



THINGS THEY BURIED

a Thung Toh jig

AMANDA K. KING &
MICHAEL R. SWANSON





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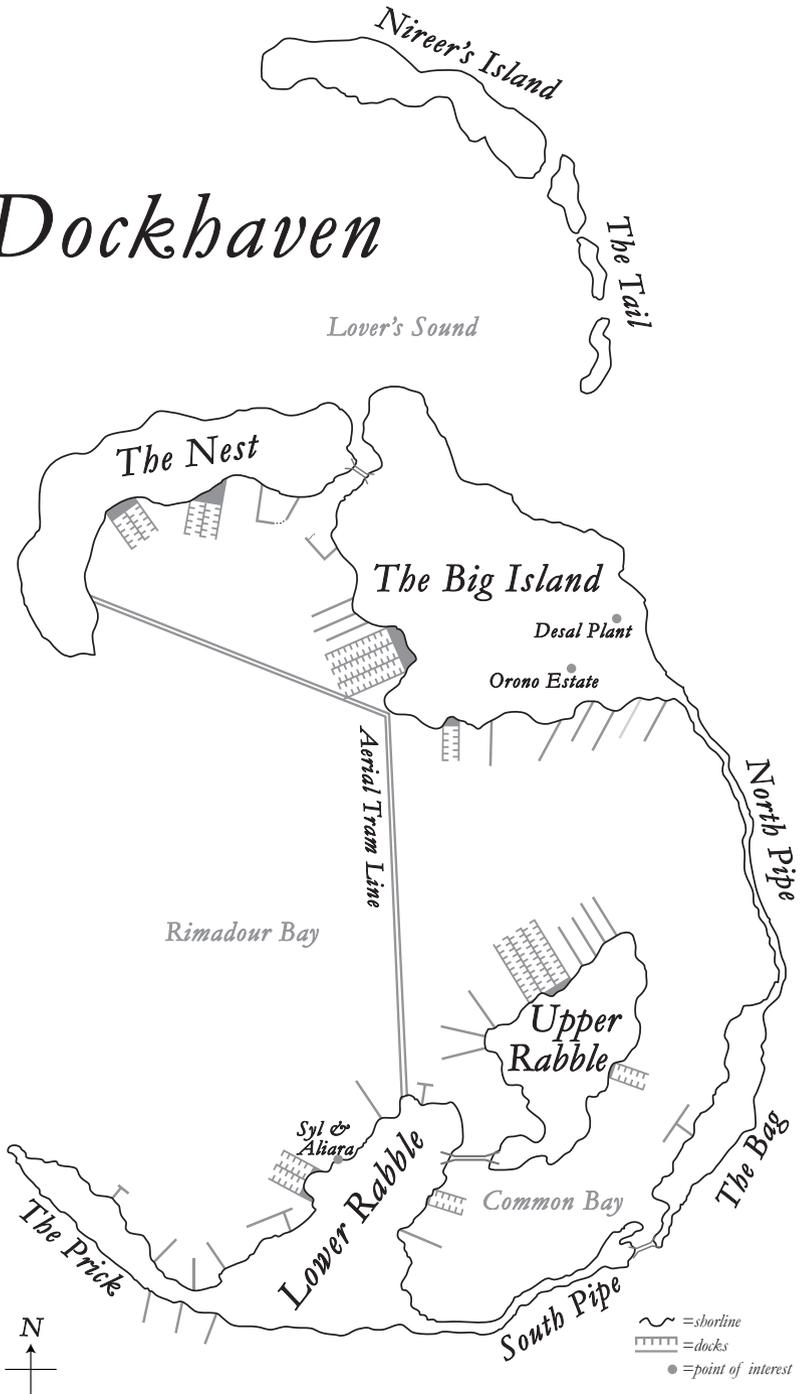
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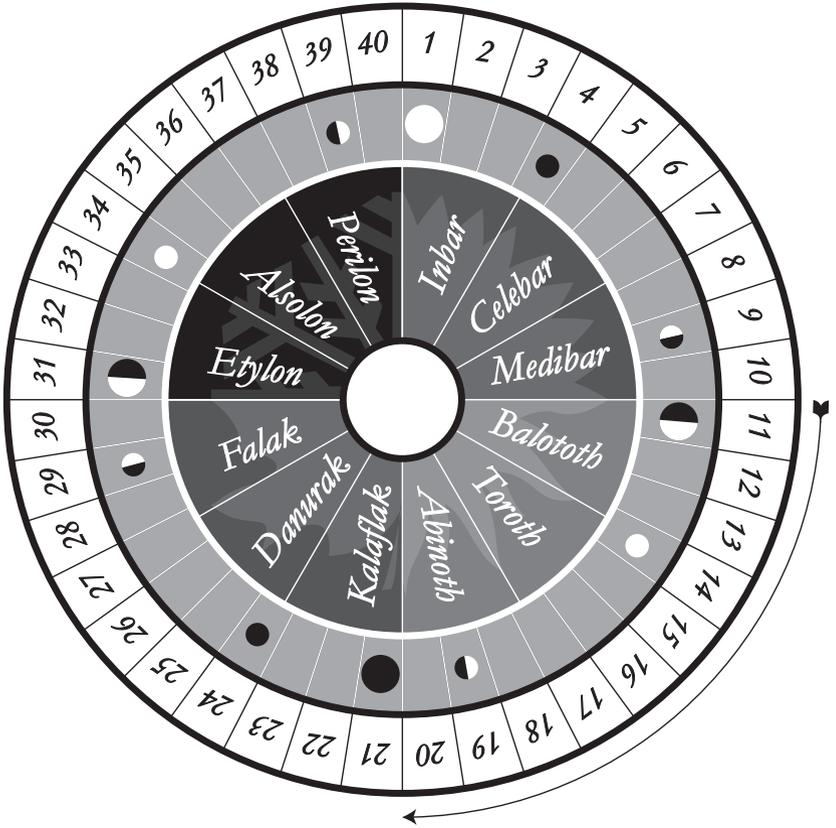
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*To Jeffrey Lincoln Swanson,
whose enthusiasm lit the fuse.*

Dockhaven



The Calendar



PROLOGUE: MALOOSE



2084 DANURAK 34

Mother was lost.

It seemed only moments ago Maloose had been tugging at the collar of his temple suit and wishing Mother would finish her dreary haggling when a curious sound drifted to him on the autumn air. He'd left off watching a young baluut chase a frisky seabird through the aftermid sky and closed his eyes, the creature's ovular shadow still visible against the sunbaked brightness behind his lids. When the muddled noise resolved into the pings, pongs, and hoots of a music box, his heart leapt. Something delightful was coming to relieve his boredom!

Maloose had stepped away from the spice-seller's booth then, away from Mother to scan the mixed crowd. A grinder emerged from amongst the shoppers, one hand winding the silver crank of the music box strapped to his chest, fingers of the other dancing over its pearly buttons. A crowd of laughing, clapping children trailed him like a school of minnows as he wound his way through the vendor-lined market path.

"O, the cat did dance for sailor's pants and was given nothin' but a skirt," the ruddy-faced karju man sang.

The grinder and his song were gloss, but Maloose was captivated by the white kitty leading the ragged parade. It wore a red cap and matching skirt that whirled gaily above its fluffy tail while it danced

and capered. It was the funniest thing Maloose had ever seen, and he had been there when old man Mushta's donkey ran right off a dock and swam all the way to the Prick.

Unable to resist the show, he'd drifted toward the group, clapping and smiling with the others.

When the grinder's song ended, the children chattered among themselves as they dispersed, and Maloose was left alone. He looked around. Nothing was as it should be. He'd intended to stop following at the first cross street, but he'd gone too far. The smile dropped from his face. Something in his core tightened and tears welled.

He hurried back down the narrow way, desperate to find the booth where he'd left her—or any of the booths they'd visited that day. Far ahead, he spotted a grey figure wearing a blue dress that looked like Mother's temple-best, the one she'd worn today. Maloose followed, turning corner after corner, calling to her until his target was lost in the blur of the mixed-species crowd. Still he hurried on, searching this way and that, chest so tight his breath came in short gasps. He tried to catch someone's eye, even tugged at a few shirtsleeves, but no one looked down. No one cared about a lost little chivori boy. Tears filled his long eyes and dribbled down his cheeks. It was hard to think.

Aftermid was fast fading into evening. Shopkeepers with strange faces flicked open the shutters on their glowing lumia signs and scowled at the boy lurking near their shops. Nothing here was right, nothing looked familiar.

He looked around in search of anything safe and spied a zoet parlor with a pop-eyed rabbit on its sign. Smiling people ambled in and out. Maloose started in to ask for help, but the door swung open, almost knocking him over. A hulking karju man with zoet horns and skin the color of strong tea stepped out with a growl. Maloose jumped from the man's path and ran down a nearby lane until it ended, the market and its crowds replaced by tall, unfamiliar buildings. Beyond, he heard surf breaking against the cliff-side. He

wasn't even sure he was still on the Big Island.

In the doorway of a shabby building, Maloose drew his knees close, buried his head in his arms, and wept.



It was cold when he woke. Blinking sleep from his eyes, Maloose turned his gaze down the sparsely occupied street. Handlers moved carts and crates to and from the buildings around him, their faces harsh and frightening beneath the streetlamps. He hoped Mother would be among them, ready to deliver one of her lectures on his foolishness. He'd take it with a smile and hug her tightly until she talked herself hoarse.

But she wasn't there. There was no lecture. There were no hugs. He'd lost her.

He sniffled, dragged the back of his hand across the fresh flow of tears running down his cheeks and whispered a prayer to the Duin that someone would arrive and rescue him.

In the dark space between two buildings, something stirred. A misty figure drifted out of the shadows. Maloose rubbed his eyes. It appeared almost to float toward him, but that couldn't be right. It glided closer, coalescing into a round old karju man in a checkered robe, his nearly bald head glinting in the streetlights almost as brightly as the array of gem-studded rings clogging his fingers. The old man's puffy pink face crinkled in a smile. He raised a hand, beckoning Maloose toward an alley that led to the enormous collection of conjoined towers Mother called the "desal plant."

Maloose stood but didn't move. He'd wished for a savior, and here was one. Things didn't work that way. Or so Mother always said. He took a hesitant step forward, bit his lip.

The man waggled plump fingers at Maloose, encouraging him to follow.

A distant street vendor shouted promises of the juiciest sausage

in town, and for a beat, Maloose looked away from the stranger toward the handlers packing their carts. The tightness of panic returned to his throat. His eyes snapped back to the old man. The workers didn't care, but this old gaffer did. Why?

Maloose nibbled at a fingernail.

The stranger might know where Mother was.

Yes, that was it. She must have sent someone to find him.

The man's smile widened, soft chins wrinkling beneath his jaw. The tension inside Maloose unwound like a clock spring. He took a small step forward, then another. The man bent and patted his thighs as if summoning a pet, then turned and wandered back into the darkness. Maloose glanced back down the street once more before hurrying after his new friend.

The alley curved along the plant wall to a narrow trail, overgrown with weeds and spotted with puddles of birdlime both dried and fresh. It wound down the cliff-side, so well camouflaged by time and nature that Maloose would have missed it altogether if not for the old man. In the dim light of the moons, he calculated his steps, leaping over gaps where rock and soil had crumbled into the sea, worrying he might encounter one too wide for him to dodge or, worse yet, the path would give way under the old man's bulk. His rescuer moved gracefully forward, though, oblivious to the boy's anxiety.

The grandfatherly figure stopped at a weather-worn door set into the cliff face, ajar just enough for a slight body to pass. He grinned and gestured Maloose inside.

Maloose paused, again nibbling his fingernail. This was an odd place for Mother to be. He glanced behind him. It was a long, dangerous way back for a little boy alone, but at least it was known, not strange and scary. As he bit his lip, mind flashing between the two pitiful options, Maloose became aware of a smell, one familiar and happy.

He sniffed deeply. Spices, sweetness, and comfort curled around him. Cookies. His mother's cookies were baking inside! She was in

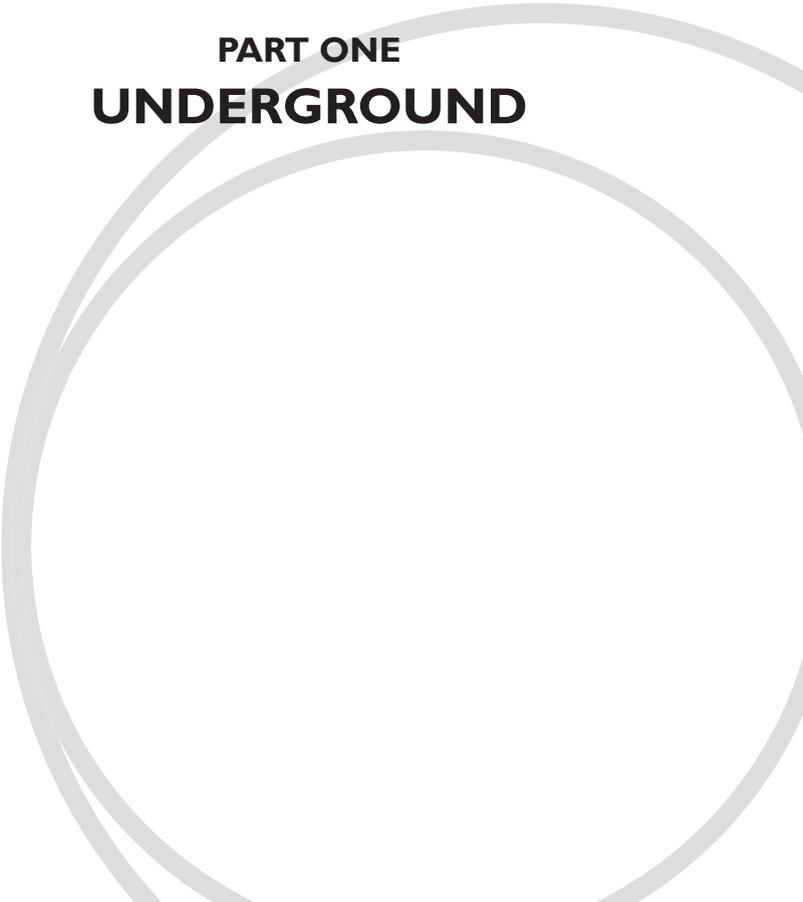
there, waiting, wondering where her little boy was. This was what the old gaffer was trying to tell him. He looked up into the round, smiling face. The stranger tapped his snoot and nodded. The fear in Maloose's chest withered.

He scabbled forward and squeezed through the gap into a dim corridor. Weak moonlight eked through the cracks in the door, revealing two other children, a boy and a girl roughly the same age as he. Their eyes were blank, jaws slack. They looked a little ill.

This wasn't right. Maloose took a step back, ready to bolt when, as one, the children raised their arms and waved a greeting. Like a cool burst of wind, comfort washed over him. They too had been lost. The old man had helped them, just as he helped Maloose, and now they were here to make him feel welcome. He just hoped Mother had made enough cookies for all three of them.

Maloose hurried further in, barely aware of the soft swish from the darkness above. Before he reached his new playmates, something warm and firm and terrible slammed into his skull.

PART ONE
UNDERGROUND

The image features two overlapping light gray circles. The top circle is partially cut off by the top edge of the frame. The bottom circle is also partially cut off by the bottom edge. The circles overlap in the center, creating a lens-like shape. The text 'PART ONE' and 'UNDERGROUND' is centered over the upper portion of these circles.



2085 MEDIBAR 17

Aliara slow-blinked the pain away. With every few swings of his dangling legs, the tipsed man across the table kicked her just below the kneecap. She shifted position, yet no matter how she sat, the errant foot always found her. He didn't notice, but continued regaling her with his nonsense, brew-foam flying across the table at her with each sibilant. She decided to allow him one more kick and two more cups-full before leaving him behind the Barnacle for the gulls and alley cats, gurgling on his own blood.

“—so Hink said we wouldn't do it,” he said, words slick and slurry from the liquor Aliara's coin had bought, “but Luula, she goes, ‘that a challenge?’ an’ I says ‘ho-ho, sounds like one,’ but Brunk, he didn' like that—”

When she had slid into the seat opposite him, offering a full cup and sympathetic ear, he'd introduced himself as Frabo. Given or surname, Aliara didn't know, didn't care. He was a scrawny, cocoa-skinned minikin, one of the unnaturally small karju, and his diminutive frame enjoyed a surprising capacity for drink. One equaled, it seemed, only by his capacity for rambling drivel.

He was seated alone when she arrived that evening, bawling about the horrors he'd witnessed the previous night while patrons and employees went on with their business around him, unconcerned with his trauma. It was a tirade familiar at the Bitter Barnacle and

other bars of its ilk, and one most patrons had learned to ignore. But Frabo was loud and insistent.

Despite her best efforts to ignore him, Aliara had picked up the thread of the story. It was clearly embellished by drink and retelling, but when Frabo had begun yelping about the desalinization plant, her interest was piqued. She completed her business, slipped into place at his table, and made her offer. That was long before she'd realized just how tedious the minikin's tale would be.

"We needed tools, ya' catch? So Brunk he goes to ol' Purdy's pocky lil' shop—you know the one over on Pier Road? Right, well, he goes with Hink an' they grab this thing." He laid a finger across his snoot, the extra olfactory organ unique to his species, snorted deeply, and swallowed.

Aliara's stomach revolted. The little flap of flesh across the bridge of the karju nose was nauseating enough when used only to bolster the species' sense of smell. She did not enjoy seeing it employed so vigorously.

Waiting for something worth hearing, Aliara let her gaze drift across the room. It seemed as though every ship in the harbor had disgorged its crew on the wharf that led to the Bitter Barnacle's door. A crowd of boisterous sailors, reveling in their brief time ashore before returning to the sea, drank and laughed and shared exaggerated tales. The karju among them, broad and tall and all brownish-pink skin, curled over the little bar tables, almost dwarfing their sinuous, grey-faced chivori comrades. The biggest karju among them whooped with laughter and slapped his table, sending the coins and glasses on its surface skittering.

At the bar, a puka woman threw her dice at her opponent, her hairless head flushing a darker shade of olive with drink and annoyance. Her partner ducked, and the dice bounced off the shoulder of a mountainous rhochrot sitting behind him. The rhochrot rose, snatched both protesting pukas from their seats and scuttled across the room, all four feet moving nimbly between tables

and patrons, and threw them out the door.

Over Frabo's shoulder, a pack of inebriates threw silver Callas, tarnished coppers, and strips of sinewy meat at a sun-leathered karju woman, who gyrated in the swirling glow of the red glass lumia pillars flanking the stage. She wagged her unfettered breasts to the melody engine's loping beat, pausing occasionally to gather coins and nibble food. One of the onlookers dared to reach out and stroke the dancer's zoet-grown tail, an expensive addition that likely netted her extra tips for its outlandishness. She whirled and rubbed one of the greasy chunks of meat in the audacious chivori's long, grey face.

"—an' an'...listen to this: It goes tink! And Luula, she laughs." Frabo licked the rim of his empty cup, stubby fingers of his free hand tapping against the table in rhythm with the music.

His foot again slammed into her knee. Aliara winced and shifted, trying once more to adjust out of his range, her mind rolling over an image of shaking him until the right answers fell out.

"Now, now, this is important." Frabo reached across the table and patted Aliara's hand, his eyes wide, face earnest as though this part of the story was vital. "Like I said earlier, it's 'cause Brunk loves a good 'venture. Came back with a bottle'a khuit—strong stuff, left trails, ya' catch? Not that we needed it." He snorted out a chuckle, then his face turned down and he sighed. "Gonna miss Brunk..." The melancholy faded as quickly as it had come. "We downed that thing in oh...well, we drank it fast."

Aliara poked at the discolored globs of tonight's special in the tin bowl before her, small pools of grease congealed on the shiny surface. Dockhaven didn't see much meat. Given the island-city's location and size, seafood dominated the markets and restaurants. What livestock the Haven saw mostly passed through unbutchered, changing ships or waiting while the crew enjoyed leave. The Barnacle's cook, however, considered red meat a specialty of the house. He frequented the stockyards, paying a pittance for the sick and dying among the herds.

She dropped her fork, pushed the plate away, and held up a hand as grey as the meat in her dinner. “Stop.”

Frabo looked at her, expression curious, then tilted his head back to drain the already-empty glass. He grunted in annoyance, slammed it on the tabletop, and ran his tongue over his bottom lip in time to catch a tendril of ale-stained drool.

“How ‘bout another?” he asked, leaning across the table toward her.

“Fine.” She glared at him through narrowed eyes. “Then you *will* arrive at a point.”

“I’m gettin’ there.” He nodded, wobbling in his seat. “Gotta tell the whole story, or it don’ make sense.”

“No, you don’t,” she said.

He grumbled.

“You were half-seas over. You were behind the abandoned part of the desal plant. Start there.”

“It’s that Orono,” he blurted.

This time it was Aliara who bent closer. “What’s ‘that Orono?’”

Frabo leaned away reflexively. “The thing ...the thing that got ‘em. Hink ‘n Brunk ‘n Luula.”

She twirled a hand for him to continue. Frabo raised his glass in a silent reminder of his needs, and Aliara signaled for another drink.

“Haunts the Haven, ya’ catch?” Frabo said quietly, as though someone might be listening. “The mayor an’ all, they say he died down there, but...” He shook his head, clicked his tongue.

“I know the story,” she said.

She knew far more than the tale spread by locals. Aliara and Syl had been owned by and subjected to Kluuta Orono for nearly two decades. When he disappeared in the incident at the desalinization plant years ago, the Dockhaven chinwaggers transformed him from eccentric inventor to folktale bugaboo. She and Syl knew the reason for Orono’s disappearance, just not its result. That was what she sought, why she had sat here for what seemed like hours listening to

this tepid little moron.

“Continue,” Aliara said.

“We was playin’ round with the junk back behind the plant—you know what a mess’a feck that is—an’ Brunk, he starts diggin’ in this pile. Said he saw somethin’ sparkly, but it was dark, ya’ catch? He was full’a plop.”

The fresh ale arrived. Frabo took a long drink, his eyes fixed on the empty space over Aliara’s shoulder.

“He just wanted salvage, so he’s pullin’ out bricks’n tiles an’ tossin’ them behind. Almost hit Luula once.” Frabo chuckled. “Did hit Hink a couple’a times. Pretty soon, Brunk, he calls back, ‘found a hole!’ an’ we all hurry over. Now we can’t *not* go in, right? So Hink digs ‘round an’ finds a length’a rope. We hook it up, drop it in, and down we go.”

“Where is this hole?”

He didn’t seem to hear. “Was dark inside. Really dark. Neat stuff lying ‘round, mostly dross, but Brunk pocketed a couple-few bits. Luula, she started actin’ like she worked there, and we all had a good laugh... Slippery. Fell down lots. Kinda’ happened slow.”

He shrugged, took another drink, eyes still distant and glassy. “Suddenly Hink says ‘what in the depths? It’s gettin’ light already.’ An’ we look round, and it’s like dawn’s comin’, but not dawn, right, ‘cause it’s blue.” He caught his breath and squeezed his eyes shut. “Luula never saw it comin’.”

Aliara waited as he gulped the ale.

“It was big,” he said softly. Frabo’s eyes blinked open, and he flailed his stubby brown arms to indicate something grandiose, splashing brew-foam on his balding head. His voice rose, catching attention all around. “So big! An’ glowy, all blue-like. But not watery-like like lumia, but blue-blue. I ran. Ran so hard. I...I...I left ‘em all behind.” Tears dripped down his cheeks.

“Wait,” Aliara said. “What was big and gl—”

The stuttered scrape of a chair against the battered wooden

floor intruded.

“Give me that.” The darkly tanned hand of a reveler from the table at Aliara’s elbow groped at the lip of her bowl.

Without shifting her eyes from Frabo, she snatched up the fork from her dish and drove its tines into the offending hand.

The man yowled and leapt up, looming over Aliara, the sheer breadth of his karju frame casting a shadow across their entire table. The pong of sweat and dead fish washed over her. She couldn’t imagine how his sensitive nose could stand such a reek.

“You twitching quim,” he growled as he yanked the fork out.

Aliara’s gaze slid up to the man’s florid face. He was only a bit taller than her, almost twice as broad, and far more tipsy than he realized. She could rid herself of him in a heartbeat, but a death in the Barnacle on such a busy night would only cause her aggravation.

She uncoiled the fingers of her right hand, exposing the blackish nut of the bane gland embedded in the valley of her palm. She allowed the fine, bony needle at its core to emerge, poised to deliver its toxin.

The man’s eyes lost their heat as they shifted from her face to the hand. “My, uh, my mistake,” he said. He tossed the fork back to her, wiped the bloody back of his hand on his pants and returned to the next table with his friends.

Aliara coaxed the needle back into place and laid her hand palm-down on Frabo’s forearm. “Where?” she asked.

He winced, bleary eyes never leaving her hand. “Where, uh... where what?”

“The hole in the wall. The one you entered.”

“Oh...” He licked his lips and gently withdrew his arm from her grasp. “Don’t ‘member just right. ‘Round the back. Nothin’ but a crack ‘bout my size. Hard to see if you’re not lookin’ right.” He lifted the glass to his lips, only to realize it was again empty.

“What part of the wall?”

“Where a couple’a towers meet. We just kinda fell into it...” He

yawned elaborately. “Just went in...fell...” He trailed off, dropped his head to his chest and feigned a snore.

Aliara threw a Calla on the table to cover the drinks, drew the hood over her short black hair, and left the Barnacle.

She slipped through the streets, anonymous among the masses in the marina’s grimy spring mist. Traders, sailors, dockworkers, and street people blended with the ubiquitous thieves in a jumble of commerce and chaos. Aliara drifted between the bodies, their stench dissipating with each gust of sea air. She turned down a rough, cobbled alley hidden between towering heaps of tenements and businesses too vulgar or too shoddy to populate the northern islets.

A couple dozen strides down the backstreet, she was jerked from her thoughts by a loud “*psst*” from the shadows. She froze, crowd breaking around her, and cocked her head toward the sound.

“Hey Rift, over here.”

Her eyes easily penetrating the gloom, she spotted the squat, shadowy body of Schmalch crouched behind the Order of Omatha. He rose, only so tall that his head reached her waist. When he smiled, his skin, the drab green of a not-quite-ripe olive, crinkled around the enormous brown orbs of eyes set so far apart they were almost on either side of his thoroughly hairless head.

Aliara was doomed, it seemed, to spend her evening with an array of irritating personalities. She stared down at his bald pate. “What?”

Schmalch looked up and gave her a dirty-toothed smile. He wiped a sleeve under the bony nose that sprouted from his forehead before running down his face like some wicked beak. He pulled open his grubby coat to reveal two sad daggers and an ornately engraved scattershot mag-pistol. Its ebony stock was inlaid with mother of pearl, the under-barrel opoli chamber shrouded in silver filigree. It was a curiously posh item for such a pathetic thief to have acquired.

“Picked ‘em today. Got a buyer for the stickers, but not the swish pistol. Still got opoli in it. I came to you first, Rift.” He nodded

enthusiastically, hand extended, palm up.

Aliara raised an eyebrow. She didn't use pistols, but Syl enjoyed a good firearm. She offered her own hand.

Still nodding, Schmalch drew the weapon and passed it to her. "Right, yeah, you'll want a look."

She wiped his dirty fingerprints from the curved handgrip. It was lovely. Expensive. On a whim, she flicked the power switch with her thumb, and the magnet inside hummed to life, tickling her palm. She pointed the flared muzzle at Schmalch's head.

He recoiled. "No, no, no, no!"

Her black-painted lips curved in a smile. "Tested?"

He gulped and shook his head as enthusiastically as he'd nodded. "Not yet. Didn't want the noise. City Corps don't much like me."

"Loaded?"

"I—I don't know," he whined.

She coughed a small laugh, held her position.

"C'mon, Rift," he whimpered.

She pulled a Calla from her cloak pocket and studied the moody face of the coin's namesake on both sides before lowering the pistol. Schmalch relaxed. Aliara fished out two more coins and tossed all three at his feet.

"But it's worth more—lots more," Schmalch said. "I brought it to you first, Rift. To you."

He wasn't wrong. The pistol was worth many times what she gave him. Why Schmalch continued doing business with her and Syl, Aliara would never know. This was not an unusual exchange.

Two more Callas tinkled to the ground. Schmalch snatched them up, alternately muttering giddy gratitude and whining complaints. She threw a final Calla over her shoulder and resumed her trek home through the turbid city.

Unlike most islands across Ismae, space on the atoll known as Dockhaven was at such a premium that the urban sprawl here spread vertically, not horizontally. Buildings nestled into the sides of bridges,

towered as high as sanity allowed, and burrowed underground until sea pressure forced a stop. Entire islets were consumed by single, massive structures. Even dockside, the hulks of abandoned freighters became apartment blocks for residents more plentiful than former crews.

Thanks to the perceived status of her mate, Duke Sylandair Imythedralin, they'd long ago obtained comparatively spacious accommodations in all this congestion. Though his duchy, Isay, sat on the low-caste rural island of O'atlor in the Dominion of Chiva'vastezz, neither she nor Syl shared that detail, instead trading on the locals' fanciful concept of a Vazztain duke. His clout was such that they could have chosen a more exclusive building on Dockhaven's Big Island, but both preferred to live in the seedier and more colorful Lower Rabble.

Aliara skimmed up the basalt stairs, their protective railing long since lost to wind and weather. The building, overlooking busy Rimadour Bay, had once been only three levels. Over the years, stories had risen atop stories, some in line, some askew, until its modern incarnation gave the impression of mismatched, awkwardly stacked packages.

Eight flights up, the steps ended at a weather-pocked patio. Aliara turned the key and slipped into their penthouse.

Sunk into the cushions of a wood-framed chair before a dying fire, looking as though he were posing just for her, Syl paged through a large book. He looked up and smiled.

"Pet," he said in that honeyed voice she knew so well, "done befuddling the City Corp so soon?"

She slipped out of her cloak and boots. "I met someone with an interesting story."

He placed the book on the smoking stand beside him, took a draw off his uurost pipe and patted his lap. "Sit and tell me about it."

Aliara drifted across the room, feet sinking into the plush Norian rug Syl had won in a card game months earlier. She stroked the long,

black tail of his hair, flecks of silver starting to reveal themselves, and bent to breathe him in, a scent as familiar as her own. They'd been together as long as she could remember, both owned by that whinging monster.

She laid the pistol atop his book. He picked it up and stroked the silver tracery with nimble, pale-grey fingers, examined the barrel, tested the grip.

“Beautiful,” he said. “Where did you get it?”

“Schmalch.”

“Pocky little douse must be growing better at his craft.” Syl smirked. “Or he found the corpse of an affluent suicide to pick before the Corps arrived. It’s wonderful, Pet. It will complement the topcoat I purchased last quartern.”

Aliara settled onto his lap, threw her legs across the chair’s arm, and kissed him.

Syl ran a hand down her thigh. “And this interesting story you heard?”

“Most was tippled rambling. Something dangerous in abandoned section of the desal plant.”

“Really? That *is* interesting.” His forehead creased. “This is the first we have heard anything more than ‘my poor baby disappeared’ in quite some time. Who was your chatty friend? Were there any details?”

Her shoulders bobbed. “Some minikin named Frabo.”

Syl pulled a face, nose wrinkling in disgust. “Why the karju don’t drown their kind at birth, I’ll never understand.”

Aliara grunted. “Whatever it was, he called it ‘big’ and ‘glowy.’”

Syl’s brows went up. “Curious.” The brows lowered. “Is that even a word?”

“His group uncovered an access behind the plant. He claims he’s the only survivor.”

Syl caressed her breast absently as he considered her words, ending with a gentle push encouraging her off his lap. Aliara curled

into the cushions of the matching chair. He rose, smoothed the blackberry jacket across his shoulders, closed the last few buttons he'd undone for comfort while seated and began a slow pace before the fire, boot heels clicking against the slate.

"He claimed it was Orono," Aliara said.

Syl paused, brows shooting even higher before resuming his stride. "What in the depths put that in his head? Simply because he's the local haint? Or something more...tangible?"

She shrugged.

Though they'd been present for part of Orono's last great experiment, neither were certain of the fate of their former captor after the explosion, the one that had permanently closed a large portion of the plant. The city had presumed Orono dead in the blast, even erected a statue of him near the entrance, but she and Syl remained unconvinced. Whether out of fear or respect, city officials left that wing in its ruined state. Rather than rebuild, they rerouted broken pipelines and hoped the rest would need no maintenance or demolition; an astonishing decision, given the value of both land and plumbing in Dockhaven.

In the few years since they returned to the Haven, Syl and she had heard stories of children vanishing from the city streets in that neighborhood, their bodies never found. While such things were far from unheard-of in the city, the concentration of disappearances around the desal plant was notable. If it was the work of their old owner, his experiment with The Book had succeeded. If that were the case, they had good reason to return.

"We should have a look." Syl stopped pacing and tapped his upper lip. "We left him deeper in when we ran, not in the plant proper. The concussion and its accompanying flames reached the plant, so I am curious, did he move with them?" he asked, not expecting an answer. "It is an ill sign that only one of the runt's group returned. Did he say how many went down with him? Were they armed?"

“Three others, all half-seas on khuit. He didn’t mention weapons.”

“This glowing entity?” he said with a smirk.

“They could have come upon a vagrant with a crank torch.”

“True. Was he the only minikin among them?”

“Didn’t say.”

Syl took the poker from its rack and used it to turn one of the logs. He stood back and watched the fire for a few seconds.

“We may have the advantage here. We are both properly formed, unlike your friend, and we know how to handle weapons. Nevertheless, should we hire an escort? I do not relish the idea of involving others, but I like the thought of dying even less.” He walked to one of the windowed walls flanking the fireplace.

“Abog Union mercs?” she asked, tone dubious.

In the glass, Syl’s reflection made a face. “They’re as common as gulls, and about as loyal.” He ran a finger down the silver loops that lined the length of his ear, all the way to his lower lug, tucked where long lobe met jaw. “This will be an exploration, nothing more.”

“More feet, more noise,” Aliara said.

“And we do not want that.”

“A single person to reconnoiter?”

“Yes, someone compliant, with sharp eyes and poor judgement.”

He turned to face her, lovely mouth spread in a wicked grin. “You said you saw Schmalch. Would he be up for such a trip?”

“Most likely.” The Duin knew they’d persuaded the puka to do far worse. “For silver.”

“Yes. He’d cut off his own finger and eat it if enough Callas were at stake. I suggest we keep our true purpose confidential. The instant that idiot puka learns that we seek proof of Orono’s continued existence, no force in all the isles will compel him to join us. No, I shall explain to him that we are pursuing something mysterious. Imply value, financial gain. Allow his mind to conjure possibilities.” Syl bent over Aliara, hands on the arms of her chair, his nose to hers.

“We are agreed?”

“Yes.”

He smiled in that way she knew so well, ran his hand across her cheek and down, working the long line of buckles that held her catsuit closed. She arched to meet him as he wound his hands inside, fire-warmed fingers dancing over the scars that covered her like armor. He let his lips run the long line of her lobe.

“But that...” Syl murmured, “...is for tomorrow.”

ALIARA



2085 MEDIBAR 18

The sky didn't yet hint at dawn when Aliara slipped out of bed, leaving Syl coiled in the inky sheets. She showered and strapped herself into tight amber pants and a loose black shirt, ran a hand through still-wet hair, raising it like nails in a board. She drew a black line around her wide-set eyes and tapped black tint on her lips, working around the old scars that split both upper and lower.

She padded quietly down the stairs, donned her cloak, and ducked into the kitchen to snatch one of the muffins left by their domestic, Sviroosa. Aliara stepped outside, frightening a group of stray cats busily gobbling kitchen scraps. She gave them a few moments lead before following into the haze of the morning.

She spied Schmalch slumped in a pool of vomit outside the Barnacle, its shuttered lumia sign and windows denying any early morning customers. His head lolled to one side, brown saucer eyes half-closed, something unpleasant dripping from his prow of a nose. She wondered idly if he stewed in his own vomit, or if it belonged to some passer-by.

She kicked him lightly, careful to avoid fouling her bespoke leather boots, cobbled without soles for a silent tread. After a second, more enthusiastic kick, Schmalch twitched and released a resounding belch. Aliara kicked harder. He blinked dazedly, wiped his nose with an already-streaked sleeve and looked around.

She squatted, careful to drape her cloak away from the vomit. “Get up.”

“Rift?” He scooted away from her, only to find himself already pressed against a wall. “Nothing wrong with that pistol, right? It was gloss when I found it. Really. I already spent the Callas.”

She waved it off and rose. “Up.”

He stood. She grabbed his collar and dragged him, muttering protests, to the nearby water’s edge and pushed him in. He squawked loud enough to send a cluster of gulls into the sky, spluttered and flailed, and finally paddled back to the ladder. On solid ground, he shook like a wet animal. He still stank, but his clothing was a bit less vile.

“Why’d you do that?” he whined. “I could’a found a bucket or somethin’. Gar’ll even let me wash up in the Barnacle sinks if I help out.”

She gave him flat eyes.

He looked at his feet, voice lowered to a mutter. “Didn’t need to throw me in the drink. Plenty of other ways to get clean ‘round here.”

“Follow.” Aliara turned and started home.

“Sure, Rift, sure.” Squishing with each step, he scurried to keep pace with her gentle stride.



Syl sat at the dining table, drinking caba and staring out the window. Beneath the fin of his nose, a finger tapped pensively against narrow lips. He looked like a painting, blue dressing gown bright against the dark-stained chair, dark hair spilling over his shoulders.

When Aliara cleared her throat, he turned those potent slate-blue eyes to her. She pushed her hood back with one hand, shoved Schmalch forward with the other. He tripped on the rug, fussed with

his hands, and glanced around, looking at anything but Syl.

“Schmalch.” Syl stood, his smile somewhere between gracious and unnerving. “Welcome. Come, sit. Enjoy a spot of caba with me. Have you eaten yet?”

Despite any misgivings, Schmalch shuffled to the indicated chair, unwilling to refuse food or liquor. They both sat, Syl waiting while the puka clambered up, and arranged himself in the chair.

“It seems I owe you my gratitude for this beautiful pistol.” Syl drew the weapon from the pocket of his robe and laid it on the table, muzzle toward his guest.

Schmalch sat very, very still.

“I’ve not yet had an opportunity to fire it. She swears you claim the power cell still works.” Syl tapped a manicured fingernail against the barrel. “Shall we load it and find out?”

Sviroosa skittered out from the kitchen in a blur of sage-green skin and brown cotton, hurriedly set plates of lox, eggs, and warm bread on the table, and vanished back through the swinging door.

Schmalch’s eyes followed her. When she disappeared, they circled from the food to the pistol and finally up to Syl. “Uh, sure, um, if you’d like to, Duke.”

“Duke...?”

“Duke Imi—Imith—” Schmalch produced some unintelligible series of sounds.

Syl scowled. “Repeat. Im-ith...”

“Im...ith...”

“uh-drah-lin.”

“uuuh...drah...lin.” Schmalch nodded and bit his lower lip, eyes drifting to the food.

“Again, all together.”

“Imythedralin,” he repeated slowly.

“Good man.” Syl pocketed the pistol and scooped eggs onto his plate. “We shall leave a test firing for another time. Eat.”

Schmalch pounced on the food, his jacket sleeves dripping

seawater on the table.

Aliara slid into the chair opposite Schmalch. She picked up a slice of bread and chewed, her black eyes following the conversation.

“Before she so fortuitously bumped into you last night, my darling girl enjoyed drinks with someone else interesting,” Syl said.

Schmalch shoveled food as his eyes swiveled from Syl to the plate and back.

When it was clear his only response would be sloppy chewing sounds, Syl sipped his caba and continued. “This person discovered something awe-inspiring beneath the abandoned region of the desalinization plant. You’re familiar? Yes. You see, we are considering taking a look ourselves, but what he found...” Syl paused, breathed deeply, and waved a hand in the air. “Well, it may be too much for the two of us to handle alone. We would need another pair of hands.”

Schmalch slowed his voracious eating at this. “What’d he find?” Bits of egg spewed from his mouth. Syl brushed them from the table with his napkin before continuing.

“He wasn’t specific,” Syl said, leaning forward conspiratorially, “but he did mention something about a glow.”

Aliara watched Schmalch’s brain work behind his enormous eyes. There was only one glowing object he could conceive of that would be worth Syl’s and her time—opoli.

“Yes, I see you understand.” Syl leaned back. “Naturally, you were the first person we thought of to provide that extra assistance. Who better than our good friend Schmalch? We intend to gather some supplies and set out in two dusk’s time. I realize it is a lot to ask, but would you consider joining us?”

Schmalch nodded vigorously and dangled another slice of lox into his mouth. Remnants of his meal spangled his damp tunic.

“Excellent. We would pay for your services as scout and assistant up front...say, fifteen Callas? You would, of course, receive an equal portion of anything we brought back.” Syl sipped his caba, allowing the words to form their own picture in the little scug’s brain.

Schmalch's chewing slowed, his eyes distant, dancing with imaginings.

"Tonight, while Aliara and I make preparations, you will locate a breach in the plant's wall." Syl refilled his guest's glass. "The man she spoke with indicated the fissure was on the Promenade side of the building, relatively obscured from view in the junction of two towers. He and his companions found it quite by accident during a drunken excursion. Can we depend on you for this, Schmalch?"

Clearly pleased with his luck, Schmalch swallowed his food with a gulp. "Sure, sure, I can do that, Duke Im-Im-Imythedralin. You know I can find things real good." The little puka beamed, thoroughly unaware of what he'd gotten into.



Schmalch could do this. He was an excellent thief. More or less. Finding a hole in a wall was no problem. The thought of scouting ahead in some towers crumbling off the side of a big, old building, though, that was a little scary. But he could do it for a big pay-off.

Squatted near a dreary workshop whose doors had closed for the day, he studied the ruined towers of the desal plant. From where he stood, the plant's bulk stretched out for blocks along High Road, almost disappearing in the growing dusk were it not for a few lit windows. Schmalch didn't like looking directly at the building; it was so big that trying to take it all in made his stomach turn on itself.

For the most part, he avoided the thing, easy since it sat on the Big Island, and he rarely left the Rabbls. He'd heard bits and pieces about what had happened to close down this section. It may have been long before he was born, but rumors got around. Some kid from the Spriggans told him the guy who built the plant went on a rampage, killing everyone and everything in his path. Another story, from Garl at the Barnacle, claimed the same guy had killed little kids trying to make himself immortal by drinking their blood. A third story said he'd set off some explosive that left this part of the place too dangerous to reopen. Schmalch couldn't remember where he'd heard that one.

He didn't know which of the stories was true, so he believed them all. Whatever the truth, it scared the pants off everyone,

including the local government types. It was crazy for them to leave so much space idle. Schmalch grew giddy just imagining how much the unused land might be worth. More than even the Duke and Rift had, he bet. Standing in the growing darkness, watching the plant's shift-change, he passed time considering what he'd do with that many Callas. Most of his dreams involved impressing friends and enemies, but there was a corner of his mind that thought warm thoughts about the Duke's housemaid. He needed to learn her name. Maybe he could charm her with his wealth once he had his share of the boodle from this venture.

Almost in chorus, the shutters on the streetlights and various lumia signs opened with a whoosh, the city shifting like a moored boat under their dull rolling glow.

He'd had to wait for dark. True, it would have been far simpler to look during the day, but Schmalch knew he'd be rousted if spotted—or worse, followed by someone wanting to horn in on his job. Now that night was officially here, however, he stared into the darkness behind the plant and reconsidered the wisdom of his plan.

He glanced back at the squat little farspeech office that sat a ways down High Road and sighed. Maybe if he'd managed to pass the farspeaker test they gave all the puka kids—the one he'd taken at the orphanage half his life ago—he wouldn't be here. He'd be rich from listening to all those messages that came in from all over the isles. Instead, he was alone in the dark, assigned to investigate the scariest spot in all of Dockhaven. He couldn't hear the farspeakers in his head. He was just another ordinary puka, doing someone else's work.

Schmalch scuttled across High Road and down Salt Street along the dark side of the plant, its cobalt-domed clay towers looming alongside him. The hum of the ever-present crowds dimmed with the streetlights' glow. With both moons in sliver tonight, he headed into thick blackness, an endless potential array of terrors waiting within.

Having spent his whole life in a city full of noise, this stillness was alien. He loved sneaking around and eavesdropping, but the uncertainty here flustered him. Being well-informed of his surroundings was integral to survival on the streets of Dockhaven. The more familiar the environs, the safer Schmalch was. Places didn't get much less familiar than this. Schmalch tugged at his ears and picked up his pace.

He rounded the damaged end of the plant and allowed his eyes to adjust to the gloom behind it, heart hammering in his chest. He couldn't see much detail, but what he could see sure did look abandoned, like a place you came to die, not to get a drink of water.

The whole yard back here had once been quite swish, according to some of the older tipplers who lurked around the Bitter Barnacle. Way back when the desal plant was all new and shiny, people came from all over the islands just to see the one-of-a kind place. The city built this spot behind the plant, called it "the Promenade." Visitors had picnics in the lawn and strolled along the boardwalk and looked out at Lover's Sound. It was all very romantic, he'd been told. Now it was all very terrifying.

He eased into the area, the smell around him fusty and dank. Dark patches of moss dotted the brownish clay, and the wood of the cliffside boardwalk seemed squishy and worn away by storms and neglect. Blue roofing tiles peppered the unkempt yard alongside an array of abandoned dross, dropped by skivers or left over from that initial incident. Schmalch swallowed his creeping fear and worked his way across the exterior of each domed tower, moving from the security of faint moonlight into the shadows.

Too deep in to escape, he jumped when a low, scraping creak shot through the silence like the roar of a blunderbuss. Panic flooded his mind. He dropped to the ground and scooted across the yard onto the rotting wood of the boardwalk, eyes searching the night, until his back slammed into a chunk of punky railing. He drew his knees close as he scanned the area, dinner-plate eyes struggling to

absorb every drop of light.

Minutes passed. No footfalls, no creaks. On hands and knees, he crept back toward the building, prepared to dart away should the need arise. Every few steps, he paused to listen for the mystery sound, his stubby hands anxiously plucking at the spongy decking and dirt.

Halfway back, his palm slipped on something round, twisting his wrist. Schmalch bit his lip to silence a yelp of pain. He patted the rotten wood around him in search of the wounding item, hand finally brushing something cool and smooth. It rolled away. He groped the ground until his fingers closed over it. Holding it up to what light he could find, Schmalch saw it was spherical, about size of his fist, with a rounded nub on each end. The thing shone with a metallic glint. Silver, maybe. It might be a watch, though not any kind he'd seen before. A toy, maybe. Or even jewelry. Didn't matter—it looked expensive, and that meant payoff. Schmalch pocketed it.

One treasure usually led to another. Fear exchanged for greed, Schmalch pawed across the ground, undeterred by the abundant puddles of gull lime. He groped and discarded a broken cup, a soggy, bug-laden cushion, the bottom half of a broom and something that felt like it may have once belonged to a pistol. None of it was worth keeping. He kept at it, sure that if he stopped, he'd miss that one gloss bit of swag only arm's-length away.

When his knuckles rapped something bulky and rough, he sat back with a groan, sucking his scraped fingers. He grabbed the wounding item with his free hand, and explored its shape—boxy but rounded, hammered metal, a circular furrow, a latch, a handle. A lantern. Worthless. He shrugged and was about to toss it aside but paused. If the lumia was still alive in there...

Schmalch pulled the fist from his mouth and fumbled with the lantern, flipping open the bull's-eye with a pale, metallic scrape. Watery aqua light rolled out. He giggled. The sound bounced back at him from the building's high walls. He snapped the lantern shut and

crouched against something that felt like a coil of sailing line. His eyes searched the area for movement, ears strained to detect sound. Satisfied no one had heard, he again opened the lantern, happy to have more than moonlight to aid his search.

He hadn't realized he'd crawled so close to the building during his hunt for boodle. Only a cart's length in front of him was the thing he'd been sent to find. A crack about his own height gaped from the shadowy crotch of two cylindrical towers, a recently disturbed mound of rubble at its mouth. Dangling into its depths was the limp end of the heap of rope he'd hidden behind. About a hog's width at the base, the crack tapered jaggedly to a point at the top, black and foreboding. The lantern's weak glow didn't touch the darkness within.

Schmalch sat back on his heels, staring, doubt seeping in. With the sleeve of his jacket, he wiped away the mist beading at the tip of his nose and sniffed. Something nasty was in the air, something that smelled like the time the Barnacle's heat eater had died, and all Garl's meat had gone bad. His skin crawled like it was trying to escape. Schmalch hopped up and ran, stumbling over the coiled line, yet managing to keep his feet.

If this was where the Duke and Rift planned to take him tomorrow, he was going to spend every coin they'd fronted him living it up tonight.



2085 MEDIBAR 19

Syl stood in the ramshackle shop of the Lower Rabble's finest metalwright, examining his well-manicured fingernails. At the counter, a soldier in the crimson and khaki of the Norian marines was several minutes into his attempt to complete a purchase with the stone-deaf vendor.

"What?" Mardo shouted at his customer.

"You remember my order from last month?" the soldier shouted, gesturing frantically in an attempt to draw an air picture of this mysterious order. "The wallarmbrust."

Mardo frowned, rosy brow crinkling. "What? Reimburse you? You haven't bought anything yet."

The soldier sighed.

Bored, Syl edged past the frustrated man, withdrew a slip of paper from his pocket and passed it to Mardo.

"Right, Duke," Mardo said, grinning wide enough to expose a silvered tooth adjacent to a missing one. He disappeared into his storeroom, leaving the soldier unaided.

As a genuine Vazztain duke, Syl enjoyed a favored position among Dockhaven's merchants. In the imperial court of the Dominion of Chiva'vastezz, the Duchy of Isay was considered rather pitiful, known only for its blalal berries and amphibious livestock. Syl had earned the title and its land, but the whole thing was something of

a joke, and one he preferred to rule in absentia. To the Haveners, however, Syl was a duke, and one who held such a title was better served than some random soldier.

“Forgot your purchase order?” Syl asked the exasperated soldier while he waited.

The man nodded.

“Perhaps write down your request for Mardo to read in lieu of making such a din next time?”

The man’s face brightened as though the idea had never occurred to him.

Mardo clomped out of his storeroom with a rattling wooden box, smile still in place.

“Quite’a challenge,” Mardo said. “What’s your plan for ‘em, Duke?”

“An experiment,” Syl said, voice raised. He slid the box under one arm.

Mardo opened his mouth, undoubtedly to ask “what?” but Syl stopped him with a palm. He laid his silver on the counter, donned his sunshades, and left Mardo and the soldier with a nod.

He strolled along the steep shore toward home, glancing at the harbor littered with floating tenements, once sturdy barges and freighters now abandoned, punky and infested with squatting poor. A karju woman lolling from the upper window of a bright-yellow three-story affair called greetings to Syl. He waved at her with a small flip of his hand. Had he ever known the woman, her name had long since escaped him.

He veered away from the coastline, past a string of shops, most still rolled up for the night. Simple shutters blocked the higher levels, bars added on the ground floor. The only activity, a seamstress on the third story hanging out her fashions for the day’s display. Syl paused to examine them, deemed them garish and sub-par, and continued on toward the neighborhood’s finest produce market. The young shop-caller, stationed as always below a painted mural of a buxom

lady eating carrots, urged Syl to stop in for vegetables delivered fresh from the docks that morning. Certain Sviroosa would see to such things, Syl strode past with only a pleasant nod in the boy's direction.

As he passed through a cloud of greasy steam billowing from an early-morning diner, a canker-ravaged woman fell into step with him. One glance gave her profession as cut-rate trull.

"How 'bout a quick suck, chivori?" she asked. She twirled a lock of greasy red-brown hair around a dirty finger. "Only two coppers for a pretty one like you."

"You would likely have better luck with the night-shifters heading home from the fisheries." Syl kept walking.

"Sometimes a girl wants something sweeter than a fish gutter." She hopped in front of him, blocking his path. "Slip down the alley with me, I'll let you box the compass." With one hand, the trull lifted her skirt to reveal something so unkempt and grubby that even the night-shifters would have run. With the other, she fumbled for his crotch.

Syl knew this routine, had run it himself with Aliara years ago. Sidestepping, he swung around to catch her partner's hand halfway into his coat pocket.

"Watch where you place that." Syl wrenched the errant hand, felt the bones inside grind. "Or be better at your craft."

The man yelped and tried to jerk away. Syl held tight. The man pulled a dull sailor's knife, brandishing it awkwardly in his off-hand. Ducking under the lurching weapon, Syl twisted the arm behind the man's back. His shoulder popped neatly out of joint. The thief fell to his knees and bawled, knife forgotten.

"You windless fid!" Ragged nails bared like claws, the trull charged.

Syl put a foot on her partner's back and shoved, rolling him into her path. She tripped, momentum carrying her across the rough cobbles of the street. Syl left both of them in a heap, moaning and bickering.

Lurking seagulls and stray cats scattered as he scaled the steps toward home, where Aliara waited, her whip-thin form hunched over the dining table. Precisely arranged before her were a length of rope, two crank torches, a fresh canvas rucksack, her leather work pack, and other assorted tools of her trade.

“Before you store all that away,” Syl said, “you’ll want to consider these as well.”

He unlatched the box, revealing a fist-sized canvas bag, a mallet, and a collection of steel pitons, the type used as climbing anchors. Near the head of each piton was a narrow band of resin filled with glowing lumia algae.

“Return guideposts.” Syl said. “I’ve no intention of being lost in that monstrosity again.”

“And that?” Aliara nodded at the bag

“A bit of shot.” He spilled several large-gauge steel balls into his palm. “You didn’t think I would leave on this little escapade without my new pistol, did you, Pet?”



Syl stood before the desal plant in dusk's waning light, staring at its clay walls, but seeing something else entirely.

"You see here the finest zoetic science has to offer," Orono said on the day he guided young Syl through the enormous water-purification plant. Only days earlier, he'd purchased Syl, purportedly as a houseboy. Reality had been quite different. "This city...no, all the civilized world would be lost without my work."

The memory rolled through Syl's mind, unwanted, insistent. He could still see the old karju through his eight-year-old eyes: hunched back, wispy white patches of hair, fleshy bulk draped in a colorful, flowing robe. He was as ancient as he seemed, though young Syl couldn't have known. The old man still drew breath only by the grace of heavy anti-agathic dosing. Without the drugs, he would have been dead years before Syl's life even began.

Orono leaned heavily on his cane, his wheezing breath as loud and real in Syl's mind as it had been at that moment. The old man gestured at the plant's complex network of harnessed lusca, zoet creatures whose genome he had designed. Their squishy, semi-transparent bodies sucked seawater from hoses, gushed freshwater into the troughs below and thick salt paste into the dangling collection-bags.

"Before I developed these zoet wonders," Orono said, "the masses relied on solar stills. Always a shortage. My tinkering with

genomes put water in their mugs.” He wagged his finger at Syl. “You be proud your master created this. Always remember that you belong to a great man.”

Caught up in the reminiscence, Syl abruptly spat in the direction of the statue erected to Orono. “Great man,” he muttered with a scowl.

Aliara’s sloe-colored, almond eyes slid his way, but she said nothing. She had her own memories of the monster’s greatness.

Shaking off the unpleasantness, Syl tugged at the bottom of his vest and plucked rogue bits of lint from his clothing. He’d foregone his standard finery in favor of more practical blue trousers, ivory sweater, and black leather vest, pistol holster tucked beneath. Aliara had gifted him his own pair of soft-soled boots for the occasion. Though he preferred a solid click with each stride, he found a hushed tread preferable for this undertaking.

Picked clean of all vestiges of disarray, he adjusted the rucksack slung across his back and tapped his foot mutely against the brick of the street.

“Where is that little puddle?” he muttered.

Around them, the shift change brought fresh plant workers in while exhausted ones shuffled home in the growing dusk. Shopkeepers and their patrons concluded business while tipplers emerged as unfailingly as the stars overhead, and couples held hands and smiled obliviously at the darkening sky. Pedicabs rang bells at pedestrians who ignored them, and shop-callers changed their song from housewares and pantry items to liquor and entertainment. Weaving among them all, the obligatory pickpockets executed their craft.

Schmalch was not among their ranks.

Aliara ignored the dwindling crowd, seemingly unbothered by the delay. She stretched and looked out to sea, the catsuit she wore clinging to every gesture. A blackened-steel stiletto hung at each of her hips, their holsters strapped to her thighs, ubiquitous black

boots tight to her knees, familiar leather bundle on her back, tools particular to her craft tucked within.

“Look, Duke, look!” The clipped, nasal voice preceded Schmalch, who appeared as though conjured by Syl’s impatience. Still wearing the same revolting clothes, a rusty old lantern held before him like a talisman, he wound his way through the press of bodies toward the quiet space where Syl and Aliara waited. He skidded to a stop and swung open the bull’s-eye. “Still glows. Even fed it.”

“Good,” Syl glanced at the lantern. “You did as requested?”

“Yeah, ‘course. Got this, too.” He held up a new pack, dotted with bright, youthful patches. “Nicked—I mean, bought it from a kid down in the Rabble. Real good one.” He opened it to display color sticks and a pair of school books mixed with his assortment of other looted possessions. “Holds a lot—think I got a good—”

“Show us,” Aliara said, cutting him off.

“What, Rift?”

Syl sighed. “The entry, Schmalch. The one you were dispatched to locate.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Schmalch’s lip twitched as he glanced uncertainly toward the back of the plant.

“Now,” she said.

Pace decreasing with each step, Schmalch led them down the boardwalk toward the rear of the building. When he stopped, he chewed on a dirty fingernail for a moment before pointing at a dark opening nestled where two towers met. It was the height of an average puka, tapered at the top. A length of fresh rope dangled into the darkness beyond, its end coiled and anchored with a heavy block. Even standing several feet away, Syl caught the odor of musty desertion, something foul beneath it.

Aliara crouched and stuck her head into the breach, pressed her ear against the wall. Satisfied with what she heard, she slipped inside. Syl heard a gritty hiss and a soft thump. He crossed to where she’d just been and placed his own ear against the cool clay. He felt the

familiar thrumming in his lower lug, the resonant tickle of vibration in his jaw. He heard only the expected from the still-operational areas of the plant—churning of the distant *lusca*, thudding of boots, conversation of plant employees, rush of water in the pipes. He peered inside. The floor was sharply canted. Two smooth lines led from the opening to where Aliara leaned against a cracked wall, peering into the room's upended doorway. A scatter of other streaks and footprints, remnants of the *minikin* and his friends, surrounded her path. The charnel odor was heavier here.

"It's safe," she said quietly. "Corpse in the hall."

He chuckled. Only Aliara would relate safety to the presence of a dead body.

Not as nimble as his mate, Syl wound the rope around his forearm and eased himself down into the room, dropping with a quiet *whoof* beside her.

He'd irrationally expected to enter through a hallway or foyer, but this was hardly a formal entrance. It was just a random hole in the wall opening onto a long-abandoned office, its state a clear illustration of damage dealt to this section of the building. Tables, chairs, and miscellaneous office detritus had tumbled across the floor, accumulating on the far side. Walls fell away into nothing, and the ceiling gave a fine view into the many stories above. How far their group could travel before the floors fell away altogether remained an open question.

Schmalch followed, riding the slanted floor like a playground slide, landing with a thud and a whine. He got to his feet, both hands holding his prodigious nostrils protectively closed.

Aliara dropped through the one-time doorway into the dark hall. Syl crouched and watched her. He had no intention of jumping in indiscriminately and landing on a putrefied carcass.

She took the crank torch from her pack, wound it, and sprayed the pale-yellow light down the windowless corridor of sea clay. On its floor, tiled in a bright-blue echo of the obnoxious roofing,

slumped the decaying body of a youngish karju man. His gut was bloated, his skin yellowed and rodent-pocked, the top half of his skull smashed to bits. What remained of his face was a tight rictus Syl interpreted as fear.

Aliara hopped over the drooping corpse, arranged herself with one foot on the wall, one on the skewed floor, and bounded down the corridor, light bobbing like a buoy on a rough sea.

Syl lowered the rumpled puka into the canted hallway and followed. Schmalch spied the body, reversed direction, and tried to climb back out. Too short to reach the exit, he managed only a few hops before Syl put a hand on his shoulder.

“Step over him.” Syl jerked his chin toward Aliara. “Now go. Follow her.”

Schmalch took one step forward and gagged, cheeks puffing out comically. He shook his head. “Isn’t there another way in?”

“I believe you were the individual in charge of locating the entry. If you found nothing else...” Syl shrugged and held out his hand, palm up. “Climb over him or return my Callas.”

Schmalch whined, head drooping heavily against his chest. With a sigh, he shuffled toward the unfortunate explorer and climbed gently over his recumbent body. Safely on the other side, the puka awkwardly loped away, grousing under his breath.

Syl took a piton and the mallet from his pack and drove the glowing marker into the wall before joining the procession.



Aliara shone her crank-torch around the old processing room, a space so vast her light didn't reach the far side. What was visible seemed surprisingly undamaged; the floor level, the equipment still in place. Rows of cracked hoses hung limply from pipes in the ceiling alongside decaying harnesses, once occupied by the working lusca. They now held only wispy bits of the zoets' desiccated corpses, pale and fluttery like the fragile ash of burned paper. The distant ping of aging metal told Aliara some of the rigs still dribbled seawater into the collection troughs below.

With a light shove, Syl urged a reluctant Schmalch into the big room. "Go," he said. "Earn your Callas."

Schmalch fished the aging lantern from his pack, took one last imploring look over his shoulder and, upon seeing no sympathy, slowly trudged into the room.

Syl placed another piton, leaned against the wall and slid down with a weary sigh. "This will likely take a while," he said. "At least the fantasy of imminent treasure will keep him moving."

Aliara dropped her pack and joined him. Syl slid an arm around her and together they watched Schmalch's bald head and bobbing light move through the room, intermittently disappearing behind collection troughs. His pace was far from hare-footed, and he showed no discernable pattern. With such a haphazard effort, he was certain to miss something. Or maybe Frabo's mystery creature

would dart out and eat him.

Aliara chuckled at the thought. Syl gave her a sidelong glance. She shook her head.

“Fine then,” he said with a smirk, “keep your secrets.”

He kissed her cheek and traced a finger over the crescent-moon scar that spanned the left side of her head. She leaned into him and closed her eyes. A low rattle and creak from somewhere in the room disturbed the moment.

Aliara opened her eyes, waiting for Schmalch’s light to move. After several moments it was still in place. “He’s been still too long.”

“Who?”

She elbowed Syl. He chuckled.

“Schmalch, are you alive?” Syl called into the room.

The words bounced back in layers.

“Looting, most likely,” Syl said. “We can review the contents of his pack when this is over. Provided we care enough to do so.”

“Maybe.”

Aliara pulled out of Syl’s grasp, rose, and headed toward the stationary light, his soft tread in rhythm behind her. Deep in the room, she found Schmalch’s lantern alone on the floor. Halfway down the row of troughs, its owner squatted by a heap of old bones, humming softly as he dug through the pockets of long-dead plant employees.

“Find something interesting?” Syl asked.

The puka lurched forward with a squeak, banging his head on the rusty trough. It thrummed and wobbled in protest. He grabbed his skull and flopped back in a puff of dust.

“Just some goodies, Duke. We can look at them together later.” He scrambled to his feet. “I knew you’d want me to pick up anything I found. Like we talked about, right?”

“Yes, the purest of intentions,” Syl said.

That rattle and creak came again, louder, longer.

“Quiet,” Aliara said.

Syl fell silent. Schmalch did not.

“I didn’t want you to be mad at me for not picking it up, Duke. You’d be really angry if I let something expensive go, right? We can look at everything now if you want.” He reached into a pocket and held out a handful of worthless dross. “See? You want anything?”

He took one step toward them and vanished as a sharp crack reverberated through the room. A long, low ringing, like the strike of an enormous gong, droned beneath the echo.

As the sound subsided, Schmalch’s voice, distant and small, said, “Help?”

Aliara edged toward the new hole, testing the floor, listening for more warning sounds. She pointed her torch into the jagged opening, its light barely effective in the cloud of stale dust kicked up by the collapse.

Schmalch and scattered bits of floor lay atop the gently arcing cap of a huge metal drum she recognized as a freshwater cistern. It was old and coated in corrosion, untouched for decades. Narrow pipes ran from the collection troughs through the floor into the tank. Larger lines extended from both sides, passing water from cistern to cistern down the main.

Syl squatted beside her. “Still alive down there?”

“Sure, Duke, can you get me out?” Schmalch asked.

Syl stretched out flat on his belly, hand extended. Schmalch hopped a few times, but never came close.

“I’ll get the rope.” Aliara passed her crank-torch to Syl and started back toward the dim glow of the piton.

She’d only just hefted the gear onto her back when another clattering racket banged through the room.

Aliara’s heart skipped. She sprinted toward where she’d left them. Schmalch had been lucky to land on the cistern when he fell. Had he missed it, he would have fallen much farther, likely broken something if not killed himself.

She found Syl lying on the cistern at the base of a long ramp

formed from broken floor. His torch was clutched in white-knuckled fingers, his hair powdered by dust. He shifted onto his elbows and coughed.

“Did you find the rope?” he asked.

She crouched and dug into the pack.

“Pet...” Syl said.

“What?”

Syl pointed to the base of the new collapse. The tip of the ramp had punched through the tank’s rusty surface. Fragments of rust flaked away from the tear, plinking into the hissing water below.

Schmalch stirred and groaned. The metal popped and buckled with each movement.

“Hold still,” Syl hissed at him. He sat up slowly, long eyes wide on Aliara. “The rope, Pet. Quickly.”

Aliara dumped the pack, snatched the coil of rope and flung one end toward him. Syl lurched forward, but the rope sizzled through his fingers. The metal beneath him screeched, split further. He scrambled to his feet, stumbling back, bits of corroded steel crumbling in his wake.

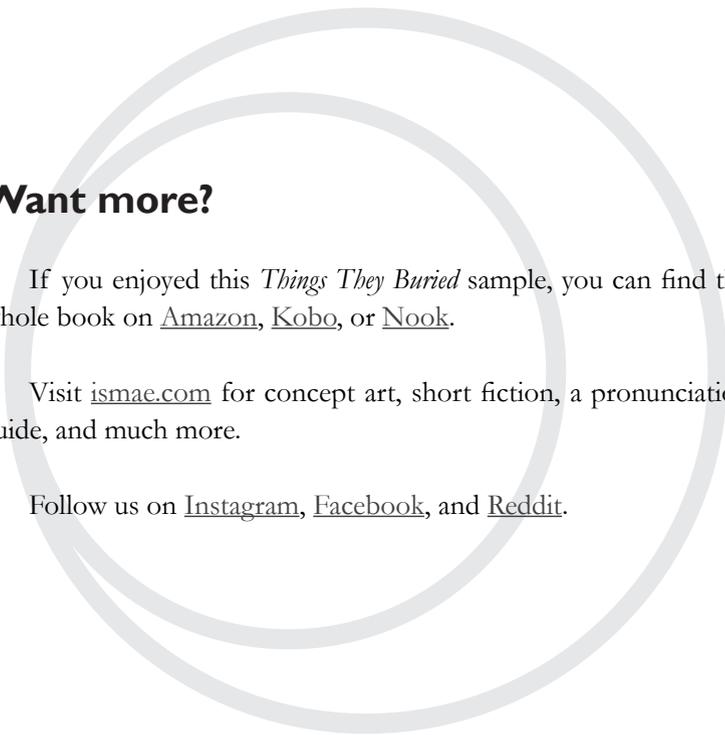
Aliara tried to retrieve the rope for another toss. She felt slow, clumsy. She wouldn’t get it to him in time. She dropped it, raced to the solid side of the opening and flopped onto her belly, arm outstretched.

Syl reached for her, glanced back, saw the cascade of metal rushing toward him and jumped. His fingertips brushed hers. He dropped back onto the cistern with a clang. The metal wailed, shattered, and Syl splashed into the water. Aliara made one final lunge for his groping hand as he slid away into the rush of the trunk line below.

She rolled away when the floor beneath her creaked warning. She grabbed the torch from Syl’s pack, wound it, and flicked it on, looking down into the ruined cistern. The water flowed east-to-west. Syl travelled with it.

Shouldering their gear, Aliara flew out the first westerly exit she found.

The fate of Schmalch never crossed her mind.



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