give me one crown, and we'll call it a day.”

“How can I know you'll keep your word?”

“Please. I'm a man of honor. One crown is nothin' to keep ya little secret.”

Joey watched from around the corner the exchange. The extortioner wore a top hat and a faded, worn-down dark blue leather waistcoat. He had a golden tooth and a smile filled with gaps.

As the passerby walked away at a rushed, embarrassed pace, the extortioner scouted the premises and, finding another potential prey went to him.

“I know what you did!”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“I know what you did!”

“Hmph... leave me alone,” the man walked away, and the extortioner tapped his foot. He waited a few moments before another potential target walked down the street.

“I know what you did! We need to talk?”

“Who are you?”

“I'm the keeper of dark secrets. I will tell your family about what you've been doing behind their backs.”

“Y-You are speaking nonsense!”

That was it. Joey approached from behind the corner and approached from his blind spot while the man was occupied with his victim.

“Hello, Reggie.” The man jumped in fright.

“Constable Jones? What a surprise.”

“You can go. He's just messing with you. He doesn't know any secret.” The man, visibly relieved that his secrets were safe, walked away. Seeing his customer leaving before he could squeeze him off his money, Reggie pouted. “Come on, constable! That's bad for business!”

“Business? You're running a scam. Anyway, I still can't believe that your scam works.”

“Everyone's got secrets, constable.”

“Speaking of which,” Reggie fidgeted uncomfortably, “What's the word in the street?”

“Oh, nothin'.”

“Does anyone know who swept the market clean?”

“Come on, constable. You know bettah than to ask me about the oil market.”

“Right, right. But do you know anything about shipments of sirenian oil being moved under the counter?”

Joey took a shilling off his pocket and flaunted it to Reggie. As the scammer's eyes landed on the shiny coin, entranced, he reached for it, but Joey kept it off his reach.

“Come on, Reggie. I have nothing for you if you've got nothing for me.”

Reggie looked left and right nervously. “All I know is that pirates have been hiring a lot of muscle. They've come into some money recently. Some people say that they got their hands on some sirenia.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing. I swear on Ambysus' eye.”

“Ambi suzai? What word is that?”

“Ambysus' eye! I thought you were a well-educated man, constable. Haven't you ever heard the phrase.” It rang a bell, but Joey couldn't place where he'd heard it before.

“No, not really. First time I heard it.”

Joey threw him the shilling. Reggie bit it to ensure it was real, causing Joey to frown. Really? This crook didn't trust him? Joey pulled out another shilling from his pocket and waved it before Reggie.

“What about the Black Merchant? Any news?”

“Have a good day, constable.”

“Come on, Reggie, don't be like that.” Joey pulled a crown from his pocket, hoping it would catch his informant's eye. “Are you sure you know nothing about the black market or the Black Merchant?” Reggie didn't budge. “Would some time in prison help you jog your memory?”

“Fine by me.” It was useless. Whenever the Black Merchant was mentioned, there wasn't a crook in town that didn't shut down like this. Everyone was terrified of the man. It was like talking about the boogie-man.

“Go on. Beat it. You know where to find me if you think of something.” Reggie gave him a creepy smile and disappeared into the alley, off to scam some other rich passersby with fear of being told on by a stranger.

Joey walked in the direction of the stable where he'd left Luna. Despite the recent events around the lake, the city didn't seem much different. The laughter of children still rang in the streets. The trees of the city's many parks still managed to interrupt the big city's grey with pops of green color. Ladies walked in their gowns and dresses as they exchanged gossip, and merchants and peddlers hawked their wares and goods out on the street. Joey smelt popcorn and sighed in

relief that his daughter wasn't there. Had she been, the argument over having or not having popcorn would have been unpleasant.

Near his destination, he passed a dark alley where he heard the excited murmurs of young men. Curious, he glanced in their direction and found two teenagers graffiti drawing on the wall.

“Hey,” shouted Joey, “You punks! That's public property.”

There was a frantic confused exchange, “The cops! Leave it! Leave it! The young men ran in the opposite direction from the constable. Joey tried keeping up with them, but he was in his mid-thirties, and the kids were teenagers in their prime. They outran him, leaving him breathless behind. When had he become so old?

Trying to recover, he doubled back and looked at what the young men were drawing. It was scribblings of some kind. Joey didn't know the alphabet. It reminded him of Arabic, but the letters were all loopy and odd. At the top was the drawing of an eye, or at least that's what Joey thought it was.

“Humph, those punks. The drawing isn't even that great. What's wrong with kids these days?”

Cursing his aching legs, Joey took off again. Arriving at the little wooden stall where he'd left his horse, Joey threw a shilling to the stable boy and jumped onto Luna. The mare, feeling that her owner had returned, neighed happily, and started to restlessly urge Joey to let her show him how fast she was. He petted his mare's neck and thought about his destination.

He couldn't think of any other informants to visit, and he had come up empty. All he found was that pirates were more active than usual. He still couldn't understand how or why. Since they took them off the water, they'd become land sharks, ruling the slums. They hung on like obnoxious barnacles to their turf. It was neigh impossible to get any word on them.

Joey gulped nervously at the thought of his next destination. He'd been delaying it for too long. It was time to see his father's estate.

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“So that means that all the animals are doing well.”

“Yes, sir. I can't explain how this happened for the life of me, but it all seems well.”

“Do me a favor, Red. Let's keep it between us, shall we? Tell the boys that I want no mention of this to anyone.”

“Sir?” the old man's eyes showed concern at the suggestion of not sharing their discoveries with the others.

“Red?”

“Fine, sir.”

“Come on, Red. Don't be like that. I'm going to share it with the others. I just don't want people to start concocting ridiculous theories. Don't you worry, Red. I'll take this information up the right channels.”

“Aye. I'll leave the business management to you, sir. I'm just here for the animals.”

“Very good, then. Are you going to take them out?”

“Aye! They've been cooped up too long. They need to be out in the open.”

“Very well. Go do that.”

Geoffrey followed Red with his eyes as he headed toward the pier. It was an interesting discovery, but he would show it to the right people when it was right. It could be an important show of goodwill when the time came. He headed toward the parlor that had a commanding view of the property.

The lake water had started receding and was returning to its usual volume. As he climbed the stairs and looked around his property, his lungs swelled with pride. From owning cardboard to sleep on, he'd come this far. This was his kingdom, all his. As he entered the building, he passed his secretary to his office.

Deborah, or Debbie as everyone called her, was one of the most recent hirings that he'd done. She had graduated with the highest honors from Orca University. She had a forgetful face, and even though she had tried to tie her hair in a ponytail, she still managed to make it look like a mess. Her desk was also covered with random piles of paper and notes scattered everywhere. Even though her work post seemed chaotic, she had some system that made her the best secretary Geoffrey had ever seen.

“Hey, Debbie. How are you doing today?”

“Sir, there's a guest for you. He says it's urgent. I ushered him in. He's in the waiting room outside your office.”

“Very well. I'll see the guest now.” Geoffrey walked down the corridor and found a familiar face. He knew this man's facial features very well, even though he knew next to nothing about him, and the last time they met, there had been a counter between them.

“Hello, Geoffrey,” spoke the tavern keeper in that wheezy dark voice.

“Hello. Who did you leave in the tavern?” As soon as Geoffrey asked it out loud, he realized how stupid the question was. This man owed him no explanations as to how they managed their business. He couldn't help it. He'd been fascinated by how their system was set up and assumed that the tavern keeper stayed behind the counter twenty-four-seven, cleaning glasses.

The man emitted a sound between a grunt and a chuckle. Geoffrey wasn't sure which it was. “Would you like to step into my office?” The same sound came from the tavern keeper. This was a man of few words.

As they made it into the office, the tavern keeper inspected the room carefully before stepping into it. They both sat down.

“So, what should I call you?”

“Tavern keeper.”

“Very well. What news do you have for me?”

“We've studied your proposition and have found a way to make it happen.”

“How so?”

“The law dictates that every oil transaction has to be carried out in the oil market of its respective district.”

“Very well, so?”

“Well, embassies are technically foreign soil. We could argue that they are a different country altogether. They have no district. Therefore, no one could say we were breaking the law if we took the oil and did the deals there.”

Geoffrey felt goosebumps and the hairs of his arms standing up. By Ambyssus' grace... the elation of a loophole. It was the best feeling

to bend and twist the law and pass it through these little cracks in the law. Geoffrey excitedly went to grab a glass of lake water and gulped it down. The rush of joy was renewed, and he took a deep pleasurable breath.

“Wonderful, wonderful. Very resourceful, and I trust you have connections with the ambassadors.” The tavern keeper nodded. “What about the oil market stamps? Any oil barrels sold must carry the stamp, or they will be confiscated.”

“No law says you can't refill old barrels that already have the stamp.” Brilliant, another loophole.

“What about the transactions? The papers?”

“You'll make a batch of fifty barrels available in the oil market, which we'll make sure to buy. Then we'll carry the fifty barrels back and forth across the border, emptying and refilling them using the same papers. It's more work but all within the boundaries of the law.”

“Very well. Oh... Where are my manners? Would you like some water, tavern keeper?” The tavern keeper refused.

“One more thing. The papers will have to contain the producer's name, so you might receive visits from customers wanting to see your estate.”

“Very well. We'll be on the same boat, and I can count on your... *charisma* and *persuasion* to ensure their collaborative silence.”

“I'll be on my way then.” The tavern keeper stood up and left. Geoffrey looked out the window that had a panoramic view of his estate. It was time to start filling his coffers.

*

Silverlake Ranch was the oldest estate in Lake Grassum. Its towers, and strong, tall walls, were characteristic of the oil estates back when pirates plagued the shores of Lake Grassum. When pirates were finally eradicated, producers invested less in military defense and channeled their profits toward comfort and luxury.

Joey prompted Luna to gallop through the gates of the property that were kept open and rode down the road that led to the manor. He couldn't help reminiscing about how often he'd chased bugs in

these very woods. After leaving the tree line that stood between the gate and the manor, to his right, the lake shimmered as it reflected the light of the sun. In the distance, he saw the familiar humps of some of his father's dugongs, who were taking breaths so they could return to placidly eat the seagrass that grew on the shores of the lake.

He left his mare at the stables of the property and walked toward the manor. The house had two fronts and was made of brownstone. As he drew closer to the front door of the house where he'd grown up and where his parents had raised them, the images of the fateful night all came in a sudden violent rush. As he relived seeing his father dead on the floor, he had to lean against the wall for support. He was gasping for air. He tried pulling his attention off the house, focusing on the lake again, hoping it would help him calm down. After a few long minutes, he managed to regain his cool.

Just the thought of entering the house had given him such a violent panic attack. There was no way he could go in. He walked away from the manor and tried to find one of the people that he had left in charge of maintaining the Silverlake Ranch. Many would be inside the house, but he was sure that there would be someone doing some gardening or attending to the animals out here.

He walked past the stables again and the warehouses. All the facilities were in disrepair. His father had painted the property every year, making it look new, but it had been at least 10 years since it was last painted. The salty winds of the lake had punished the walls of the manor, making them look old and tired. His father would have hated seeing it.

Finally, he saw signs of movement. He spotted a woman at the piers of the property. She was carrying a basket of apples that she was throwing to the dugongs. As soon as her eyes landed on Joey, the stewardess smiled radiantly, put the basket down, and ran toward Joey. *Run* might be too strong of a word to describe what this sixty-year-old lady was doing, but still, she was marching as quickly as she could toward him.

“Joseph. It's you.” She hugged him, and Joey was happy to return the gesture.

“Hey, Sophie. It's been a long time, hey?”

“Too long! Too long! Are you... are you here to... maybe...” she tried clumsily. Every time they met, it was the same thing.

“No, Sophie. I'm not coming back to live here. You know I can't come near the house. It breaks my heart.”

“But it's a fine house, Joseph. It's a fine house indeed. It could fit all of your family nicely. How's the wife? And your daughter?”

“They're fine, thank you.”

“You know, you could have a whole litter of little Mollys running around the property if you moved back in, master. I'd help you care for the kids like I used to help your mother watch over you. Fine house this is.”

“I told you no, Sophie!” he screamed. She shrunk back, scared. “I'm sorry, Sophie. Too many memories.”

“It's alright Joseph. I'm sad that your father's heart would be broken if he knew this house was empty. It has housed five generations of your family, sir. It was once the last outpost against the pirates. It survived so many canon shots, but all it took was a broken heart to bring it down finally,” she said quietly. Seeing one of his old nannies brought back many powerful memories, too powerful for Joey to handle. He tried to change the subject.

“How are pop's dugongs?”

“Well, as you have instructed, we just leave them be. We care for them, but we don't ever harvest their blubber. Shame, that is, sir. It's a fine herd. You could get several barrels a year. It would help you cover the expenditures of...”

“I don't care about the money, Sophie. My father left me more than enough of it. The only reason why I keep the dugongs is because they knew my father and, in a way, they were his best friends.” They were the only ones that Joey was sure hadn't been involved in his father's demise.

“That they were, sir. Your father loved the dugongs as if they were his children.”

“I just came to check how the flood affected the estate. Any damage?”

“Ambyssus' grief!” Joey turned. It was the second time he was hearing this phrase today. “Of course not, sir. Your father's property

could hold off an army of pirates! Not even a tsunami could bring it down.”

“What about the dugongs? I heard that something strange happened with the water.”

“It's true that the water changed. It became sweet. Why don't you taste it, Joseph? It's so tasty!”

“Uh, no. Thank you.” He wouldn't drink anything that hadn't been extensively boiled and tested for poison. He didn't care if it was taken from a river in front of him, much less a lake that had undergone a weird change like that.

“That's too bad. Anyway, the animals were physically uncomfortable for a couple of days, but then, suddenly, they relaxed and settled in nicely.”

“Really? I thought that dugongs only did well in brackish or seawater.”

“I don't know the reason for it, sir. All I know is that they're doing well.” Strange.

“Sophie, what about the vacuuming parlor? Is it operational?”

“No, sir. Someone from the city came already to ask me that question a day or two ago.” Who could it have been? “What was the person's name?”

“Sidney? Mikey?”

“Finley?”

“Oh, yes. That's it. I'm sorry, Joseph. My head is getting old.

Joey allowed himself a small smile. The mayor hadn't fully trusted Joey's word and had sent someone behind his back just to make sure that estate's vacuuming parlor was really out of order. It seems that the mayor wasn't fully happy with the monopoly that Geoffrey was keeping over the extraction of sirenian blubber.”

“OK. And did you show him the equipment?”

“I did, sir. But what is there to show? It hasn't been used in over a decade. You know how the salt of the lake eats away at the metal and the wiring. It's all a huge mess. You have to fully disassemble it, clean it, maybe even change some parts, and assemble it again.

“I see. Maybe we should do that, you know? To help the city? After all, other producers will have to move their facilities away from the

shore, and all that we would have to do here would be to repair our vacuum.”

“That we could do, sir. If you're lucky enough to find someone who'll do it.”

“What do you mean, Sophie?”

“Haven't you heard? After the flood, every mechanical engineer good enough to handle this kind of equipment was hired. There's a huge waitlist. There's been a full bidding war between different producers.”

“Bidding? They are auctioning the mechanical engineer's service?”

“That they are, Joseph. From what I've heard, the price that you would have to spend to do this would be astronomical.”

“I wasn't expecting that. Bidding for a repairman's services? That doesn't sound right.”

“What can you do? The one with more money gets dibs on the specialized workforce.” He had to tell the mayor about this. “It's not right, sir. To kick these poor ranchers when they're down...”

Hearing Sophie speak of the poor ranchers made Joey sick.

“Well, *poor* wouldn't be the word I would use to describe them, Sophie.”

“Fair enough, sir.”

“Very well. I want you to have someone at least paint the house. And keep taking good care of my father's friends.” Hearing that Joey was giving the order to restore the property, Sophie smiled from ear to ear.

“Don't worry, I'll find the best painters in town. I'll talk to old Billy, who ran the crew that painted the house in your father's day. Mr. Jones would be proud, Joseph. Maybe your mother would even be happy to come here and take a look once we...”

“Thank you, Sophie,” Joey moved in for a hug. “I have to get going. Have to go back to work.”

“Very well, sir.” Joey turned to walk away.

“Joseph,” called the stewardess.

“Yes?”

“Remember, this will always be your house, sir. And this is your daughter's house too. “

“I know. I’ll see you later, Sophie. It was good seeing you.”

Joey walked to the stables and found Luna. She reached out with her head and drew Joey close, a horse's equivalent of a hug. He hugged her back and cried.

Ch. 8- The Rendez-Vous

It was a cloudy Saturday, and Joey was waiting at New Lisbon Central Station. The city was not the country's political capital, but it was certainly the heart of the economy. It wouldn't be an understatement to say that this city was the world's financial heart, pumping life-giving sirenia to the rest of the planet.

The majestic station had lines upon lines of railways that linked it to the rest of the continent. Adjacent to the station were the Aquilae Airport and the New Lisbon Port. They were all neatly designed and impressive constructs. Unlike other cities that kept building new atop of new, this city had practically appeared from thin air a hundred and fifty years ago when the formula to make sirenia was discovered, and commercial exploration of this lake began.

Joey looked up at the giant clock at the center of the three mega transportation structures. Rendezvous Clock, as it was called, marked ten fifteen in the morning. When people wanted to meet up, they often met there, hence the name. He appreciated how horses tied to the giant clock crank went about their daily march to wind up the giant timekeeping behemoth.

The commissioner had told him to come here to pick up the ambassador from the Science Academy. He thought back to the conversation. When asked why, he had said, "This is a weird case, and you're the weirdest investigator I have. You're a good fit for this assignment." He still wasn't sure if this had been a humorous jab or if the commissioner thought him weird.

He checked the dark plaque on which he had written in white chalk the name of the invited investigator, Professor Lincoln. It was very impressive that the mayor could get a member of the Science Academy in New Lisbon within a week of the incident.

Since he knew the train on which Professor Lincoln would arrive, rather than waiting at the Rendezvous Clock, Joey waited patiently at the platform to which the professor would be arriving any minute now. He felt something tug his trousers.

“Mr. Constable, can I see your badge?” A little girl with two ponytails and a cute lime green dress was calling for his attention. A few steps away, the constable spotted the girl’s mother lovingly smiling, watching the little girl ensure she was well-behaved and polite. The constable slightly bowed and touched his hat in greeting. The mom nodded and gestured an apology for the girl’s boldness. Joey crouched to be at the same eye level as the little girl.

“Of course, ma’am. I’m Constable Joey. What’s your name?”

“I’m Eliana, but my friends call me Lilly.” The girl turned the constable’s badge over in her hands, entranced by it. “One day, I’m going to be a constable too!”

“Are you? That’s fantastic.”

“Are you here looking for bad guys or thieves?” She accusingly pointed a finger at one other child standing next to the girl’s mother. “My brother stole my cookie from me earlier and called me ugly. Can you put him in jail?” The girl’s brother hid behind his mother, realizing his sibling was accusing him. Joey laughed at how adorable this situation was.

“Well, I don’t think your little brother has a criminal record. Why don’t I let him go with a warning this time?” Lilly smiled triumphantly at her brother.

“Can I draw on your chalkboard?” The constable spared a glance at the time on Rendezvous Clock. There were no signs of the train either. He could spare a few minutes. “Sure, Lilly. Here is some chalk. Go ahead.”

Seeing that the constable wasn’t going to arrest him, Lilly’s brother towed his mother along and curiously tried to make out what his sister was drawing.

“I'm sorry, officer. Are the children bothering you?”

“Not at all, madam. Entertaining law-abiding children is my favorite part of the job. Waiting for someone?”

“Yes, officer. My husband. He is coming back from a business trip to the capital. The children are very excited to see him. Isn't that right, children?”

Lilly excitedly drew on the chalkboard with the chalk. “Tony, you will never guess what this is!”

“Hmmm... I need to see more.”

Joey looked over the girl's shoulder to try to make what she was drawing. Was that an octopus? He could make out a spherical shape with one big eye in the middle. Tentacles or roots coming out of it. What in the world was this girl drawing?

“I know, Lilly! It's Ambyssus!”

“Ah. You've got me. Your turn, Tony.”

“Ambyssus?” Asked Joey to the children. There was that word again. He'd been hearing it more and more lately. “What is an Ambyssus?”

The children looked at him, surprised.

“Constable, you don't know who Ambyssus is?” Asked Lilly, disbelief in her voice.

“Constable, Ambyssus is a very smart cookie!” Added Tony, excitedly.

“Why does it only have one eye?”

“Because one is more than enough. It's a very good eye.”

“Yes, constable. Ambyssus has an eye for business.” The constable chuckled. What a rich imagination.

“What about these things? Are these roots?”

The children burst out laughing. “Of course not. These are his fingers.”

“But his fingers are different from ours. It's something more like tentacles.”

“How many fingers does he have?”

“Isn't that obvious? As many as he needs.”

“Did they come up with this story on their own?” inquired Joey from the children's mother.

“Oh, it’s just a bedtime story that we always tell them. Didn’t your mother tell it to you, constable?”

Strange. “No. I’ve never heard it before.”

The train whistle blew in the distance. The train was almost here. “Excuse me, children, I am going to need that back. It was nice to meet you, Lilly, and Tony. You be good now. Otherwise, Mom and Dad will come to the constable’s office, and I’ll need to have a word with you.

“Yes, Mr. Constable,” the children replied in unison.

Joey wiped the octopus-like drawing from the board and wrote again in bold letters, ‘Professor Lincoln.’ He held it up so that the professor would be able to spot him. The train stopped, and passengers started exiting the cars. Long-lost friends hugged, and families embraced. Joey witnessed the reunion of Lilly and Tony with their father. Soon, they were excitedly telling their dad a story while pointing at the constable. Joey laughed. Kids.

“Excuse me, agent. I am Professor Lincoln.”

Joey looked down. A middle-aged woman in a long coat greeted him. She had blue eyes and black hair. Her attire was simple and discreet but tasteful. She held a suitcase in each of her hands.

“Welcome to New Lisbon, Professor. Please, call me Joey. Let me help you with those bags.”

“Thank you, Joey. You can call me Esther.”

*

After Geoffrey returned home from another undercover incursion to the city, he first bathed himself in the lake. There was a certain stench that the slums had. Urchins and thieves could practically smell outsiders. Geoffrey had made sure that his whole ensemble would allow him to fit into the streets, but he now had to go back to what he liked to think as his real self, a wealthy businessman.

In the lake’s clear transparent water, Geoffrey enjoyed incomparable tranquility. The most pervasive feeling in his heart was that he wasn’t alone. As he relaxed in the lake, he took big gulps of the lake’s water to quench his thirst. As he did, flashes of certain

images came to his mind. Scenes from recent recurring dreams. They should have been scary or disturbing, given that they were so strange and alien, but Geoffrey felt no fear or repulsion, only nostalgia.

After Geoffrey had returned to the parlor, shaved, and put on a fresh set of clothes, he found his secretary busily navigating her chaotic organization system.

“Debbie, when's my next appointment?”

“At 11:00, sir. Shirley from the Bank is coming to see you.”

He held his silver pocket watch in his hand. Holding it soothed him. He checked the time. He still had thirty minutes until his next appointment. He supposed he could relax a bit and paint.

“Ha. Wonderful. That gives me plenty of time. I'll be in the office.”

Geoffrey went into his office. Today was a cloudy day, which gave the lake a grayish look. Through the other window, he could see the vacuuming parlor. They were working on a batch of balatees.

First, Geoffrey went to the little mini-bar he kept in his office. He grabbed a bottle of apple cider and opened it. Then, he took a flask he'd filled with lake water earlier and poured its contents into the bottle. He poured himself a cup and tasted the fruity drink.

Geoffrey searched the drawers of his desk and grabbed the brushes. He mixed the paint to get the right color and turned toward the painting, like a swordsman about to meet his opponent. He'd been under so much stress lately that he needed these rare moments of solace and relaxation.

Facing a white canvas, he decided to try to paint Ambysus's eye again. The hardest thing about painting was imprinting an emotion in something static. And this was a challenging emotion he was trying to convey. The one eye should capture Ambysus' intellect and guile while showing his respect for the game's rules. It should capture its majesty and obliviousness.

As Geoffrey painted the eye that looked beyond the depths and surfaces of the lake and onto the rest of the world, a small part of his mind wondered why he had become so obsessed with this image. He had always taken enough pleasure in reproducing the work of others. Why had he so fervently begun trying to paint his work all of a sudden? And where had he dredged up this image? Why did he see

this image in his mind's eye every night when he slept or every day when he drank water from the lake? When had he even started to only drink water from the lake or bathe in it? Where had he heard of Ambysus before? When had he become such a creative painter and underhanded businessman? Even as parts of his mind tried to weave the thoughts together and build up panic from the strangeness of it all, a soothing mental song from the lake's depths unfastened his concerns and tied them into bolder grander plans.

After a few minutes, Geoffrey paused, admiring his work in the painting. The eye now conveyed outrage at even being considered scary and violent. This was a harmless creature, the eye said, one that lived for business and profit, not for bloodshed and barbarity. See me as the ocean, the eye said, for like me, it is big and deep beyond your imagination, yet you fear it not. It's there to be surfed, harnessed and traversed. So am I, said Ambysus' eye. The painting showed the eye focused on the outside world while ignoring the herds of dugongs and manatees that graced the upper lighter corners of the painting, for it didn't care. It didn't mind the company if it was poorer than him.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Mr. Geoffrey, Shirley from the bank is here to see you." Joey checked his treasured watch, a beloved gift from his mentor. It was 11 o'clock already? He completely lost track of time whenever he painted.

"Please let her in," said Geoffrey as he carefully put down his brushes and clumsily took off the apron he had put on before he started to paint. He had arrived at a meeting with paint smudges on his clothes more than once.

Shirley walked herself in. She was wearing a smart business suit and held a briefcase. She was in her thirties. She wore her brown hair in a ponytail and had intelligent eyes and a professional smile.

"Shirley, come on in. Come on in."

"Jeff," greeted Shirley. From the tone of her voice, Jeff could tell that she was not happy with his letter. "Well, Jeff, let me tell you that I was skeptical that you could pay off your debt so quickly. I have to say that my manager at the bank was very happy with us." Looking

around at the office, her eyes were drawn to the painting Geoffrey had been working on. She forced herself to look away. "What I won't be able to explain to my manager," she continued, "is that you want to make an even crazier investment right after you've just finished paying off your ludicrous debt."

"Now, now," reassured Jeffrey, "you know I'm good for my word. I've just proved that to you. If anything, our last business exchange helped me build rapport with your bank management. Let me tell you, I can guarantee that I'll be able to pay this loan off in about a month. As you know, I've been taking payments in animals, and you can take all that as collateral." Geoffrey stood up and calmly headed toward the window facing the lake. His herdsmen were bringing in some of the manatees given to him as payment for using his vacuuming parlor. Geoffrey stretched out his hand toward the event unfolding before them. "As you can see, I'm not going out of business anytime soon."

Shirley stared at Geoffrey.

"You look different, Jeff."

"What do you mean?"

"You've always been a good business person. You've always had a good eye for business, but you have this voraciousness now. Hunger for more."

Geoffrey reached out for the drink's cabinet and poured out a glass of apple cider in a cup.

"Here, Shirley. Please have some."

"Thank you. She drank the cup and stood dazed for a few moments. After losing an invisible battle, she finally yielded.

"I'll see what I can do, Geoffrey. I'll get back to you as soon as possible. I need to bring this up to management. This is no small amount you're borrowing from us."

"Of course, of course. Perfectly understandable. Yes. I know that it sounds scary. But don't forget that I've just finished paying a loan that you thought was impossibly risky in less than a week. Please believe me on this. I'm going to make your bank even richer. I'm willing to pay back with interest, as I mentioned. Discuss the rate. Try to negotiate it down as much as possible but get me that loan. I need it."

“Very well, Geoffrey. I will see what I can do.”

“That's all I ask, Shirley. As always, it's been a pleasure.” Shirley stood up, turned around, and left. Seeing that Shirley left, Debbie knocked at the door. “Sir, two merchants that have bought oil from the estate came here to meet you.”

Slightly annoyed by the mention of the next guests, Geoffrey's answer was curt and dry. “Alright. Please let them in. I'll give them a tour of the facilities.” The pirate lord had come through and had secured sales channels by which he could get rid of all the oil he had hoarded and that the market thirstily craved. He wouldn't ruin the game, though. It all had to be within the boundaries of the law.

Unfortunately, for things to be legal, it was necessary to disclose the identity of the oil's seller. In case of an inspection of the cargo, the appropriate paperwork was essential. Geoffrey didn't mind it except for the fact that all merchants somehow thought they could have access to an unlimited supply of oil by getting in his good graces. That was not the case.

But Geoffrey would need these connections later on, and he would have never been able to get in touch with some of these people if it weren't for the pirate lord's schemes. Tiresome and draining as it was, he put on a professional smile and went to greet his guests so that he could give them a tour of the estate.

*

“Are you sure you don't need more rest, Professor? It was a long way from the capital.”

“It's fine, Joey. I took the night train precisely so I could arrive and start working immediately.”

The remark caused a little twinge of envy in Joey. He always had a tough time sleeping on the train. He had brought the professor to her accommodations in the Aurum Hotel, but she had insisted on leaving the bags at the reception, not even bothering to check-in. She wanted to get started as soon as possible.

“As I told you earlier, professor, the Commissioner has assigned me to provide you with as much assistance as you need during your investigation.”

“I appreciate that, constable.”

“So, where would you like to go first?”

“I would like to go straight to the lake, if possible.”

She didn't waste any time.

“Of course, right this way. We can take one of the precinct's locomotives. If I recall correctly, Dr. Link's boat should return in a few days, but they're already ready to receive you at the camp they've set up near the shores of the lake.”

“If it's OK with you, I would like to take a look on my own before I meet the local scientists.”

“Very well,” Joey considered pensively. Was the gap between the Science Academy and the rest of the scientific community so large, that the professor didn't even want to hear what her colleagues had to say?

Anyway, his assignment was not to judge but to treat the professor like a queen, using the commissioner's words. If the professor wanted to check things independently, they could go just walk the lake shores. Thoughts of Geoffrey came to him. Maybe he should take the professor to visit his estate. After all, it was close to the city, and he could take the locomotive there. Besides, he had felt something strange the last time they met. Bringing an emissary from the Science Academy to make his old friend sweat might be a good idea. He just had to make sure he didn't tell his wife about it.

“How about this? I have a friend who owns a ranch. Would you like to go there instead?”

“That sounds perfect.”

As Esther entered the cab, Joey checked the boiler and refilled it with sirenia. Joey appreciated how well-situated the hotel was. It was near a crossroad where three different lines intersected, allowing quick access to almost anywhere in the city. Joey climbed up into the green and brown locomotive and started it. The constable picked the purple flag and waved it while leaving the yard. They started heading toward the lake.

As the journey began, Joey observed the professor. She had a rucksack from which she took several newspapers. Looking at one of them, he saw the logo of the Aurum Hotel in the corner. She had asked for these at the hotel reception. Smart. A good way of getting a feel for the city's situation in the fastest way possible. Hotels usually kept copies of the most important newspapers for guests.

She went through each of them. He noticed how they went back a week. The incident happened five days ago. Right now, she was going through the newspaper from yesterday. The front page read "Barrel of Sirenian Oil at Record High Prices." The constable angrily sighed.

Despite the Mayor's constant reassurances that a deal had been made and that there would be no cuts in the supply of oil, he couldn't stop the buyers from rushing to the market and panic purchasing the barrels of oil stored. The mayor had been forced to limit the number of barrels that could be purchased daily, and the prices had soared even higher. Yesterday one lot of 50 barrels had been sold at a record price of 300 dollars apiece.

As the professor read and Joey was lost in his thoughts, the journey progressed swiftly. They were soon outside the city and heading toward Geoffrey's estate. It would still take them one more hour before they would get there. Professor Lincoln put down the papers and signaled she was ready to speak.

"So... any theories?"

"Theories will come later, and so will questions. You are a competent detective and a brilliant investigator; otherwise, you wouldn't be assigned to accompany me. I feel, however, that right now, a fresh pair of eyes and an unbiased opinion is the greatest contribution I can provide. Let's go to the lake and check on the situation, and then we can exchange impressions. Deal?"

Joey nodded. A few moments later, he heard a train whistle.

Ch. 9 – The Painting

Joey hurriedly stood up and saw that a locomotive was coming from the opposite direction. He pulled the brakes, and the vehicle came to a halt. This was one of the inconveniences of having a single track on a route. Even though Geoffrey had invested significantly in the rails that connected the town to his estate, he likely hadn't ever considered installing double rails. That was just too expensive, even for him.

Joey brought up the checkered flag and waved it in counter-clockwise circles. The conductor from the other locomotive signaled with their checkered flag in a square-like movement.

“We need to go back to the nearest turning stop so that they can get through. Please hold on a minute.”

The constable shifted gears and slowly pulled back. The other vehicle followed suit and continued its onward march. Finally, they made it to the emergency stop. Joey stopped the locomotive, took a bar out of the cab, and went to the railway switch. He changed the direction of the tracks and parked the locomotive so that the next locomotive could pass.

As the other locomotive passed slowly, the two passengers came to the window and took off their hats in a gesture of thanks. They were foreigners. From their wealthy attire, they seemed to be merchants from the East. They hastily returned to the cab as they saw the badge on the constable's uniform.

“Wait!” Ordered Joey. There was something off here. They were afraid of him.

The men came back to the cab’s window.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I am Constable Joseph Jones. May I see some papers, please?”

Both men were visibly nervous. They took out their passports. Joey checked them. They were both merchants, as he had suspected. Strange. Why would these two be so nervous about meeting local law enforcement? Were they up to some monkey business?

“What brings you fine gentlemen, here?”

“Nossing special sir. We went to see mister Geoffrey to make a business proposition.”

“Do you mind if I search the locomotive?”

Both men exchanged frightened looks.

“I don’t see why...”

“Please step aside, gentlemen.”

Both merchants stepped out of the locomotive. Geoffrey went around searching for any signs of illegalities with no success. Everything seemed in order. He discovered they were oil merchants when he opened the men’s business ledger. As he went through the ledger, a document fell out. Joey examined it. It was a receipt for a purchase. They had purchased fifty oil barrels for three hundred and fifty dollars apiece. What a fortune. Perhaps this was why the men were so nervous, reasoned Joey.

Although purchases in the oil market always disclaimed the supplier, the buyer’s identity was never disclosed in the records. Too many times, pirates had scouted the auction house looking for merchants to rob. Confidentiality and discretion were important qualities in the oil trade. Noticing the supplier, he saw they had bought oil made at Geoffrey’s estate. These were some of the lucky ones that had been able to purchase from the oil market in the last few days. What a coincidence. They had managed to buy fifty casks, all from Geoffrey’s estate.

They might have wanted to meet with their supplier to visit the facilities. Sometimes, merchants did this as an added guarantee that the oil was of superior quality.

“Everything is in order, gentlemen. Have a good day.”

“Sank you, sir.” They soon resumed their march. The watchful gaze of Professor Taylor had witnessed the whole exchange. As the constable reengaged the rail switch and set the locomotive in motion, his thoughts lingered in the encounter.

“That was awkward.”

“I felt something was off. But I think they were just nervous because they didn’t want too many people to know about the cargo they would take back home. Standard merchants’ practice.” The professor shrugged while Joey considered why they would have been so afraid of him. They continued on their journey.

They arrived at the terminal on Geoffrey's property. There wasn't much to say about the terminal other than that it just ended. There was no imponent station or a wide respectable platform. The line just ended, and there was a track switch that led to another ending in case some maneuvering was necessary.

Joey helped the professor out of the cab, and she took in the sights around her. Joey noted how she was taking deep breaths. He wondered if the mayor had mentioned that the smell of the lake water was one of the things that had changed.

“This way,” said Joey. He took the professor down a gravel path, past the warehouses near the terminal and the horses. He wasn't sure which means of transportation Jeff used these days to get his produce into town, but if he had to guess, it would be his locomotive. It was much faster than taking the horses. With the steep price of sirenia these days, Jeff would likely have to consider using horses instead.

Around the corner, Joey stopped as the professor slowed her pace to appreciate the view of the lake.

“Is this your first time to Lake Grassum?”

“No. But it's been many years. I'd forgotten how clear the water is.”

“Come. My friend is probably in his office. Let's go up.”

Geoffrey had dug into the sand until he hit the bedrock and laid large rocks on top of it, forming what could be mistaken for the old forts used in the pirate wars. Undoubtedly, he'd gotten the inspiration for the design from Silverlake Ranch, where they had played together

as toddlers many times. A big canal was dug from the building to the lake shore, which brought the animals to a water elevator. Once the animals were herded toward the tower, the pumps were activated, flooding the construct and bringing the sirenians close to the extraction facilities.

One could easily understand how much more expensive it was to build things this way than bringing the parlors right on the shore. Not to speak of the fuel costs of running the pumps for the water elevators. No wonder Geoffrey was the only rancher *crazy* enough to make this investment. Even if others had laughed at him before, no one was laughing at him now.

Joey and Esther climbed up the stairs and walked in through the door that was left open. It seemed that Jeff had hired a new secretary since he last visited.

“Hi. I'm Constable Joseph Jones. This is Esther Lincoln. I was hoping I could see Mr. Geoffrey?”

“You didn't make an appointment.”

“No, I did not. But if you tell Mr. Geoffrey that Joey is here, I'm sure he'll vacate some room in his schedule.”

“Follow me. You can wait here. He's in a meeting right now, but it should be almost over at any minute.

“Thank you.”

The professor gave Joey a meaningful look. She had registered the oddness of not announcing the arrival of a Science Academy emissary. Still, he just shrugged it off with an apology and told her that he'd explain it later. They sat in the comfortable sofas in the waiting room. There was the distant sound of a door opening and steps and increasingly clear voices.

“... walk you out.”

“Thank you. I am sorry, Mr. Geoffrey; I thought you would keep the animals after vacuuming them. I didn't realize the contract specified that the animals we give you should be over a certain weight.” The voice was heavy and serious.

“Understandable, Mr. Wilson. Perfectly understandable. Why don't I let you bring me the animals at a later date of your convenience? I know these are grim times. Troubled times. Yes. We'll

make it at a later date. If the weight is within the terms of what was contracted per animal, I don't mind which ones you choose."

Joey and Esther saw an old man emerge from the corridor, accompanied by a younger one, leave the office. They absent-mindedly acknowledged their presence with a nod and walked past them, darkness and gloominess cast on their tired walk. They looked like men who had just lost a war. The gloom was soon dispersed as Geoffrey appeared after them.

"Have a safe trip."

Geoffrey caught sight of Joey and stood in a daze for a second. He blinked a couple of times as if to make sure that he was actually seeing him and not dreaming, and then his lips broke into a radiant smile!

"Joey! What are you doing here?"

"Well, you did tell me to come for a visit."

"I did, didn't I? What a wonderful surprise."

"Sir, they said..."

"No worries, Debbie. You did well. Joey is a dear friend. We go way back. I'll take them to the office."

"Very well, sir."

"Joey! It feels like forever since I saw you, old friend. But it hasn't even been a week. Please come on in." Joey caught Jeff raising his brow, evidently intrigued by Joey's company.

A thick and warm red carpet blanketed Geoffrey's office floor while a gentle fireplace burned away in one of the walls with its crackling song. There was an outward window that gave a panoramic view of the lake and another inward window that faced the vacuuming parlor. The men were busily working the cattle outside.

"It can't possibly be the original. Can it?" asked Professor Lincoln as she walked toward a painting hanging over the fireplace.

"By no means, madam. Painting is just a hobby of mine. This is my crude attempt at reproducing the masterpiece."

The painting portrayed a dark tumultuous sea with a whale dead along its shore. Then, a muscled man, tears on his face, hammered a bloody harpoon into a hoe. Joey recognized it. It was one of the most emblematic paintings pertaining to the whale extinction disaster. It was called "The New Beginning."

“I once saw the original at the Art Gallery of the capital. It left quite an impression on me. I have tried painting it multiple times. This has been the most successful attempt. The way Vincenzo painted the sea and the pain in the man’s face is just beyond my skill. By the way, I’m Geoffrey. You are...”

“Esther Lincoln.”

“This is the ambassador from the Science Academy,” added Joey, expectant to see his friend’s reaction. He widened his eyes but soon regained his composure.

“I see. Of course. And I suppose that you’re escorting the professor?”

“Yes, we’ll be investigating the flood together.” Joey didn’t miss the flash of alarm in Geoffrey’s eyes that he quickly repressed.

“That was naughty of you, Joey. You didn’t warn me of your visit or tell me you would bring the esteemed professor along. I could have ensured refreshments suited to such a fortuitous encounter. It’s not every day that we get a representative from the capital and the Science Academy. Can I get you anything? Our apple milkshake is a specialty of my estate. The secret is to use manatee milk, you see. It’s sweeter than dugong’s milk. I also have apple cider, water, and whisky.”

“No, thank you, Jeff.”

“I will pass on your kind offer, Mr. Geoffrey.”

Sad disappointment came to Geoffrey. “How sad that you won’t have a taste of our lake products.” Joey registered the emotion as very exaggerated. There was something off about Jeff. “Oh, silly me. I forgot about your little trauma, Joey. I shouldn’t have offered. I apologize.”

“It’s fine, Jeff. Don’t worry.”

“What about that painting over there?” Asked Esther as she gestured toward a canvas covered by a cloth.

“Oh, it isn’t finished, Professor.”

“Is it another attempt at The New Beginning?”

“No, it’s something different. I hardly ever do this, but I was trying to paint an original.”

“Let’s see it, Jeff. It can’t be that bad,” joked Joey.

“Fine. Fine. You can see it.” Jeff crossed the office and unveiled his creation.

The painting showed something happening underwater. A giant eyeball could be seen in the shadows of darkness. One could tell it was giant because nearer to the surface, herds of dugongs, tiny in comparison, leisurely swam around. Shadows projected by tendrils and tentacles could be seen in the distance.

“What an interesting painting, Mister Geoffrey.”

“Do you like it, professor? I'm glad.”

“On one hand, the creature at the bottom of the painting should feel eerie and frightening, but... how can I put this? It looks harmless. And there's so much intelligence in it.”

“You have a good eye. That's exactly it. It's a recurrent dream I have been having lately. I thought it would make a good painting.”

“It reminds me of something I have seen before,” Joey said.

“Really? Curious. Curious.”

“What will you call the painting, Mr. Geoffrey?”

“I don't know. I'll have to think about it.” After looking appreciatively at the alien creature depicted in the painting, Joey finally broke the artistic silence in the room.

“Ahem, Jeff, I was hoping you could assist us in our investigation.”

“Certainly. Certainly. Have you ever been to a vacuuming parlor, Professor Lincoln?”

“I can't say I have.”

“Well, in that case, why don't I give you a tour of my estate first? As a producer, I'm just as worried as everyone else. We care about the lake's herds. They are the lifeline of the world. I would be happy to show you how things work and answer any questions you might have along the way.”

“That would suit me. Would that be alright with you, constable?”

“Sure. I have never had the official tour of your estate either, Jeff.”

“Nonsense, nonsense, Joey. You have been here many times. This estate would have never been possible without the help of your late father; may he rest in peace. You see, Professor Lincoln, Joey, and I were schoolmates. I was the poorest bloke, and Joey the wealthiest. His father was one of the biggest ranchers in the lake. I was always a

hardworking man and wanted to start a herd, but no one would lend me the capital to get started. Joey's father was the only one who believed in me and gave me a chance."

"Pops was a kind soul," confirmed Joey, "he took great pleasure in helping kids with potential."

"He sure was. He sure was. Anyhow, don't let looks fool you, Professor Taylor. Your escort is one of the wealthiest men in town. He inherited quite a fortune," said Jeff, winking. "Here is the vacuuming parlor."

A giant cylinder was at the center of the large room. Valves and pipes lined the walls and connected the lipovacuum to the boilers in the next room. A crew of men busily handled needles connected to the cylinder by thin hoses. Thirty dugongs gently waited as the men vacuumed them. The machine was loud, so Geoffrey had to scream to make himself heard as he explained how things worked.

"So, the idea is to vacuum the blubber of the animals. The animals don't go through any pain throughout the procedure. Can you see those green needles right there? They contain a saline solution that magnifies the volume of the blubber. It also has a local anesthetic. The men use these needles first in whatever body parts are particularly plump, usually the midsection. Then, they use those needles marked in red. They are kept hot with the steam of the machine. They soften the fat and make it easier to vacuum it. It also cauterizes the wound as it exits so the animals can scar nicely."

"Do they experience any discomfort? Are there any side effects to the animals?" shouted Professor Taylor.

"No, no. We aren't heartless. We take animal rights very seriously. The blubber of sirenians hardly does anything for them regarding heat insulation. It helps them have good buoyancy. We never take more than what would affect their swimming. Because of the local climate, they don't feel any cold. They don't experience any more discomfort than a cow being milked."

"How often can you vacuum them?"

"In a bad year, three times. In an exceptional year, six times. The foremen let us know once they are fat enough to undergo the procedure. On average, we can get five barrels per dugong a year. One

barrel has one hundred and fifty liters, so about 750 liters per year, per animal.”

They neared the platform. One bull was being vacuumed, and didn't seem to mind it. Professor Lincoln gently petted the animal's snout, to which the bull seemed to react with contentment.

“They are harmless animals, professor. Incredible creatures.”

“It's my first time seeing one up close. They are so big!”

“Adults get to three meters and five hundred kilos. Dugongs are the smallest of sirenians, however. Our facilities are also equipped to vacuum the bigger manatees or even balatees. Let's go outside. I am going deaf in here.”

Once they left the vacuuming parlor, the silence was music to everyone's ears.

“Great Ambyssus. That's why I had the windows of my office be as soundproof as possible. This room kills me.” The constable grimaced, hearing the word. He had been hearing the name more and more over the last few days. He caught Esther frowning as she heard the expression.

“What is done with the oil once it's vacuumed?”

“The oil is then slowly boiled in water for two to three days until it reaches the desired viscosity. Then it is shipped to the capital.”

“Fascinating.”

“Jeff, do you think we can show her how we take care of the herds? We also want to get to the lake, as we told you. That's the main reason we're here.”

“Of course, of course. I apologize. I'll introduce you to Red, our chief herder. He'll show you the works.”

As they left the building, they started walking toward the lake. Soon, they spotted Red. Geoffrey shouted out his name and beckoned him to join them. Red parted from his assistants with some admonitions and instructions and went to join the group.

“Red, you know Joey. Professor Esther, allow me to introduce you to the finest herdsman in the whole lake.”

“Ma'am. Constable.”

“How are you doing, Red?”

“I'll leave you two with Red. Red, show them the herd and assist them however you can. Feel free to take them in the Nautilus for a ride if they like.”

“Yes, boss.”

“I'm afraid I must leave you to it. As you know, a lot is going on since the flood happened and I must attend to my business. It was a pleasure to meet you, professor. I hope you enjoy your stay in New Lisbon. Joey.”

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“Thank you, Mr. Geoffrey.”

Geoffrey turned around and hurried back to the vacuuming parlor. He kept his eyes on his two guests, that were chatting with Red.

Geoffrey soon was back in his office. He started pacing around in it. The first stage of his plan had been successful. The first step had only been possible because he was the first to get wind of what was happening at the lake. He had old Red to thank for that. As Joey's old man always said, the early bird gets the worm. Knowledge was an advantage that couldn't be understated or underestimated in business.

The next step had been to capitalize on the foreknowledge of the disaster and empty out the oil reserves in the auction house. That had inflated the price beyond what it would have been if he hadn't done anything about it. The cost of barrels of oil had skyrocketed to triple the amount it used to be. This gave him a return of three times as much money as he had invested in the space of a week.

Of course, he had foreseen that the mayor's office would try to enforce some sort of regulation to prevent the barrels from being dealt under the table, but the pirate lord's assistance ensured he could sell all his stock.

The greatest concern was his previous guests. Thoughts of Joey and Esther's visit came to him. He had to make sure those two didn't meddle in his affairs. He was sure he could handle Joey, but this professor was a variable that he failed to take into consideration. How could he forget that the Science Academy would send an ambassador here? This could mean trouble. He had to hurry his plans.

Ch. 10 – The Nautilus

Red was a thin man in his fifties. His skin was burned by the sun, and he smelled of water and nature. He took off his hat, revealing his bald head.

“So, what can I do for you today?”

“I would like first to take a walk by the lakeside. Would that be all right?”

“Of course, ma'am. Please follow me.”

Since the time of the flood, one week earlier, the water level had steadily decreased to more normal levels. But the still submerged trees and the lack of any beach still attested to the disaster.

“On the day of the flood, the water went as high as this,” signaled Red. There was a mark in the barks of the tree that illustrated his point.

“The preliminary report sent to the academy commented that there had been a change in the lake’s salinity. Is that correct?”

“That’s right, mam. You should have a taste. It's fresh. Sweet, even. Here, let me go get a glass for you to try...”

“That won't be necessary, Mr. Reddington.”

Esther put down her bag and started pulling out boxes, bottles, and tools. She methodically collected lake water samples and started mixing them with different reagents. The water changed colors in the different vials and tubes. While the professor ran her experiments and tests, Joey poked around a little.

“Hey, Red? Is it just me, or does Jeff seem a bit strange?”

“Not my place to say, sir. I am just a humble herdsman.”

“Come on, Red. It’s just the two of us talking. Is he OK? Something seemed off about him today.”

“I guess it’s because of the flood. No one was expecting that.”

“So, you do see a difference.”

“Well, Mr. Geoffrey is a bit more... how can I put this? He is more single-minded than usual.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know Mr. Geoffrey. He has always been a good businessman. No one climbs his way out of poverty like he did without being hardworking. But he seems to be a bit more devoted to work than usual. He’s been spending every minute he can at the estate. He hasn’t gone home in many days. I have spotted him spending the night in his office more than once. What’s the use of having those tracks to get home quick if he doesn’t use them?”

It wasn’t the kind of answer that Joey was expecting. Was he really the only one seeing how Jeff looked strange?

“How peculiar,” commented Esther.

“What’s that, ma’am?” Inquired Red.

“Have there been any sightings of dead fish coasting?”

“Should there be? It’s not like the lake drowned them”, joked Red.

“But the decrease in salinity would have. Not all species. Many species that inhabit brackish water environments can adapt to a change in salinity, but not every single one. Some more sensitive species of fauna and flora wouldn’t be able to deal with the radical change in the environment.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, mam. I guess the lake stabilized more quickly than we imagined possible. The lake leads into the ocean. Maybe they just made a run for it!”

Esther didn’t seem convinced by the theory.

“The newspaper mentioned that the last time there was a flood in Lake Grassum was over a hundred years ago?”

“Yes, mam. It’s a very rare event. First time I’ve seen something like this in all my life.”

“Why don’t you take us to your herd, Mr. Red? I want to learn more about the local ecosystem and the part that the herds play in it.”

“Most certainly. Right this way. They're resting in the pen, but we can all go out in the Nautilus to take them to graze.”

They walked back toward the compound.

“How many animals live in this estate?” Asked the Professor.

“We had three hundred until last week, but because of the crisis and the deal the boss has cut with other producers, our herd has already tripled in size. So far, we have only had manatees, but now the boss wants to branch out and is accepting dugongs, balatees, and even Stellers' out in the ocean. I can't hire new herdsman fast enough. We have been all working around the clock to accommodate the newcomers.”

“Have the animals displayed any sign of sickness or discomfort after the lake's conditions changed?”

“No, mam. They're relaxed. No signs of stress. This is the middle of their reproduction cycle, and they haven't stopped breeding either. Animals sense when it is not a good time to breed. The fact that they keep going is a good sign.”

They made it to the beach. Colorful buoys marked the outlines of the pen where the herd was kept. Occasionally, animals came to the surface to take a deep breath before they submerged again.

“Why do you keep them in pens? Are there any predators in the lake?”

“Nothing attacks an adult. But sharks try their luck with juveniles sometimes. You will only find sharks deep into the lake. The biggest concern is cattle thieves. Sometimes they try to take the beasts away.” Red spat on the floor. “Never on my watch, though.”

“I see. What about the food? What do your animals eat?”

“Sirenians eat mostly seagrass. They eat an average of 40 kg of it a day. When they come near the coast, they also love to eat pond apples or nuts falling into the water. We sometimes feed them lettuce, apples, or other vegetables if we can't take them out to graze.” He pointed to some men dumping apples off the boat in the middle of the pen. Apple orchards were having an excellent year and could be bought at cheap prices. They were used to supplement the herds' diet.

“You must be concerned with the decrease in the lake salinity, then?”

“Well. At first, I was. Seagrass needs salt. If the lake stopped having brackish water, we would all be ruined. It's one of the things that makes Lake Grassum the best place in the world to raise cattle. The clear waters, sunlight throughout the year, and the lake's high salinity make it a perfect place for the seagrass. But, despite our fears and concerns, it turns out that seagrass is still thriving.”

“How is that possible?”

“I am not sure you'd believe me if I told you. It's easier if I show you. Would you like to spend the day with me on the lake, shepherding the herd?”

The professor looked at Joey. Joey nodded, consenting to whatever decision she'd made.

“That would be lovely.”

“Very good, then. Let's get into the Nautilus, then.”

Red walked with them to a pier made up of floating platforms. In this, too, Geoffrey had shown great foresight and caution. All piers in the other producers' estates were probably submerged. But not this floating one. The platforms were roped together and anchored to the lakebed. Despite the anchoring, the platforms still wobbled and shifted as they stepped on them. Joey and Esther tried to keep their balance, but Red walked them as if on solid ground.

“Here we are. Our Nautilus fleet. Hey, Johnny! I'm going to take the herd out for grazing. Gather the boys and the dolphins. We are going to be out for the day.”

The Nautilus was shaped like a globe. It was made of metal and wood. Two propellers hinted at how the submarine maneuvered through the water. A big window afforded a good view to the passengers of the submarine, and lanterns on the front of the vessel helped it light the bottom of the lake when it was underwater.

“Have you ever been on a submarine dive?”

Joey nodded. Esther shook her head.

“Well, don't be afraid, professor. It's just like riding a boat. There is enough space for the three of us in Nautilus I. It's the biggest submarine in our fleet. Please step right in.” Red opened the door and stretched out his hand to assist the professor. She confidently jumped

from the platform and made her way into the submersible. Joey followed suit, and finally, Red.

Red sat in the pilot's seat, and Esther sat next to him for a better view throughout the trip. Joey took the back seat. Red started showing the newcomer how a submarine was operated.

"Here is the fuel gauge. Like trains and zeppelins, submarines are also powered by sirenia. Here is the boiler and the pressure valve. We want to ensure that the pressure and temperature are always above this threshold. The boiler is isolated from the hull, but despite the small space, the water around us will keep us cool, so the temperature will be quite pleasant, although it can get a bit hot sometimes.

Now here are the ballast tanks. We let water into them when we want to go down and push water out when we want to go up. The boiler powers the tanks, but there are these manual pumps in case of malfunction. We can turn the headlights of the submarine on right here. Feel free to do so if there is anything that you wish to see or illuminate. Is that clear?"

"How do you make sure that the sirenians follow you?"

"Well, they aren't the brightest animal, but they are surely one of the meekest. They already know us and follow the submarines. We also have some help." Red searched inside his shirt and found a small brass cylinder. He blew it. No sound came out. Shortly after, a shadow crossed the submarine's window, and a series of splashes followed. A pod of dolphins happily jumped and swam around the Nautilus. They were two meters long, slick, and with smooth rubbery skin. Their long noses and curious, intelligent eyes approached the window, looking amusedly at Red.

"Shepherd dolphins!" Exclaimed Esther.

"That's right." Said Red, love for the animals in his eyes. "They've been bred right here in the lake and have become our greatest friends in caring for the sirenian herds. The big one over there is Sunny. She is the matriarch of the group. The one with the scar is Bay. He got that from fighting off a shark."

"Red is one of the best dolphin trainers in the lake. That's why Jeff values him so much."

"How would the dolphins do in freshwater?"

“Dolphins develop skin conditions if they spend too much time in freshwater. But as you can see,” he said, pointing at the pod, “they are all doing fine.”

Red pushed the lever and let water enter the ballast tanks. The submarine started diving into the water. Soon they were completely under the surface.

“Let me show you why.” Red picked up the whistle again and blew on it in a short sequence. The pod disappeared out of view. That had been the sign to round up the herd.

“How do the dolphins guide the herd?”

“Sirenians have a very good sense of hearing. The dolphins use their sonar and ultrasound to make them go where they want to. Today we're going to go as far north as we can. It's a good thing you got here early. It will give us enough time to be back before nightfall.”

Red pushed another lever, the propellers started spinning, and the submarine moved slowly forward. As the ballast tanks filled, the submarine became fully emerged. Soon one of the dolphins moved past the Nautilus and then another. Slowly, dugong after dugong went past the Nautilus, following the direction of the dolphins.

“The lake's the best place to take 'em out to graze 'cause it's clear and transparent. Seagrass needs a lot of sunlight to grow quickly.”

“Where will you take the herd to graze?”

“Where there's grass tall enough.”

“Does the grass grow everywhere in the lake?”

“No. Only where it's shallow. Let's say up to 40 meters in depth. More than that, and the plants don't get enough light.”

“How much of the lake is that deep?”

“Several kilometers near the shore. Then, toward the center, it gets really deep. More than a kilometer, from what I've heard.”

The herd swam slowly in a peaceful and orderly fashion. They looked like a flock of birds covering the sky. Wherever Joey and Esther looked, dugongs and manatees were swimming above, under, to the sides, and all around them.

After traveling for one hour, Red found a seagrass underwater prairie meadow that he deemed worthy.

“What makes you decide where to stop?”

“This seagrass gets 5 to 6 meters in height. It's nearly full-grown. That means it's ripe for the cattle to eat it.”

“I see.”

“We're here. I'll let the herd graze while we explore. There's something I want to show you.” Red blew the whistle in a short, repeated pattern, and the pod of shepherd dolphins led the cattle down to graze.

“We must go deeper to see it; it only works from certain angles. Let me see if I can adjust the Nautilus just right...”

A series of maneuvers followed, with Red slowly filling more of the tanks and spinning the submarine. Finally, after several attempts, he found what he was looking for. He pointed to it, excited.

“Look. Over there! Can you see it?”

The water seemed to be split in two, one deeper and darker, the other lighter and clearer.

“It can't be. Is that...?” pointed Esther to the window, wide-eyed.

“Let's go. See what happens when I cross it.” Red guided the submarine through the border between the two. It felt like they were breaking the water's surface, but they were going from one type of water to the other.

“A halocline!” Exclaimed Esther.

“What's that?” Asked Joey.

“It's when water stratifies or forms layers. It's like oil and water that don't mix, but in this case, it's with different types of water. The darker, I suppose, is saltier. The more transparent one is freshwater.” Joey regarded the dolphins as they went up to the surface for air and then rushed to the saltier and more comfortable layer of water. The dugongs also seemed to be sticking to the darker strata of the water. It was uncanny.

“But why don't they just mix?” asked Joey. “Isn't it all just water?”

“There are many forces at play that can contribute to a cline. Temperature. Salinity.” Joey noted that although the professor had started as if she would list many more factors, she was stuck at two.

“But they have always mixed. Why don't they mix now?”

The professor paused. She didn't know.

“Let me show you a bit more.” Red made the submarine go in a wide circle. “There! Do you see it, Professor?”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” The cline they had seen earlier was perfectly horizontal, but here, the shape of the cline grew shapeless and erratic, as if branching out. The deeper water stretched towards the surface, forming tunnels that cut through the freshwater layer.

“Could it be a current of some kind?” asked Red.

“I... I don’t know. But this explains why there haven’t been coastings of dead fish and plants. The lake didn’t lose its salt. Some force just reorganized the salt in the water.”

*

For the rest of the day, Geoffrey kept welcoming merchants, fellow producers, and representatives from the mayor’s office. Throughout the afternoon, he kept looking toward the lake, wondering how much Joey and the Science Academy professor had managed to uncover. They had been out for several hours.

After his ninth meeting of the day, Geoffrey called Debbie over.

“Sir?”

“Is there anyone else wanting to meet me?”

“Three more people, sir.”

“Did they make an appointment?”

“They did not.”

“Ask them to return tomorrow. Tell them I have a meeting to go to.”

“I’ll do so, Mr. Geoffrey.”

“Thank you, Debbie.”

It was enough for the day. It was surprising how much his hospitality was essential to the next step of the day. But it was mid-afternoon, and, truth be told, he didn’t want to be here when Joey and the professor returned. He felt almost embarrassed to admit it. After all, Joey was his close friend. Maybe he should just have a heart-to-heart conversation with him. Geoffrey began feeling his mouth go dry and overwhelming anxiety. He reached for the jar filled with lake

water and drank it in big gulps. So refreshing. Where was he... oh, yes! He was about to leave toward the stables.

He couldn't take his Mercury 3000 on this next errand. It was too conspicuous. Besides, it wouldn't hurt for everyone to think he hadn't left the office.

Geoffrey went to grab a horse from the stables. Geoffrey's horse was white and glorious. His name was Avalanche. He petted him soothingly and whispered comforting words into his ears. He then jumped on him and took off. Even though machinery had its complexity and beauty, nothing could beat the sense of freedom from riding.

The sun set as Geoffrey galloped through the dusty road. All over the different ranches in the lake, workers were about to end their shifts, and many would go to Beluga Tavern. Over the last few days, Geoffrey had come here every night, asked for a cider, and tried to get a pulse of workers' morale in the competing estates.

Even though City Hall and the Producers Union tried to present a united, strong front, those more aware of the numbers of financial projections of the following months knew that their situation was dire. The maintenance costs for getting the vacuum parlors up and running again were oppressive. The fact that Geoffrey kept a man, constantly bidding for engineers and jacking up the prices even further, wasn't helping his colleagues either.

In addition, even if no more floods would come in their lifetime, legislation was surely underway to ensure a fiasco like this year's wouldn't happen again. Producers couldn't afford to leave things as they were. They would have to relocate their facilities to higher ground. To worsen the situation, everything became more costly with the price of energy rising. The bills were overwhelming.

But the straw that broke the camel's back was the deal they had signed with him. When Geoffrey had presented to his colleagues his price table, everyone had reluctantly agreed in the end and had even rejoiced at the prospect of having the legal safety of a contract. What many had failed to realize, though, was that the city hall's lawyers weren't particularly experienced in husbandry deals.

Geoffrey's contract specified that all animals given to them had to be a certain weight. Many had presumed that meant that once animals were led to the estate to be vacuumed, they would stay there so that Geoffrey could get them fat again before they could be vacuumed. Too late, they had noticed the trap. The producers were the ones who had to fatten up the cattle again. Geoffrey had to be paid in premium quality stock.

This meant that, in the end, Geoffrey was making money out of one-fifth of their herds. That was twenty percent of the animals in the lake. It was too late when producers realized that the animals given as payment had to be different from those brought to be vacuumed. Nonetheless, they couldn't even vacuum the animals if they wanted. They had no equipment to do so. Grinding their teeth, they had to do something no sane producer did: to sell fat manatees full of fuel.

In a week, Geoffrey had become the biggest cattle owner in the world, and he was involved in producing a quarter of the oil in New Lisbon. He was rich. As for the producers, they were making loss after loss. For them to lose ten percent of their herds, plus having to pay Geoffrey, all in fat plump animals, had added to the financial losses for the year. The production would decrease by about twenty percent this year while operating costs had just risen to historical records. Many producers were forced to make cuts where possible, and they had turned toward their workforce.

The next step that Geoffrey needed to follow to complete his plan depended on the discontent of his fellow patrons at the tavern.

"Hilton, calm down, man."

"Don't tell me to calm down, Jonah. You're not the one whose salary just got cut in half!" said the man angrily.

Geoffrey watched with interest. He thought he recognized the man from somewhere. He called over one of the girls serving at the tables. "Can I get you anything else, sir?"

"I am fine for now. But I could use some information," said Geoffrey, taking a shilling from his pocket. "Interested?"

The girl eyed him suspiciously. He was dressed as a ragged beggar. It was strange that he would be carrying around so much money.

"If it's nothing weird..."

“That man, talking loudly. The one with a beard,” said Geoffrey. The girl followed his gesture and then returned her gaze to Geoffrey. “Do you know him?”

“It’s Peter Hilton.” Geoffrey thought he recognized the name.

“What do you know about him? Does he work around here?”

“From what I have heard, he is one of the best baleen craftsmen in the region.”

“Of course. Peter Hilton.” Geoffrey now remembered where he had heard the name. It was from old Red. He failed to connect the dots because Red just called him Stinky Pete. Pete, as in Peter. If that was so, from the looks of it, it was time for him to take his next step.

“Can you call him over to join me? Tell him I have a business proposition.”

Ch. 11 – The Cerberus

The waitress grabbed the silver coin Geoffrey gave her and turned it over in her hand, trying to determine whether it was the real thing. Satisfied, she walked over toward Peter Hilton. Geoffrey leaned back again into the shadows of the corner of the tavern as he followed the waitress going up to Peter Hilton and then pointing back at him. Excusing himself from his friends, Peter Hilton came to Geoffrey's table and sat facing him.

From what Red had told him, this man would be expensive, but his services would undoubtedly be worth the price. Peter Hilton was one of the most renowned balatee stockmen on the lake. When whales went extinct, other than their oil, one resource that soon became much desired was baleen. Many whales had rigid yet flexible whiskers on their mouth, which they used to filter plankton and eat krill. This valuable material could be used to make springs, corsets, and other infinitely varied industrial applications. With the extinction of whales, there was no more supply to meet the increasing demand.

Even though scientists had discovered that it was possible to synthesize baleen-like material from petroleum, the research in that direction had been blocked by the Science Academy after being judged potentially catastrophic to the environment. Fortunately, it had been discovered that baleen could be harvested from the balatees, one of the relatives of the dugongs and manatees, more closely related to the Stellar Sea Cow.

Balatees were animals that could grow as large as eight meters long and weigh 2 to 3 tons. Even though their blubber wasn't as good for sirenia production, its mouth contained whiskers with properties similar to baleen. This trait was explored and, after careful selective breeding, soon improved.

Balatees, like other sea cows, were mild and meek beasts. Unlike their cousins, they favored the deepest reaches of Lake Grassum, where they could find food better suited to them. Geoffrey's herd had been entirely made of dugongs. He had no previous experience with balatees. These sensitive animals required one to pay extra care not only to how plump they were but also to how their health affected the quality of the baleen in their mouths. This man would be an important asset to bring over to this side.

Peter was taller than him. His face was squared, and he had a large forehead. He seemed to be in his mid-forties. The expressionless look on his face conveyed life experience and calm. He patiently waited for Geoffrey to state his business. After Geoffrey was satisfied with examining the man's character up close, he started by poking at the man's soft spot.

"How goes work?" probed Geoffrey.

The sting of pain on Peter's face revealed that the question had scored a hit. He soon recovered his composure, revealing his life experience.

"Things are a bit... underwhelming at work. Times are tough. But I'm not worried. I'm good at what I do and I'll find something soon."

"Perhaps, you just did."

Peter listened in. "I am all ears."

"I represent a businessman who has been expanding his activities lately. He'd like to invite you to a job interview." As Geoffrey said it, he slid a card with the symbol of Geoffrey's estate. A flash of surprise appeared on Peter's face. Geoffrey could see the gears turning in the man's head.

"What do you say, Mr. Hilton?"

"I thought Mr. Geoffrey only kept dugongs. I work with balatees."

“And your expertise is why you’re being offered this opportunity. Come to Mr. Geoffrey’s estate tomorrow. Compensation will be more than appropriate for a man of your talents.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Any noteworthy competent friends of yours that are unhappy about... *underwhelming* working conditions?”

*

The day was spent, and even though the professor had kept asking for five more minutes in the lake, Red had eventually made the call to start heading back. The sea cows had grazed to satisfaction and leveled a lush underwater jungle into a neatly trimmed prairie. With their bellies full of seagrass, they now happily followed their dolphin friends and the submarine, probably hoping to be fed some dessert in the form of juicy apples, back on the lake shore.

Throughout the day, Joey had gone from not knowing what the word cline meant to becoming a quasi-expert. They had seen all sorts of shapes and sizes of clines through the window of the nautilus. In most of the lake, it seemed like the freshwater had been brought to the surface, and saltwater was at the bottom. However, the stratification wasn’t uniform everywhere.

Sometimes, columns of saltwater formed pillars that rose until they touched the surface. Other times, the freshwater extended itself in complex rootlike patterns cutting through the deeper saltwater. The seagrass continued to enjoy its needed salinity. Fish that favored saltwater stayed within the boundaries of it, not crossing to the clearer side. Dolphins and dugongs went freely between layers but spent more time in the saltwater.

It baffled Joey that it could all be water but not mix. Professor Esther had spent the day researching chemoclines, haloclines, pycnoclines, thermoclines, and lysoclines. He caught her fidgeting her leg restlessly as she thought up theories to explain this phenomenon.

“So, if there are all these types of clines, this means that there must be a logical explanation for this, right?” tried Joey.

“This is not my first time seeing clines before, Joey. But this is a complete mess. I can't understand how there would be so many different types of clines stratifying the water column in such a chaotic way.”

“What should it be like, then?”

“Typically, it would be a horizontal water cline. I once was part of an expedition to an underwater cave where the heavier saltier water sank to the bottom, while the lighter, fresher water stuck to the top, like what you saw in most parts of the lake.”

“Right...”

“I've also seen vertical clines. Sometimes when two rivers meet, the water remains undivided for miles before mixing. Or when river waters and sea waters meet, vertical clines can form.” Joey nodded. They had seen both types of clines during their trip today.

“You can consider sea currents a type of cline too. Sea currents form a complex tunnel system in the ocean waters. The forces that drive these currents include differences in temperature and salinity.”

“Then this is normal.”

“No, Joey. It isn't. Seeing all these combined in so many different patterns and shapes so close to each other is unprecedented. And for the life of me, I can't think of a reason for the weirder shapes in the clines that we saw. What explains those root-like patterns? Or the pillars? It makes no sense... it makes no sense...” Her explanations again devolved into mumbled whispers. Joey gave up trying to understand.”

By the time they coasted the submarine, the sun was already setting. A full day had already passed. Red, agilely, stepped out of the submarine first. Even though he was the oldest, his experience made Joey and Esther look clumsy and elderly. As Red hauled them up onto the pier, Joey felt the relief of stepping again onto dry land.

“Thank you, Red. We appreciate you letting us tag along with your crew for the day.”

“Don't mention it, Joey. We all want what is best for the town.”

Esther stood beside Joey, eyes on the sunset over the lake, lost in her thoughts. Joey thought that the fatigue of the overnight journey and a busy day of scientific exploration had taken its toll. He should take the professor back to her hotel promptly.

“Shall we go, professor?”

Awoken from her thoughts, Esther finally responded. “Of course, Joey. Thank you, Mr. Red. I appreciate your help.”

“Don't mention it.”

Joey and Esther started heading toward their locomotive while Red returned to the pen. He started barking orders to the other foremen while whistling commands to his shepherd dolphin pod to get the cattle into the pens.

Soon they were going back through the woods toward the city, accompanied by the clickety-clack of the locomotive.

“So? Is this now the time we exchange theories, professor?” prompted the constable.

“Sure. I think so, yes.”

“Ladies first. What do you make of what you've seen today? Any theories?”

“I have an inkling of an idea, but its implications are far larger than I can imagine.”

“Maybe talking about it with someone else will help you get your thoughts sorted. Let's hear it.”

“Very well.” Esther investigated the rucksack and searched the newspapers she had read earlier. She found the one dated the day of the flood. “Here.” That day's newspaper headline read: “Green Comet Sighted by Observatory.”

“I don't follow. I read about this. Apparently, there is going to be a good vintage of wine this year. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Constable, do you know the difference between a meteor and a comet?”

“Uuh... not really. Aren't they the same thing?”

“From a certain perspective, you could say so. Essentially meteors and comets are rocks that travel through outer space. The difference is that comets go past our planet while meteors are caught in the

Earth's gravity and enter our atmosphere. If they are big and resistant enough, they make it to the planet's surface. You can see some meteorites in the Natural History Museum of the capital."

"So, what is your point?"

"What if this wasn't a comet? What if it was a meteorite? What if it fell into the lake?"

Joey pondered for a moment.

"So, you're suggesting that the rise in the lake's water level was because this meteorite crashed into it, and it was big enough to make the water level rise? Kind of like when you have a bathtub and enter it, causing the water to overflow."

"Precisely."

"But wouldn't the meteorite have to be enormous to cause such a big lake to flood?"

Esther paused for a moment. "You're right. Lake Grassum occupies an area of roughly ninety thousand square kilometers. The water level rose by a full meter. The meteorite would have had to have the size of ninety cubic kilometers to be able to displace this much water.

"Is that a lot?"

"It's the size of the biggest mountain on Earth. Imagine a nine-kilometer-tall mountain falling from space into the lake."

Joey gulped. He couldn't wrap his head around the scale.

"But wouldn't the fall of a large meteorite be seen from everywhere around the lake?"

"That's where things start to get tricky. A fall of a meteorite that big would have cataclysmic effects. It could very well have killed everyone on the continent. That's where things don't seem to add up. Even if the entry angle into the atmosphere was just right, and the meteorite fell into a deep part of the lake that could soften its fall, I still think that the explosion would have killed everything in a radius of thousands of kilometers."

"I see. Since we're all alive, that theory doesn't work, right?"

The professor shrugged. "It seems unlikely. But at the same time, it's too big of a coincidence."

"Yes. It is."

“Just in case, I would send letters to all the coastal towns of the lake inquiring if any meteorite falls were spotted. If the atmosphere broke the meteorite into small enough chunks, perhaps there would be the possibility of that much mass falling into the lake while not having a cataclysmic impact.”

Joey took his little notepad and started taking notes. He would ask the commissioner to send letters to distant towns.

“As you know, the prevalent theory in town is that there was some underwater volcanic eruption. Doesn't that sound more likely? What do you have to say about that?”

“It's also plausible, and I haven't discarded the possibility. The problem with both possibilities is that big occurrences must mark events of such magnitude. Earthquakes, for example. Or smoke coming out of the lake. A change in the water's chemical composition.”

“If you think about it, there was a change in the water's chemical composition. The salinity and the clines.”

“True. What troubles me most is that the way the water is stratified looks too organized, too defined. How could an event be cataclysmic enough to trigger this type of change while being meticulous enough to cause this sort of change.”

Joey sighed. The emissaries of the Science Academy were legendary figures. Professor Esther easily discussed hydrology, chemistry, and astronomy showing great mastery over all the different fields. She had also revealed already, throughout the day, incredible knowledge in mechanical engineering and socioeconomics. He wondered if asking how many degrees she had would be impolite.

On top of that, she had traveled the world at the academy's service. She had seen the world and had a vast reserve of experience and knowledge to draw from. For even such an insightful figure to not be able to make sense of the situation made Joey have a bittersweet taste in his mouth. On the one hand, it was a boost to his self-esteem. If an emissary from the Science Academy hadn't cracked this, there was nothing wrong with him not having done it either. On the other hand, it filled him with worry. There was no one else they could call.

Professor Esther Lincoln was the best help they would get in sorting this.

“Joey, leaving the ecological phenomena aside, I would still like to ask what you make of the situation. How is the city coping?”

“Well, the situation is unprecedented. There hasn’t been panic buying like this since the Whale Wars. It’s scary how fragile the world is. One flood in a lake can destroy a country on the other side of the planet.”

Esther nodded.

“To the city’s merit, the mayor and the ranchers have all come together and presented a united front to the public. Every day they encourage people to stay calm and say that everything will return to normal soon. Although some greedy idiot wiped the storehouse of the oil market clean before anyone else could get a hold of what was going on in the lake, the mayor was able to put together a stock of sirenian oil from the ranchers' and the city's reserves.”

“And why is it that you're suspicious of Mr. Geoffrey?” Joey stared at her wide-eyed.

“You saw through that, didn't you?” The professor nodded.

“You're not the first trying to use the presence of an emissary of the Science Academy as a political maneuver.”

“I wouldn't say it was political. I'm no politician.”

“Still...” Joey sighed.

“Geoffrey and I went to school together. He used to come to school barefoot because he couldn’t afford even a pair of shoes. Now, he is the businessman hero who single-handedly ensures that the supply chain of sirenian oil is not interrupted.”

“And...”

“I bumped into him on the day of the flood. He seemed strange. He has explored the weakness of the other ranchers and is sucking them dry.”

“And...” This professor's insight was uncanny. It felt like she could see through him.

“Look... I can't help but have a gut feeling that Geoffrey is somehow related to the flood in the lake. I can't explain to you why.

I do. It almost feels like he knows exactly what happened. There's something strange going on with him.”

The professor remained silent. She was probably wondering why her escort was behaving like a child and bringing along one of the most prestigious academics on the planet on this sort of fool's errand.

“I see. He did know about the clines already, didn't he?”

“You don't think I'm acting crazy?” asked Joey in surprise.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I got the same feeling.” Joey's heart skipped a beat. “Listen, Joey, the human brain is the greatest frontier. In spite of how far we've come in our pursuit of science, the way the mind works is beyond us. Sometimes, these gut feelings are hints from our subconscious. I wouldn't dismiss Geoffrey withholding information from us. Keep observing him discreetly. I'll do the same.”

*

Deep in the sewers that ran under New Lisbon was a massive chamber. Its archways and high ceilings made it look like an underground cathedral. This used to be a warehouse used by the workers who had constructed the underground sewage system decades ago. One could easily imagine hundreds of workers, heavy steam machinery, and depots of building materials fitting here. With the construction of the sewage system complete, the chamber had been forgotten and abandoned. Regardless of what it used to be, it was now the black merchant's lab.

A young woman sat somewhere in the center of the chamber, strapped to a metal chair. She seemed to be twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. Her brown eyes were open but unfocused and distant. She appeared completely oblivious to her surroundings. She wore a gray tunic, something that a patient in a hospital would wear. Her shaved head only strengthened that impression. She was wearing what seemed like only half of a helmet.

Off the leather of the helmet, hair-thin metal rods stood out like the spikes of a hedgehog. They kept slightly moving. As they moved,

a similar contraption hanging down from a metal crane mirrored its movements. The equipment seemed extremely delicate as if the slightest tension would break the helmet's needle-like rods or contraption in half. The girl's head had been fastened to prevent her from making the tiniest move.

The seemingly small apparatus that connected the head of the woman to the crane branched and grew, expanding into a titanic machine that occupied most of the massive facilities. Cogwheels and gears turned. Some cogwheels were as large as houses, and others were as tiny as acorns. Pistons fired and then reset. Throughout the machine, gauges kept moving their dials in faster or slower movements, indicating their performance. Whistling jets of steam sometimes screeched loud enough to pierce through the mechanical humming of the giant machine.

A few minutes earlier, an intruder had arrived. He had triggered an alarm on his way in but had avoided all the booby traps protecting the lab's entrance. He wore a business suit and had curly blonde hair. He now stood next to the woman sitting down. His eyes were closed as if he were asleep. That didn't seem to hinder the precision of his movements. He had come in carrying a water skin, which he had opened, and he was now helping the young girl to drink.

As she slowly swallowed some of the lake's water, her blank expression focused for a moment, and then, she closed her eyes. Having fulfilled his sleepwalking mission, the man dropped the water skin on the ground and, turning back, left the secret lab. On his way out, as he seamlessly and effortlessly again avoided the traps set by the lab master, he tripped on the same wire as before. As his figure disappeared in the shadows of the tunnel, the lamp's light glimmered one last time off the man's silver pocket watch, and then he was gone.

After the sleepwalker had disappeared, a cloaked figure rushed into the lab no more than thirty seconds later. He tried to walk stealthily, a task not difficult with the background mechanical noise. The heavy determined steps gave him away as being a man. He dashed from shadow to shadow, always cautiously pointing his rifle in different directions, before he moved again. He made it to an aperture in the

machinery where he could have his back toward the machine while keeping an eye out for the intruder.

As soon as he was sure that he was in a safe spot, he leaned his head in and put his ear against the machine. He quietly waited for a few seconds. To this man, what was noise to everyone else was a song rife with information. After all, he had built this machine, and only hearing its hum was enough for him to conclude that it hadn't been tampered with. The noises from the machine also told the Black Merchant that the intruder hadn't tried to conceal himself inside the machine, either. Smart. That would have been suicide. The Black Merchant would have found him and terminated him in a blink of an eye.

Now that he knew that the Cerberus was not compromised, he confidently turned his back to it and slowly sidestepped toward the console with the rifle ready to fire. He tried to resist the desperate urge to check in on his daughter. That could be the moment the invader was waiting for. His mind worked furiously. He had gone to great lengths to ensure no one else suspected this place existed. He was the only one who came here.

After some patient minutes, he reached the control console, pushed one of the buttons, and a thick paper strip came out. Precariously holding the rifle with only one hand while keeping an eye on his surroundings, he searched the ribbon with his finger finding the holes punctured by the machine. As his knowledgeable fingers ran through the length of the strip, he discovered that the lab had been broken into nine minutes earlier, and the invader had left four minutes later. No traps had been triggered.

“No need for all thesse theatriccs.” The black merchant froze. On the one hand, the voice he was hearing was familiar, which touched his being to the core, instantly causing tears to form in his eyes. On the other hand, he couldn't recognize the accent. It was strangely sibilant. Hearing the voice of his beloved daughter, the man threw all caution into the wind and ran for the chair where he had left Miriam. Before he could throw himself into her arms, he was stopped by her alien expression. This wasn't Miriam. It couldn't be.

“Who? How?” the black merchant stammered. “M-m-miriam?”

“You were a difficult man to discover, Arssurius.”

Ch. 12 – The Game

Arthurius gulped at hearing his name being mentioned.

“It’s not everyday that I am impressed. You’re the wealthiest man in the country... neigh... the world, without anyone knowing the wiser.”

The black merchant was terrified. No one alive should have known his name nor that he had a daughter. To find his most seclusive and secret safe house, and to even know about Miriam... He felt exposed and naked.

He knew how disarming it was to come to a meeting more well-informed than an opposing party. He had used this move many times. He was in the presence of someone of similar means. Therefore, whatever happened from here would be crucial. He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. One didn’t become ruler of the underworld by losing composure.

“Relax. My agent has left long ago. I am merely introducing myself through Miriam. Sweet sweet Miriam.” The black merchant tried not to react to the mention of his daughter’s name. His daughter had been brain-dead for over a decade. He couldn’t get a facial expression or a word out of her. Not even a grunt.

“How are you doing this?”

“You and I are puppeteers. We pull strings from the shadows. My strings are special. I know how to connect my mind to hers.” After a pause, indicating further thought, the voice added. “Like a chain connecting two gears in a bicycle.”

Arthurius didn't see any chains or strings around his daughter. All he could see was a skin bottle fallen on the floor, and water spilled on the floor. Perhaps a drug he was unfamiliar with. He would have to have a chat with a poison master later.

"Considering the technology you have at your disposal, this..." Miriam's eyes rolled as if gesturing toward the Cerberus, "is a fine brain prosthesiss." Only the eyes moved since the girl's head was strapped to the chair. It gave Arthurius an eerie feeling. He had seen much in life. More than he wished. He thought he had developed an immunity to surprise or fear. He stood corrected.

"Am I too far from succeeding?" Arthurius tested.

"That depends on how you do in our game."

"What game? Who are you?"

"I told you. I am a fellow puppeteer. A new player in town. I have arrived here resssently wissout a dime, and already became a millionaire right under your nossse. It's been sso eassy."

Arthurius was slightly annoyed. These were bold claims. He kept tabs on everything that happened in town. He had heard nothing of any new figures appearing in the underworld. This made him apprehensive. Whoever could avoid his network of spies could not be underestimated. Unless this was not a figure from the criminal underworld but someone playing in the light of day. Could this be the one who had wiped the oil market clean? Arthurius tried not to let anything show on his face.

"What game is this you speak of?"

"A game for your daughter'sss life."

Arthurius paused. He had climbed his way from an engineer to a criminal mastermind. He had cheated, lied, and stolen from whoever he could. He had manipulated, terminated, and squashed his opposition. All of it had been done to find a way to heal his daughter, embrace her, and speak to her one last time. Even though the Cerberus had come a long way, it was still far from finished and had always been a long shot. This situation seemed impossible and dangerous, but maybe it was his daughter's only chance.

"State your terms."

"Sssimple. First to make a hundred billion dollars winsss."

A hundred billion dollars? Arthurius thought for a moment. His wealth amounted to half that amount.

“Does our current wealth already count to the game?”

“Yesss.” That means I have a headstart, he thought. My opponent is confident.

“So, if I win, you'll heal my daughter. What if you win?”

“You become my butler.”

“Butler?” The notion was ridiculous. He was the greatest criminal mastermind on the planet. Politicians, law enforcement, and fellow criminals were all little children dancing to the beat of his evil beat, and now this wannabe wanted him to become his butler.

“Yesss. A retired old one such as I could ussse a butler.” Retired? This means he is advanced in years. Maybe he is just trying to throw me off my game.

“What are the rules of the game?”

Miriam smiled. It had been years since Arthurius had seen her beautiful smile, but all it did right now was cause shivers down his spine.

“We can only ussse puppetsss. We can't intervene directly. If you get to a hundred billion dollarsss firsst you win. If you find my lair, as I have found yoursss you win.”

He was being given every advantage. He was starting from halfway down the race and had multiple win conditions. He wasn't forbidden from using violence or any other means at his disposal. This meant that this freak was confident.

“Why are you doing this?”

Miriam's eyes started losing their focus. Before the connection was broken entirely the parting words of his invisible opponent answered him.

“Becausse, it'sss fun.”

*

After Joey had dropped Professor Lincoln at the hotel, she told him she would go to the university the following day and test the samples she collected from the lake.

Esther had explained to him that she also wanted to take the day to consult local libraries and compare her findings with other events on record. The mayor had been kind enough to hand her a copy of the key to the library for as long as she was in town. In fact, he had given her the whole keychain with the keys to all the city's libraries. The biggest ones were the Municipal Library which could be accessed through the purple line and wasn't far from Esther's Hotel. The other one was on the New Lisbon University campus.

Since Joey didn't know his way around books or libraries, the Professor had considered his dead weight and thought better of letting the detective rest so she could count on his keen mind the day after.

The extra day should also give enough time for Dr. Link's expedition to return with additional data they could analyze. The boat was supposed to arrive this afternoon.

After Joey communicated Professor Lincoln's intentions to the commissioner and he, in turn, communicated it to the mayor's office, after some back and forth, Joey got the news that he was so eagerly waiting for. He was given a day off.

Molly was asleep when he arrived last night and was only hearing about this now.

"What? The whole day?" Molly's sparkly eyes and restlessness made Joey feel emotional but also terrified at the excitement the little girl was showing. He could foresee a busy day.

"That's right! We've got the day off to ourselves."

"So, what's the plan?" Marie asked.

"I was thinking about visiting my mother at the hospice in the morning, and then we could go out to lunch and then take Molly to the park."

"Yey! The big park?"

"Sure, honey," answered Marie. "Come, Mom, quick. Help me get dressed." Marie giggled as she was pulled by her daughter toward their bedroom. Joey followed them with his eyes, smiling from ear to ear. It was such a great feeling to be so important to someone. Molly was happy just to have him there.

It had been a couple of weeks since Joey had last visited. Sure, the lake incident had been keeping him very busy, but Joey knew that he hadn't come because it wasn't easy for him to do so.

It was hard for Joey to see his mother. Every time he came, she was a little older and a little more senile. The distress of seeing his mother's fractured mind breaking apart was too much for him to bear.

After they gave their names at the reception, a doctor soon came to meet them. He was short and wore thick spectacles. He was a man that walked with small, steady steps. Joey suspected that for which step he took, the doctor took two.

"Good morning, Joey. Hello, Marie," Joe's wife performed a short bow in greeting. "And could this be your sister, Constable Joseph?" the doctor playfully teased as he addressed the little girl.

"No! I am not Daddy's sister! I am his daughter!"

"Oh, pardon me. I thought you were forty years old already." Molly giggled contentedly at the silly doctor's jokes.

"How is she doing, doc?"

"Joey, you know there's nothing we can do but wait. I am afraid that the damage of the cruel poison she was given keeps wreaking havoc on her mind and body."

Joey squeezed his wife's hand, and she squeezed it back, trying to impart some comfort. Feeling her papa was down, Molly gently came toward him and hugged his leg. Joey felt that there was something the doctor wanted to say but was holding back.

"What else, doctor? Is everything alright with my mother?"

The doctor briefly hesitated. "I am afraid that since you last visited, she and other patients have been dealing with," the doctor uncomfortably cleared his throat, "collective hallucinations."

"Doctor, what is a collective hallucination?" asked Marie.

"Sometimes, in mental institutions such as our own, patients fixate on one person, event, or object. This has been the case for the past weeks," the doctor explained. "It's quite rare. There is hardly any research done on this. We have already contacted the psychiatric society to send someone to document this. I am afraid that when you

see your mom today, she will ramble on a bit. Please ignore it. It's all just crazy talk."

"Mommy? Is grandma OK?"

"Oh, Molly, she's sick. Very sick. But don't worry. Once you kiss her and show her the drawing you made for her, she will feel better soon."

"Where is she?" asked Joey.

"Near the fountain, with the others."

The mental hospice was a building complex with a garden in the middle. Seeing some green helped soothe the mind, although some workers had more than once cursed the shrubbery and bushes for providing psychotic runaway patients with too many hiding spots.

At the center of the gardens, there was a fountain. Running water could be heard from afar, and clockwork mechanisms made the fountain spout water jets at fixed intervals. Several of the mental hospital patients sat on benches and chairs. They all stared at the water fountain, entranced.

Joey spotted his mother sitting in a wheelchair under the sun. He approached and gently grabbed her hand.

"Ma, it's me. Joey." She kept staring at the fountain, but Joey felt his mother's grip tighten around his hand. "I have brought Marie, my wife, and your granddaughter, Molly."

Hearing her dad's cue, Molly swiftly climbed onto her grandmother's lap and told her about her day at school and playmates, and then showed her the drawing she had made of them together as a family. The grandmother never stopped looking at the fountain, but her facial expression softened.

"Grandma, please, tell me a story." Joey took a step toward Maggie to explain that grandmother had a tough time speaking. Joey himself hadn't heard his mother's voice for several weeks.

"Certainly, my dear," spoke Joey's mother, freezing him on the spot. He looked up at Marie, only to find her throwing him back a surprised look.

"Once upon a time, there was a world. A big world, much bigger than Earth. It was covered in water. In this world lived a naughty little octopus." The grandmother stopped. "Hmmm... it was not an

octopus. It was more the water. Or was it an eye in the end? Anyway, this clever, beautiful creature had a talent for making trouble and amassing wealth.”

Joey stood dumbfounded. He hadn't heard his mother put two words together in years, and suddenly she'd become an eloquent storyteller. What was going on?

“After centuries of... legitimate business practices, there was no more wealth to pillage in its world. All the money on the planet became his, and contemplating his treasure trove, the magnificent entrepreneur learned something only rich folk can: a neighbor's silver is more precious than one's gold.

Therefore, his majesty set out for the stars. Oh... the riches it gained! Rubies from Antillaris, emeralds from Sirius, and pearls from Omax. At one point, he had been so rich that he'd bought a planet and had built two moons, one made of solid gold and another made of pure sapphire. Alas, jealousy is a powerful force. Driven by unreasonable and unjustified hatred, authorities and courts made preposterous claims, and he was forced to liquidate his fortune and make a run for it.

When navigating the blackness of space, now older and wiser, he thought of the joy he had felt every time he came to a planet with nothing and built an empire from scratch. It was the journey that gave him pleasure, not the destination. It was the game that filled his belly, not the prize.

That was when he decided on his course, he would go to an old world, one that didn't know nor was known by other distant stars, and one last time use his brilliance and have fun building a home for him to retire and spend the rest of his days.”

Molly seemed delighted with the tale.

“Grandma, you tell this story so well. No one at school tells it better.”

“What do you mean, Molly? Have you heard this story before?” asked Marie, puzzled.

“Have you never heard the story of Ambyssus?” asked Molly innocently. Joey stopped. There was that name again.

“Ambyssus? Isn't that the story all your friends have talked about at school lately?”

“Yes! All my friends know this story.” Joey could swear he had never heard the name 'Ambyssus' until a few days ago. Suddenly, it was as if the name had spread like wildfire.

“Honey, I have been hearing more and more of this word over the last week.”

“It's true, isn't it? Now that you mention it...”

“Have you ever heard it before?”

“Not that I recall.” So it wasn't just Joey. He wasn't going crazy.

“Don't you find it strange that a word that we never heard before he's being spoken by everyone in the city?”

“I don't know, Joey. You know how quickly novelties spread among the children. Perhaps one of the children told one of these patients, and because they're so impressionable, they have become fixated on it.”

Joey paused. For the first time, he noticed an oddity about the hospice today. The sound of conversations was louder than usual. He observed people around him. It was visiting hours, so other families talked to loved ones. He started to pay attention to what the patients said to the family.

“Have I told you that Ambyssus can see from kilometers away?” An old man excitedly shared with his grandchildren.

“Whenever I am close to the fountain, it's as if I can hear him singing to me,” a young woman told her mother.

“Last night, I won against Arthur on Domino. Ambyssus was so proud of me when I told it to him in my dreams,” bragged a man to his brother.

There was something wrong here, very wrong. How could a word become so widespread in such a short time? How could so many hospitalized people who were usually catatonic speak so much? Joey's mind wired for an investigation started clicking and connecting facts. There was the flood, the graffiti, Geoffrey's painting, and the children on the train platform.

“Do you think it's connected to what happened in the lake?”
“Don't you think that you might be looking too much into this? It's just a tale told by children.”

“And mentally unstable people.”

Marie gave him a look.

“You're probably right, Marie. It's just that I've been so tense with this whole flood thing and...”

“That's why you've taken the day off. Stop thinking like a detective, and start thinking like a husband and a father spending the day with his family. You're talking crazy, Joey.”

“I'm sorry.” His wife was probably right. He was thinking about this too much. There was no way that the two things could be connected. He tried to force his mind off the subject. “Now, where do you girls want to have lunch?”

*

Monday had arrived. The hustle and bustle of the city slowly woke the town from its weekend's slumber. Apprehension over the soaring inflation still hung in the air. All the rest followed once fuel prices went up. Agricultural work was done extensively by steam-powered tractors.

Factories relied on the fuel to feed their furnaces and engines. Transportation extensively relied on sirenia. The good news was that the lake's waters had been steadily receding. Producers could clean their parlors and resume oil production even if they didn't move their facilities yet.

Joey waited for Esther at the lounge of the hotel. The decoration was not overly luxurious but was tasteful. Tables with glass lids and white carved metal legs gave the space elegance. The chairs covered in gray and green cornucopias added to the style of the room. Curtains were of a beige tinge, and walls featured various paintings with landscapes of the Grassum Lake or the Aurum River.

Joey sat in the lounge with a view of the busy street outside. People walked to and fro. It was commuting time. Many were going to work. Joey noticed a bulky man in an apron with singed mustaches or burns.

That seemed to be a blacksmith. His eyes were drawn next to a man pedaling a bicycle with a rucksack strapped around his shoulder. Joey thought for a moment. It was a tinkerer or a locksmith if Joey had to guess. As he played this little game to fill the minutes until the professor came down, a glimmer of light caught his eye.

On another table near him, golden apple syrup ran down a glorious stack of pancakes. It looked delicious. When the waiter caught him staring at the pancakes, he came to ask him if he would like a portion for himself or some coffee. Joey thanked him but dismissed him. Since Joey's parents were poisoned, he never ate or drank anything that hadn't been prepared in front of his eyes. Not even kings of old were as paranoid about poisoning as Joey was.

"Good morning, Joey," greeted Esther.

"Good morning, professor. How was your Sunday? Read much?"

"I would say I read enough. Yes. I trust that you were able to rest well."

"Yes, ma'am. You?"

"I can't say I have, constable, no."

Seeing Esther sitting down, the waiter came to take her order.

"I won't have anything to eat or drink, thank you. But I would like to have a copy of today's newspaper." The waiter turned around and went to attend to Esther's request.

"It's going to be a long day, professor. Are you sure you don't want to have a good breakfast?"

She regarded him curiously.

"I thought you'd noticed, constable."

"Notice what?"

"No need to play the fool. I know you noticed. I do the same as you do, or rather I don't do what you don't do." Joey had noticed. After a few awkward moments of silence, the professor answered the question he hesitated to ask.

"Have you heard of dracunculiasis?"

Joey shook his head. He hadn't.

"You see, I have a bit of a trauma. One of my first trips as an academy emissary was to visit a town where everyone had fallen ill. People would develop blisters, and parasites would crawl out of the

wounds. It was disgusting.” Joey could see how Esther shivered as she recalled the experience. He felt a knot in his stomach.

“There was no way of killing the parasite. You just had to help the patient stay still as it painfully crawled out; otherwise, the parasite could die inside the body and rot, resulting in infection and death. We eventually narrowed it down to unclean water. Worms laid their eggs in the water, making the village's people sick.

It was one of the grossest things I've seen, Joey. I still have nightmares about it. One of my colleagues, Barry, died because of it. He wasn't careful enough with what he ate and drank. You can imagine how painful his death was. Since then, I can't stand to have anything to eat or drink that I'm not sure is safe. I boil all the water I drink for at least fifteen minutes. I also make sure to prepare all my food.”

“For me, it was my...”

“It's OK, Joey. I read about it in the newspaper. Who hasn't heard of the great Jebediah? My mentor was the dean at Opportunity School back in the day.”

“You knew Professor Niven?”

“He spoke well of your father. He was a great man. I even recall him talking about his son a couple of times.”

Joey sighed. What were the odds? More importantly, how likely was it that the investigators shared similar traumas? As the waiter brought the newspaper, Esther opened it and skimmed through it.

“Anything interesting?” asked Joey.

“I would say so, yes. Do you recognize anyone here?” She asked as she showed him the featured article. The headline read, “Local Hero Saves the World.”

Ch. 13 – The Camp

Local Hero Saves Town

In an inspiring tale of selflessness, a local rancher has single-handedly secured the town's economic stability through his precautionary foresight and charitable spirit. Geoffrey Ford was born in the slums, where he had to fend for himself as an impoverished youth.

“Those were tough times, dark times. I tell all the children I meet that every meal is a gift and that they should never take even the simplest things for granted.” Despite a bumpy start, Geoffrey was able to climb his way off poverty, as he told the Herald in an exclusive interview.

“For me, the turning point was when Mr. Jebediah Jones started the Opportunity School. I couldn't believe it when I was allowed to enroll. It changed my life. Mr. Jebediah's school opened my mind to everything I could do and changed my life.”

Geoffrey's journey from poverty to prosperity is nothing short of remarkable. “My first job was begging, believe it or not. Then I got a newspaper route. From then on I did everything from sweeping chimneys, shining shoes, and baking pies.”

“We appreciate Mr. Geoffrey's industriousness and precautionary measures,” said Mr. Finley, an aide to the mayor. “The city thanks Mr. Geoffrey who stands as a reminder that every child of the city is a treasure that should be nurtured.”

“What do you think?” questioned the professor, seeing the constable's frown, “You seem to disagree with the praises?”

“I want to believe he is a hero,” started Joey cautiously. “I've known him since he was a child, and my dad believed in him enough to invest in his future.” After a few seconds of thought, Joey relaxed

and leaned back into his chair. “But perhaps it's me just reading too much into things. There's no denying he's been providing a great service to the city. I guess time will tell whether he's a hero. How about you, professor? Did your research yesterday lead to anything interesting?”

The professor took a little notepad and put on some glasses like she was about to start a class. “Well, let's start with the more obvious things. First, I can confirm that there is no record of so many types of clines being so closely together anywhere else in nature.

“Well, that was a given based on what you had told me yesterday.”

“Right. In addition to that, I did some research on the various compositions of meteorites discovered throughout the world. I couldn't find anything to account for the changes caused to the lake's salinity.”

“OK. So, whatever this phenomenon is... is it the first of its kind?”

“Correct. Furthermore, I went to the university and used their labs to examine the samples I collected from the lake more closely. I can tell you that there were no spikes in ammonia levels.”

“Which means,” prompted Joey.

“It means that there isn't anything dying in the lake. When many things die in a water medium, there is a spike in the production of ammonia caused by the bacteria that break it down.”

“That checks with the fact that different creatures are sticking to different layers of the cline.”

“Right. But it also means that the rearrangement of water was so sudden that it didn't cause any damage to the ecosystem. There should have been at least a significant number of casualties to impact the lake's ecology. That baffles me. A change of such a scale and such an organized one. The odds of it happening are infinitesimally small.”

“What about the possibility of an underwater eruption?”

“No vestiges of sulfur compounds. I think we can discard that theory.”

Silence followed.

“Does this mean we have no leads?”

“I still think that the meteorite theory is the most likely one. It’s too much of a coincidence for a comet to be sighted on the same day the flood happened.”

“What’s the next step then?”

“It will take days before we hear back from all the towns around the lake. Our best chance is to wait for Dr. Link’s ship to arrive.”

“Shall we go the camp then?”

“Let’s go.”

*

“Thank you for seeing me today, Mr. Wilson.”

Geoffrey had come to Mr. Wilson’s house in Rolling Hills, one of the richer neighborhoods in New Lisbon. Many of the city’s successful businessmen owned manors here. The streets were kept clean and neat. There was also a strong police presence which ensured the neighborhood’s tranquility.

Mr. Wilson stared Geoffrey down with his piercing blue eyes. He constantly took a handkerchief from his jacket’s pocket and wiped the sweat off his bald head. His mustache was kept neatly trimmed. He had more weight than he should, even if one used his age as an excuse for not being in shape. His neck fat popped out of his shirt’s collar, causing a bit of repulse to the faint of heart.

Even though the old man tried to appear superior and aloof in his leather chair, Geoffrey saw through the pretense. Mr. Wilson was having a hard time staying afloat. A little bird had told him that he had thrown quite a fit in the bank a couple of days earlier when he had been denied a loan. Sitting in the corner of the office, the presence of Mr. Wilson’s lawyer told Jeff that the man had learned his lesson and wouldn’t be easily baited by another of Geoffrey’s ruses.

“Congratulations on making the first page,” said Mr. Wilson sarcastically. Geoffrey ignored the jab.

“Thank you. You know how papers work. They complimented far too much. You all are the real heroes if you ask me.”

“What do you want, Jeff?” he spoke as he poured himself a scotch. Geoffrey noted that he hadn’t been offered any. “Are you here to rip me off again?”

“Rip you off? What do you mean?” Geoffrey’s voice seemed genuinely surprised. His acting skills were well-polished—another survival skill he’d picked in his life on the streets. He felt no pleasure in using them, but he needed Mr. Wilson’s trust to succeed in his plan’s next step.

“You know full well what I mean, boy. Your little maneuver with the contract. You weren’t fully honest with us!”

“This is all but a misunderstanding, Mr. Wilson. I can assure you that I have done nothing unlawful. Everyone was given full access to the contract before signing it. Including you.” Mr. Wilson shot his lawyer a furious glance. The man seemed to shrink in his chair.

“Tell me what you want, Jeff. I have to get to work.”

“Mr. Wilson, I know times are tough, and everyone has taken a blow this year.”

“Everyone but you, Jeff,” protested the old man.

“On the contrary. While I vacuum everyone’s cattle, I have no time to tend to my own. Please believe me when I tell you that seeing my fellow men suffer gives me no pleasure. It keeps me awake at night.” The statement was said with sincerity. Geoffrey meant it. He felt no pleasure in seeing others suffer. Mr. Wilson studied him, thrown off by his sincerity.

“I will get straight to the point,” continued Geoffrey. “Having accepted payment in the form of sea cow stock, I need space to build additional pens to expand my operations.”

“Yeah, so?” At the mention of their previous business dealing, Mr. Wilson’s hatred came back with a passion.

“I would like to buy a part of your property. Namely, the land immediately adjacent to the lakeshore.”

Wilson eyed him suspiciously. “What’s your endgame, Jeff? You know that after the flood, everyone must move their facilities to higher ground. There’s no way the Mayor will let us keep our facilities on the shore. That land is next to worthless to me at the moment.”

Realization dawning on Mr. Wilson added accusingly, "Are you trying to cut me off the lake?"

"Not at all, not at all. I need the extra space to build my pens. I am willing to buy it from you in cash." Mr. Wilson wiped his bald head with the handkerchief once again. The prospect of some money coming in was enticing. Even with the Mayor's help, he was close to bankruptcy. "I am also willing to let your good legal aide," he said, pointing to the lawyer, "Draft up an agreement in which I promise I won't cut you off the lake. I was thinking of letting you pay rent, similar to what railtors do when securing the rights to install tracks on a property."

"What if I want to keep just a little bit of the land connecting to the lake?"

"Come on now, Mr. Wilson. I need all the space I can get, and you need all the cash you can get. To give you a good offer, I'm only willing to buy all the land you own near the lake. If you really must have that tiny piece of land, so be it. But my offer will be considerably less generous. Take it or leave it. Of course, I can always go to Wilkinson and buy his lakefront properties."

Geoffrey conveniently kept to himself that he had already done so. Technically, it wasn't his yet, because the contract still had to be signed, but he had shaken hands with Wilkinson before he had come here. This was the sixth land purchase he made this morning and the seventeenth this week. He already owned ten percent of the lake's shore.

Geoffrey could see the gears turn inside Mr. Wilson's head as he considered it. He needed cash, fast. The bank had just turned him away. He was facing the risk of losing everything. On the one hand, he didn't want to be cut off from the lake, but on the other hand, he didn't need the land anymore. Were he to keep his facilities on the shore, right on top of the lake, he faced the risk of another flood or, worse, being fined by the mayor's office.

Even as for pens, even though it was useful to keep herds close to the beach, he could keep them a bit further out and just rent the access to the lake and a mooring place for his subs. Mr. Wilson. closed his fists.

Yes. Geoffrey could see how he didn't want to become someone's tenant. But he had knocked at every door he could. The mayor told him he had given him all that he could. His fellow producers were having a hard time staying afloat. There was no bank willing to lend him a dime. He looked at his lawyer, waiting for a signal, and Geoffrey caught the approving nod through the reflection of Mr. Wilson's glass.

Mr. Wilson stood up and stretched out his hand toward Geoffrey. "You got yourself a deal."

*

Dr. Link's camp wasn't set too far from where they had visited yesterday. Even though they were calling it a camp, there were no tents. The scientists had set up a base on one of the buildings of Wilkshire Port. This had once been one of the most important strongholds that guaranteed the lake's safety and kept pirates at bay. Nowadays, it was just a small port kept in a good enough state to keep pirates scared from going back into the water but not so well-maintained that it emptied the mayor's coffers.

This where had been the port from where Dr. Link's expedition had departed a few days earlier. He'd said he'd be back in the morning of this day, and since they had no leads they decided to come here earlier. Right now, Professor Lincoln was being received as if she was a queen.

"Can we get you anything else, professor?"

"No, please treat me as a colleague and catch me up on your findings here."

Hearing the professor's request to be treated as an equal, Joey could swear that more than one of the men in lab coats was this close to passing out. Everyone greatly respected the emissaries of the Science Academy. They were the best and the brightest. What he hadn't considered was that, for other scientists, these were idols.

After an embarrassing few seconds of discussion over who would have the privilege of presenting their findings to the esteemed professor, one of the scientists finally started talking.

“Well, professor, our team was deployed when we heard of the incident. One of the first things we did was to test the health of the sirenians in the lake, trying to determine if the changes to the water were harmful to them.”

“And?”

“The animals showed no signs of discomfort or stress. At the same time, we ran every type of test we could think of on the water.”

“PH?”

“Normal.”

“What about minerals and metals?”

“All within the parameters.”

“Nitrites and ammonia?” As Joey heard ammonia, he remembered what the Professor had said earlier, which worried him. She already had tested for that herself. She was scrambling.

“When we took one of the ranchers' sub to explore the lake, we discovered an erratic form of stratification.”

“Clines.”

“That's right.”

“Did you test the different strata of the clines?”

“Yes.”

“And...?”

“The only significant difference is the level of salinity. Some of the strata are salty, while the other is fresh.”

She drummed her fingers. So far, everything checked out with their discoveries.

“Which brings us to Dr. Link's expedition...”

“Dr. Link wanted to travel deeper into the lake and see if the stratification differs. He also wanted to take samples of the water at different depths to see if there was something that we needed to include. He said that regardless of what he discovered, he'd return with some news today.”

“Very well. In that case, let's wait. In the meantime, have you tested the soil around the lake?” The scientists exchanged looks. “No, we didn't think of...”

“What about other animals?”

“Only the sea cows.”

“I want you to catch and quarantine every creature you can imagine. Brine shrimp, crabs, crayfish, mollies, alligators, and sharks. One of each. Focus on carnivores. They accumulate more toxins because they’re higher up in the food chain. I want to be told anything out of the ordinary.”

The scientists all got to work, grabbing nets, fishing poles and running toward small boats that were moored to the port. As for Joey, he grabbed a flask he had brought and poured himself some coffee. He’d wait for the boat to arrive and take it from there.

They waited the whole morning—the whole day. But Dr. Link never returned.

*

Geoffrey looked at the blank canvas before him and tried visualizing what he was about to paint. Today he'd woken up with a picture, a vision. It was a picture of a sinking ship, cleanly cut into two, like a piece of butter cut by a scorching knife.

There were no people in his vision. That part was necessary for this painting to work. For a moment, Geoffrey wondered why it would be important, but then the obvious answer came to him. Because whoever had done this hated casualties, of course. Casualties were the epitome of waste. Who was left to marvel at your accomplishments if a victory was fatal?

As Geoffrey started giving the painting a black coat of paint to give the painting some depth, the sound of a commotion outside disturbed him. Although the wall that led to the parlor was soundproof, the door to the corridor was not, and that's where the commotion seemed to be coming from.

“...demand to see him!”

“I’m sorry. I have to go check if he's available.”

Geoffrey's eyes landed on the uninvited arrival as he arrived at the front desk. Although he had only occasionally greeted the man in passing, he recognized him immediately. “Mr. Ezekiel. What seems to be the matter?”

“You!” The man was in his face after a few large strides. “You poached all my best men! How dare you, Geoffrey?” As the man spoke, he didn't try to stop the spit from landing on Geoffrey's face, and he poked him with his finger blurring the line between a heated argument and a physical confrontation.

“Please, Mr. Ezekiel. Let's go into the office. We can talk this through over there.”

“I won't have it, Geoffrey! I raised some of those men since they were little boys. I taught them everything! What gives you the right to come and take them away from me?” Mr. Ezekiel's shouts were only becoming louder. Debbie behind them had disappeared, maybe to go call some of the men in the estate to help manage the situation.

“Mr. Ezekiel, I don't understand why you're upset. Many of the men in the ranches have been coming to me lately complaining they had salary cuts or were dismissed. They asked me for a job. Should I in good conscience let those men go beg on the street when I can use their work in my estate?”

“You! You have a talent for twisting the facts. You disgust me. I have ears in the taverns too, Geoffrey. You don't think I haven't heard about the mysterious men going about the taverns offering millionaire salaries to the best men in the estates!” He'd been seen through. No matter. It was too late.

“Mr. Ezekiel, I don't understand why you're so upset with me. Just get new men to do the work.”

“You know they are irreplaceable! It will take years to train new ones. Without them, my estate is working only at half-capacity.”

Several men that worked in the parlors had appeared and were ready to step in if things started getting violent.

“Mr. Ezekiel. I'm sorry to hear about your troubles. Why don't you come in? Maybe we can come to some agreement.”

“I hope you're thinking of letting my men come back and offer me proper compensation to offer me, Geoffrey!”

“Please, come in, and all will be sorted. But before that. Can I pour you a drink?”

*

“Did she stay behind in the camp?”

“Yes, sir. She took what was left of Dr. Link's crew to run an exploratory trip in one of the subs.”

“What in the world could have happened to that ship?”

“I don't know, sir. Should we organize the rescue operation?”

“I don't know, Joey. It's all bizarre. There hasn't been a shipwreck in the lake in decades. The weather reports have also given no hint of a storm or anything that might precipitate this event. It is all so strange.” Joey gulped. The sight of seeing Fabius clueless about what to do next was unsettling. He'd always been the confident commissioner who never faltered and was always sure about what to do next.

“So, what should we do?”

“For now, we're going to avoid spreading panic. I'll send word to the mayor's office. When the papers come to ask us about Dr. Link's expedition, we'll just give them the reports of the discovery of the clients that you were telling me about.”

“Clines, sir.” Fabius didn't give him *the look*, even after he corrected him. The world must be coming to an end, thought Joey.

“Clines. That way, without lying, we can draw people's attention away from the missing ship. That should buy us enough time to discover what happened to Dr. Link and his team.” Joey moved uncomfortably in the seats. It didn't like the idea of lying to the public. But then, as he thought of the possibility of widespread chaos, he nodded in agreement.

“What else, sir?”

“Well, I think it's time to discover what's happening deep in the lake. I've already made provisions, Joey. Get the professor. The mayor has given us the albatross.”

Ch. 14 – The Albatross

Joey and Esther arrived at the Aquil Airport. Joey had been here several times before. Although he didn't have a particular need to air travel often, he had fond memories of this place. He smiled as he remembered his father taking him along for a hot air balloon ride to get a bird's eye view of their lake estate.

When he was a child, he wanted to explore the unknown. He had wanted to cross borders, ride a Zeppelin for the first time, and travel underwater in a submarine. His father had gone to great lengths to provide him with these incredible experiences. No wonder he went to the same lengths for his daughter, Molly. His little princess was getting to the age where she kept asking her father for a new adventure every month. He had already taken her on a hot air balloon ride, but Molly now said she wanted to travel in a Zeppelin because it was much more exciting and faster.

The airport director was already waiting for them at the arranged meeting place, courtesy of the Mayor's endorsement.

"Professor. Constable. It's an honor. The mayor has instructed me to assist you with whatever you need." Joey grimaced at the volume in which the director spoke. He felt like an old man being given the courtesy of being shouted at so that he could hear the conversation.

"Thank you, director," responded Esther.

The way the director leaned in to listen told Joey that the director was hard of hearing—one of the hazards of flying. Joey shouted to the director.

“We hoped you would help us find a vessel that can go as high as possible. We want to have a bird's eye view of the lake as wide as possible.”

Visibly grateful for the added volume, the director thought for a few seconds.

“That means we'll be taking the Albatross.”

The professor smiled pleasantly. “That's perfect, director.”

“Follow me. I'll take you up myself. The Mayor told me that you should get the best treatment possible, and I'm the best pilot in the fleet.”

Smiling at the humble remark, Joey followed after the director as he started heading toward their vessel.

“Tell us about the Albatross, captain.” As the director would fly them, the change in terminology for the title to address him seemed appropriate.

“It's one of the newest zeppelins in the fleet. It can take us up to about 15,000 feet.”

“That's impressive,” exclaimed Joey.

“How many people can it take?”

“Forty-two.”

As they left the terminal and came to the airstrip, The director took them toward a massive warehouse. The director gave orders to the crew, and they started opening the bay doors. Horses started pulling the beast out of its lair and into the sun's light. Once it was entirely out of its warehouse, the vessel's majesty was glorious. It was hard to wrap one's head around the size of the airship. It was gigantic, more significant than most buildings in the city. The Albatross was gray and shaped like a missile. The beast was two hundred and fifty meters long by thirty meters wide.

“Ain't she a beauty?” asked the director.

“Most certainly,” answered Esther humbly. Joey was still dazzled by the sight of the airship and was at a loss for words.

As the preparations for take-off were being completed, the captain brought Joey and Esther aboard the zeppelin. A ladder was lowered, and they went up onto the gangways. The gangways were made not of solid metal but out of latticed metal instead to reduce the airship's

weight. The gangways branched and interconnected, forming the skeleton that gave the airship its rigid shape.

“What do you use to make the envelope?”

“Yes. You're right. It's dope.” Esther couldn't hold it in and let out a little giggle.

“No. What fabric do you use to make the envelope?”

“Oh! It's made of goldbeater's skin.” Joey was surprised. So it was made of goldbeater's skin, a processed outer membrane of an animal's intestines. He wondered whether any of his old man's sea cow cattle lived on, aboard this vessel.

“Are those the fuel tanks?” Asked Joey pointing at the giant recipients on both sides of the path they were walking.

“You're welcome. It's a pleasure.”

Esther laughed again.

“What?” asked Joey.

“What?” asked the captain.

Esther burst out laughing.

“I asked if those were the fuel tanks.”

“Ha! No, those are the gasbags. They provide lift to the ship.” There were many, one after the other, like carriages in a train. “Even if something goes wrong with one of them, the rest can easily sustain the zeppelin.”

As they walked down the gangway, the airship's crew busily climbed up and down the zeppelin's structure, performing the final checks and ensuring everything was ready. The captain, walking in front of them, more than once shouted out to a crewmember to compliment their excellent work or chastise them for a careless performance. After walking for a surprisingly long while, they reached the gondola. The captain opened the hatch, and they were in.

Now inside the gondola, Joey noticed the stair tower. Only after seeing it did Joey realize that the captain had taken them up through a service entrance reserved solely for the ship's crew. “This is the stair tower. It's how passengers usually board the ship.” Joey wasn't sure if the alternate entrance was done as a display of hospitality toward them so that they could see the inner workings of the Albatross or if

it had been carelessly done as part of an automatic decades-old routine.

“Have you ever flown in the Albatross?”

“Can't say I have.”

“No. First time too.”

“Let me give you the full tour then. Unlike older models with only one car for passengers and crew, the Albatross keeps two separate cars. One is in the bow of the ship, where the navigation room and the steering room can be found, as well as quarters for the crew. We are in the car in the stern of the ship.

They were first led to the starboard side of the ship. There were two big rooms covered in paneled fragrant wood. Everything was bolted to the ground for safety reasons. The decoration was luxurious and tasteful while remaining practical. “These are the two most extensive compartments inside the gondola: the dining room and the saloon. This is where passengers have their meals, mingle, and chat as the trip progresses.” After making it to the port side of the Albatross, they were shown the reading and writing rooms.

“It is a bit quieter here. You can come here to read or write. And here are the kitchens.”

Finally, they were shown the ship's center, where the sleeping cabins were located. “We keep the rooms as far away as possible from the loud engines outside to guarantee a sound night of sleep,” explained the captain. Joey was grateful for the thoughtfulness of the engineers who had designed the car. He didn't want to become deaf like the captain.

After seeing the whole car, Joey's favorite feature of the gondola turned out to be the promenade, a corridor lined with inclined glass windows that afforded a fantastic view of the ground. It went all around the ship. Through it, Joey saw that as part of the final checks, someone outside was making sure the glass windows were spotless to ensure they would have as good of a view as possible. He couldn't wait to see the view of the lake from 4000 feet in the air. Provided that the sky was clear.

“That's the whole tour. Make yourselves at home. If you excuse me, I have to go to the crew's car and get this baby off the ground.

I'll come and check on you later.” The captain went to the same door they had used to come in. He would take the gangways and head toward the navigation car in the zeppelin's bow. He then was gone.

“What do you think, Esther?”

“It's a very impressive zeppelin. I had heard rumors of it, but I am glad we can use it.”

“It's the biggest I've been on.”

“Same here.”

Outside, the propellers' rumbling signaled that they would take flight. Tethers were loosened, and the buoyancy of the gas balls inside the zeppelin fought the gravity of the airship. The zeppelin started to lift off the ground.

“So, what is the plan?”

“I want to perform a survey of the lake, constable. We will search the lake in a grid pattern. The clines will be seen from an aerial view as a shift in the color of the water. I want to understand if there is some pattern we're missing. We should be able to see the clines from up here. We will map the clines of the lake. That will hopefully provide some insights into this phenomenon's nature.”

“How long is that going to take us?”

“I would say about a week.”

*

As Geoffrey walked through his estate, his guests followed him like children walking behind a teacher on a field trip. The entourage of merchants, ambassadors, and business tycoons comprised the contacts made by his deals through the pirate lord. They met all the criteria he was looking for for the next step in his plan to work. First, they were all extremely wealthy. Second, they weren't afraid of taking chances. Otherwise, they would have never bought his oil under the table.

“As you can see, gentleman, all our equipment is state of the art.” Geoffrey used the respite caused by his guests' wondering gazes to the Nautilus and the rest of the submarine fleet. They had all been scrubbed clean and polished and reflected the light so majestically that

one had to squint to look at them. In the distance, the shepherd dolphin pod contributed to the festive environment by performing fancy acrobatics.

Among his guests, he could count ambassadors from thirteenth countries, at least six of them from very wealthy nations. There were also different businessmen from several industries. He recognized Mary Oakland, the Railway Empress. She was one of the wealthiest people in the nation. Her family owned 70% of the Railway business.

He could also see Mr. Daniel, one of the largest cotton producers on the planet. One of the senior managers of his bank also has made an appearance, as well as many other high-profile entrepreneurs. Surprisingly, he also spotted one of the aides to the mayor. He wasn't expecting to see someone from the mayor's office here. It made no difference now. All the oil he'd bought had been sold and couldn't be traced back to him. They were too late to do anything about it. He continued the tour of his estate.

“Before the Flood, we had a herd of 300 manatees. But after the disaster abated, many of the ranchers in the lake could no longer care for all of their animals. To help them, I've been relieving them from some of their herds.

We now own 1500 manatees, 1200 dugongs, and 500 balatees. I also own a ranch of Stellar sea cows on one of the Ash Islands. And this number is only going to keep getting bigger. Gentlemen, our projects place Geoffrey Incorporated as controlling a little under 10% of the world's energy market. And things don't have to stop here.

We're expanding our activities, so we need land, money, and resources. If you want to be a part of the future of Geoffrey Inc., I invite you to invest in us. I guarantee you a return of 10% in the next three months.”

Sounds of surprise and disbelief ran through the crowd. Geoffrey could see the different old foxes running the numbers in their minds. In the first step of this plan, he had made a name for himself in the black market and had made connections to the pirate lord. In the second step, he had weakened his competitors, thus making him more valuable in the eyes of investors. Now, all that was left was for them

to take the bite, and he could move on to the next step of his plan. He needed more money to keep buying the shore of the lake!

“I hope you gentlemen have enjoyed the visit. If you want to become stockholders or investors in Geoffrey Estates, please leave your contact information with Deborah. We only accept investments over two hundred thousand crowns but promise a return of 10% on your investment within the first two years. Let’s brighten the world together.”

The crowd dispersed, and he was happy to see one ambassador taking the initiative to go talk to his secretary.

“Excuse me, Mr. Geoffrey?”

“Hello! You are the mayor's aide, Mr. Finley. Right?”

“Excellent memory, sir.”

“What business does the mayor have with our humble estate? Is the city hall thinking of investing public funds into this enterprise?”

“No, I'm not here on City Hall's business. One of your... *associates* told me about the little operation you're running here.” Geoffrey gulped. Could this be a mole placed by the pirates? If so, he was impressed. The scrutiny this man had to endure was off the charts. “I want to ask you a few questions.”

“By all means.”

“You promise a 10% return within three months. Correct?”

“Yes. Absolutely. We will put all of my estate and the animals as collateral.”

“Imagine I invest five billion crowns.” Geoffrey's eyes widened. How did this man have so much money? It was enough to buy the whole country! “Could you sweeten the deal? Maybe 20% within two months.” Geoffrey stood speechless. He'd never imagined someone would be crazy to invest that kind of money.

“I-I'm sorry, sir, I can't promise that.”

“Shame. Well, I must leave.”

Geoffrey gulped. Who was this person? He'd appeared out of thin air, asking casually about a five billion crown investment. A mix of emotions rushed through him like a stampede of wild beasts. First, fear. Then came jealousy and finally amusement.

“Mr. Geoffrey, can I ask you a few questions?”

“Mrs. Oakwood. What a privilege to have you in my humble abode. Please, by all means.”

*

Five days of flight had gone by aboard the Albatross. The Zeppelin could achieve a speed of a hundred kilometers per hour thanks to its powerful engines. Lake Grassum was six hundred kilometers long at its longest length from East to West and three hundred kilometers wide at its greatest width from North to South.

Esther and Joey spent their days in the promenade mapping the clines. She had asked the captain to fly over the lake in progressively smaller circles in a whirlpool pattern. This would give Esther more reference points on the shore and a better sense of scale. With each progressive circle, the time it took to complete them was progressively shorter. It had taken them two full days to go around the lake close enough to view the shores. A day and a half for the second circle, and now they were running more than a circle a day.

Joey looked over Esther’s shoulders. He was feeling useless in this survey. He had, in vain, tried to assist Esther with drawing the boundaries of the clines, but was terrible at it. Esther had a firm hand and drew confident lines. Joey admitted that he had taken the hard work of cartographers for granted.

As a policeman, he often had to make use of maps. It took a mix of imagination and precision to draft an accurate map. On the one hand, drawing a map was something divine. You drew miles of geographical features with the slightest movement of a pen. It amazed him how Esther rarely adjusted what she had drawn.

“How confident are you that your drawing resembles the real thing?”

“Very.” Joey wasn't fully convinced.

“Are you bored, Joey?”

“To be honest with you, Esther, yes.” After spending so many days together, they had gotten around to treating each other on a first-name basis. “To be perfectly candid, I miss my wife and daughter. I

would have rather stayed at home with them. It's not like I'm doing anything here.”

“Your presence is appreciated, Joey. I feel safe with you around to watch my back.”

“You're only saying that to make me happy.” She giggled. “My boss would never have agreed to me staying at home. Are you aware that the city is treating you like a messianic figure? You could ask for literally anything, and they would do it.”

“I'm aware of the city's hospitality.”

Joey wondered how his wife and his daughter were doing. They had both been disappointed when he had told them he would be away for about a week. He had assured them the commissioner had already promised him a week of holidays after closing the investigation. He wanted to go back home.

“Professor, how long would you say we have left before we can go home?” Esther studied the landscape and then the map.

“We have been very fortunate. The weather has been clear throughout the week, and the winds haven't been too bad. Today we will finally fly over the center of the lake, Joey. If all goes well, we'll return to the city tomorrow.”

“Good,” answered Joey happily. He was tired of being stuck in the gondola. He needed some action.

“Shall I go prepare some coffee for us? Maybe a snack?”

“I would appreciate that. Thank you.”

Over the last few days, Esther and Joey had become closer. Joey realized that Esther reminded him of his mother. His mother had been a teacher, so the way they communicated, as if they were always in a classroom, felt natural to him. She had many adventures and stories to share. After spending more time together, two days earlier, Esther had taken a step in showing trust in Joey and had asked him to prepare her a cup of tea. Until then, both of them had always handled their food and drink, despite the kind offers the captain and his crew constantly made.

Joey went to the kitchen and carefully boiled the water he would use for fifteen minutes. This was the only place on the ship where a fire could be lit. It was hazardous to have ignition near the gasbags

full of helium. He took a small vial of liquid and put a drop on top of each ingredient he would use. The liquid never changed color, indicating that it shouldn't have any toxins. Still, he carefully smelled and tasted each one. Once he was satisfied, he went about preparing an omelet and brewed the coffee.

He recognized that his trauma came with a lot of work. When he was dating his wife, he remembered that she had first found it romantic that he always cooked and prepared their meals. Later when she realized that the reason for this was because of Joey's trust issues and the trauma that had come from how he lost his parents, she reformulated her opinion. It had taken a lot of convincing from Joey to assure her that he trusted her. He had told her many times that it wasn't that he didn't trust her, but that the best poisoners ensure that the food that kills their prey is served by hands they trust. To this day, he didn't let anyone in his house prepare food when he was in. His wife, in turn, had needed years of insistence to make him stop coming home from work to cook and ensure that everything was OK before he returned to work.

Joey heard a scream. It was a desperate shout. Dropping the coffee on the ground and breaking the cups, he grabbed his gun and ran toward the promenade where he had left the professor. He had hardly heard Esther's screams over the hum of the engines and perhaps would have missed it entirely if he hadn't gotten used to the engine's noise. After a few days, the brain learned how to ignore the sound and make out all the other sounds under the constant turning of the propellers.

He ran. She was standing with the map, and the pen lay fallen on the floor. Her hands covered her mouth. She had seen something that had frightened her. He ran toward her to try to see the reason for her scream.

“Joey... it's...”

Joey looked down the window. Most of the lake under them seemed ochre yellow. First, Joey thought this was a new type of cline. He looked around and saw that the cline seemed to curve on the horizon. Looking around, he saw that this new yellow cline seemed to form a giant circle. In the middle of the yellow circle was a darker

black circle, perhaps one kilometer wide. Joey realized that the black inner circle was expanding.

“It can’t be.”

It was an eye.

Ch. 15 – The Dream

Since the flood a few weeks ago, Geoffrey had the same dream every night. Each time, it became clearer. He was faintly aware that he was not awake; otherwise, he would be drowning. After all, in his dream, he had been swimming underwater for many hours. Herds of dugongs passed by him. Such peace, such tranquility.

As he looked up, he saw a blue sky. The sunlight warmed the water, making it comfortable. Beyond the surf, up above, white clouds were passing by. One of the clouds, he realized, was too defined, too straight. In some corner of Geoffrey's mind, he noticed that the dream was deviating from its usual course. He looked up and focused with interest. His vision zoomed in on the cloud until he saw it was no cloud. It was an airship. A Zeppelin. He could see the letters writing the word Albatross on the side of the giant envelope. He felt the presence of people aboard. Fifty-six souls were busily working away.

He looked down. Below him, stretching as far as he could see, was a giant topaz. It was polished and almost transparent, like a glass ball. In the middle of it, dark obsidian-like stone formed a perfect circle. Inside the yellow glass sphere, little root patterns stretched, and, in the distance, shadows and dark shapes formed tendrils like mountains and pillars. The glass ball seemed to pulse as if it were a heart. It sounded like a taskmaster drumming to keep the enslaved rowers in an accelerated tempo.

He looked back up. There was something odd about the airship. He could feel fifty-six minds connected to his, but there seemed to

be more people aboard. He zoomed in. Below him, the black sphere expanded more and more. The zeppelin became clearer until it seemed like it was right in front of them. A man and a woman. Joey? Professor? They seemed pale and horrified. What was wrong with them?

He heard a scream. It was horrific and otherworldly, like a thousand voices singing a thousand songs. He saw Esther bleeding from her nose and falling. Joey fell to his knees but kept looking horrified. He picked a pen with great effort and seemed to write something—there was another otherworldly scream. Joey collapsed. Even from here, Geoffrey could see blood coming from Joey's ears.

“Boss! Boss!” someone was urgently knocking on Geoffrey's door. He woke up, an intense headache brewing. He recognized Peter Hilton's voice, one of the employees he had more recently hired. Geoffrey felt slightly disoriented. The dream had felt so real.

“Coming,” he said with a grumpy voice. He opened the door and found Peter Hilton anxiously looking at him.

“What is it, Pete? What happened?”

“Sir! We've been robbed!”

“What?” At the mention of the robbery, Geoffrey felt his head clear up with the rush of adrenaline. “What has been robbed?”

“Sir, all the oil we vacuumed yesterday has been stolen.”

“How many casks?”

“At least three hundred.” Geoffrey cursed. It was a significant amount. He would face a lot of pressure from the producers and the Mayor. What a headache. Nevertheless, he managed to stay calm. It was a hit, but not a deadly one.

“Go to the mayor's office. I will go to the precinct first and then join you there.”

“Yes, sir. On my way.”

As Geoffrey searched his feelings, he found delight and curiosity. He wasn't sure about the reason for his good mood. Why would a setback such as this bring him such pleasure? He went to get a glass of lake water and drank. He felt refreshed. After putting on some clothes, he got in his locomotive and headed toward the police station.

It was a swift trip from his manor at Rolling Hills to the nearest precinct. In fifteen minutes, he had arrived. He wasn't sure of the precinct's opening hours and had come prepared to wait for someone to open the door. He had even come prepared to arrive at a deserted precinct. A different scene greeted him.

An extensive line waited at the door. Officers hastily rushed in and out of the building. Geoffrey checked the time on his silver pocket watch. It was five-thirty in the morning. It was strange that there would be such a frenzy in front of a precinct this early. He decided to ask the person who was ahead of him in line.

"Excuse me, sir?"

The person in front of him was a man in his fifties. His clothes and oil smudges in his hands gave him away as a craftsman.

"Yes?"

"What's going on? Is it normal for there to be such a big line and people at the precinct at this time?"

"I don't know! I've tried to go in, but they are swamped. They told me I had to wait in line."

Geoffrey looked around everywhere, trying to pick clues that would let him make sense of the situation. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two men chatting and pointing at him. As he turned toward them, he found they were walking in his direction.

"Mr. Geoffrey?" they tried, trying to confirm whether they had recognized him.

"Yes?"

"William Murray, from the New Lisbon Gazette. Have you been a victim of any of the crimes that afflicted the city last night?"

"I am sorry. I don't follow," Geoffrey tried to play the fool, even though it was obvious that he just had been a victim of a crime. Why else would he be here at this ungodly hour? A game of chess had begun between the two. On one side, a scoop-smelling reporter. Here was the hero of the energy crisis, at the precinct on a fateful night of crime. On the other side was Geoffrey, trying not to give anything away while hopefully gleaning some information from the reporter.

"Have you or have you not been the victim of a crime, Mr. Geoffrey? Is the production of oil compromised? Should the world

be worried about a break in the supply chain?” Geoffrey spared a look at his surroundings and saw other reporters starting to come his way. They reminded him of vultures who flock together as soon as one of them finds a carcass.

“I have no comments,” he said, turning away. The commotion started to grow more prominent, attracting the attention of the people around them. Geoffrey headed toward the precinct, trying to cut the line to find some refuge. As soon as he was within reach of a police officer, he urgently called for help. “Officer! Help, please.”

The officer turned and, recognizing Geoffrey, went toward him.

“Mr. Geoffrey! How much oil was stolen, exactly?”

“Mr. Geoffrey, Rachel Dodson from the New Lisbon Times. Is it true that Geoffrey’s Estate was robbed tonight?”

The officer reached Geoffrey. “Aren’t you, Mr. Geoffrey, from the news? What...?”

Amid flashes of cameras, Geoffrey pulled the officer close. “Do the city a favor and get me away from these jackals. Let me in the precinct.” The officer pulled him in, and as reporters screamed questions at Geoffrey and other people in line protested about him cutting the line, he made it into the precinct and another type of chaos. Officers rushed from one place to another. Everyone was collecting statements from different citizens. The officer took Geoffrey to his desk and asked him to sit down while he called his superior officer.

While waiting, he overheard bits of information from the conversations between police officers and other crime victims.

“...and is it like your father to not come home without telling anyone about it?” he heard to his right.

“... I told you. He is a blacksmith. I don’t see how his job is relevant for his disappearance!” he heard to his left.

“...curator, was there anything else missing from the museum?” a police officer asked a gentleman behind him.

Geoffrey felt a tingling excitement in his heart. What was this? What had happened to the city overnight?

Joey woke up in an unfamiliar bed. Looking around, he realized he was in a hospital. In a blue armchair in the corner, his wife was sleeping. She looked exhausted. He searched around to see if there was anyone else. There wasn't. Looking out the window, he could see that it was morning. The sky was blue and clear. He felt a horrible headache.

"Marie?" he called, voice hoarse.

His wife opened her eyes and, seeing her husband awake, immediately started crying and leaped toward him.

"Oh, Joey. You're finally up," she said through tears.

"Marie, I'm sorry I worried you. What happened?"

She kept crying. Realizing she needed a moment to release the emotional tension, Joey gave her a few moments. "Is Molly OK?"

"Yes, I left her with my sister."

"How long was I out?"

"A little over three days."

Joey's heartbeat started racing, and his chest started hurting. He began to feel trapped.

"That long? Does that mean that...? Oh no... I might have been poisoned! No! No!" Joey began hyperventilating. Marie held him down.

"Joey! Joey! Calm down, honey! I haven't left your side. Everything you've been fed has been done so under my watch."

He relaxed somewhat.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. The captain of the Albatross flew you guys in as soon as you had a seizure and immediately brought you to the hospital. They didn't give you guys anything either."

Hearing the plural, Joey thought of the professor. "The professor. Where is she? Is she OK?"

"She's fine. She woke up one day ago. Whatever happened to both of you guys, for some reason, hit you harder."

Joey tried to find his bearings and remember what happened before the seizure. He couldn't remember anything. The last thing he could remember was that he was in the kitchen of the Albatross

preparing some tea for both him and Esther. After that, it was a big blank.

“She was also hospitalized?”

“She was. She was in the room next door. Despite the doctor’s recommendations, she already took off.”

“What did the doctors say?”

“I’ll call the doctors to explain it to you. Please, don’t go anywhere.” His wife left the room. Joey felt unsettled about what had happened to him. He felt he had been attacked somehow, as if someone had sneaked up on him from behind and bludgeoned him. Whenever he tried to make sense of what had happened over the last three days, he felt there was nothing in his mind to recall, as if someone had picked up an eraser and scrubbed the records of the last days clean.

He heard steps in the hallway. Turning his head, instead of Marie, he found someone he wasn’t expecting.

“Jeff?”

“Joey!” Geoffrey approached the bed and held Joey’s shoulders firmly. “My dear friend, I was so worried when I heard what happened to you. How do you feel?”

“A little confused. It feels like someone hit me in the head with a hammer.”

“Sorry to hear that. What happened? Did someone hit you with a hammer?” Jeff chuckled.

“I honestly can’t remember. There’s only this big blank in my memory.”

“I see...”

“How goes business?”

“Better than ever,” Jeff responded enthusiastically. Catching Joey’s sad look, Geoffrey frowned. “You don’t seem happy to hear about your friend’s good luck, Joey. You almost look depressed!”

“Look, Jeff. We go way back.”

“Were it not for you, those bullies would have made me into minced meat. You’ve always looked after me, Joey. You and your pops.”

“Is everything OK with you, Geoffrey?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don't seem like yourself these days. You've always been mellow and upright in how you deal with business, but everything you've been doing over the last weeks doesn't seem like you.”

“Are you saying that I'm doing something wrong or unlawful?” He drew away.

“No, no. That's not what I'm saying. You are just doing things differently from what my father would have done.”

The words hit Geoffrey hard. He seemed unsettled. He stood up unsteadily and, with shaking hands, reached for a flask in his pocket. He then started mumbling loose nonsensical words, “W-where... J-joe? Help...”

“Geoffrey, are you OK?”

Geoffrey opened the flask with shaky hands and took big gulps of what was inside. Joey couldn't smell any alcohol. After drinking, Geoffrey regained his composure and sat back down as if nothing had happened.

“Jeff. What was that? Are you sick? Are you taking medicine?”

“I'm sorry, Joey. Seeing you like this and then hearing those words had a big impact on my emotions.”

“What was that you were drinking?”

“Just water. Want some?”

“Jeff. What's wrong? You're scaring me.”

“Listen, Joey. I'm sorry you feel that I'm disrespecting your father's memory. Not a day goes by that I don't think of him and all that he's done for me. Can't you see? He's why I work so hard! I'm trying my best to make Geoffrey Inc. something your father would admire. It's how I honor his memory.” He stood up to leave.

“Jeff, don't go. Let's talk. We can...”

“I'm afraid I have an afternoon appointment I can't miss. I'm sorry that you lost your memory, Joey,” Geoffrey said the sentence with an awkward smile that didn't match the sadness in his voice. “I wish you a speedy recovery, old friend.”

And just like that, he was out the door. Joey got an eerie feeling. What was this? What was wrong with his friend? For a moment, it almost seemed like Jeff had a panic attack. Was he sick?

Marie came back, bringing a doctor along. The doctor was a tall woman in her fifties. She was so big that Joey couldn't help but feel some respect for her. She seemed like a cousin of his commissioner. When she spoke, a surprisingly gentle voice addressed him.

"Mr. Joseph, I'm your doctor, Dr. Woods."

"Hello, doctor. Thank you for your work. Marie?"

"Yes, honey."

"Jeff was just here."

"He's been coming here every day to check in on you. He's been so worried."

"Did you see him in the hallway?"

"I must have missed him."

"I see." His mind was replaying the conversation in his mind. The moment he stood up, panicked, and drank from the flask had been strange. He caught the doctor stoically waiting for him to finish his conversation with his wife.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. I thank you for coming here. Do you know what happened to me?"

"I suspect you suffered encephalitis or severe brain inflammation."

"I've never had anything like that before."

"So your wife tells me. We don't know what caused it."

"Did Esther, the professor, also have the same thing?"

"She did."

"So whatever caused the encephalitis was something external."

"That seems the logical conclusion, yes. However, the captain assures me that no one aboard the Albatross has experienced anything remotely similar to what you felt. Not even a headache."

"Does the professor remember anything?"

"In both cases, you seem to suffer from episodic amnesia. It's common when you experience some brain trauma to experience disorientation. Perhaps, with time, the memories will come back to you."

"I see. Should I be worried? Is this treatable?"

"Yes, absolutely. Just drink plenty of fluids and take these anti-inflammatories for about a week. Avoid anything that avoids big changes in pressure for the next few days, such as flying or diving."

“If I don't take the medicine...”

“Your wife has already told me about your trauma, Mr. Joseph. I recommend you take them. If you don't, your recovery will be slower.”

“What about stress from work, doctor?” Marie prompted the doctor while shooting her husband a furious warning stare.

“It wouldn't hurt to rest...”

“I'll see him now!” a bass voice roared in the hallway.

The commotion outside in the hallway disrupted the conversation. The whole hospital seemed to shake with each step of the new arrival. Fabius came in.

“Joey! My boy, you're awake! Good! Put your clothes on. We have work to do.”

Marie immediately protested. “Now, listen to me, Fabius! You might rule over that precinct of yours, but you don't have the authority to drag my husband out of the hospital bed and put him to work as soon as he regains consciousness!” Although Marie was half as tall as Fabius, her presence still seemed to tower over the chief of New Lisbon's police.

The commissioner laughed heartily, trying to disguise his nervousness around the woman. Joey had never seen him blink when facing drug dealers, human traffickers, and murderers, but he looked terrified whenever Maria was mad at him.

“Joey! You got yourself a fiery one,” he said jokingly.

Marie stared him down.

“Marie, I...”

“Don't Marie me, Fabius! See what this work has done to the father of my daughter! Although the doctor might disagree with me, I blame it all on you and this cursed work you two do!” Marie started to tear up, making the bear-like Fabius pause.

“Marie, I know this job is a lot. I promise you that after this crisis, I'll give your husband leave for two weeks so that you all can spend some time together!”

Hearing holidays being mentioned, Marie's ears perked up, and her facial expression became feline.

“Two weeks? That’s hardly enough to catch up on all that has happened this week! Give him two months off! Take it or leave you, old grizzly bear!”

“Done,” Fabius grunted.

Joey stood dazed, witnessing this battle of wills. If his boss, who ordered him around, was being bossed around by his wife, he was at the bottom of the food chain here.

“Would that be OK, doctor?” Fabius questioned Doctor Woods.

She hesitated. “Don’t push him too hard. If he experiences any headache or discomfort, he should stop whatever he is doing immediately.”

“Good. Joey! Come along!”

Joey stood up, upset. He was the only one who didn’t seem to have a say in his actions. He put on his clothes, said goodbye to Marie, and met Fabius, who was waiting outside. Fabius hurriedly walked toward the exit. Joey was having a hard time keeping up.

“What’s wrong, boss? What did I miss?”

“Joey, the situation is bad. There has been a string of thefts and kidnappings. The whole city has been turned upside down. Your nose for trouble is going to be put to work.”

*

Esther searched the lab for a seat, but all she found was machinery everywhere. She sighed. Even though she was trying to be strong, her headache wasn't improving, but she refused to take any medicine. She needed clarity to make sense of what was happening.

After she woke up, the doctors failed to explain what had happened. So, she came to Orca University looking for answers. If she was considered a VIP among politicians and law enforcement, she was seen as a goddess within the academic community. She had been immediately given the keys to Dr. Neuer’s lab and was told to wait as someone went to get the doctor. Since it was a Sunday morning, Esther presumed they had gone to the man’s house to do so.

She finally found a stool, hidden under clutter and blueprints, and after vacating it, she sat. Grabbing a copy of the newspaper she had secured earlier at the hotel, she skimmed through it. The string of kidnappings and thefts was still the news on the front page. But there was a smaller piece that caught her attention.

“The Lake that Heals

Reports have emerged of chronically ill individuals experiencing miraculous healing after diving into the waters of Lake Grassum. While skepticism abounds within the medical community, many testimonies have surfaced, lending credence to what locals call the “Miracle Dive.”

There are multiple accounts from individuals who embarked on this unconventional therapeutic journey and have experienced astonishing recovery. From conditions as diverse as chronic pain, autoimmune disorders, and even certain forms of cancer, individuals have reported a significant improvement in their health following a dip in the lake's waters.

Dr. Laura Simmons, a respected New Lisbon Medical Center physician, voiced skepticism while acknowledging the community's excitement. “While the reports are intriguing, it is crucial to exercise scientific rigor when evaluating such claims. Spontaneous remissions and unexplained recoveries have occurred throughout medical history, and attributing them solely to the lake's waters would be premature.”

Despite the reservations of the medical establishment, the growing momentum behind the “Miracle Dive” has prompted some researchers to explore potential scientific explanations. Water composition, mineral content, and the psychological effect of hope and belief are currently being considered.

We have interviewed local resident Sarah Turner, who suffered from a debilitating autoimmune disorder and attests to the lake's transformative powers. “The flood has transformed the lake. It was bestowed with a blessing from the heavens; now, the water has become the heavens themselves. I had tried every treatment imaginable, and nothing worked until I took that dive into Lake Grassum. It's as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and I am getting my life back.”

So this had been the reason for the multiple arguments she had caught between doctors and patients on her exit from the hospital.

Undoubtedly, the medical community was apprehensive about the *healing properties* of the lakewater, while hopeless family members were up for anything after seeing conventional science fail.

A door opened, letting an academic who had evidently been strongarmed out of bed.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Dr. Neuer.”

Ch. 16 – The Crime Spree

She studied the man in front of her. He was short, and his hair was meticulously combed and drenched in hair products. His lab coat was full of oil smears, which were highly unusual for someone in his field of study. She had read his file before and integrated the panel discussing whether he was a suitable candidate for the academy. Even though he was undoubtedly a brilliant man with a degree in mechanical engineering and another in neurology, the academy considered his research eccentric, and his nomination had been turned down more than once.

“It’s no trouble at all, emissary. Having someone from the Science Academy here to see me is an honor. Although I have to admit that, for the life of me, I can’t understand why you’d come to see me.”

“To be honest with you, Dr. Neuer, I came to see you because I read your file, and I know you’re the best neurologist in New Lisbon.”

The man stood there unfazed, silently accepting the professor’s praise. He didn’t bother with false modesty but didn’t look proud, either. It was just a fact. Esther imagined that had she said that the sky was blue or that water was wet, she would get the same reaction.

“Who’s the patient?”

“Me, actually.” The doctor widened his eyes and jolted upright with a flashlight in hand.

“What symptoms do you have?” He turned on the flashlight and tested her pupil’s reactions.

“I was aboard a Zeppelin for a week, and suddenly, I and a colleague passed out. None of the other crew members suffered

anything similar. We were taken to the hospital. I was out for two days, and my colleague hasn't awakened yet. I woke up with no recollection of what happened to me."

"This is highly unusual. Were you and your colleague together when this happened?"

"I don't remember. But the crew that found us said that we were."

The doctor spared a look at the machine. "When did you say this was?"

"Three days ago." She noticed how the man gulped nervously.

"What time of the day?"

"Mid-afternoon?"

"Please excuse me for a moment. Doris! Come here!" Esther felt heavy steps like a bear was walking in the lab but was greeted with something entirely different. It was a short woman, or at least, that's what Dr. Neuer had designed the automaton to look like. She was entirely made of metal, and a huge tube kept her connected to what Esther assumed was a boiler of some kind.

Esther couldn't help but think of the automaton clock in her hometown. Her mom had taken her there several times at noon when the parade of choreographed mechanical dolls performed an amusing ballet for the public.

"Did you build this automaton?"

"No, an old student did."

"Really? He must be brilliant."

"He sure was. Came from Mr. Jebediah's opportunity school. He knew his way around machines like no one else. Everything he did was ground-breaking. I might be the best neurologist, but that boy was a better mechanical engineer."

"Was?"

"Yes. Sadly, he's no longer here with us."

With precise movements, Doris finally arrived at their side. The craftsmanship was exquisite!

"It's impressive. And did it just obey your command?"

"Yes."

"How?"

“Sounds are vibrations in the air. It's tricky, but I created a mechanism that responds to certain sequences of vibrations caused by my commands.” She noted how he proudly took credit for the upgrades to his student's inventions.

“What commands does it understand?”

“It's all still very rudimentary. It responds to 'come,' 'rest,' and 'report.’” The mechanical doll stared with her dead eyes at Esther but didn't move otherwise. It was unsettling and fascinating at the same time.

“She hasn't done anything after hearing you issue those commands just now.”

“It's because I need to preface it with her name. Doris, report.”

“When?” The voice was muffled and seemed to come from an entirely different place in the lab, almost like a recording played on a gramophone. “Three days.” This automaton was much more advanced than the doctor was letting on. They were having a conversation. Esther made a mental note to send a letter to the academy. This man was far too brilliant to remain here. His student was also a genius for creating this automaton. Both would be valuable assets to the academy. From the doll's back, a long slip of paper rolled out. By the time the slip had fully come out, it was three meters long.

“What's that?”

“Since the flood started, my wave scanner has been giving me trouble.”

“Wave scanner?”

“My latest research.”

“Which is...” prompted Esther.

“Just like we use vibrations in the air to propagate sound, I've been researching the existence of other invisible vibrations in the air. I call them mental waves.” Esther made an effort not to twist her mouth. She didn't want to disrespect the man or show her reluctance. “This machine is designed to scan them and register the results on this piece of paper. But from a few weeks back, the device has been going haywire. It's always giving me results off the charts, and the time you experienced this brain trauma coincides with when my machine picked up these readings. Here. Look.”

As Esther picked up the paper, at first, all she saw were scribbles. But then, she recognized the oscillations running through the paper. They weren't very different from the ones produced by seismographs. "Are these mental waves?" she asked skeptically.

"Yes. Look over there. See that spike? It coincides with your condition."

"Can't it be a coincidence?"

"Were it just one person, I would say so. But two?"

"What is your suggestion, doctor?"

"What if all the static my device has been capturing isn't static? What if it is the prelude of some mental wave eruption? Perhaps some phenomenon produced a huge burst of mental wave energy. It was localized and only affected you and your colleague."

Esther sighed. So this was why he hadn't made it into the Science Academy. After you spoke to him briefly, all the crazy started coming out. "Thank you so much for your help, Dr. Neuer. It's been terrific."

"I'd like to run some tests. Just to make sure you're alright."

"Maybe some other time. I have an afternoon appointment that I'm dreading but can't miss."

*

Joey had been brought to the precinct and rushed into the commissioner's office. All blinds were closed, and he was feeling woozy after the effort of coming straight out of a hospital bed. To make it worse, they had ridden here on horseback. Given the urgency in the commissioner's tone, Joey couldn't understand why they hadn't brought the locotank. Now that they weren't galloping on horses and in a quiet place, the commissioner let Joey make himself comfortable so that he could brief him.

"What is this about, chief?"

"Where should I start, Joey?" The commissioner walked toward a board filled with notes and connected with strings. "Toward the end of your journey aboard the Albatross three days ago, there was an unprecedented crime spree in the city."

"What happened?"

“The most outstanding thing was a series of kidnappings. Clocksmiths, blacksmiths, train engineers, zeppelin mechanics, and other craftsmen disappeared overnight. They were all at the top of their fields. Some didn’t make it home. Others disappeared from their beds without their loved ones noticing. They simply vanished. All throughout the city. So far, we have registered over a thousand people missing without explanation.”

“A thousand?”

“Over a thousand. The real number is one thousand two hundred and three.” Joey thought furiously. This had never happened in the city. Sure, sometimes kidnapping and ransom demands happened here, like everywhere else on the planet, but it was exceedingly rare for there to be a kidnapping in a week. But over a thousand in just one night?

“This is a disaster! Any ransom demands? Any word from the kidnappers?”

“Nothing. No leads, no clues. That’s just the tip of the iceberg. There was a string of thefts, too.”

“What was stolen?”

“To begin with,” Joey noticed how this sentence was dripping with rage, “All of our locotanks were stolen.”

“What?”

“You heard me. The bandits had the gall to break into our precincts’ trainyards and steal our locotanks.”

“The nerve!”

“The rendezvous clock was also stolen.”

Joey stared blankly at the commissioner.

“Excuse me?”

“The rendez-vous clock. Stolen. The market one, too.”

Joey was silent for a few seconds. These were huge pieces of machinery. How could they disappear into thin air in one night?

“The whole tower?”

The commissioner chuckled. “I don’t blame you for asking. The whole thing sounds preposterous. No. Just the clock and the crank. It is an empty tower now. Everything inside was stolen.”

Joey couldn't process the scale of the criminal operation involved in making all these legendary crimes in one evening.

"That's not all. Two zeppelins have disappeared. Six trains were stolen. And almost every single diamond in the city has gone missing. The most significant theft was that of the Dawn Star, the biggest diamond in the world, that was on display in the New Lisbon Metropolitan Museum.

As Joey tried to wrap his head around what had happened, he started to make sense of the board in the commissioner's office: A list of names showing all those kidnapped. Next to it, there were some notes. 'Most victims are craftsmen. Why?' Croppings of newspaper articles were also pinned next to it. 'Where did they go?' read the Chronicle. 'Finley Thompson, right-hand of the mayor, gone missing.' The board had similar croppings next to notes related to some thefts. 'Only the bones of the clock remain,' read the New Lisbon Times.

"The whole city has gone crazy. A thousand people is a lot. Everyone in the city knows at least one of them or one of their relatives. The news spread and things started to get ugly. There have been acts of vandalism everywhere. The whole city has been graffitied. But that's not all. Something weird is also happening in the lake."

"Again? Don't tell me it has flooded."

"This is different."

"Did Dr. Link's expedition make it back?"

The commissioner sadly shook his head. Joey saw that the commissioner had bags under his eyes. He also noticed that this wasn't the usual briefing. It didn't feel like a boss briefing an underling but a detective touching bases with his partner.

"I'm going crazy. I have this unsettling feeling that all is connected, but I can't see how. Everything looks strange, and I can't make sense of it. I want your pair of fresh eyes on this, Joey. What do you make of all of this?"

"The first thing that stands out to me is that there is no way these crimes happened on the same night by accident or coincidence. This well-planned operation most likely involved every single criminal in New Lisbon. Not even a local pirate lord could activate so many

resources at once. One would have to have control over all the pirate lords of the city to get this done. My first suspicion is that the black merchant did this. I mean... we have never confirmed whether he is an actual person or a local legend, but after seeing this, I can't think of anyone else who could orchestrate something like this."

"So we have the who and the how." Fabius flipped the board to reveal a chalkboard. He grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote in big capital letters, 'black merchant' and then to one side, 'every criminal in the city involved.'

"As for the why... All that has been stolen is related to machinery. Even the people that were kidnapped were all craftsmen. My best guess is that the black merchant wants to build something." Joey stopped. "I am sorry, commissioner, I am so tired that I am spinning a fable. This is all too far-fetched. Perhaps we should..."

"Nonsense, Joey. Quit whining and keep talking." Fabius wrote on the board: 'Building something. What?' "So, how would you go about cracking this case, Joey?"

"I wouldn't spend any time looking at the individual crimes and would try to see the bigger picture."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, if every criminal in the city had to be involved, I would go out into the streets and bring in every single criminal I could get my hands on to interrogate them. Maybe by cross-referencing their interviews, we could get a glimpse of what was going on."

Fabius wrote down his suggestion on the board under the 'to-do list.'

"What else?"

"I would consult the academic community in the city. I would list everything stolen and ask them what could be built with it." Fabius wrote that down as well.

"Sir, something is bothering me, which I think will have to be considered too."

"What is it, Joey?"

"The locotanks... wait a minute! Is that why you went to get me to the hospital?" Fabius grimaced.

“So you noticed,” he sighed. “Joey, there is no way on earth criminals could waltz into the precinct and take the locotanks. We have had hundreds of hours of training to learn how to operate the thing. They wouldn’t be able to drive it easily either.”

“They have people inside the force,” Joey exclaimed.

“You’re the only one I can trust, Joey. You’ve been outside the city for a week and in a hospital for the last few days. You are the only one I’m sure couldn’t have been involved in this.”

*

The Lithos Mountains were the most extensive mountain range in the world. They stretched hundreds of kilometers and were famous for their mines and precious gems. The mountains were so colossal that they impacted the weather throughout the continent.

Deep underground, a rock started shaking. Then another, and yet another. The vibration turned to warmth, and the warmth became smoldering heat. Incandescent rock melted into a trickling fiery ooze, which began converging into a mighty river of fire.

There was something in the air. It wasn't in the rock but in the water. It was far away, but it was there. How long had it been since another mind great as this had visited this backend world? Could it be that there was someone new to play with?

*

“Impressive, hey?” signaled Geoffrey toward the lake shore. From here, a crowd of people could be seen on one of the beaches near Geoffrey's animal pens. They were carrying people in wheelchairs and on beds and bringing them into the water. There were also shouts of joy and festive music. “What would you say is the scientific explanation for these miracle dives, professor?”

“I believe it to be some placebo effect. The crowd has been built into a frenzy. Once they calm down, the pains and symptoms will return.”

“I don't know about that. I went to check it the other day, and there was a boy who could hardly talk when he got there, and once he came out of the water, he was singing like an angel.” The professor let out a raspy sigh, signaling how annoyed she was. Geoffrey was having a hard time breaking the ice.

“Are you sure I can't interest you in some tea?” asked Geoffrey.

“No, Mr. Geoffrey. You can not. But I thank you for your hospitality.”

Professor Esther looked tired and pale, perhaps due to her recent hospitalization. But the discomfort she felt was more than that. She didn't like him. She resented him for some reason. He wondered where that had come from.

“I was so worried to hear about what happened to you two. I got to see Joey this morning.”

“How is the constable doing?”

“He had just woken up when I saw him, but the doctors believe he'll be OK. What about you? Are you feeling better today?”

“Yes, just slightly out of it. But I trust I should be back to a hundred percent in two days or so.”

“Good. Good. Find anything interesting while flying over the lake?” Geoffrey felt nervous and apprehensive about the possible answer. He didn't know why he felt this way, though. His concern was what was happening on the lake shores, not deep into the lake.

“Nothing that I am ready to share at the moment. I still have to study the notes of my journey, and, as I am sure you can imagine, after leaving the hospital, I still haven't gotten around to it.”

“Certainly. Certainly.”

“Why did you call me here, Mr. Geoffrey? Asking for a Science Academy's ambassador is no small matter. I hope that your reason to call me is substantial.”

“Yes, professor. I understand that any unexplained ecological phenomena must be brought to the academy's attention.”

“That is correct, yes.”

“I would like to invite you to follow me, then.”

Esther stood and reluctantly followed after Geoffrey.

“Where are you taking me, Mr. Geoffrey? You're not taking me into that crowd of 'miracle divers,' right?”

“No, not at all. You see, shortly after the flood, I noticed something unusual.”

“What?”

“It's easier if I show it to you. Please, bear with me.”

Geoffrey walked past the pier and headed toward one of the beaches on his property. The lake had again receded to normal levels. Although no trees emerged from the water now, some had branches long enough that they stretched over the lake's water. Unlike the other beach, which was filled with people, this one was empty and quiet.

“What is unusual about this beach, Mr. Geoffrey?”

“Please, bear with me. Wait.”

Plop.

Esther turned. Something had fallen off one of the trees and fallen into the water.

“Probably a pond apple or a horse chestnut,” suggested Esther. Pond apple trees and horse chestnut trees thrived in salty soils and lined the lake shores. Its fruits sometimes fell onto the water and were appreciated by the sirenian herds.

“Except it is not the right season for one or the other,” riposted Geoffrey. “It's something else, Professor.”

Plop. Something else fell into the water, somewhere else. *Plop.* Again.

“Please, hold this for me,” asked Esther after taking off her long coat and handing it to Geoffrey. She promptly started climbing the nearest tree. Despite her recent health episode and age, she climbed it nimbly like a monkey. Once she got into the canopy of the trees, she disappeared behind the leaves.

Geoffrey smiled with an evil grin. It was all going according to plan. He patiently waited for a few minutes.

“Mr. Geoffrey, bring me my bag! Quick! Quick!”

Geoffrey put the rucksack around his back, hung the Professor's jacket and his on one branch of the nearest tree, and started climbing clumsily. As he made it past the canopy of trees, he found Esther

sitting on a branch, immobile, like a cat preparing to pounce on a mouse.

“Please, get me one of the jars inside my bag,” she whispered

Geoffrey searched the bag and, finding one, passed it to her. She slowly grabbed the jar and, after a few patient seconds, in a swift movement, put a bug into it, quickly closing the lid.

A beetle, dark as the bark, looked at them through the glass jar. The unusual thing about the beetle is that it had only one eye. It tried going against the glass to leave the jar without success.

“Have you ever seen this insect?”

“Not before the flood. No.”

A flash of light brightened inside the jar. The beetle had been set on fire and, in seconds, was reduced to nothing. Not even ashes remained.

“It did it again.”

That’s why I told you it would be easier to show it. I couldn’t catch one despite several efforts.

Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop.

The sounds of objects falling into the water all around them interrupted the quiet silence of the forest.

“And there we go again. After you try to catch one, they all run away.”

“Strange. It’s not natural for beetles to swarm like this.” She took a notebook from her pocket and started drawing and taking notes. “Its eye was the strangest thing. I have never seen anything like it. It’s so unusual for an animal to only have one eye. As far as I know, only some microorganisms have only one eye.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” interrupted Geoffrey, “I would like to go back down. I am not as comfortable as you seem to be with heights.”

They swiftly climbed back down.

“You did well to call me Mr. Geoffrey. This insect has to be studied.”

“Is it a new species?”

“I am not sure yet, but I believe it is.” She took out the book that she had been drawing in on top of the tree. She had drafted a very

realistic portrayal of the animal. “Most insects have what is called Bilateral Symmetry. This means that if you had to draw a line through the middle of their bodies, you would see that both sides are the same. These”, said Esther, pointing to her drawing, “are different. They have one eye. They are asymmetrical. When I counted the number of legs, it was an uneven number. Additionally, what animal bursts into flames by being observed? This is unheard of.”

“And how strange that its appearance matches the timing of the flood.”

Realization hit Esther, and Geoffrey could see the gears in her head turning. The seed had been successfully planted.

“Mr. Geoffrey, would you mind if I stayed here for the rest of the afternoon? I want to study these creatures more if that’s OK with you.”

“Of course, of course! I’ll tell my boys to come and set up a tent for you and get you some supplies. Feel free to stay for as long as you like. I apologize, but I need to be back now. I have business to attend to, you see?”

“Of course. Thank you, Mr. Geoffrey.”

“Don’t mention it.” He winked and walked away.

*

As Esther saw Geoffrey’s back disappear in the distance, she sighed, intrigued. She looked at the drawing she had made. What were the chances of a new species of insect being discovered after all the strange events in town? She took the map she had drawn aboard the Albatross out of her bag. Looking at it and comparing it to the beetle, she sighed. It couldn’t be just a coincidence, could it?

*

“Miracle water! Miracle water! Get your miracle water for one quid!” It looked like Reggie had decided to change his game. Instead of claiming that he was the keeper of the passersby’s deepest, darkest secrets, he shifted toward selling lake water. Even though the idea

looked ridiculous, multiple people were coming to him and making purchases.

“You won't regret it, miss. After you drink this, I promise you'll feel ten years youngah.”

“If that water is miraculous, how come none of your teeth has grown back? Or your hair?”

“Constable Joey, what a jolly good pleasure to see you. Came to get a bottle of the good stuff? Hey?”

“Please, Reggie. Don't try to fool me. Do you believe this stuff?”

“Do I? My good friend Tibbers got a limp for ages. The other day, I saw him runnin'. How do you explain it, chief?”

“Reggie, come on. You can't be serious. Is this even water from the lake?”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn't sound too convincing.”

“Constable, what do you want with ol' Reggie? I already told ya everything I knew the other day. I know nothin' about no oil.”

“Today, what brings me here is something else entirely. Come to the precinct. You and I need to talk about what happened three days ago.”

Ch. 17 – The Beetle

“What is the police going to do about this?”

“Mr. Pierre, I can assure you we’re doing everything we can about the vandalism in the city.”

“Bah! Everything? Everything? You’re doing nothing!”

Joey sighed. When the hotel manager saw Joey arriving in uniform, he grabbed him and showed him the damage done. There was nothing that Joey had been able to do for the manager. These graffiti were popping up all over town. It was some form of new art movement. Joey didn't care for it. It was doodles with loopy lines that didn't make sense. Despite the force's best efforts, they had difficulty stopping this vandalism wave.

“Mr. Pierre, I’m sorry to hear about your troubles. I have an important meeting with one of your guests. I’ll swing by later and take your statement. Is that alright?”

It had been three days since Joey had woken up. Despite his best efforts to meet up with Esther, she had gone off the grid. Finally, he'd managed to arrange a meeting at the hotel. He took a seat in the restaurant area. The once pristine windows were now sullied with paint, and some of the hotel staff were trying to wipe away the graffiti on the glass that some hooligans had done the night before.

Joey drew his eyes away from the window and focused on his friend, who had just arrived and was walking in his direction. She looked pale and sickly.

“Esther. I’m so happy to see you finally. How is your health? You look pale.”

“I’m OK, Joey.” Despite sounding light and breezy, Joey didn't miss the bags under her eyes or the deeply creased forehead. She had discovered something.

“Please, take a seat. Do you still have any headaches?”

“I’m getting there,” she smiled sadly.

Joey sighed. He, too, still had persistent headaches but refused to take the medicine the doctor had prescribed him. He'd concocted a mix of anti-inflammatory herbs at home, which helped slightly, but at this rate, he would still need several days before getting back on his feet. “Professor, where have you been the past few days? I've been trying to get in contact with you.”

“I know, Joey. I'm sorry. I've had to spend more time on the shores of the lake.”

“Why?”

“It's a long story.” She didn't say anything else. She pulled out a flask of water from her bag and, with shaky hands, drank it. She had found something that was worrying her.

“Esther, what do you remember from the Albatross?”

“Nothing. All I remember is that I asked you for some tea. After that, it's just a big blank.”

“Same here.”

“Joey, there's something I need to show you,” said Esther as she pulled a scroll from her rucksack. “This is the map that I drew aboard the Albatross.” She unfurled it on the table. Joey again marveled at the exquisite penmanship and how precisely she could draw. The map showed the different clines. They branched and radiated out from the center of the lake. In the center was something different. In a much thicker stroke, someone had clumsily drawn a circle with another circle within it as if it were an eye.

“It looks like a giant octopus,” joked Joey. “Did you let a child get to your precious map, professor?”

The professor didn't laugh.

"What? It's just a joke, Esther. Calm down."

"I drew all the clines, Joey. But I didn't draw the eye in the middle. The captain told me I was bleeding from the nose when they found us, but you were bleeding from both nose and ear. You had a pen in your hand."

"Wait. Does that mean..."

"Yes, Joey. You made a huge effort to draw this before you passed out."

Silence. Joey tried to think of the implications.

"Why would I do that?"

"Perhaps you saw something. *We* saw something."

"Did the captain speak of anything?"

The professor leaned back on her chair. "No."

"Look. I agree with you. This is all very strange. But why would only the two of us see something weird lakeside? Can you think of any reason for it? There were at least fifty people in that Zeppelin."

"Some tea, coffee? Some water?" the waiter asked after approaching the table. Joey would never have accepted, but his refusal was even more adamant as he recalled how mad the hotel manager was at him.

"No, thank you," they replied in unison.

"Just bear with me for a second," continued the professor.

"Go ahead."

"Let's recap the events of the last month. A flash flood like nothing ever seen before here in the lake happens. The equivalent of ninety cubic kilometers of water falls into the lake and causes the water level to rise. Yes?"

"Yes," said Joey.

"Later, we discover that the water of the whole lake has been reorganized into clines of freshwater and saltwater."

"Right."

"And finally," she searched her rucksack and took a notebook, "I discovered this."

She opened the notepad into a drawing of a disgusting creature. It looked like an insect but was unlike anything Joey had ever seen. The

drawing depicted something resembling a beetle but with only one big eye. It had seven legs and five antennae.

“What is this thing?”

“This new species was discovered in the lake, Joey. It’s been named the cyclops-beetle.”

“I have never seen anything like this before.”

“No one has. This is why I’ve been in the lake for the past few days, Joey. I’ve been studying this creature. Have you heard of the miracle dives?”

“Who hasn’t? Even Marie said I should go there to see if it helps with the headache. I told her I don’t believe in quack doctors and fountain of youth legends.” Joey laughed at his own joke, but Esther’s serious stare forced him to swallow his laughter.

“Wait, are you saying that..”

“Yes, Joey. It’s true. I’ve seen it.”

“No. That’s impossible.”

“There’s a team from New Lisbon General collecting further data, but it’s true. The lake is healing people.”

“But how? How can this be?”

She tapped her finger on the drawing of the beetle.

“It’s because of this, Joey. This is a completely new life form. I’m still studying its life cycle, but after it feeds on the shore, these beetles fall into the water and undergo a metamorphosis. They dissolve into the water.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Joey, this thing is different from any other lifeform on Earth. These insects are changing the water and healing people.”

“You can’t be serious, Esther. Do you have any idea of how crazy this is? A bug that dissolves into water and heals people? You sound like a lunatic.” Joey started sweating. Esther was starting to remind him of his mother when she started going crazy.

“I know it sounds far-fetched, but here is my theory. There was a meteorite or something that fell into the lake. I don’t know why it didn’t cause a massive explosion or a cataclysmic event. But let’s assume that’s what happened. Let’s imagine that there was something

aboard the meteorite. Something alive.” She pointed her finger toward the drawing again. Joey gulped nervously.

“Are you saying this is an alien?”

Esther nodded. “I’ve sent my findings to the Science Academy. They agree with my assessment. I’m going to the city hall to start making arrangements and quarantine the lake. We’re bringing everyone out here. We need to enclose the creatures and try to contain them somehow. And study them too, of course.”

“Wow! Alien life. If that is true, this is the discovery of the century,” said Joey. He still wasn’t convinced. The whole story seemed unbelievable.

“Not to speak of how it can help heal many illnesses,” she added.

“But are you sure it is alien?”

“Look at it, Joey! It’s asymmetrical. It’s completely different from everything else in nature. What animal dissolves into the water? Also, here, Joey.” She pulled a jar from her bag. A little black ball was inside it. “Look at it.”

“What is that?”

“This is the corpse of a cyclops-beetle.”

“So?”

“Whenever you try capturing a cyclops-beetle, it commits suicide. The first one I tried to grab burst into flames, burning my hands.” She took off one of the gloves, showing scar tissue. “When I trapped this beetle in the jar, I saw it burst into flames. I put the jar to the side but never opened it. As I went through my bag yesterday, I discovered the beetle’s remains inside the jar.”

“What? How? Why would you see the thing burn and then find it later in the jar?”

Joey sensed that the whole conversation had been led up to this point. He felt that Esther was about to drop a bomb on him. “I think that this creature has mental powers. It can make us see things. The hallucination is powerful.” She showed the burns on her hands again. “So strong that my hands burned because I believed they were burning.

But what if this was not the only creature in the meteorite? What if something else fell on the lake? Something bigger, smarter? What if

we saw it from the Albatross, and when it found us out, instead of tricking us into seeing it bursting itself into flames, it just wiped the memory off our minds?”

“Are you telling me,” probed Joey cautiously, “That you’re considering the possibility of a giant alien octopus falling into the lake, bringing with it his little suicidal beetle friends? An octopus with super mental powers that can wipe memories off? Why would only the two of us be able to see it? Why didn’t the rest of the crew see it?”

“That’s the only thing that makes me believe this theory is wrong.”

“It’s a good one, though. It’s a fantastic one.” Joey was struggling right now. Somehow his gut told him there was merit to this line of reasoning, but it sounded so outlandish that he couldn't accept it.

The professor let out a small, forced laughter that almost sounded like a groan. “I am sorry, Joey, I just had to say this out loud. I was going crazy keeping this theory to myself.”

“Don’t worry. We have been through a rough time and have left the hospital recently. Perhaps this is some coping mechanism our mind is using, you know? Trying to find a reason for what has happened and all that. Not to speak of everything that has happened to the city.”

“Maybe. We’ll see more of each other in the next few months. I am one of the scientists assigned to study the cyclops beetle. I’ll be in town.”

“Where will your team stay?”

“We’ll set up camp somewhere on the lake shores.” Joey tried to weigh his emotions and desire to help. He forced himself to speak: “Why don't you stay in the Silverlake Estate? It belonged to my father, and I own it now. There is plenty of room for everyone. The stewards there would be happy to have you, and I know my father would, too.”

For the first time in the conversation today, Esther relaxed and gave him a warm smile. “Thank you, Joey. That's very kind.” She started standing up. “I have to go now. We need to make arrangements to isolate the lake.”

“The miracle divers won't be happy.”

“Don't worry. We have our ways in the Science Academy.”

“Take care, Joey.”

“See you around, Esther.”

He followed her departing figure with his eyes and stood up. “Good grief. An alien octopus with superpowers.” Joey laughed nervously.

*

Geoffrey looked at his silver pocket watch. It was 4 pm. He then happily looked at the map hanging on the wall of his office. It was a nice feeling to admit the fruits of one’s labor. He had worked non-stop over the last few days and had finally finished spending all the capital he had secured from loans and investors, buying as much of the lake shore as possible.

Little red pins circled the lake on the map in an almost perfect circle. Occasionally, some yellow pin signaled more stubborn or wealthier producers who resisted his offers but who wouldn’t make a dent in his grand plan. Inside his desk drawer were the contracts and title properties of all this land. No one could come to whine at his door now.

He would have never been able to own all of this land if it weren’t for the flood. The producer’s financial trouble and the memories of the recent flood fresh in their minds had allowed Geoffrey to buy what once was considered premium land for comparatively dirt-cheap prices. Any second now, the final part of his plan would come to be.

“Mr. Geoffrey,” he heard his secretary say through the door, “Professor Esther Lincoln from the Science Academy has asked to see you as quickly as possible. She made no prior reservation. Should I...?”

“Let her in. Let her in. I am available now. Please, send for my lawyer and have him come here as soon as possible.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Geoffrey.”

Professor Esther came into the office.

“Please, professor. Have a seat.”

She sat and spared a look around the office. First, she looked at the now-finished painting of Ambyssus’ eye. She looked disturbed as her eyes studied it. She seemed unable to take her eyes off the

otherworldly eye. He took that as a compliment to his artistry. She then went on to look at the map Geoffrey had been looking at. She locked her jaw, and her nostrils started flaring.

“Mr. Geoffrey, I’ve been studying the creatures you showed me over the past few days.”

“Yes? Fascinating things, aren’t they? Alien, even.” He said the last word with amusement as he saw the woman look at him in surprise. As he spoke, he poured himself a glass of apple cider and then added some lake water into it, taking a flask from a pocket. So refreshing.

“For lack of a better word, yes. Mr. Geoffrey, I have already discussed this with my colleagues and have gone to see the mayor. This is a new species, and it will have to be protected and isolated.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, smiling.

“From what I’ve been able to ascertain. The beetle’s life cycle starts in the lake. They lay eggs on the beach, and then the larvae feed on the trees immediately adjacent to the lake before they return to the lake. They never leave the immediate vicinity of the beach.”

“Really? How interesting! I had never imagined that a beetle could swim,” he said sarcastically. Esther tried not to show how annoyed she was, which only made provoking her more fun. A Science Academy emissary! Bah. She was eating off the palm of his hand.

“Under article 5, subsection 3 of the Environment Protection Act, under my authority as an ambassador of the Science Academy, I am proclaiming the whole lake shore a natural park. Of course, the herds of sirenians can’t be relocated, but production will have to be monitored and controlled more closely by the Science Academy.

Additionally, we’re appropriating the land around the lake twenty-meter from the shore. All landowners will be informed and appropriately compensated according to the estimated value of the land.” Grinding her teeth, she looked again at the map.

“The mayor’s office has reported that you own ninety-four percent of the lake’s shore. Therefore, I wanted to inform you first. The Science Academy will transfer you,” she ground her teeth again, “A hundred and thirty-three billion dollars for this. This price has been calculated according to the price table determined in the law. We will also draft new legislation that will determine how the lake can be used

for raising sea cows while not disturbing the habitat of these new creatures.”

“Very good! Very good! It’s a pity I’ll lose all the land I bought. And I had such great plans. But I thank you immensely, Professor. You have been most kind. Please, transmit my thanks to the Academy.”

The professor stood up. With her back turning toward him, she added a question.

“How long have you known about the beetles?”

“For some weeks.”

“And what is out there in the lake?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I see.” She stomped out of Geoffrey’s office.

Geoffrey stayed behind, smiling profusely. When he found out about the beetles, he knew he had discovered a gold mine. The professor hadn’t mentioned to him some things that he knew, namely, that the beetles were not beetles at all. It was a completely new life form. In their first life cycle stage, they came from the lake, brought by the tides, like dandelion seeds brought by the wind.

Once they landed on the beach, they dug into the sand to emerge as larvae a few days later. The larvae then climbed the trees, feeding on the leaves and the fruits, to cocoon and emerge as beetles. Once they became beetles, they fed on bark and rock and returned to the lake. Once the beetles returned to the lake, they melted and dissolved, turning themselves into algae taken by the currents right to the heart of the lake.

There, the spores deposited themselves on the lake bed, grew roots, and became something similar to seagrass. After a few days, it released little seeds that floated until they broke the surface, blossomed into dandelion-like feathery forms, and were retaken by the winds to restart its lifecycle. These creatures brought about minerals and nutrients to keep the conditions in the lake just right for... well... just right.

Geoffrey doubted that the professor, brilliant as she was, had figured out all of this information already. Doubtlessly, she hadn’t

even dreamed of the applications of some of the substances produced by the creatures at different stages of their life.

For example, if one dissolved a beetle in lake water and added the right ingredients, one could produce a potion that slowed aging, extending human life by as much as thirty years. The seeds could be ground into a paste that, when mixed with the shell left behind by the larvae when they wrapped, could cure any cancer. This would come later.

The knowledge came to Geoffrey's mind, leaving it as mysteriously as it had appeared. He started feeling woozy and light-headed. He had to sit down. His eyes were drawn to the painting that he'd made, and he felt his shirt becoming drenched in sweat.

"Why?" He asked the painting as if it could speak. The answer came in the form of a sweet voice in his mind.

"Becaussse it'sss fun Geoffrey. Issn't this what you wanted? To be resspectd? To ssstand at the top?"

"Not at the expense of others! Joey will be so disappointed when he finds out."

"Joey, Joey, Joey. He's nobody. You are much more important now."

"Now that you've won, will you leave me alone?" he begged.

"I haven't won. It'ss a tie."

"What do you mean? You promised."

"Hush, hush now, little Jeff. Come down. Go have some more water."

"No, I don't want to..." Geoffrey saw himself stand, go for the water flask, and take big swigs. His worries unraveled, and the memory of panic passed. It was all quiet once again.

"Sir?"

"Oh? Debbie. What seems to be the matter?"

"I heard you speaking, but since you weren't supposed to have anyone here, I just came to check you were OK."

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm just a little tired. I'm going to get some sleep."

*

“What are the whereabouts of the black merchant?” pressed the commissioner.

“I told you. I don't know!” protested Reggie in a whining tone. He hadn't eaten all day and had been questioned non-stop by the Commissioner and Joey.

“Of course, you know Reggie,” said Joey. “Everyone knows that you are a low life that leeches on bigger fish. Don't tell me you didn't participate in the crime spree of four days ago.”

“I told cha everythin' I know,” Reggie protested. “Now bring me my lawyer, or I'll sue. I know me rights!” Fabius and Joey exchanged glances. Joey spared a look at the clock in the interrogation room. It was 3 pm. They had been at it for almost 24 hours straight, and the man hadn't budged.

Reggie was the most cowardly small-time criminal he could think of. He had broken under interrogation before. This was a man who, in the name of self-preservation, was willing to throw everyone he knew and cared about under the bus. But even though he was scared of two policemen, he wasn't as scared of them as of whoever had procured his services. Someone knocked on the glass.

“Don't go anywhere, Reggie. We'll be right back.” The commissioner and Joey left the room. One of the lieutenants was waiting outside the room.

“Sir!” he said while saluting the commissioner.

“At ease, lieutenant? What is it? I told you I didn't want to be interrupted.”

“Chief, you told us that if anything strange happened in the city, we should notify you immediately.”

“Yes, I did. What happened?”

“Well, Chief, there are reports from all over the city that an unusual amount of steam is coming out of the sewers. Additionally, some of the disappeared craftsmen have been popping up all over town.”

“What? Where have they been all this time?”

“People saw them coming out of the sewers too.”

“The sewers?” asked Joey. They hadn't even thought of looking for anything down there.

“Come! Take me there immediately.”

The ground shook. *Boom*. It shook again, the impact even stronger than the previous one. It was as if the city was groaning and breaking apart.

Ch. 18 – The Colossus

As the impact shook the building, Joey struggled to keep balance. “Is it an earthquake?” screamed Joey,

“No, I don’t think so. It sounds as if it’s coming from outside.”

They ran toward the exit of the precinct. As they left the building, they heard screams in the streets. The ground kept shaking. People all around them were yelling while pointing East. Following their gaze, they finally saw it. Blocking the sun and standing tall amidst a cloud of dust and debris was a giant metal man-like machine. From here, it seemed to be thirty or forty meters tall. It was hard to say from this distance. Joey rushed back into the precinct.

“Binoculars! Quick! Who has a pair?” he screamed furiously. One of his colleagues, whose desk was closer to the door, threw a pair toward him. Picking it up, he dashed toward the street once again. The commissioner was telling people around him not to panic while keeping an eye on the robot. Seeing the binoculars in Joey's hand, he gave him a thumbs-up.

Joey got a clearer view of the machine. It was made of latticed metal. Inside the skeleton, he recognized several gas balls similar to those aboard the Albatross. He could only tell what they were because he had seen it recently. There were also giant gears and pieces adding to the structure that were kept in motion. The giant machine had to be extremely heavy. He guessed that the gas helped to alleviate some of the colossal weight. How else would something so large and heavy move? The metal giant looked like something patched together from different machines without care for how well it looked.

“What do you see, Joey?” The commissioner ran toward Joey and asked for more information.

“Here, sir. I think we found out what the black merchant wanted to build.”

“Goodness, gracious.”

“Look at the shoulder joints, sir.”

“Cursed be that black merchant!”

In the shoulders of the machine, some pieces of the locotank could be made out if one knew the machines well enough. The compact boilers had been butchered and added to the machine.

“It’s brilliant if you think about it, sir. The only thing that the force had that could even put a dent in that thing was the tanks. By stealing them, he killed two birds with one stone.”

The massive automaton resumed its march. *Boom.* The city again shook as the metal behemoth took a step. Sounds of things breaking and more screams rang out in response to the stomp.

“Chief, what are we going to do? The only thing that could stop this thing is a bunch of locotanks. And they have all been stolen from us.”

“Joey, grab a horse and chase after that thing. See what it’s up to. I will try to get us some backup. I’ll see if the pneumatic tubes that connect the precinct to the airport and the mayor’s office are operating. If they are, I’ll deploy the Air Force. We need to bring in everyone, every cop in town, every cannon, every ship, every Zeppelin. I want this thing stopped. I don’t know what the black merchant plans to do, but if this metal monster goes on a rampage and starts hurting people, this could be the biggest disaster that the city has ever seen.”

It already is, thought Joey. He didn’t voice his thoughts, though. “Okay, chief.” *Boom. Boom.* The robot was gaining momentum and taking quicker steps. “And what do I do once I catch up with the metal man?” Joey realized that this situation was ridiculous. It all felt like a dream.

“I don’t know, Joey. Just figure out where the thing is going! I trust your judgment. I have to go back in there.” Fabius turned around and ran back to the precinct. The robot seemed to have emerged from the

ground. If so, maybe some of the pneumatic tube network running through the city could have been damaged. Hopefully, it would still work.

Joey ran toward the stables of the precinct and grabbed Luna. He also went to the armory and grabbed a rifle. He wasn't thinking. What could a rifle do against a metal giant? He was just trusting his gut. The tremors of the robot's step seemed to be getting more distant. Joey began to gallop toward the trail of smoke and the source of the loud noises. Joey saw, with some relief, that it was moving north. His family lived south, so they wouldn't be in any immediate danger. Where was the thing heading?

After it had traversed hundreds of meters in a few steps, the robot stopped walking. Seeing its tall silhouette through the gaps in the buildings, Joey realized that it had stopped in front of the city hall. Loud crashing noises and more screams could be heard from the distance. As Joey fearlessly galloped toward the robot and in the opposite direction of where everyone was running, he finally got a good glimpse of the full body of the giant robot.

He could now gauge the robot's height more precisely. It was roughly thirty meters tall. The arms and legs seemed to have been made up out of butchered trains. In every joint was a boiler, and gears kept turning non-stop all over the machine. The robot let out a constant stream of steam and smoke that only added to the cloud of dust it was kicking up. Smelling the air, Joey noticed an unpleasant smell. The monster, Joey thought. It ran on forbidden fuels. Cursed be the black merchant.

The robot finally stopped in front of the city hall. The arms of the metal giant had punctured one of the ceilings of the emblematic building. Joey never stopped moving closer with his horse. Thankfully, Luna was well-trained and didn't shy away from the colossal figure and the loud noises. What was that ungodly machine trying to do? The thing kept putting his hands into the building and searching around. Joey couldn't help but think of a farmer searching around the hay to find out if the hens had laid eggs already. It finally stopped. It had found what it was looking for.

Today was a Sunday, so there should be hardly anyone inside the City Hall. Only some security guards. If they had already run away for their lives, Joey wouldn't blame them.

He galloped past the legs of the giant and up the stairs of the city hall. He pulled out his gun and precisely shot the door lock before his horse rammed it. He was inside the building. An ominous dust cloud fogged his view, but he could hear loud mechanical noises inside. Although Joey had walked these corridors many times, it was the first time he was riding a horse inside of them. For a few nonsensical moments, he found himself wondering if he was the first ever to do so.

Luna's loud neighs drew out some of the security officers who had hidden away. Seeing Joey's uniform and shaken out of shock by the courageous figure, they slowly began to trickle after him and toward the source of the noise. Finally, they had made it to where the robot's arms had stopped. It had broken into the vault of the city hall. It had just ripped the door of the vault off its hinges. The robot's massive hand was resting on the floor, and people were coming in and out of it carrying bags.

Joey realized what the black merchant's plan was. He was stealing the city's gold reserve.

*

The black merchant oversaw the loading of the ingots onto the Colossus. He had found the biggest, burliest men in the city, and they carried bag after bag onto the conveyor belts that stretched out of the Colossus' hand. After that, they were automatically brought up into the robot and transported down to its legs. He had made the men practice run after run, not with gold, but with rocks, of course, until they could load the Colossus in fifteen minutes.

The lookout gave him the signal. As he had expected, the sight of his giant creation had intimidated the law enforcement agents momentarily, but after five minutes, not seeing it move anymore, they had mustered up the courage to attack. Although most of the robot

was made out of lighter latticed metal, he had gone through the care of giving the forearm armor for precisely this situation.

“Don’t stop loading the gold. I’ll delay them.”

Going up to the arm, he pushed a lever. The steam that was building up in the boilers was exhausted onto the corridor, shielding the arm from view. Then, the black merchant lit some firecrackers and threw them onto the corridor. This was more than enough to keep these monkeys busy.

Once they were robbed of their sight and started hearing explosions, one of the agents fired their gun blindly in response. Then another. Soon, a shootout between the security officers and an inexistent opponent began.

“Continue. Do as we practiced.” He lit more firecrackers and threw them into the corridor. He kept checking the weight gauges in the robot. Every other minute or so, he threw an actual stun grenade just to make the security see he meant business. So far, it had proven enough.

After ten minutes, it was done. He had stolen over a hundred billion dollars worth of gold.

“We are out of here,” he screamed, lighting up all the firecrackers he had left and throwing two stun grenades. He boarded the hand once again, followed by his platoon of exhausted grunts. Inside the Colossus’ pilot cabin, situated in one of the robot’s hips, he pulled leavers again and made the robot move.

The added weight of the hundreds of tons of gold was too much for it to start moving. He needed to drop some ballast. He pushed a lever to his right, and both arms of the Colossus were discarded, causing a loud crashing noise as it hit the ground. Now armless but lighter, he directed the robot toward the train tracks he had prepared.

The mechanical noise of the robot deafened him to everything around him. He couldn’t hear the children scream, the houses collapsing, or see the tremors he was causing in the city. It wouldn’t take long for him to make it back safely into the sewers and save his daughter. A gauge to his left spiked. He clicked his tongue in annoyance. They had figured it out. Another gauge again spiked. He had to hurry. They were targeting the helium balloons inside of the

metal skeleton to make the robot become heavier and be forced to a halt.

The robot was being showered by bullets from marksmen stationed on the roofs and in hot air balloons and zeppelins that now hovered in the vicinity of the Colossus. Ever slower, the merchant finally brought the robot to the train tracks he had prepared. This was a twin set of tracks. Not needing more of the boilers to move the robot, he pulled a lever to his left and exhausted the steam of one of them. This would provide him with the smokescreen he needed for his next trick.

He carefully aligned the robot's right leg with the tracks. He had made both the tracks and the foot's coupling wheels out of magnetic materials so that he could dock to it even in these difficult conditions. Nevertheless, anyone else would have failed in performing the alignment. Once the foot was properly docked, he pushed the red button in front of him. He had won.

The robot came apart, and the right leg collapsed onto the tracks. The robot's right leg, which was carrying the gold, had turned into a train. It started moving away from the smokescreen, picking up speed. Aboard the cabin, the black merchant put on a terrified look as he tried to look like a person fleeing in panic from the disaster.

He amusedly observed as some law enforcement agents looked intrigued at the train, thinking of how it could have come out unscathed from being trampled on by the giant robot. Behind him, the authorities had found the wreckage of the Colossus, and it would take hours before they realized what he had done. By then, he would be long gone.

He had previously manned the switch stations with his men, who directed his train toward the service track of a warehouse he had bought three days earlier. He had pulled off the biggest heist in history. He had spent all of his fortune of fifty billion, bribing, buying, and paying every criminal in the city. He had used all of his connections, all of his expertise, but he had managed to win in the end.

All the grunts, thieves, and pirates waiting in the warehouse clapped their hands, rejoicing. They were all rich.

He called the triplets. They were three pirate lords that most people assumed were just one person. They were a hassle because they demanded three times as much as every other pirate lord, claiming they were three pirate lords and not just one. They were worth the price, though. Their connections ran deep, and everyone respected them.

“Hey. I want the gold on those trains by nightfall.”

“Yes, boss.”

He went to the room where he'd left his daughter. He didn't worry that anyone would try to steal them. All the criminals had been forced to drink a potion he had prepared with the help of his poison master. They would all die by the end of the day if he didn't give them the antidote. No one but him knew where it was. Anyone who tried to rip him off would be dead before they knew it.

Making it to the room in the warehouse where he had left his daughter, he found, as he expected, that they weren't alone in the room. A tall man with blonde curly hair and business attire stood beside his daughter. A silver pocket watch hung from a chain on his jacket. Golden G letters were embroidered into his clothes. His eyes were closed, however, and the man seemed to be sleeping.

“Right on time. We meet again, Arssuriuss, or Finley. Whichever you prefer.”

“So this is your... puppet. I knew this man was becoming richer and richer without the help of anyone in the underworld, but I never suspected that you were sponsoring him.”

“He'sss been ussseful. He's a man of many talentsss.”

“My win, monster. Now, heal my daughter!”

“I'm afraid you haven't won, Arssuriuss,” saying that, the sleeping man pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to the black merchant. It was a bank statement. The balance was a hundred and three billion dollars.”

How had this monster pulled it off? Arthurius had used decades of connections and had a head start, and still, this so-called ‘new player’ had amassed this type of fortune in weeks.

“No. I won! I have a train full of gold in this warehouse! I'm the winner! You have to heal my daughter.”

“In all my yearsss of playing gamesss, thiss wasss the firsst time I tie with my opponent.”

“A tie? What do you mean by a tie?”

“I just got here. At almosst the ssame time as you, Arsssurius.”

Arthurius tried to make sense of what that meant.

“But we didn’t agree on the terms if we tied.” He didn’t like where this was going.

“True. Let’sss play another game then. First to five hundred billion winsss. I will give you a year’s headstart. Same terms as before. I will also heal your daughter. Additionally, you already know my puppet. You have an advantage.”

Hearing that his daughter could still be healed, the black merchant accepted without hesitation.

“Deal.”

“But jussst to keep you motivated... if you lossse, I will,” the voice paused, trying to think of the right word for what he wanted to do, “Unheal her again.” As the sleeping man spoke, he started snoring. The black merchant clicked his tongue. This monster had no respect for him. Whatever. If he had tied once, he could tie again. Perhaps he could even win next time.

“Very well.”

Geoffrey stood up and sleep-walked away. The black merchant waited for something to happen. His daughter slowly opened her eyes. Looking up, she saw her father.

“Daddy? Is that you? Why do you look so old?”

The black merchant fell to his knees and held on to his daughter, crying like a baby. He realized he was just entertainment for whatever this vile thing was, but he didn’t mind. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for his daughter. From the moment he’d poisoned his benefactor to start his fortune, there was nothing he wouldn’t do. For the sake of healing his daughter, anything was worth it.

*

The city had been turned upside down after the giant metal man incident. Cities and houses had been destroyed, and cranes and

construction crews busily worked to restore the city to its former glory. It had been several days since the incident. Joey rode past the forest that separated the gate from his father's old manor. The manor had been painted just like he'd asked. Things weren't quiet, unlike the last time he'd been here. Men in lab coats carrying gear and equipment moved to and fro.

The arrival of the Science Academy emissaries had brought the Silverlake Ranch back to life. He hadn't seen Esther in a few days. Getting closer he spotted her at the pier. As soon as she spotted him, she excused herself and ran to meet him.

"I believe congratulations are in order," she greeted.

"Esther, good to see you."

"Hello, constable. Or should I say, commissioner?" Fabius had resigned after the metal man incident. He said that someone had to be blamed for the disaster and that it should be him. The mayor hadn't hesitated to accept Fabius' resignation. But more payment had been demanded from the populace and the world governments that had seen their gold stolen from the reserve. Although Mayor Mayer tried to fight it, he was forced to step down in the end too.

Early elections were called for, and surprisingly, Geoffrey was one of the favorite runners for the mayorship of the city hall.

"No. Please. Just call me Joey. I don't know how to feel about the new position yet. I have to say, it isn't something I wanted."

"It shows Commissioner Fabius' faith in you." That remark made Joey smile.

"How is the research going?"

"It's very promising. We've learned a lot over the past few days. The life cycle of this creature is incredible, and its pharmaceutical properties are miraculous. We could be looking at a real blessing here. Something good enough to make it up to the city.

"That's wonderful." In the end, they never found what had caused the lake to flood, but if there was a creature that could cure diseases, it all had to have been worth it. Right?

"Marie has asked me to invite you for dinner."

"Are you still going to get that vacation after all?"

“Yes. I told the mayor I wouldn't accept the job if I didn't have holidays. Besides, there are no leads on the gold stolen from the reserve. It disappeared into thin air.”

“If there's anyone who can find it, it's you, Joey.”

“Thank you.”

“Want to come in for some tea before you leave?”

Joey looked at the house and started sweating. Just as he was about to spiral, the professor put her arm around his. “Come on. I'll brew it for you.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

*

A few weeks later, after things calmed down, the city returned to its routine. Esther was having the breakfast she had meticulously prepared for herself, and she thought of Joey and his family. She wondered how their holiday was going. She was sure that little Molly was having the time of her life aboard the Albatross.

“Professor! Professor!” She heard someone scream. Ivan, one of her assistants, ran into her room without knocking.

“Ivan? Can't you knock? What is the matter with you?” Her assistant looked distraught and pale. “Professor, you've got to see this.”

“What?” The assistant dragged Esther out of the house and pointed toward the west. “You're hurting me. What's the matter?” As her eyes saw the horizon, she fell to her knees. “No... impossible.”

A mountain range had appeared on the horizon of Lake Grassum overnight.

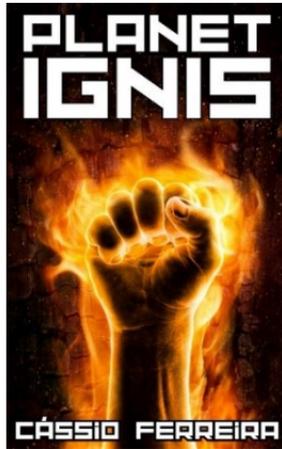
THE END

Did you enjoy the book? I would love to have your sincere opinion about it. Please leave a review for this book [here](#).

You can check my other works [here](#).

I release new content every week on [Royal Road](#) and [Patreon](#).

But don't leave just yet! I would like to give you a quick preview of one of my other novels. It's called [‘Planet Ignis.’](#)



Teach the children. Master longevity chess. Burn for your tribe.

Life in the Burrows can be challenging. Planet Ignis' environment is unforgiving, and life is short. Trother does his best to prepare the children of the Burrows to serve their tribe, but all are caught by surprise when one of the settlements on the planet suddenly goes dark, and there is news of the return of an ancient evil.

However, not all hope is lost. A prodigy is born in these dark times, and it's up to Trother to nurture the ember that will burn the ancient evil away. The only way for the settlers in the colony to stand a chance at survival is if Eli and Trother thoroughly learn how to harness the power of ignium and the superpowers it grants. Can they make it? Follow Trother's and Eli's journey as they try to save their tribe and the fragile society of Ignians.

Planet Ignis brings you a sci-fi fantasy dystopian novel reminiscent of Ender's Game and Red Rising. Read along if you like chess, dystopian tribal societies, superpowers, class systems, and smart characters.

Some praise for the book:

"A book that ignites the imaginative flames in your heart..."

"...it kept me going until I'd read through the whole thing in a day..."

"Loved the setting and world-building."

"...stole me smiles and tears..."

PREVIEW OF PLANET IGNIS

Golden yellow flames lit up the night. That had been the last yellow burst left in him. Mercury-thick sweat dripped from his forehead onto the ground. Now that he had depleted so much time, only despair fueled what would be his last stand. Sadly, time always trumps despair... and time was no longer his ally. Just despair would have to do.

Aag had lived up to the honor and responsibilities of his tribe. Not that any of his clan had been left conscious to see it. They were as good as gone now. All just colorless ash in a hearth. He was the last incandescent ember in a dying fire that sooner or later – in his case, sooner rather than later – blackens and crumples into that ash. They had burned together; they would be ash together.

Now that Aag's longevity reserves were running so low, there was only enough for three, no..., maybe four bursts. But what could crimson ones do even if golden bursts hadn't slowed that monster? He turned, limping away from the scorched scar that he had violently painted on the ground. As he turned, he ignited his mutation sparingly. Better to burst once true than twice blindly. In seconds, hours of his life unnaturally burned in the cells of his body and were converted into light and fire.

Silence. There was nothing on the spectrum. His body glowed with a feverish faint red light casting some light on the dark tunnels he walked through—still nothing. After a few patient seconds, Aag flashed into a red ball of fire. It was so bright that, from afar, it could easily be mistaken for a dying red dwarf star. He finally found the void

absorbed by the shroud of the monster. The hole in the light outlined its inhuman ghoulish form, with its long-needed spikes and predatory gait. It was closing in at 9 o'clock. Aag at once channeled his burst's energy into his body's muscles. They instantly bulged, and feeling the added strength in his legs, he sprinted in the opposite direction at great speed.

Time, shadow, and claws fastened their relentless siege even as he dashed inhumanely fast. Although Aag had been deprived of how long he would live, he could still decide how he would die. He would do so in a blaze. He left the tunnels of the Harrows and kept running until he reached the tribe's Lighthouse. He opened the heavy metal doors with his huge muscles and shut them. He then engaged the magnetic locks behind him. As soon as he had sealed what would become his tomb, his muscles deflated, and he breathed heavily with tiredness. The Lighthouse shook. Successive dents deformed the gates. It would hold long enough, Aag thought. But only if he didn't dally, he realized, as the hinges started giving with each successive blow to the door.

He ran as fast as he could to the top of the tower until he reached the Beacon. It was a transparent globe big enough to fit a man. It had two parallel bars crossing it from top to bottom. He entered it, and as he did so, a distant explosion again rattled the tower. It was coming. He grasped the bars, one in each hand, and, closing his eyes, he burst for the last time in his life.

His hands heated up and lit brightly. Then the bars. For brief moments, the top of the Lighthouse erupted into light, and in a last burning statement, Aag, the Yellow, sent his brothers and sisters his last words. The energy spreading from his arms into the bars pulsed and flickered, coding the urgent message. The Beacon reverberated and amplified the signal echoing his thoughts: "The raptor comes. Grows stronger. Anaximanders smoked. Gather..."

The Lighthouse was silent.

The Beacon shone and transmitted the signal to the orbit of Ignis. Hitting repeater after repeater, it broadcasted the promise of doom.

Chapter 1

... this is the reason why the eighth truth focuses on education. In past reigns, we were awfully close to extinction, not because we failed to invest in proper evaluation procedures but because we neglected the children's feelings. We learned that it is essential to invest enough time in teaching them to love the tribe and to be selfless. Even when a tribesman is proficient in bursting, he is of no worth to the tribe if he is self-centered.

I defend that the language of this truth needs reviewing. Instead of its current form - 'all flames big start small' - I propose changing it to 'All flames blue start red.' This change is beneficial for two reasons: Firstly, it adds the nuance that, in the tribe, color doesn't make you more or less valuable. More importantly, talking about the size of a flame can create the idea in the children that the bigger the flame, the better. That is rarely the case. Here are some examples...

From "A Proposal for the Review of the Nine Truths" by Trother, the Wise

Shadows danced in the heart of the Burrows. The king summoned a rekindling, and the tribe heeded the call. The rekindlers were already in their places, crowded around the Hearth, holding onto the metal halo that stemmed from it. Even though this was one of the largest chambers in the underground settlement, Trother knew that the cylindrical machine was much larger than the pillar seen here. The Hearth was so tall that it stretched onto chambers above and below. The floors and ceilings hid its massive batteries. They would be the recipient of the energy provided during the ceremony.

As Trother held the metal halo in his hands and saw his twenty-nine companions for this ceremony doing the same, he realized something: During the rekindling, in a sense, they, too, were the Hearth. They all became cogs in the machine that energized the tribe. All thirty rekindlers burst steadily together, the fire in their hands heating the bar into a vermilion blaze.

Trother caught his colors starting to slip and regained control. There was an optimal temperature for the task he was performing. Too much, and some energy would be wasted. Too little, and the batteries wouldn't fully charge. Trother stabilized his mind and readjusted his burst back to the right temperature. The years hadn't made Trother careless or wasteful. On the contrary, giving generously to the tribe wasn't the same as squandering, and, by the flames, he wouldn't waste time that could be better spent surviving and getting his job done.

The more optimally he used his mutation, the more longevity he would have. The more longevity he had, the longer he lived. Trother patiently and meticulously stretched his life as much as possible for the sake of teaching class after class, thus strengthening the tribe. The love for his people glimmered in Trother's eyes as he fed the Hearth of the Burrows. The fire in his heart mirrored the ballet performed by the tongues of flames and sparks of light caused by the carelessness of the young group as their output kept exceeding or going below the perfect temperature.

As time slipped out of their hands and into the tribe, Trother pondered how much he stood out from all others at this rekindling. For one, he was by far the oldest. Being in one's forties was a luxury among teenagers and children. The second thing was the two oranges standing behind him. One of them was always in a permanent slow, steady burst. How poetic, Trother thought. Even as Trother burst for the tribe at the rekindling, so did the tribe burst for him, kindling him.

The last distinctive feature that made Trother stand out was the effort he put into bursting. As all others displayed visible effort through beads of sweat, grunts of discomfort, or shrieks of pain, Trother burst casually. Had he wanted to, he could have casually struck up a conversation with a fellow rekindler or to one of his

batteries without letting his fire waver. Trother dismissed the thought as soon as it formed. This was a sacred moment; by the great Hearth, he was well beyond a youthful desire to flaunt. His advanced age didn't come from burning life away willy-nilly. Instead of wasting time showing off to others, he used it to assess his to-be students.

Unlike most ceremonies when practically every rekindler feeding the Hearth was an orange adolescent, reds occupied many spots around the Hearth today. Twelve children fresh out of the incubators surrounded Trother. They were all bursting alongside him. He had never met any of these young ones personally. That was only natural. With many hundreds in the tribe and how fleeting lives were in this forsaken world, getting to know everyone that came by was impossible. These would all be his students starting tomorrow; he was already their teacher, starting today. He knew all their names and AI reports based on their performance in the incubators, and after seeing them at this ceremony, he would also have an estimate of how efficient they were at bursting.

As the hour went on, he scanned each of his future students. His small eyes saw grandiose things. Even without using his powers, the trembling light and the temperature variations were all signs of unskillful waste and, in his trained eyes, obvious. That was his prerogative as an instructor, after all. After a few minutes of the rekindling, one of his new students caught his eye. This was because, unlike all other reds and oranges in attendance, Trother had needed a few long minutes to examine this child.

His was a steady, unshakable flame. It was easily mistaken for that of a more experienced orange. But although his fire burned steady, it did so at a slightly suboptimal temperature, giving him away as a rookie. A glimmer of interest shone on Trother's insightful eyes. The footnote added to the boy's report by the king came to his mind. What was it that Brodnir had said? Something like, "Eli's flame burns brighter than hotter"? Trother grinned. This was a diamond in the rough that he would enjoy polishing.

Although Trother had already seen everything he needed, he patiently kept bursting while watching the children. Toward the end of the ceremony, they started showing signs of fatigue. This was a

valuable training opportunity for them and why lits always attended the Initiation of their class of reds. To assess a child's potential, seeing them in long bursts was crucial. As fatigue kicked in, concentration faltered, revealing weaknesses he would have to hammer out of them in the anvil of the Collegium. As it was the culture in the Burrows, wherever possible, everyone burned two ingots with one fire.

By staying until the end of the ceremony, Trother also taught a valuable lesson to the children: no personal warmth was above the greater heat. Although none of the children had spoken to him, all of them knew he would be their teacher. They had seen him from afar before the rekindling and respectfully bowed to him. It was the custom not to address an instructor except on the first day of school in the interviews. Still, they knew: Their guide was on the same level as them, bursting with them. This was their first lesson. In a tribe, regardless of your color, there were no ranks, just service. And, as it was the culture in the Burrows, everyone burned two or even three ingots with one fire whenever possible.

The Hearth buzzed, signaling that the energy stores of the Burrows were filled, thus ending the rekindling. One year of each of the thirty lives were converted into a month for the tribe's Hearth. One year for an hour; an hour for a month. It wasn't kind math, but the gains outweighed the losses.

As it was custom to end the rekindling, one yellow addressed them:

"Rekindlers, we of the Fahrenheit salute you," said the man loudly. "Yours is a flame that warms the heart and feeds the Hearth. We praise your sacrifice, altruism, and generosity. Truth!"

"A flame spread is never dead," the group chanted in one voice.

"Also, with us today, we have the initiated. Truth!"

"All flames blue, start red!" the twelve red children responded.

"May this be your first step in a life of service. As others have been burnt and spent, may you do so for the next ones to follow. Truth!"

"I burn my warmth for the greater heat!" All the rekindlers, including Trother, said this last remark.

"Know that though you leave with shortened lives, their significance has grown larger. May your flames always burn strong."

Maybe it was because of Trother's advancing years, but even though he had attended many Initiations, he felt emotional at the end of each one. He proudly watched on as one after the other of his students left the rekindling. Each of them went out and about with the energy and hurry of the young. None of them forgot to look at him and bow. He glanced at the departing figure of the diamond in the rough, Eli. He was looking forward to teaching that boy.

Trother turned to leave. He caught one of his batteries lingering with her sight fixed on the Hearth. Understanding, he asked:

"How many more until termination, Sywel?"

"Depends, sir. Five if lucky. Realistically two."

Trother silently agreed, looking at the veins of Sywel's neck starting to turn blue. Although his garment covered it, Trother's chest had begun to reveal similar painful symptoms. "Are you scared, dear?"

"No, sir. Just thinking about my little ones. I am going to miss their first burst."

"I see."

Everyone left as life-giving energy was pumped into the Burrows of Fahrenheit.

Chapter 2

...the history of our people has shaped many of the truths.

In hindsight, the third truth was the first embodied by the Ignian people. When the Phoenix crew decided to split into four different settlements, it wasn't only to reduce the chances of Schneider detecting them. It was a matter of guaranteeing redundancy. There were more chances to survive if we weren't all grouped. If something went wrong, and one of the Settlements was destroyed, at least the others would continue.

I propose that we change the order of the truths and make the third truth - 'A flame spread is never dead' - the first one. It's only proper to do so when we consider its historical significance. Additionally...

From "A Proposal for the Review of the Nine Truths" by Trother, the Wise.

Trother looked up at the starry sky. He couldn't remember how he got to the surface. He noticed that his hands felt different. Studying them, he found these were younger, stronger hands. He was dreaming again. Standing before him was a beautiful woman with flawless ebony skin and a lean neck. Her dark hair was braided together and tied into a ponytail. He tried to say her name, but his voice failed him. He tried to move but couldn't. He was frozen still, only able to listen.

"My love, you know I have to do this." Her voice was gentle and soothing.

"But I don't want you to go," he tried to say. No sound came out. That didn't seem to stop her from hearing his thoughts.

“I know. I know. But they have children too. This,” she said, pointing toward the sled, “will make a difference in their lives. Besides,” she added while stroking his clean-shaven face, “we always knew that I would be the first one to go.”

“I’ll go instead,” he wanted to say. He felt tears rolling down his face.

“Take care of our baby.”

She took out her oxygen mask and gave it to Trother. She then activated her mutation, Enhancing her muscles. She grew taller and more muscular. Her waist was tied to a sled in which different metal ingots were bundled together. She took off, towing along the sled. Her figure became smaller and smaller as she disappeared in the distance.

“Naiara!” Trother screamed. Opening his eyes, Trother woke up sweating and panting. He was in his room, in the Burrows. Looking around, he found Sywel beside him, silently bursting. As Trother slowly rose from his bed, Sywel opened one eye. She greeted him with a respectful nod and went back to bursting. Out of courtesy, she didn’t comment on Trother’s recurrent nightmares. He was grateful for that.

Sywel was a 19-year-old he had seen grow, marry, and have children; the twins last year. Yet, despite her love for her children, evident by how much she talked about them at every possible chance, her hand burned determinedly. She held a device connected to Trother. One cable, as thick as a thumb, burned red as Sywel poured her life for one of the teachers of the tribe. Maybe, Trother would be able to repay her one day. Perhaps he would guide at least one of her children, provided he lived until then.

Sylar slept in the corner of the room. His tall, lumbering figure had stood watch during the first hours of the morning until Sywel had switched places with him. He seemed to be sleeping unperturbed, but Trother knew his nightmare had probably woken him up too. They were a discreet couple. He had enjoyed being with them as Glacies completed its nine-day satellite cycle around Ignis. Most likely, he would have their company for the last time.

Even though it was customary in the Burrows to sleep only the bare minimum needed to function, Trother needed eight hours of sound rest as he got older. On the other hand, batteries stuck to the usual six, or as termination drew near, four hours of sleep. In this case, the numbers fit nicely into two battery shifts between the couple.

As Trother got out of bed, Sywel stood up, and Sylar quickly followed suit. They walked to the cleansing tube at the corner of the room. Shipishly, or sheepishly, or whatever the word was, Trother went into it and closed the door. The tube glowed and reverberated as Sylar and Sywel poured orange-grade energy into it. Impurities that, unattended in Trother's skin would smell unpleasant, were burned away, and exhausted through the vent down to the Smiths. Impurities were just the right molecules in the wrong configuration and, small as they were, there was still use for them if adequately processed. The cleansing took just a few seconds.

After Trother finished, he left the tube, refreshed. He let Sylar and Sywel have their turns. As oranges, they would fuel their own cleansing. One could argue that a bath wasn't an essential use of longevity. Nevertheless, according to previously recorded experience, it was better to live a slightly shorter clean life than smell like porks, pigs, or whatever the word was. That's what his lit had taught him, and that's what he taught.

Trother left for his morning walk from his room to the Collegium. Sure, there was an optimal route from his chambers to the mess hall and the Collegium. One could also argue that taking any other way was a waste of energy. Trother, however, enjoyed choosing a slightly different path every day. It was always the same tunnel compound, but he found that by changing his route, the Burrows seemed somewhat different. Gaining new perspectives on the home of the tribe often unlocked inspiring new ideas in Trother's mind. Therefore, the mental clarity gained from this habit made him a more productive member of the tribe, outweighing the expenditure of calories and oxygen. Sylar and Sywel, familiar with Trother's routine, followed suit, silently walking behind him.

“Let’s start from the top today and walk toward the bottom,” proclaimed Trother to the teenage couple. Sylar seemed to twitch his mouth in disagreement. Sywel sighed.

“I know, Sylar, I know. Don’t worry. We will pass by the mess hall on the way down,” she said. “Trother, have I told you that the twins twitch their mouths just like Sylar when they’re unhappy? It’s the cutest thing,” she said giddily.

The group was already on the upper level of the Burrows, where the sleeping chambers were. They quickly reached the highest point in the underground settlement, the door to Howner Avenue. Seeing the door and what was beyond, Trother shivered. Memories of his nightmares came to him. After leaving the Burrows through this door, he had lost what was most precious to him. The group began their downward march.

As they finished walking past all the rooms, Trother wondered whether any of his students behind these doors was already up. He thought back to the time when he was a small child and how excited he had been to discover what his place in the tribe would be. He could hardly sleep the night before his evaluation.

After the sleeping quarters were the Throne Room and the Womb, he paused outside the latter. He rested his hand on the door. Until very recently, all of his students had been here. He spared a look at the adjacent chamber, the Throne Room, and smiled. He’d come around for a visit soon.

They passed the Vault of the Golden Guard, the Yellow Chemist’s Lab, and walked down to the deeper, lower levels. They ignored the empty Hearth and moved on to the Forge. The chambers where the Smiths worked were always bright and hot. Tribesmen shot flames into the furnaces while others poured the unprocessed ore harvested from the mines below into cauldrons. Others excited the ignium in their arms to wield big hammers, which they used to beat down the cooling metal. The smell of fire, sweat, and metal hung in the air. Trother waved to workers here and there, recognizing some former students or old friends. By the looks of it, they were preparing another batch of food.

“Hi, teacher!” screamed one of his former students. He wielded an apron, and his face was dark with soot. His arms were incandescent, shooting orange flames into a cauldron nearby.

“Welion, you seem to be doing alright.” Glancing at what he was doing, he added, “No need to burn that hot for that alloy, Welion. Cool down before the Bronze Smith sees you wasting your life away and throws you into one of the cauldrons!”

“Yes, sir,” Welion said embarrassedly as he adjusted his burst and returned to work. He heard Sywel chuckle.

Next to the Forge were the mess halls. Trother could feel Sylar’s eyes looking at him so intensely that it felt like he was burning a hole in the back of his head.

“Alright, alright. Let’s go in, Sylar. No need to look at me like that. I want to eat too, you know?”

*

After they finished breakfast, Trother and his batteries left the mess hall and started heading toward the Collegium. It was almost time for class, and Trother made it a point always to be the first to arrive. He took punctuality seriously, just as he took every other aspect involved in teaching seriously. It was no accident or chance that he had coached five other lits, three yellows, and even the blue king himself.

Trother and his entourage arrived at the Collegium. Like most chambers in the Burrows, it was a spherical space, resulting from being dug in a termination. Benches at different heights had been built and added so that each student could have a clear line of sight of their instructor and the other way around. All seats were vacant, though. No one had arrived yet. Trother went to the adjacent room to the theater and finished the preparations for today’s class.

As soon as the nanite arrived at his office, Trother stood up. It was time. He stepped out to find a line of children standing at attention in the Collegium’s large amphitheater. This class consisted of the usual twelve students. Five boys, seven girls. Trother looked them all up and down. It was time to feed these flames.

END of preview.

How about that? Did it sound like something you might enjoy? If so, this novel is available on [Kindle Unlimited and Amazon.](#)