

Harvest Moon

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Jack November's footsteps echoed against the concrete platform and the concave wall above. With his hands in the pockets of his patched avocado-green peacoat he made his way towards his favorite bar in the abandoned tunnels. The clientele consisted of veterans of the Past

War; those who served the city in its darkest hour. After a few dusty pints, they regaled those who would listen with stories of white-knuckle exploits of daring do, back when you could still use a phrase like that without a smirk and a sideways glance. Never mind the Past War was an indeterminate amount of years in the past. Those at the bar had their stories, sure, but the way it was discussed: Jack wasn't sure. It almost seemed to Jack like they were passing a well-known story on booze-fragranced breath.

No one begrudged them their white-knuckle lies. People came to The Tube for a pint and the piss; to escape the cold streets and surveillance of Frigoris above.

Jack approached The Tube, tossing a few spare parts here and there to those wrapped in blankets, laying atop pieces of cardboard along the walkway. There were even a couple teenagers busking, battered guitar cases open, their music echoing brightly against the walls. They smiled their thanks as Jack walked past.

Jack shouldered the sliding doors of The Tube open and was immediately greeted with calls of "November!" from those inside.

The interior of the subway car had been disassembled and redecorated. Pieces of scrap metal had been welded to the walls and surrounded with stools mounted with the orange molded seats. Some of the seats against the windows had been left in place; large cable spools, dark with spilled beer and age, served as the table. Windows had been papered over with old posters gathered from the underground, advertisements for *Blotto Malt Beer*, *Sparkle Toothpaste*, and a handful of others. Not a single poster calling for "*Brotherhood during these dark days*" or asking those who read to "*Look to the Moon for Our Salvation*" could be found on The Tube's walls. Those posters were used as kindling in the barrel fires outside.

Jack did a cursory inspection of the bar as he walked towards the counter at the front of the converted car. There were those already holding the rails to remain upright, cheeks bright with laughter and rotgut.

"Jackie-boy," the bartender smiled as November sidled up to the bar.

"Gramercy," he nodded. November pulled out a handful of nuts and bolts from his pocket and placed it with a loud thunk in front of the bartender. "What'll this get me?"

Gramercy removed a pair of spectacles from his shirt pocket. The prescription made his wide set green eyes positively owl-like. The rail of a man leaned against the counter, and more to himself than Jack, said, "Now, what have we here?"

“Handful of salvaged parts from the control panel of a subway on the other side of town,” Jack shrugged. “It’s in better shape than this hunk of junk,” he laughed.

“Bite your tongue,” Gramercy replied, sliding the parts into his upturned palm. When he placed them into the till, he gently touched the wall. “There’s nothing wrong with you, is there, sweetie?” When it failed to answer on its own accord, he patted it once more with his meat hook of a hand and shook his head. “No, there’s not. November’s as bitter as the wind.”

While the bartender was waxing poetic to his beloved subway car, Jack caught sight of his reflection in the smudged mirror behind Gramercy. His short brown hair was matted flat against his scalp with grease and days without being properly washed. His cheekbones were prominent, if not a little hollow beneath. Despite his obvious appetite, his brown eyes were full of humor, and his shoulders were still wide and strong beneath the padding of his peacoat.

“What’ll it be, Jackie-boy?” Gramercy asked.

“The usual.”

“Company, too?” Gramercy put a pint of bitter in front of November and nodded his head towards the rear of the subway car with a wink.

November followed the bartender’s gaze and settled on his drinking buddy, Yuse Pascal.

“Get on with you,” Gramercy smiled and picked up a glass to wipe down, not because he had to necessarily, but because it helped establish his presence and purpose in the bar. “I’m sure there’s tales to be told and whispers to be had.”

November grinned, grabbed his drink, and pushed off from the bar.

Yuse Pascal resembled a bear sitting atop a pinhead. He wore a familiar pair of grease-stained khakis, a black turtleneck, and a salmon-colored kimono. It was a widely discussed piece of clothing by the Underground’s fashionistas but done in the quietest of registers; at least around Yuse. The man didn’t take kindly to being discussed and offered a ‘Bacon sandwich’ to all those that did with ham-handed fists. With a perpetually sunburned, heavily lined forehead—a feat to be sure in the Underground—a pencil moustache, and shockingly blue eyes, Pascal was as generous with his laughter or a juicy piece of gossip, as he was with physical abuse.

It was those eyes that regarded Jack November as the younger man approached. They solemnly touched the sides of their nose as Jack took the seat across from him.

“The sun is shining,” Yuse said. His voice and face were deathly still.

“But the shit’s slippery?” Jack’s flashed a smile.

The pair broke into sudden laughter.

“What’s the good word?” Yuse replied, taking a long pull from his rotgut.

“*Parochial*,’ but I’m not sure why?” Jack answered. “Found some books tucked away in one of the cars in the older part of the city. Apparently, children went to school and were taught by Fathers and Sisters; ‘Nuns,’ he clarified.

“Well, which is it?” Yuse laughed. “Sisters or ‘nones?’”

“Beats me,” Jack shrugged. “What have you found?”

Pascal’s massive head somehow shrunk between his wide shoulders. “Before the occupation,” Yuse whispered, “People used to pack a basket made of sticks with food, and drive to the country.”

“Why?”

“To eat the food,” the bear explained.

“Why didn’t they eat at home?” Jack’s brow furrowed. “How did they make it back before curfew.”

Yuse pulled a face. “No idea,” he admitted. “Just relaying what I heard. I forgot to tell you!” he reached across the table and grabbed a handful of November’s peacoat. “Sometimes, when they were ‘pick-nicking’ they’d go *swimming*,” his blue eyes widened at the last word.

Silence settled between them like a still lake.

“I don’t know what that means?” Jack admitted. “‘Swimming,’ he tasted the word, uncertainly.

Yuse leaned back in his seat with a satisfied smile. “No idea,” he repeated. “It sounds delightful though, doesn’t it?”

November shook his head. Half of the conversations with Pascal involved trading antiquated concepts that neither had reference points for.

Jack took a drink of his beer.

Yuse took a drink of his rotgut.

The din of conversation in The Tube kept the silence from being awkward.

Finally, Jack leaned forward and said, “Have you heard the rumors about Chaz Barvo?”

Yuse tugged on the lapels of his kimono. Recognition lit his glacial eyes. “Cheese?”

The younger man snapped his fingers and pointed at the bear. “The one and only.”

“What about him?”

Jack mirrored his friend's posture, poised, conspiratorial. He wiggled his eyebrows and said, "He met a girl."

"Pffff!" Yuse waved his hand dismissively as if batting away a fly. "Who *hasn't* met a girl? 'He met a girl!'" Pascal told one of the drunks hanging onto the rail for support. He looked back at Jack. "Who cares?"

Jack smiled in quiet triumph. "This one glowed."



The blood red moon crept into the like a portent of death. Throughout the city, eyes turned and watched its ascent with fear constricting their throats. Mothers soothed their wailing children, rocking them to sleep, hovering near their bedsides, reading an extra story, smoothing their hair for good measure, peppering them with kisses and promises about the coming day, though it wasn't certain; because it wasn't certain. They even forgot to be cross with the children when they trundled into their bedrooms minutes later, asking for a glass of water, or to sleep in their bed for the night. It was to be expected. They could be gone soon. Any of them could.

Husbands in the parlor clamped down firmly on pipes and their resolve, promising to remain calm; to demonstrate a steady hand and firm upper lip. "It's just the moon," they'd say as their spouse recalled fables from their youth; stories of ancestors coming to unfortunate ends under the Harvest Moon. "*Blood red or silver, one folk should shiver,*" they'd say, while their spouse laughed tolerantly.

"Go to bed, you old busy body," they'd demand. Once they'd left the room to hover outside of their children's bedroom door like a sentinel, the husbands would sneak out to the fire escape and say a silent prayer that tonight it would pass. Not them. Not their wife or husband. Not their children. "It's just the moon," they'd whisper, convincing themselves, now. "It's just the moon."

With the air scented with pipe smoke and fear, they would close their eyes against the lights in other apartments flicking on one by one, oblivious to the silhouettes framed within the rectangle of light, craned heads alike, and hope the screams wouldn't come. But, on night such as this, with the blood red moon riding the night sky, the fear wedged itself deep.

Meanwhile, the moon continued its ascent, red against the gray clouds.

On a night such as this, while the city's inhabitants peeked through their curtains at the moon in dread, a figure stealthily moved through the streets below with a subtle hitch in their step. If you weren't paying close attention, you would have missed it completely—the hitch and the shadow—which was the point. The shadow was trying hard not to be seen. With the streetlamps extinguished to discourage people from leaving their apartments after curfew, the shadow skipped from one patch of darkness to another. From empty alleys, door stops, and edging along crumbling brick walls, the figure moved, ears perked.

It paused near the town square, in between a delicatessen and the bombed-out structure of an old resistance newsprint operation, the shadow pressed his body flat against the wall. Palms sweating, he clung to it as if there wasn't a dirty street beneath him; as if he would fall to his death if he let an ounce of daylight between his spine and the wall that supported it. But, of course, it wasn't daylight, reader. It's only a figure of speech. Rest assured, it was the dead of the night, and the shadow heard the approaching footsteps of another.

Whereas our shadow's footsteps were fleet and secretive, careful to avoid detection, the boots he heard announced their presence like the chimes of the town clock striking three o'clock in the morning. Heart in his throat, sweat trickled down the side of our Shadow's face.

Illuminated only by moonlight, he watched the other figure's shadow lengthen, creeping into the gap of light between the two buildings, until, finally, it stepped into the space.

It was then that Chaz Barvo saw what he dreaded.

Moonlight fell on The Gloam.



"You said there would be a girl that glowed," Yuse snorted. He pinched his nose and wiped it with the back of his hand.

"I can't jump right to the glowing girl," Jack replied.

"I already know about The Gloam and The Harvest."

Those in November and Pascal's immediate area cast side long glances at their table.

Jack took a large gulp of his beer, "I'm getting there, alright? I've got to set up the atmosphere. If you don't want to hear it, that's fine. But, it's good. It's not about 'swimming,' whatever that is, and it's not about some long dead word we found in a book. The girl could save us all."

“All right, all right,” Yuse laughed. He reached across the table and playfully slapped November’s cheek. “If we’re going to be here awhile, we’ll need more drinks.” He tipped his glass to prove his point.

Jack took a large breath and grinned reluctantly. “I can’t argue with that.”

“Even if you could, you can take it up with Gramercy. Off with you, now.” He flicked the back of his meat hook of a hand towards the bar.

When Jack returned, Yuse took his drink, and shook the index finger of his other hand. “Let’s get back to it, Jacko. And, don’t go telling me Cheese outsmarted a Gloam, okay? It just isn’t done. If they catch sight of you, all that’s left is a pile of clothes in the street steadily growing cold.”

A couple at the table beside them stopped talking. Their hands tightened around their drinks, and the flames in the lanterns guttered with a sudden gust of wind.

“Keep it down!” Jack muttered.

“They don’t come down here,” Yuse chuckled. “Gently unknot your underoos and take a breath. Relax—RELAX!” he ordered their neighbors with a disarming smile. “The Gloam stay topside.”

“But the Grays come down,” one of them answered. A middle-aged man with close-cropped silver hair, a crooked nose, which they wiped repeatedly with a gray handkerchief, and a dodgy eye.

“There hasn’t been a raid in weeks,” Yuse pushed up the sleeves of his kimono. “Besides, if you don’t like our topic of conversation, either quit dropping eaves or jog on. Unless, you’re looking for a problem?” All affability drained from Pascal’s voice, and his bear-like frame seemed to quintuple in size, humming with the possibility of violence.

“YUSE!” November snapped his fingers in front of the larger man’s face. “Leave ‘em alone. We’re sorry—he’s sorry!” he brought the bear back from the precipice of confrontation. “Chaz Barvo, yeah? Should I continue?”

Yuse observed November with hooded eyes and a look of boredom. “Do you have any tobacco?”

Jack removed a pouch from his inner coat pocket and tossed it to his friend.

Yuse rolled a cigarette and lit it. He took a long drag and sighed. “Go ahead,” he sighed contentedly. “Cheese and the Gloam.” He arched an eyebrow and cast a questioning sidelong

glance at their neighbors, who made an irritable show of standing, and finding an empty table towards the front of the car. Pascal smiled and extended a hand towards November. “Proceed with your Gloam, Jacko. *With skin so white and nasty, and eyes so blue and glass—Hey!*” The table rocked as Pascal’s knees bumped against it in surprise. “You *kicked* me.”

Jack jabbed his index finger in the air towards the bear. “Intimidating the other drunks is one thing, but there’s no need to tempt fate.”

“It’s just a game,” Yuse countered, still in shock that someone had the audacity to lay a finger on him, or, in Jack’s case, a steel-toed boot. “Didn’t you play as a child? Staring at the mirror in the bathroom with the lights off after your parents went to bed? Shitting yourself with fear, but whispering the rhyme all the same to try and get one to come to your door to hopefully whisk your old man away?”

Jack took a drink and shook his head. “I loved my parents. While they were around, at least.”

Yuse shrugged. “Tell your damn story. If you kick me again, though, I’ll break your leg.”



Illuminated only by moonlight, he watched the other figure’s shadow lengthened, creeping into the gap of light between the two buildings, until, finally, it stepped into the space.

It was then that Chaz Barvo, or Cheese as he was known to his friends, saw what he dreaded.

The moonlight fell on a Gloam.

Still hidden from view, Chaz watched the enigmatic figure pause. Clad in tight-fitting black clothing and a trench coat made of—what looked like—an oil spill, The Gloam patrolled the empty city streets, waiting for anyone who dared violate curfew. With skin the color of a corpse, and eyes that left a trail of smokeless blue fire as they moved. If they spotted you, you were dead. They did it without speed, without malice, without mercy. All that was left after a confrontation with the Gloam was the clothes on your back, gathered in a pile on the street to pick through the next day.

There had been patrols as long as The Harvest. Some believed the Harvest came first, and The Gloam afterwards to ensure order and docility of those in the city.

It worked.

And one was staring at Cheese, or rather, the immediate darkness that he was hidden in. He said a silent prayer to the ancestors who came before him, to his quickening heartbeat, to the laces in the grommets of his scuffed brown boots, for fate to intervene. He didn't want the last thing he saw on that cursed and miserable earth to be the blank, fiery eyes of The Gloam.

Some said it hurt—the dematerialization. But who could say? People screamed, yes, but Chaz Barvo thought it had more to do with fear. Your soul's last gasp at self-preservation. That irrepressible need to live; he could feel it tightening in his lungs as he stood there trembling, awaiting the moment when he would plead for mercy.

When he felt he could take it no longer, somewhere behind him in the alley, fate manifested itself in stereotypical fashion as a hungry tomcat upset a battered can of garbage and tipped its contents on to the cobbled street. Startling even itself, it leapt out of the shadows, and ran through The Gloam's legs. It didn't even pause to turn into an elastic ribbon of pleasure, winding and purring at the grace a stationary pair of legs provided. Perhaps it knew better.

The Gloam remained motionless for a few seconds more, eyes blazing, yet offering no light. Seemingly satisfied, it began its slow patrol once more, leaving the mouth of the alley free of its shadow, and Chaz Barvo's mouth full of stifled cries of thanks to the universe.

He waited there for what seemed like hours, terrified that The Gloam would return. After Cheese convinced himself that he'd successfully skirted death, he peeled himself from the wall, and limped further down the alley, pressing his leg at the knee with his right hand, willing its cooperation. Before stepping into a moonlit opening, he listened for the methodical pace of the Gloam, or the lockstep of a Gray Patrol. Satisfied at hearing neither, he picked up a well-worn crowbar leaning against the wall of an apartment building near a sewer grate and used it to pry the manhole cover open. Emboldened by the taste of freedom on the tip of his lips, his actions became clumsier.

The inhabitants of the apartments bordering the open space peeked through curtains at the noise. Cheese pocketed the crowbar in a voluminous pocket of his trench coat and disappeared into the safety of the sewer system. The lid clanged shut overhead before anyone had a chance to see him. Good thing, too.

Most everyone and their mother, assuming she hadn't been vaporized yet, would sell you out without a second thought in order to get in the good graces of the Gray. It didn't matter if you were a fellow Red, or not. Even the downtrodden would put a boot in your back if it helped them stand a little taller.

Regardless, Chaz "Cheese" Barvo was home free. At least for now. But, on those streets, 'for now' was the only kind of future you could ask for.

When Cheese stepped off the last rung of the ladder and onto the metal platform of the sewers, he paused a moment. Laughter bubbled in his chest. It crept up his esophagus and log-jammed in the back of his throat for a moment before bursting from his chapped lips. It bounced off of the glistening walls and joined the noise of the rats and the steady drip-drop of water. He doubled over with it, clutching his stomach with his left arm, while his right hand smothered the sound as the laughter transformed into hysterical, muffled sobs.

He'd seen The Gloam before, but never the whites of their eyes. Never the blue flames. Cheese knew that the line in his chest had almost been severed cleanly tonight and he had a healthy appreciation of the fact. As safe as he was in the sewer, he needed to get deeper still. All it would take to be discovered is one of the several groups of Grays patrolling tonight to hear his echoing laughter on the streets filtering up through a sewer grate and alert their comrades. Cheese would be ferreted out in short order.

When he caught his breath, he stood as straight as his form allowed. His eyes adjusted to the surrounding darkness. From the depths of his coat, he removed a pocket torch with a piece of red cellophane over the lens. He followed the small beam of light, careful to keep his boot steps as quiet as possible, pushing his stubborn right leg along as he practiced the words he'd tell Semper Moses when he returned.

"The Grays are amassing in numbers. The Gloam walks among them," he whispered. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead from the point of his widow's peak. "The Grays are amassing in numbers. The Gloam walks among them," he repeated.

His words lost their form the deeper he traveled into the tunnels until they were a whisper. Nameless. Faceless. Just as the Grays viewed them from above.

Deeper within the labyrinthine structure of the underground, away from the sewer grates that led to the streets, Cheese let his half-gloved fingers trail along a familiar sweaty wall. He smirked to himself, pulled the miniature flashlight from his mouth, and clicked off the red light.

His fingertips felt the grooves and bite of the crumbling red brick until they found one that still retained its sharp edges. He drew a complicated glyph against the center of the brick. When he was finished tracing, he waited, quietly cursing under his breath as the seconds ticked by. After what seemed like hours, while rats grew emboldened, and started nipping at Chaz Barvo's ankles, the brick began to hum slightly and emit a soft white light. Soon, one false brick after another came to life and lit the dim tunnel until it resembled something like daylight.

Cheese stepped back from the irregular pattern on the wall. No matter how many times he saw The Veil of Truth, he was always struck by its magic. Of course, there were many names for the Veil of Truth. The Lighted Way, The Brick Tapestry, and the strangest Boondock's Dragoon. In truth, it simply pointed a safe way to the underground; a series of entrances made visible for those in the know. Those in the know were familiar with the glyph. The Grays were relatively successful with picking off the Down Belowers in the sewer systems, but once they'd retreated into the subway, they were all but cut off until they returned to the surface for supplies.

Those who were caught spilled their guts, sometimes, it's true. But the location of the Veil of Truth moved to a different chamber when someone was captured. The only way they could get inside is if one of the Leaders of the Subway Cars gave up the ghost.

Chaz was well on his way, and starving to death, in a figurative kind of way. As the Veil of Truth Dimmed, he lifted the top of a secret entrance and disappeared into the sewers, dreaming of dinner, his bed, and the message: The Grays are amassing in numbers. The Gloam walks among them.

Before they lost the war, Frigoris was a bustling hub of transportation. Light rail, taxi cabs, elevated trains, and subways. It was like most cities. Since their defeat decades before in the nameless past to an equally nameless, yet ferocious, enemy. Stories of brutality were a popular currency to trade, even as their economy collapsed. If pressed to give basic details, the tales deteriorated into speculation. What was a known fact, proven annually by a population caught in a tug of war of attrition and sacrifice, was that 'To the victor goes the spoils,' and a right spoiled lot they were.

They demanded a yearly sacrifice of the city's men and women to prove their loyalty. It also kept their numbers thin, and resistance a fantasy indulged only by those with a death wish.

Each year, Frigoris limped along as a shadow of its former self, patrolled by white-skinned death-dealers of the enemy—The Gloam—and those looking to curry favor by turning on their own. The Gray. Of course, not all of the Gray were bad—Some were municipal workers trying to earn enough to feed their family. Teachers, lawyers, accountants—Those concerned with the general upkeep of the city. In feeding their own, and making a Frigoris an expertly run municipality, they begrudgingly ensured the possibility that an annual sacrifice would continue in perpetuity by educated, efficient, and utterly hogtied employ—



“Exposition!” Yuse brought the flat side of his hand down against the table.

Jack November paused with an eyebrow arched. “What about it?”

“I hate it!” Yuse’s voice was tight and cheeks were redder than when the story began. “I already know about Frigoris!” He rolled his eyes and said, “*All the Grays aren’t bad, they’re just trying to raise a family, but they’re not all good either because they’ve got the enemy’s hand up their ass.*” Pascal rolled up the sleeves of his kimono and said, “Meanwhile the Reds do what they can to get by and some escape down below to the old Subway system to avoid the Grays. Can we *leave?*” He growled rhetorically. “*No, of course not. Because the entire city is walled in, including the subways.*”

Pascal brought his hand down again and pointed at an unimpressed November. “I’ve been patient with you, Jacko. I have!” he chuckled, suddenly. “But, if you’re not getting to the glowing girl, cut the expositional shit. Cheese lives in one of the Subway towns. Period. We know that for a fact. Quit with the backstory of our historic tragedies and get on with it!”

“Are you done?” November leaned back in his seat, yawning.

“That all depends,” Pascal shrugged casually. “Are you getting to the good stuff?”

“You mean action, romance, betrayal, and death?”

Yuse licked his lips. “Exactly!”

“I’m getting there,” November cleaned beneath his fingernails with the edge of a piece of cardboard.

“Go on!” Pascal smiled.

“Right,” November leaned forward, rubbing his hands together for dramatic effect. He opened his mouth to continue, and said, “I’m going to get another drink. Want anything?”

“Oh, Jacko,” Pascal sighed, genuinely disappointed. “You’re a right bastard.” Then, thinking twice, he added, “Yes. Get me another, you big tease.”



Approaching the terminal, he called home, the Palace Epidemiarium, Chaz was greeted warmly by several of the subway townfolk.

“Cheese!” they thumped him on the back, smiling.

Despite the harrowing quality of his evening, he returned their high-fives and handshakes, and felt the pack-ice of fear lodged in his chest began to break. Down here, he was a valued citizen. No one hunted him. No one wanted him dead. They knew his face and liked what they saw.

The corrugated exterior of the subway shimmered in the jaundiced light of the lit lanterns hanging from the terminal’s walls. Its doors stood open to the connected, open gangway cars, allowing people a place to visit with each other, sharing stories of the day’s adventures. Modesty was something of a luxury in their community as the living spaces were separated with bedsheets, cardboard, or whatever else could be foraged. Even with these in place, people still had to get to their own beds, which meant walking past yours, no matter what stage of undress or activity you were participating in.

Chaz made his way to the head car, which stood empty except for one man; Semper Moses, their town’s leader.

The man was somewhere in his late forties to mid-sixties with long white hair, a chest-length beard, and skin like a walnut. Laugh lines gathered in bunches around his shrewd brown eyes, which he often used to peer down his slightly crooked nose at whoever he addressed. Those same eyes were also known to dance with humor when the situation merited—however infrequently—as well as glitter with tears of compassion. He clothed his wiry frame with an impossibly white tank top and capacious tan dungarees, made from old fire houses. His coat, when he wore one, was made of once-glossy subway schedules, now worn with age, sweat, and grease, stitched together. He wore round, tortoise shell eyeglasses with the lenses removed. Semper Moses would

remove them as he spoke and twirl them around his index finger as he contemplated the message he was being delivered. The turquoise and silver bracelets around his wrists completed the eccentric leader's wardrobe.

When Cheese stepped into the car after quietly knocking on the open door, Semper Moses turned from the exposed controls of the cockpit. "You're back," he grinned. After wiping the steel dust and grease from his hands with a clean rag, he approached Barvo and clasped the sides of his shoulders, "And you're still in one piece. A successful mission in my book."

Cheese opened his mouth to speak, but Moses waved the words away. "Hold your horses, son," he chuckled. "All in good time. All in good time." The old man took the seat behind the controls of the inoperable train and motioned to the seat on the other side of the room. "Take a load off, Chaz. We'll visit for a minute."

Barvo situated himself, adjusting his leg once seated. The pair stared into the yawning darkness of the tunnel ahead. In the distance, they could just make out the back lights of their sister city, the Solitudinus Terminal.

"Have any parts that might fix this bucket of bolts?" Semper Moses asked. He patted the exposed guts of the train affectionately.

Cheese rummaged in his pockets and brought out a handful of parts. "Not much," he answered. "Besides," he paused, "If I turn these over, I won't have much to live on until my next scavenge." His ears burned with embarrassment.

Moses moved the parts around with the top of his index finger, and gently closed Barvo's fingers around the parts. "Put 'em away, son," he smiled, gently. "I shouldn't have asked. Forgive an old man's desire to tinker. Once you reach a certain age, it grips you like a curse."

Everyone in Frigoris was on a constant search to get the subways moving. A chance to escape the city, the Harvest. Above ground, they had their money; below, scavenged train parts were as good as gold, and treated as such.

Cheese returned his spare parts to his pocket. His hand came out clutching a pouch of tobacco. He held it in the air momentarily, and asked Semper Moses, "Would you..." and let his voice trail off. When the ragged, hippy leader shook his head with a small laugh, Barvo followed up with, "Do you mind if I..."

“Please,” Moses fiddled with a broken switch. “Some days I miss it. The routine. The act of retrieval. The feel of the parchment against my fingertips. The taste of the adhesive. That first rancid, soul-jarring puff. No,” he added, more to himself this time. “I don’t mind at all.”

When the smell of Turkish blend filled the cabin, Semper Moses looked at Cheese. “I think we should get to it now, don’t you?” He stood and picked up a piece of PVC tubing as tall as his shoulder and began to walk in small circles. “I don’t want you to get the impression that your mission wasn’t important, but social pleasantries should always be observed when possible; a ‘Hey, how are ya?’ A minute to smoke,” he paused and regarded Cheese through the empty tortoise shell frames. “But, you’re important, son. The information you provide is vital.”

“I know your ways,” Cheese looked at the floor. “I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Good,” he grasped Cheese’s shoulder, moving through the rank cloud of tobacco smoke. “Did you make contact?”

Barvo sat up. “Yes.”

“In the usual place?”

“Mr. Foxtrot’s apartment, yes.”

Semper held up a hand and shook his head. “Within this train car you must always refer to him as Mr. Gray.”

Down Below, people wouldn’t think twice if they heard the name ‘Foxtrot.’ Everyone recreated themselves in the Underground. Gray was always gray, no matter the shade, but Cheese didn’t quibble. Like he said, Semper Moses had a certain way about him. Given the respect he’d earned as a stalwart champion of their community, fighting off countless attacks, and rallying hope after the annual purges, Barvo would do as he was told.

“Well, go on, son. What did he say?” Moses returned to his seat. Every few seconds he thumped the PVC tube against the floor, creating a bassy “Whump!”

Cheese closed his eyes and recalled the scene.

The darkness of the street. His heart pounding in his chest. Clandestinely creeping into the drab concrete apartment building to the address he had been given on a scrap of paper to the drab structure’s third floor. While he waited in the hallway, Cheese still had the wherewithal to take stock of his surroundings: the stained carpet, the pockmarked walls, and the sickly yellow paint job. Mr. Foxtrot was a lieutenant within the Gray; not a clerk, accountant, or municipal trash

collector. Cheese had always assumed they lived in greater opulence than those they were oppressing. By the time Mr. Foxtrot answered the door—practically yanking Barvo off his feet, and forcing him inside—he'd almost, *almost*, felt pity for the enemy; selling their soul for the stench of cabbage and cat piss, just like everyone else.

The man himself was the epitome Frigoris propaganda surrounding The Grays. Hale and hearty, Mr. Foxtrot lit a room with his smile and limitless vitality. While Cheese righted himself, and recovered his sense of defiance, the lieutenant engaged two deadbolts, and threaded the chain. He stood at the door, listening. "Did anyone see you?" he asked with his back turned.

Chaz Barvo shook his head, before remembering he lacked the man's undivided attention. "No," he said aloud as he stared at the tectonic plates of the man's shoulder blades. "I followed your instructions."

"Good," Foxtrot nodded. "Good," he repeated as he turned. His brown hair grayed at the temples but was impeccably combed. Beside the faint stubble on his chin, his appearance was flawless, except for an irregular tick to the man's left eye, which—of course—were a stunning blue. "Can I offer you anything to drink? Some grappa, perhaps?"

"The Gloam," Cheese answered simply. "I'll need my wits about me when I leave."

"Smart," Foxtrot was already pouring a clear liquid into a glass of cut crystal. "You don't mind if I help myself?"

"To your health," he shrugged, rolling a cigarette without asking. Barvo limped to the kitchen table and sat down. He used an ashtray of similar aesthetic to the glass Foxtrot drank from. As the ache in his leg eased, he willed his shoulders to relax to fully inhabit the role of spy the best he could. "Mr. Moses sent me at great personal risk."

"Not one he was willing to take himself, eh?" The whiskey loosened The Gray's tongue. A small chuckle escaped his glistening lips. "Have you ever stopped to wonder why he sends a cripple to do a man's job?"

The compassion he felt for the officer evaporated. Cheese hooded his eyes. "I haven't been caught yet, have I?"

"All in due time, *Cheese*," Foxtrot accentuated the last word with a sardonic lilt. "You'll forgive my foul mood," he added quickly, remembering himself. "These nights tend to wear on my psyche. Always worried that one of my own will discover my treachery; break down the door, arrest us both."

Cheese shrugged; his face unreadable. He took a drag of his cigarette and let the smoke serve as his unimpressed reply. "What do you want Mr. Moses to know?"

"Right," Mr. Foxtrot nodded. "You certainly don't waste any time, do you?"

"I don't have much to spare," Cheese replied.

"Fair enough," Mr. Foxtrot sat opposite Cheese. After draining his grappa, he set it on the table, and squared his elbows against the sides of his body. The cut crystal sat in the parenthesis of Foxtrot's hand as if it contained a small flame he was afraid would be blown out. "You've heard about the Moon, correct?" the Gray Officer began, cautiously.

"We've all heard about the moon, Mr. Gray. It's the only damn thing anyone can think about. *Is tonight the night it goes silver to red? Is tonight the night I'll wind up dead?*" Cheese ground out his cigarette as he concluded the nursery rhyme they'd all heard as children. "*My clothes in a pile, my breath to the wind, don't worry the moon will come again.*"

The pair of men pretended not to notice the subtle shiver that moved through them both. Foxtrot shook his head. "That's *Frigoris'* moon. I'm talking about the *real* Moon."

"The *real* Moon?" Cheese guffawed. "The *Moon-Moon?*"

Foxtrot nodded slowly. "The one that moves through the sky and takes no one."

"A fairy tale," Cheese shook his head, rolling another cigarette.

"Let me have one of those."

Cheese tossed him the one he had just finished and started another. With his eyes on the paper, he was able to conceal his excitement and doubt. As a child, it was his favorite story. Each month, the moon would glide through the sky revealing its face until eventually turning away. Like a merry-go-round engulfed in shadow. While he imagined the calliope music, he asked, "What *about* the moon?" he leaned over and lit Foxtrot's cigarette with a wooden match he lit with his fingernail.

"There's a legend that—and bear with me," he smiled, sheepishly. "Remember: it's only a legend." When Cheese nodded his understanding, Foxtrot continued. "They say that the moon will save *Frigoris* from our own."

"From our own, what?"

"Our *own* moon," Foxtrot replied.

Cheese stood. "This is why Semper Moses sent me tonight? To trade fairy tales and rumors. These meetings are for concrete facts."

Foxtrot looked at the paper-thin adjoining wall to the other apartment. They both heard a television blaring. "I'd appreciate it if you kept it down, Mr. Barvo. You're here at my pleasure, mind you, and if you don't drop the insolence attitude, I'll raise the alarm; consequences be damned."

Chaz reached into the depths of his trench coat and returned with a miniature canoe paddle. One side of the oar had been dipped in metal and sharpened to a razor's edge. "I'm sure I'd get a few whacks in before they'd make it up here."

"What the hell is *that*?" The curiosity in Foxtrot's voice evaporated the tension.

Cheese smiled, proud of his handcrafted weapon. "I called it my Sward. Get it?"

"Clever," Foxtrot poured a second glass of grappa and pushed it towards Cheese's empty chair. "Just a sip. An apology, if you will." He gestured to the blade with his blue eyes. "Quite the weapon."

Barvo, not completely unrepentant, slammed the blade into the corner of Mr. Gray's table. It sliced into the wood like butter. As Cheese returned to his seat, he hid his smile at the look of quiet disapproval on the officer's face. One thing Chaz Barvo discovered in his life; it was hard to disagree with the edge of a sharpened blade. It cut through most arguments.

He took a sip of grappa—just a sip—and said, "Tell me about the moon. Is the story worth hearing?"

"Of course, it is," Foxtrot pried his attention from the effrontery of Cheese's weapon. "It begins 'Once upon a time.'"

Jack November tapped on the table like a bongo; a word he'd discovered long ago in the crumbling pages of a long-forgotten book about something called 'Percussion instruments.' "Whelp!" He stood uncertainly, bracing himself against the wall of The Tube for support.

Pascal stared, incredulously. "What do you mean, 'Whelp?'" The bear's eyes took a moment to focus on November's. "You're not done," he said.

"Oh, but I am," Jack smiled. "At least for tonight. I have a blanket in my hammock that's softer than that god-awful kimono of yours."

The nearby patrons stiffened at the mention of Pascal's evening attire. It was a general rule that the kimono, much like Yuse himself, was only ever glancingly acknowledged. He'd pummeled lesser men for having the audacity to treat him as if he weren't invisible. Jack November was a different animal altogether. Pascal let him get away with all manner of things because of his gift for gab, a talent he currently found wanting. "You haven't even gotten to the—

"The girl, I know," Jack thumbed the side of his nose. "All in good time, my friend. A good story is like a glass of the strongest stuff, my friend. It keeps you coming back for more. Right now, I'm dead on my feet. Tomorrow, okay?"

Yuse nodded, begrudgingly, as he whispered darkly to himself.

November stepped onto the platform. The wind was bracing and dug its icy fingers into the collar of his coat. He walked towards the end of the car, slipped into the space between the back of the subway and the wall, and hopped on to the tracks. The lanterns behind him cast his shadow in ghoulish proportions against the wall, a walking stick bug. He whistled to himself until the meager light dimmed, and he was left in darkness. The nearest rail town was a couple miles away. The echoes heard in its direction sounded of movement; unusual for this time of night.

He pushed up his coat and checked the glowing hands of his watch. Morning. It was an act he'd fallen out of practice doing since he rarely went above ground these days. When he looked, he noticed the large hand inching towards midnight. Rather than fear the passing night and the possibility of Harvest, he moved aside the cinderblocks he used to shield his living space from prying eyes and stepped inside.

Years before, he'd discovered the crumbled wall and remnants of a maintenance office. It provided a roof and more space than he could remember. Much more than the cramped confines of a shared subway car. He had defended it when necessary from marauding Down Belowers and buried what needed burying if it came to that. Luckily, it didn't come to that often.

He replaced the concrete blocks and replaced a shelf as an extra barrier against intruders. The blanket that called to him earlier was warm against his grease-streaked arms.

As he drifted, his mind registered a rumble moving through the walls, like a smoker's cough. Ragged and shuddering. Before abandoning himself to the darkness, a scrap of the story returned to him; something Mr. Foxtrot said to Chaz Barvo:

Once upon a time...

There were two groups of people that lived in a land of vast natural resources. For a while, these two groups of people lived off the land separated by a great distance.

Each morning, the sun would rise and light the world around them and remind them of their blessings. Each night, these two groups looked to the sky when the sun sank beneath the ground and watched its silver partner rise in wonder.

Both groups loved the silver brilliance of the moon. When they stared at it, it didn't hurt their eyes. When they lay beneath it, it didn't burn their skin an angry red, or make them sweat uncomfortably. At night, when the world smoked after being scorched by the sun, the moon would send out protective blades of light in the forests and the fields. There were even times when a rainbow of light encircled the moon like a promise; a solemn vow that, as long as it traveled through the night sky, it would always protect them from its blazing counterpart.

Years passed, and both groups lived peacefully, oblivious of the other's presence, both thankful of the moon's benign presence, and tolerating the sun's fiery anger.

As is often the case in these stories, the wide world became small. One day, a hunting party from one group stumbled across the other. A fight broke out, leaving several dead. When they returned to their tribes, they spoke of an enemy across the mountains. An enemy without compassion. Rumors spread in camp about how the other group loved everything that was twisted and evil. They even cared more for the sun than their silver benefactress.

Before long, torches were lit, and mobs were assembled. One silver lit night, after pledging their undying love to the moon, as the sun was beginning to set, both parties set out and wage war

on the other, and they did. With their sharpened pikes and bludgeons, all were wounded. Some were killed.

During a lull in the battle, both groups looked to the sky for support from their faithful moon mother. However, that night, the sky was empty and black. Stunned and confused, both groups retreated to bury their dead. Back at camp, they burned fragrant herbs and whispered prayers of supplication, apologizing for the violence, whatever they might have done to make the moon withdraw its support.

When the next night dawned, and the sky was empty once more, they were ashamed. Word traveled through camp that it was the other group's fault. If they hadn't provoked them, everything would be as it was before. Mobs were reassembled. Torches relit. As shadows danced around the newly dug graves, both parties set out again for the field of battle.

The battle was bloody. At its conclusion, only one survivor remained; a Little. The elders in the other group made a great pyre. Despite the younglings' cries for its mother, for the moon, they slit his throat and watched him burn. With the air spiced with woodsmoke, boiling blood, and seared flesh, they looked to the sky in anticipation.

They did not like what they saw. The moon rose, yes. But, it was blood red and furious. The group stumbled from the corpse on the fire, shocked.

Meanwhile, in the other camp, a similar ritual had taken place. The other group had managed to snare a Little who had sneaked away from the enemy's camp to watch an older brother, and to ensure his safety.

After the Little's murder, they too saw the blood red moon.

Both parties took cover and hid, sure they had upset it. They both vowed vengeance on the other.

For years, they waged war until one was the clear victor. They enslaved the other, all while shielding themselves from the night, from the moon.

Meanwhile, the moon loved both groups of children, the reds *and* the grays, the grays and the reds. They were all the same to her. On the night when both enacted violence against the Littles, She had risen into the sky, borrowing a page from the Sun's book, red and angry. She was heartbroken and frustrated that her children would raise a hand against the other.

After that night, they hid from her. They no longer played in the fields or slept beneath the stars. They built shelters and closed their curtains to her silvery face and feathery light. Instead,

they shifted their schedules, and tolerated the sun, eventually shifting their praise from Her to Him. They forgot about Her and, in so doing, she became a fraction of her former glory. Some nights, she would turn her face away, and disappear altogether.

Unbeknownst to Her, they watched from behind their curtains. Each time She disappeared, the reds and grays took it as further proof that she no longer loved them, and they must continue hiding.

Every parent knows that a mother cannot live without their children. Once Her heart expands to make room for a Little, it remains that size forever. Without her Littles, her heart was cavernous and cold. But, the Moon has an idea. One night, while the world was empty and dark, she planted a moonbeam in the hills. Each day, she tended the plot, watering it with love and light. After a time, a daughter sprung forth from the earth.

The Moon smiled upon her Little's smooth, luminous face. "Oh, my daughter," she said. "I have made you, and you are mine."

"What am I to do?" Her daughter asked. "There is no one but you to keep me company, and you have to go away soon."

"Yes, the Moon replied. "Every night."

"What am I to do, then?" Her daughter repeated. "I will be lonesome."

"Find them," The Moon replied. "Find the others and bring them back to me."

The Moon watched her daughter disappear over the hills in search of her lost children.

Jack woke to the sound of a muffled explosion. He blinked away the disorientation brought on by sleep. When his world shuffled back into place, he remembered the sound, not entirely convinced he hadn't dreamt it.

He stepped into his waiting boots and put on his green coat before shambling to the entrance of his home.

"You are not where I left you," he addressed a couple of cinder blocks from the wall he constructed outside of his door. They had fallen to the ground and cracked. Wiping the crust of sleep from his eyes, he moved aside the rest and stepped into the blackness of the tunnel.

To his left, he saw the darkened windows of the subway in the Hyginus Terminal. Gramercy had closed up The Tube hours before, while the rest of the subway's inhabitants were asleep

in their quarters. The smell of sulfur in November's sharp nostrils turned his head to the right. Ahead, he saw only darkness.

He clicked on his torch and followed its beam for a half-mile. When he saw the flickering light of the Serenitatis Terminal, Jack noticed nothing out of the ordinary. A couple stood on the platform staring in his direction, noses in the air.

"Maybe I didn't dream the sound after all," he muttered, turning back towards his apartment. Jack walked the rails, abandoning any thought of going back to bed. He made a tin of cannellini beans over a battery-operated hot plate. After seasoning them with ketchup, he pulled a large soup spoon from his pocket and ate with quiet relish. Afterwards, he grabbed a canvas rucksack from a hook on the wall and set out for the day.

As he walked the rails, and listened to the persistent chatter of the rats, he rehearsed what he would tell Yuse when they met that evening.

"After Mr. Foxtrot recounted the myth of the Moon's daughter, Chaz looked at him in that sleepy way of his; a combination of boredom and incredulity. As if he couldn't quite figure out what the hell the story had to do with him, or why the police officer felt the need to share stories from their childhood."



"Are you trying to waste my time, Foxtrot," Cheese said when the story was finished. "You told Semper Moses you had important information."

"I do, Mr. Barvo. You're not paying attention, I'm afraid."

He dislodged his Sward from the table and set it flat against his lap. "Then maybe you can get to the damn point, yeah? How is Seline going to help the Deebees? No one's heard from her in centuries. And that's only *if* you believe the old stories."

Mr. Foxtrot steepled his thin fingers and leaned forward. He hesitated a moment, nervously licking his lips. "I think I've found her."

"Her?" Cheese's eyebrows peaked. "Seline?"

Foxtrot rubbed his hands together, nodding. "She's real."

"Okay," Cheese stood with a chuckle of disbelief. "I've had enough. I'll come back tomorrow after you've gotten some rest and can talk an ounce of sense."

"I'm telling the truth," his eyes darted towards the adjoining hallway in the living room. "You have to tell Moses," his eyes darted back towards Cheese. "Tell him to send you back tomorrow." His voice continued to rise. "I'll prove it."

Cheese put a cautious finger to his chapped lips. "Get *abold* of yourself, man. The entire building will hear you!"

"Just, tell him, okay?" Foxtrot held his palms out towards Cheese, fingers splayed. "Tell him I'll have the girl tomorrow, yes? Will you do that?"

Cheese looked at the exposed bundle of nerves, all composure vanished. With eyebrows furrowed, Sward hanging at his side, he nodded. "I'll come back tomorrow if Semper Moses agrees."

Mr. Foxtrot let out a long sigh. "Tell him to wait, Mr. Barvo. Tell him to wait and see."

Cheese nodded and peeked his head into the hallway to make sure it was empty. Mr. Foxtrot stood in his doorway until Cheese disappeared into the stairwell. As the door clicked shut, Mr. Foxtrot hung his head.



Cheese finished recounting his story to Semper Moses.

The weathered old hippie drew a hand through his beard, and contemplated Foxtrot's message. "Do you believe him?"

Cheese took a sip from a mason jar full of kombucha Moses had pushed into his hands halfway through his recitation of the evening's events. "Do I believe he knows the whereabouts of The Moon's daughter, Seline?" he chuckled. "No. I think that man's insane. That's just a story we were told as children. Right?" He added after Semper Moses' expression turned to one of sadness.

"I suppose it's a matter of belief, isn't it?" Moses replied. "The situation we're in. The annual Harvests. The Gloam. People vanishing into thin air. Is it that far of a stretch to believe the old myths?"

"No, but..." Cheese faltered. "It's make-believe."

"Your generation," Moses shook his head. "Signs and wonders surround you, yet you fail to believe." He stood, tap-tap-tapping his staff against the floor. His coat of subway maps rustled all the while. He opened a drawer beneath a counter topped with mason jars filled with dried herbs.

He pulled out a heavily dog-eared book and tossed it to Cheese. “Read this. You might find it interesting.”

Barvo looked at the book in his hands and read the title aloud. “*The Seven Trials of Seline, And Other Creation Stories.*”

“Treat it like a primer,” Semper Moses tugged at his beard. “I haven’t heard any rumors about Seline’s arrival, but that doesn’t mean it’s a lie. I trust Mr. Gray.”

“Should I go back tomorrow?”

“Yes, but be careful,” Moses replied. “Something doesn’t feel right about this. You said he was nervous, yes?”

Cheese nodded.

“Hmm...” the old man appeared lost in thought, as he chewed on the end of his beard. “We’ll find out the truth tomorrow,” he clasped Cheese’s shoulder. “Excellent work tonight, son. Now, get some sleep. I’ve kept you up long enough.”

Chaz Barvo drained the rest of his kombucha and wished the leader a goodnight. Once he made his way to his quarters near the rear of the train, he hung his blade from a nail by his hammock, removed his boots, and began the process of emptying his coat pockets. The molded seats beside his bed became cluttered with scavenged parts, loose change, folded wads of paper from books that had long given up their bindings, and an assortment of tinned foods.

Though his stomach rumbled, he turned towards a thin sheet diving his quarters from that of his neighbors. a young newlywed couple, and their newborn daughter. The parents’ names were Juliet and Delta; typical Down Belowers: wide-eyed and hollow cheeked, when the pair looked at that little girl, hunger vanished. They looked as vibrant and happy as any well-fed Gray while doting over their daughter, Maria.

Cheese listened to the young mother as she whispered something indistinct to her husband. Their conversation was cut short by a scream of irritation from Maria, as tumultuous as any ocean on the moon. The cry was silenced by Juliet’s bare breast as she pressed into the little girl’s mouth. While the baby gurgled pleasantly, Cheese tossed a label-less can into the air, listening as the contents sloshed inside. He settled on, what he thought was, a tin of tuna fish and a dented tin of fruit cocktail. He placed them on the floor just outside their shared curtain.

When he finally got comfortable in his hammock, Cheese picked up the book Semper Moses had given him. He opened to the first chapter, and began to read:

Seline and the Mountain Lion

Freshly sewn from the ground, and still with dirt between her alabaster toes, Seline Moonchild set across the flat expanse of land before her without looking back. She didn't need to. She could feel her mother's vigilant eyes watching fretfully from above.

Moonchild held her mother's edict to her chest like a fragile bird. She knew the mission's success depended upon her grit and perseverance, so she tried not to think how ill equipped she was to handle the job. What business did a child have righting the wrongs of those much older and wiser than her?

Her celestial body was thin-limbed, and smooth-skinned, with white-blond hair, and gray eyes. In appearance, she resembled a teen-aged youngling just entering adulthood. If she came upon anyone that wished her harm, she would certainly be overpowered. Unlike her mother, she was stubbornly earth-bound, with only her wits to defend herself. Yet her eyes were kind and smiled, pleasant. Maybe they would serve her secret purpose when danger arose.

And rise it did the following morning. As her mother's silvery light retreated from the sky, Seline turned her brow to the heavens and watched the final wind of darkness turn from amaranth to pink. So taken by the coming morning, she was completely oblivious that she was no longer alone until a voice interrupted her reverie.

"I've watched the day begin for everyone that calls this world home, but I have never spied you, child. What is your name?" A tawny mountain lion watched her from atop a boulder at the edge of the clearing. Its coat was silken, pulled tight over its muscular frame. The mountain lion watched her with its sharp green eyes.

"Do you find it common practice to sneak upon a stranger unaware?" Seline replied indignantly. Her feet remained planted in place. An unaccountable fear seized her chest.

"I didn't mean to startle you, child," the mountain lion replied. "Your attention was elsewhere. The other option was to let you pass by oblivious, and I would never have forgiven myself the opportunity to make your acquaintance."

"My name is Seline," the girl replied. "You needn't reply, yourself. I've already determined who you are."

“Perhaps it’s you who owes me an apology, then for catching me unaware,” the mountain lion replied. “Enlighten me, child. Who am I?”

Seline tilted her chin defiantly. “You are Brother Sun, and I am my mother’s daughter.”

The Sun’s tail twitched as he regarded Seline. “And, who might your mother be?”

“Based on your deadly tone of voice, you already seem to know.”

“The Moon,” The Sun replied, simply.

Seline nodded.

“Then we are enemies.”

“Does it have to be so?” Seline answered evasively, stalling for time. “Is the grievance between my mother and I enough to draw blood?”

The Mountain Lion crouched, hind end twitching in anticipation. “Your mother held her own quarter in the darkness, while I prowled the light. We were two sides of the same coin, but you, my dear, walk the bright green edge; places I cannot go.”

“Yet, here you are before me,” she countered. It appeared she wouldn’t get far on her mother’s mission after all. She prepared herself for death.

The Sun shook its leonine head. “I cannot set foot upon the shadows of this world. They retreat when I approach. You, however, walk unencumbered. No such prohibition had been placed on your movements.”

Seline considered the Mountain Lion’s argument, and realized He was correct. She could walk between sunlight and shade without trouble. “What do you intend to do?”

“If I spill your blood, I can claim your celestial birthright as my own. With you dead, I will possess dominion over the entire land, and your mother will be separated from her children forever. Don’t be coy. I know that is why you’ve come.”

Seline Moonchild held her arms in the air, fingertips pointed towards the Sun. “If I am to die, I will do so fighting.” Her heartbeat slowed. Her breathing calmed. “Cut me down if you must, but I promise you this: I will not go quietly.”

“Delightful,” The Mountain Lion chuckled. “I prefer it that way.” A low growl rumbled in The Mountain Lion’s throat just before it pounced, claws extended.

Seline pressed her little and ring finger to the palm of her right hand, while her left moved in a complicated, automatic gesture. At the same moment, she felt a great power rise in her diaphragm. As a

defiant scream burst from her lips, a faint silver scythe erupted from her chest. It boomeranged through the air towards her adversary.

In an instant, The Mountain Lion's white chest was a mess of red. It crumpled to the ground and limped back to its rock.

The sky transformed from pink to red.

"You've struck me," The Sun announced in a voice as ragged as its chest.

"You forced my hand," Seline replied. Despite it being the first time her celestial powers manifested itself, she was not entirely surprised. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew her mother would not leave her only daughter helpless. "Will you allow me safe passage since I have bested you?"

"For now," The Mountain Lion's blood dripped upon the boulder and turned it black. It leapt into the air and shed its feline artifice.

Seline diverted her eyes from the brilliant light.

"I will spoil your plans whenever possible," The Sun promised. "If an obstacle exists that will distract your attention or slow your purpose, I will put it in your path." With that, The Sun ascended into the heavens, leaving Seline alone.

"Thank you, mother," she whispered. "I am sure there are many trials to come, but I will persevere until I bring your children back into the safe bosom of the night."

Cheese closed the book. As he lay in his hammock staring at the ceiling, he thought of Mr. Foxtrot's story and Semper Moses' parting words. Signs and Wonders. The truth. Ephemeral ideas, at best. With the book pressed to his chest, he wondered if any of it could be true, or if living in Frigoris had touched both in irreparable ways. Celestial beings didn't matter in the day-to-day, not when there was a stomach to feed, and, for people like Juliet and Delta, children to look after.

Sleep found him before he could finish turning over the question. What he didn't know was that the coming day would answer it for him.

He woke the next morning with Juliet's smiling face hovering over his hammock. Before he could check the automatic response, he grabbed his Sward from the wall, and was about to use it when she screamed and threw the cans of tuna fish and fruit cocktail she held in her hands at his forehead.

She stumbled backwards, tore the curtain from the ceiling, and landed in a heap on the molded seats across from Cheese. “You fucking maniac,” she clutched her chest, laughing through startled tears. “What the hell is wrong with you? I just came by to thank you for the food.”

Cheese placed his feet on the floor with the handle of his weapon placed on his knee. The world came into focus. “How many times do I have to tell you not to come in here while I’m sleeping?”

“Before I answer, can I have the cans back? I’d like to chuck them at your head again. You woke Maria up.” The sound of her daughter’s cries filled their car. “It took me hours to get her to sleep.”

“Oh, no you don’t. You’ve only yourself to blame.” Barvo pulled on his boots. “Has Delta left, already?”

With Maria now in the crook of her arm, Juliet nodded. “They’re clearing rubble from Hyginus Drive, today.”

“They’ve been at that tunnel for months,” Cheese replied.

“It keeps collapsing.”

“And, yet they persist,” he shook his head.

Juliet believed Delta's work, and the Clearing Crews in general, was invaluable. Like most Down Below, Juliet held a sliver of hope that one of the tunnels would provide a way out of Frigoris. What these idealists couldn't accept was that even if the tracks were cleared, they all led to The Barrier, which kept the Reds in, the same as The Grays. Rather than go within an inch of the topic that early in the morning, Cheese picked up the weaponized cans from the floor. “Did you come in to assault me, or would you like to have breakfast?”

“Breakfast would be nice,” Juliet smiled. “Sorry about your head.”

“I’ll be fine,” he removed a can opener from the bench beside his hammock. “Fish or fruit?”

“Fish,” Juliet extended her hand. With a scoop full of albacore in her mouth, she asked, “Can I ask you for a favor?”

“You mean besides not killing you this morning?”

She rolled her eyes, and said, “I’m sure you’ve sliced it in two by now, Cheese. You can move on.”

“Wait, what have I cut in two?”

“The dead horse you’re beating with that silly blade of yours.” She reached out and patted his hand, sardonically. “Give it a rest, sweets. I’ve already apologized.”

“And, I’m sure you won’t do it again until tomorrow, right?”

Juliet ignored the dig. “Can you bring Delta his lunch for me? He forgot it when he left for work.”

Cheese looked from Maria, to Juliet, to the battered lunch pail she held out. She batted her eyelashes as he took it with an air of exasperation. “I was going to try to find the Oceanus Procellarum Station today. I feel like I’m close.”

“Now who’s dreaming?” she laughed. “All right, you brute. I have to put Maria down. *Again*. Give Delta my love.”

“I’ll give him his lunch.”

“Close enough,” she replied before disappearing behind the curtain.

A streak of irritation moved through Cheese as he loaded his coats with the accoutrements he would need throughout the day: his blade, spoon, and spade, and a few other items. While he patted down his pockets, he realized he was annoyed with Juliet for not showing the same level of excitement for Oceanus Procellarum. Legend held that the long-lost terminal housed the central operations hub for the entire underground system. If Cheese could find it, and somehow reactivate its controls, maybe he could get the trains moving again. He knew the chances were farfetched to say the least; maybe as foolish as the notion he’d meet Seline Moonchild in the flesh when he visited Mr. Foxtrot a second time. Hell, even Semper Moses, with his vast knowledge of the underground, claimed Oceanus Procellarum was lost to antiquity.

He looked at Cheese with pity whenever he set out on his daily quests. “You’ll just as soon catch your shadow, son.”

He climbed up through a maze of pipes and service walkways until he found one of the rotating exits revealed by the Veil of Truth. He would have to cross above ground before meeting up with the red line of the Hyginus Transfer Station Delta and his crew were working on. Since it was daylight, Cheese was not afraid of walking the streets of Frigoris. The well-kept Red and Grays looked askance at his stained clothing and matted hair, but they could all go to hell.

Judgmental looks were about the only thing he had to contend with; at least during the day. The Gloam only appeared by direct request of Gray High Command. Even then, it was understood they only did so by their own mysterious pleasure. Normally, they only appeared at night to evaporate those who broke curfew.

With hands buried in his pockets, Cheese moved north through the tumbledown streets of Frigoris. The sky was a familiar pewter gray as its citizens queued outside of kiosks for supplies for much-needed supplies. Old and young alike shifted to keep warm, while officers patrolled the ranks to ensure peaceful assembly, if only for a loaf of bread. Like the grainy food they waited for, those in line were like chalk and cheese.

The Grays clothing was better kept, less faded and absent of the small eyelets from fabric being taken out, and new buttons sewn on. Then clothes suited them better, having a steady stream of government bribes, but only marginally so. The Reds in line were a step away in appearance from Cheese. The difference was that they hadn't made the leap to Down Below, yet. Another hour in the que might change that.

Chaz Barvo hurried past. Once he arrived at the Hyginus terminal, he found a back alley. All street entrances to the subway had been destroyed during The Past War and were never rebuilt. With the installation of The Barrier after Frigoris lost, most saw the futility in public transportation.

What was the point of getting from point A to point B faster, if they were all trapped to begin with. Most took up walking or, more to the point, a despondent kind of shambling from place to place. Always, always, with one eye on the Moon.

He wandered the back alleys near Hyginus until he found a storm drain with a heavily scuffed pick hole. Smiling, his eyes jumped to the walls of the surrounding buildings. Carefully hidden beneath a dumpster, Cheese found a crowbar and worked the manhole free, keeping close eye for patrolling Grays. Even though the Gloam weren't about, they would still take issue with active escape Down Below. It was against the law, after all.

Satisfied that he was alone, he awkwardly found his footing on the ladder with his bad leg and replaced the cover as he climbed down.



Yuse Pascal arched an eyebrow and scrutinized Jack November across their usual booth. Tonight, his kimono was a splash of midnight blue. “How long did you actually talk to Cheese?” he asked.

The pair had been sitting in the bar for hours now. After a day of scavenging, they had reconnected in the tube to continue Chaz Barvo’s tale.

“What do you mean?” Jack twirled his glass on their table.

“You’ve been Jacky-jawing for hours,” Yuse replied.

“So?”

“You promised action, adventure, betrayal, and death,” Yuse took a heavy pull of his rotgut and smacked his lips. “You also said that Cheese would save us all.”

“Listen, buddy: I’ve kept up glass-for-glass with you tonight, which I’m sure I’ll regret tomorrow,” Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you have a point to make, how about you get to it, huh?”

Paschal leaned forward. Lantern light etched shone on his sweaty forehead. “Are you telling me that at some point, you met up with Cheese, who—according to you, was in the middle of saving the world, mind you—”

“Don’t forget the girl,” Jack added.

“With a girl in tow,” Yuse tipped his sweaty mug towards November, “and, what? He sat you down, and said, ‘Jackie-boy: I’ve got much more important things to do, but—what the hell? Would you like me to tell you a story? Moon above,’” Yuse laughed. “This isn’t a yarn, Jack. This is a goddamn quilt.”

“Have you been *listening*?” Jack replied, irritably. “Delta was working on the Hyginus tunnel the day Cheese brought him his lunch. That’s *our* tunnel, ya doof. He stopped in here for a drink before he delivered it.”

“He started talking to the first person he saw, or what?”

“Cheese and I go way back.”

“How do you know him?”

Jack smiled. "When you're as thick as thieves, sometimes the sauce gets a little murky. Hey," he sat up in his chair. "What's with all the questions, huh? You don't believe me, or something?"

Yuse shook his head. "Just trying to nail down the finer points."

Jack lapsed into silence, staring sullenly at his empty glass.

"Oh, don't be like that now," Paschal chided, trying not to laugh. His chair creaked as he shifted his weight. "Cheese was a good boy and delivered the lunch like Juliet asked. What happened next?"

"After sharing a pint with yours truly..."



Cheese found Delta moving aside rubble with a group of other men. As he saw Cheese limping towards him, he broke away and smiled.

The boy was about Barvo's age yet retained a sense of naïveté that made him seem much younger. In appearance, he was similar in build to his wife: lanky and pale, with an oval face and large, close-set brown eyes. In the right light, you could see the boy's blood pulsing through the prominent veins in his neck. "What the hell are you doing here?" Delta asked. He removed his gloves and put them into the back pocket of his worn blue jeans. "Come to finally offer your support?"

Barvo held up the boy's forgotten lunch pail. "Not quite."

Delta smacked his forehead. "I swear, that woman is too good for me."

"Can't argue with you there." He tipped his head towards the work crew beyond. "How's it coming?"

"Pretty good," Delta looked over his shoulder. "We've been able to clear out a substantial portion of the ceiling from the tracks. We're trying to brace it against future cave-ins."

"Any idea what's behind it?" Cheese pressed his right arm against his leg as he took a couple of steps forward.

Delta's eyes brightened. "We've sent someone through with a headlamp to check it out. He didn't want to go too far in case the ceiling collapsed." He motioned back towards the rubble.

“This whole line is pretty unstable to begin with, but they say the tracks are clear on the other side.”

When Cheese didn't get as excited he'd hoped, Delta shook his head. “Granted, it's no Oceanus Procellarum, but it's what we have in front of us.”

Cheese gently cuffed the boy, grinning. “You chase your pipe dreams, and I'll chase mine.”

“You sure you don't want to help? Our man says there are some subway cars on the other side. They've been trapped down there since The Past War. They'd probably make for some good looting, when we get these tracks cleared.”

A low rumble and a cloud of dust drifted from the ceiling. Voices echoed against the wall as their torch lights swung wildly about.

Cheese's eyebrows went towards his hairline as he smiled, lazily.

Delta nodded. “Point taken.”

“Try to make it home tonight, alright?” He touched the boy's shoulder and headed back the way he came.

“Tell Juliet I said, ‘Thank you!’” Delta called to Cheese's retreating frame.

Without turning, Barvo called back, “I have stuff to do today. Tell her yourself.”

A couple of hours later, Cheese found himself in the bombed-out remnants of the Frigoris Public Library. Part of the structure remained intact, but the east wing was destroyed in the Past War. With housing and infrastructure taking precedence over arts and entertainment, library staff recovered what they could and left the rest to the elements. While Frigoris became populated with bleak, concrete structure during the Reconstruction, most forgot about the simple joy of reading, except for a handful of bibliophiles like Chaz Barvo.

He'd spend hours moving aside debris, and uncovering titles that hadn't seen the light of day in decades. Every so often he'd run into those of the same ilk, Down Belowers looking to expand their minds beyond their underground tunnels.

That day, all he could find were tattered periodicals and old newspapers. He gave up around noon and headed towards Frigoris Commons to watch the river ooze along its channels. A Red-labeled baker nearby looked the other way and let him lighten their dumpster in back. With a mouthful of black bread, and a handful of crumbs, he fed the pigeons, imagining the sky rats as Gray police officers fleecing the earth of what little food it had to provide.

Cheese found a bench when his leg began to bother him and opened Semper Moses' book to pass the time until his meeting with Mr. Foxtrot. He flipped through the pages and read what it had to say about the weather.

During the day, the sky above Frigoris is a perpetual smudge of thin gray clouds. Just enough sunlight filters through the haze to inform those below that it's depressing outside and reasons for hope are as narrow as the forecasted weather. It'll be cloudy today, tomorrow, and this weekend. Next week, and the week after.

According to the book, there were a couple explanations for this. In the first scenario, The Moon, upon learning of the Sun's attack against Seline, seethed with anger. Molten lava and ash erupted from Her underground volcanoes and showered the earth below before She could calm Herself. Unfortunately, the damage was done. Wildfires tore through fields, destroyed crops, and charred riverbeds. Smoke choked out the world. The Sun, already blinded by his need for revenge, never took notice as it moved through the sky searching for Seline. It was only after the Moon returned to the heavens each night that she lovingly, and with some embarrassment, blew it all away.

The second story involved the Reds and Grays below. In this version, they were infuriated by their Mother's loss of temper. Their crops burned, and water tasted of ash. Rather than extinguish the flames, they let it burn as a sacrifice to the Sun. They hoped He would protect them from her capricious mother's whims.

Cheese believed that the weather was shitty, and it didn't matter why. Would it kill The Sun, the Moon—whoever—for a little variety? He thought all of these things as he held onto the iron steps in the darkness of the barrel section of a sewer and waited for an opportune time to ditch his hiding spot and meet up with Mr. Foxtrot. With the crown of his head, he pushed the manhole cover aside and checked to see if the coast was clear.

He'd left the park before the Gloaming; a Frigoris colloquialism that meant both sundown, and The Gloam's arrival. The streets would empty in a flash as everyone fled to their apartments to begin the night's vigil; to ask—or quiet—the question, "Is tonight the night I'm going to die?" Siblings would dare the other to watch the deserted streets for the leather clad corpses that haunted their nightmares. Those who looked away first lost the game. In truth, they were the lucky ones

because sometimes, the Gloam looked *up*. If that happened, curtains snapped shut, and whispered charms passed trembling lips:

The Gloam, The Gloam
The Gloam is a-comin'!
The Gloam, The Gloam
You better start a-runnin'!

Depending upon who lost the supernatural staring contest, the victor always changed the last line into a taunt:

The Gloam, The Gloam
There's no point a-runnin'!

Fear of the Gloam never left an inhabitant of Frigoris. They were all children frozen at the window, dreading, waiting, watching. If they were treated like a joke, your laugh would be the last thing you did before you died. Few tried to fight. If you spotted them, your best chance was to run. As fast as you could.

The Gloam, The Gloam,
The Gloam is a-comin'...

Satisfied he'd found a gap in their patrol, he slipped the manhole cover aside, and hoisted himself onto the street. Armed with his Sward, he limped towards Mr. Foxtrot's apartment as quickly and quietly as possible. Sweat trickled down the sides of his face. He squeezed the pain away in his leg and pushed it along in time.

He stopped across the street from Mr. Foxtrot's apartment and found a patch of shadow to melt into. The street was empty. Curtains were pulled against the night in the five-story structure.

Once known for its gleaming marble lobby and famous clientele, The Lunar Mont Complex struggled with the rest of Frigoris in the decades following the Past War. It once stood singularly against the skyline, with the Commons as a verdant punctuation mark to its opulence. Now, tenement buildings sandwiched the sagging structure, and tied its fate to theirs with lines of graying laundry and a smell that permeated the block; the scent of stewed cabbage, cat piss, and desperation.

In the distance, Cheese felt a stab of anxiety as a hunched form hurried across Frigoris Commons. Their gate matched his when a desire for speed did not match the vessel you had to work with. From behind that scurrying frame, a Gloam appeared from the darkness and stood in the orange, sodium-glow of a streetlamp.

Its blue eyes blazed momentarily as it lifted its hand, and turned it palm side down. Sensing its presence, the woman—Cheese saw it was a woman—turned. A shawl of burnt orange fell to her neck. Her body started trembling, and she turned to run as best she could.

She managed a single step before her body evaporated and her clothes drifted to the ground, uninhabited.

The Gloam lowered its arm, paused—whether to admire his work, or reset whatever calculus ordered its inner world—and began to walk the streets once more.

“Shit,” Cheese hissed through clenched teeth. His hairline was drenched, with matching crescent moons beneath his armpits. He pulled his jacket close to his body to avoid jingling as he darted across the street to the propped side entrance of the Lunar Mont Apartments. Before the heel of his boot passed the threshold of the alley’s safety, the Gloam turned and noticed his crooked frame.

Cheese climbed the steps, unaware the sentinel was headed his way. He was thinking about what he’d seen in the sky in that offhand way when your brain reminds you of something you’d missed: The moon hung fat and heavy in the sky, going from buttery yellow to a delicate pink, a sure sign that The Harvest was imminent. Frigoris had a week—maybe two—before another Harvest. After that, it would pour for days.

The Seven Trials of Seline touched upon the recurring phenomenon. The book called it *The Storm of Sorrow*; an annual deluge when Frigoris’ crops were nourished for the year from the water harvested from those in the Cull. At the first sound of thunder, Red and Gray alike took to the streets and turned their faces to the nourishing clouds of death. As their children danced in the

gutters and splashed in quickly forming puddles—mouths open, tongues out to catch the droplets—their parents, uncles, cousins—whoever was left—would fight the urge to chastise. To slap their wet cheeks, and scream, “This rain? *That’s* your papa! *That’s* your sister!” Instead, they would twist the narrative to their own purpose. Tears concealed by the rain, they imagined one last game, one last caress, a last goodbye until they themselves would become water...

Cheese quickened his ascent and, for the moment, dared to believe in Seline Moonchild as more than a myth. Maybe Foxtrot really did know where she was. Maybe she could save them all from their collective fate.

His hopes were immediately dashed when Cheese stepped foot on Mr. Foxtrot’s floor. A knot of residents stood outside of the Gray lieutenant’s door. It hung askew from its hinges and stood partially ajar. When the tenants finally took notice of his blade-wielding frame, instinct kicked in and they dispersed like shadows under direct sunlight. Within seconds, their doors were shut and bolted. They watched Cheese from their peepholes and waited for the other shoe to drop. With a mess like this, there would probably be tap dancing before long.

Blade at the ready, Cheese stood at the threshold a moment before inching the door open with the tip of his boot. The room was in shambles. He thought twice about entering, but inquisitive doors squealed on their hinges up and down the hallways as the rats of Lunar Mont returned to the scent of fresh blood. Cheese rushed inside, forced Mr. Foxtrot’s door closed, locked its two deadbolts, and threaded the chain.

To his immediate level, the kitchen stood in disarray. Cabinet stood open, and the chairs surrounding the circular kitchen table had been knocked over. He carefully navigated the shattered dinnerware scattered across the bubbling linoleum floor and picked up Mr. Foxtrot’s pineapple-cut crystal decanter. The stopper was gone. When Cheese held it up to the light, it was free of glass. He brought the treacle-flavored liquid to his lips and drank to steady his nerves.

The rest of the apartment was in similar disarray. The worn living room furniture was in tatters, its stuffing spilled to the floor. Squares of discoloration framed the walls where photographs had been removed or smashed to pieces. Books lay open on the floor like grounded paper birds with broken wings.

“Foxtrot?” Cheese remembered himself, his mission. “Are you in here?”

His footsteps were muffled as he moved across the scuffed hardwood floor. A short hallway stood to the right of the living room. A curtain fluttered in the breeze of the partially opened living

room window facing the street. Cheese edged closer, looked down. Beyond the fire escape, a mass of Grays were assembling below. They stood in formation, with arms folded behind their back. Gray uniforms crisp. At the corner of each ninety-degree angle, standing slightly apart from the mass of officers, were four Gloams.

His skin crawled as he stepped away from the window, heart racing. While the officers stared at the glass-fronted doors of the Lunar Mont's lobby, the Gloam's flame-rimmed eyes were trained on something else entirely.

While Gloams were identical in dress and methodical movements, they varied in one bowel-clenching regard: each had a unique way in which the flame leaked from their eyes like an epidemic. It could drip down their necrotic flesh without burning. Others swirled in hypnotic helices as they moved. Cheese had even seen one where the tongues of fire trailed the Gloam in twin, foot-long banners. The flames of the Gloam Cheese saw earlier rimmed its eyes like electric kohl.

Those same arctic tunnels were now trained on him, or, at the very least, Mr. Foxtrot's living room window.

"Shit," Cheese muttered, as he flicked his thumbnail against his clenched front teeth. He hurried down the hallway in a last-ditch effort to fulfill his promise to Semper Moses and find out what he could about Seline.

Clothes were strewn across the bed, the floor. Dresser drawers were flung open and smashed. Also, Mr. Foxtrot lay dead on the floor. His caved in head lay in a pool of blood. It seemed to speak to Chaz Barvo. He spoke the words aloud:

"Shit, shit, shit!"

He bent down and inspected Mr. Foxtrot's body, lifting it with the flat, wooden part of his oar. Before he could formulate a thought—how he would escape the Gloams, the apartment, what he would tell Moses—the sound of ragged breathing turned his head.

Hiding beneath the queen-sized bed, a girl with pale skin, white-blonde hair, and wide frightened eyes regarded him in terror. She wore a pale blue pajama top and bottoms, and thick, black gloves. She held her hands near her head, palms out, towards Cheese. The young woman shook her head, repeatedly, silently pleading with him not to hurt her like Mr. Foxtrot, whose body she refused to look at.

“*You*,” he nearly toppled over with astonishment. Seline Moonchild in the flesh. Before he could ask her questions as to what led to the death of Mr. Foxtrot, and what part she had to play in the Gray officer’s grisly end, loud thumping reverberated throughout the apartment.

“Police!” someone screamed through the door. “Open the door!”

The girl began to tremble once more, as she covered her ears. Her pajamas were splattered with Mr. Foxtrot’s blood.

Cheese gently grabbed her elbow and helped her out from under the bed. “We can talk later. Right now, we need to get out of this apartment!”

As she stood, another wall-shaking staccato burst blasted the walls.

Cheese pulled a bathrobe hanging from Mr. Foxtrot’s bathroom door and threw it over the girl. His mind slipped into the instinctual response of a scavenger as he glanced at the room with greedy eyes. He looked for anything that might be of use, anything that Semper Moses might need to prove the veracity of Mr. Foxtrot’s outrageous claims. Small leather-bound notebooks, stacks of paper, all disappeared into the Cheese’s pockets. He opened the closet door, as the girl brought him back to reality, and the violent thumping on the apartment door.

“Go,” she tugged on his trench coat, as she inched towards the bedroom door. “Leave,” she pointed. “Go!”

Against his better judgement, Cheese succumbed to her insistence. He slammed the door, leaving Mr. Foxtrot’s body behind, and allowed himself to be led. Cheese gripped his Sward, sure he would need it, soon.

As they stood in the center of the living room frozen between the violent battering of the apartment door, and the third-story view, Cheese had a cerebral moment of clarity. Looking down upon himself and Seline Moonchild, he knew that if they didn’t come up with a plan, and quickly, “We are going to die,” he spoke the truth aloud. Hearing his voice rooted himself in his body once more.

He looked around the room one last time, vaguely aware that Seline was putting on an oversized pair of boots. The door splintered down the middle. Through the gap in the wood, Cheese saw the dead-eyed star of a Gloam, watching, waiting.

“We have to go!” he grabbed Seline’s hand, and practically pushed her out of the window onto the fire escape. He followed after, helping her to her feet. He grasped the gritty railing and looked down into the streets. The blue flame of a Gloam illuminated the surrounding buildings.

Quietly cursing their luck, he dragged Seline behind, and mounted the stairs. It was at this moment that the door buckled and fell to the floor with a crash.

A Gloam walked with deliberate movements into Mr. Foxtrot's kitchenette, followed by a steady stream of uniform-clad Grays, weapons ready. One of them pointed at Cheese and Seline's disappearing legs as the ran pell-mell up the fire escape. He heard them yell an order to give chase. First, however, they waited for the Gloam.

Alone for the moment, Cheese ran across the roof amongst lines of dirty hanging laundry fluttering in the breeze, lawn chairs, and rusted hibachi grills. He looked back and noticed light shining against the building opposite the stairs. Thankfully, the neighboring tenement building had been constructed within a hair's breadth of the Lunar Mont. They would be able to hop onto it without any trouble. Well, trouble enough with the Gloam fast on their tails.

It crested the stairs and casually observed Cheese and Seline before continuing its death-dealing approach.

"Go," Cheese instructed, helping her onto the ledge. Her steps were wobbly within the oversized boots. For a terrifying moment, she held her arms horizontally to the ground and almost pitched over the side. She regained her balance and made the jump.

As she watched him climb the parapet, her eyes widened.

The Gloam was within striking distance. All it needed to do was lift its arm, and turn its hand to evaporate Barvo, leaving behind his trench coat, and a foiled escape. With his coat caught on a twisted nail, Cheese looked behind him, and tried to rip his coat free. "Go!" he yelled at Seline, eyes wide, voice calm, yet authoritative. "Save yourself."

Instead, she raised her gloved left hand, and splayed her fingers. Eyes closed, her body trembled, as if summoning a great reserve of power. As the Gloam mirrored her movements to wipe them from the face of the earth, Seline screamed.

Cheese felt wind rush past his face from where Seline stood, as turned to see what she'd done.

A charred hole burned in the center of the creature's chest, encircled with bright blue flames. The fire spread across the Gloam's body until the wind carried the ash away. As the last of the creature was blown from the roof, Cheese freed his coat, and looked at Seline with increasing wonder. He thought of the Mountain Lion. Cheese whispered, "It really is you."

The sound of clinking Gray footsteps sounded against the fire escape stairs, no doubt wondering what was taking The Gloam so long to return.

Seline held out her hand and motioned for Cheese to take it. “Go,” she said “*Go!*”

The pair descended the opposite side of the building, taking the fire escape steps as quietly as their boots would allow. The braying voices of the Grays echoed against the buildings around them from the neighboring roof above. Cheese and Seline had given them the slip without being seen. It wouldn't be long before the police put two-and-two together, but the pair used those precious moments to their benefit. All the same, Barvo was well aware that three Gloam remained with the Grays, and he couldn't count on the mysterious powers of a shell-shocked teenage girl to save their hides again. He grasped the handle of his Sward, wincing in pain burning through his leg.

“Wait,” he grabbed her arm when they reached the streets and leaned against a damp brick wall, shrouded in darkness. “I don't know that I'll be able to continue much further.” Sweat ran in rivulets down the sides of his face. “We have to find shelter; a place to hide.”

In the moonlight, Mr. Foxtrot's blood spatter looked black against the fabric of her pajamas. She looked at him intently, her heartbeat evident through her clothes. “Go,” she tugged on his sweaty hand. She pointed towards the swinging flashlights overhead as the Grays indistinct voices filtered to the street, and then to Cheese and herself. “Go!” she insisted.

“You're not listening,” he hissed. “It's my damn leg. I'm spent.”

She touched her chest, and pointed to Cheese, once more. Without warning, she darted from the safety of their alley, and ran down the center of the street.

The beam of a flashlight zeroed in on her. “There!” one of the patrols shouted. The report of gunfire ricocheted through the quiet night. A burst of brick dust erupted near Cheese's head.

“Not here,” he grimaced. “*There!*” and limped after Seline, offering a silent prayer to the Moon that all of the grays were as well-trained as a marksman as the one who'd taken the first shot.

He followed her flashing shadow through Frigoris Commons. Steam rose in the streets, leaving Cheese with the strange impression that he was chasing a ghost. Given what he'd seen with the death of the Gloam, maybe he wasn't far off. A ghost, maybe not, but more ghost than girl.

A brief glance behind kept the pain in his leg in check. Three Gloam, equal distance between them, stood at the boundary of the dead grass, approached inexorably, deathly quiet, eyes blazing. The Grays boiled into the streets, and gave chase, guns drawn.

Despite the fear, a laugh rose into Cheese's chest. "This girl is going to get me killed, Moon help me," he chuckled, and shouted, "Will you wait just a damn minute," to Seline's jackrabbiting form. "You're running from them, not me."

At the western edge of the Commons, the manicured, albeit dead, grass of the park terminates into a dense knot of hillocks and a smattering of trees. While Cheese had passed through the area on errands during daytime hours, the Underground was largely foreign due to its proximity to Gray Central Precinct. The Down Belowers typically tried to avoid setting up camp in the backyard of the Lion's Den. As Seline disappeared behind one of the hills, Cheese slowed his speed to catch his breath.

Behind, The Gloam continued their precise advancement. It wasn't that they couldn't move faster. Their speed depended upon the certainty of their success. With three sentinels on his coattails and a precinct of Grays close behind, Cheese would need more than an oar blade and a teenage girl to get him through.

"Seline!" he whispered, turning in a wide circle in the middle of the clearing. For the moment, he was alone with certain death moments away. "Where the hell did you disappear to?" He stretched his left arm and leaned against a hillock. Barvo smoothed his hair and straightened the collar of his trench coat as he caught his breath and prepared to meet his untimely death with aplomb, blade in hand.

Before he had recovered completely, a gloved hand appeared through the dense trellis of vines and a carpet of vegetation from the hill, pulling his feet out from beneath him. With a force that surpassed her years, Seline dragged him into the cavern with surprising ease. Once inside, the vines drifted back into place, concealing the entrance.

No sooner than she had, The Gloam stepped into the clearing.

She held her finger to her pursed lips as the sentinels stood motionless outside. They were joined soon after by the Gray. Their searchlights scanned the hills and surrounding parkland, as they quietly cursed their luck.

A young captain approached The Gloam. He had the rangy build of an athlete. He removed his helmet, revealing closely cropped hair, and a fierce expression. A name stitched across his left pocket identified him as "Fidelis." Before speaking, he seemed to choose his words carefully, inhaling a large, calming breath, and releasing it. "Where did they go?" He addressed the trio calmly.

The Gloam stared back, impassively.

"Nothing?" Hotel fumed. "You've just let our suspects vanish into thin air," he paused. "And not in the *good* way either." His hand flew into the air, as he mimicked an explosion and opened his fingers to mime gently falling clothes. "Just gone." He turned and regarded the hillocks and the sleeping streets beyond. "Our Chief is dead, and the rats responsible just found a hole in the wall. When my boss wants answers, what am I supposed to tell him?"

The Gloam's eyes burned forbiddingly, yet they held their tongues.

"Perfect," Hotel muttered. "Just perfect. Men!" He replaced his helmet. "Search the area. They can't have gotten far."

While the crowd dispersed, one of The Gloam lingered in the clearing. With its head cocked, its blue flames swished like the tail of a horse.

Seline pressed her hand to Barvo's mouth to quiet his breathing.

Satisfied with what it heard, or didn't, the Gloam left the clearing, and followed the Grays as they fanned out into the neighborhood.

Safe for the moment, Cheese stood and found himself in the abandoned remains of an empty stairwell. Its wide stairwell and tiled walls led into the darkness below.

He thought of Semper Moses and his extensive knowledge of the Underground, wishing an ounce of it for himself.

Seline watched Cheese with those wide blue eyes of her as he removed a contraption from one of the pockets of his coat.

“It’s a gas detector,” Cheese explained as he whacked it against his open palm, testing the batteries. “Last thing we need is to escape the Gloam, and then asphyxiate the death, huh?” Satisfied with the reading, he replaced it to his coat, and turned to Seline. “Well?” he extended a hand. “Are you coming? I’d rather not wait around up here for one of them to come back. The sooner we’re underground, the safer we’ll be.”

Seline regarded the callused hand and took it.

“Are you cold?” he moved her hand this way and that, inspecting it.

She pulled it away.

“I wasn’t going to take them,” Cheese laughed. “Keep your secrets.” He handed her a torch, and said, “You’ll be our light, sister. I’ll handle security,” he held up his blade. “Based on what I saw out there, you’re perfectly capable of handling yourself.”

“Go,” she motioned towards the darkness of the stairs.

“The modest type, huh?”

At the bottom of the steps, the room opened onto a large, abandoned platform scattered with large chunks of rubble from the collapsed roof. An empty subway sat waiting for decades-old passengers that would never board. Mushrooms grew in clusters on the roof where earth had settled. Their tendrils covered one of the cars’ open doors.

Cheese released Seline’s hand. “No one’s been down here since probably the Past War,” he explained. “A few of the stations were destroyed completely when the bombs fell. How did you know it was here?”

Seline shrugged, disappearing into one of the cars. The torch light skittered from within against the walls...



“Hang on,” Yuse waved his hand. “Who *is* this girl? You’re telling me she killed a Gloam, and found The Ghost Station of Frigoris, and Cheese is just going to grin and bear it?” He shook his large head, downing the remnants of his rotgut. “It’s a tad unbelievable, don’t you think? Are you sure he wasn’t just pulling your leg.” A moment passed, “Or, maybe you’re pulling mine?” he concluded, slowly.

Jack November laughed. “No one’s pulling your leg, ya doof. You keep interrupting before I can get to the questions and answers. You don’t think our boy Cheese might be biding his time? That he had Seline Moonchild in his presence, and he’s going to, what? Stop everything and have a chin wag while their lives hang in the balance?” Jack reached over and patted his friend's burly hand. “I never figured you for one, Yuse, but you’re a real Nervous Nancy.”

“What did you call me?” Paschal clenched his fist, as if recoiling from November’s touch.

“A Nervous Nancy,” Jack hiccupped. “Would you like me to slow it down for you? Now, don’t be like that,” he wagged his index finger. “I’m just teasing.”

“The last person that teased me had their head split open.”

“Let’s split the difference and hold your tongue. I’ll get to the good stuff,” he bristled suddenly with irritation. “Just shut your damn mouth. All these interruptions are beginning to annoy me.”

Yuse stood, unsteadily. “That’s the way it’s going to be, huh? Using that kind of language towards your best friend?”

Jack’s face relaxed into one of bewilderment. “You just threatened to split my skull if I didn’t get on with it.”

“Hypotheticals,” the great bear adjusted his electric green kimono. “There was no harm in it, but you—” he pointed. “You crossed the line, Jack-o. I am aggrieved,” he slurred.

“You are drunk,” November laughed.

Gramercy slowed his glass-wiping at the bar. The remaining patrons of The Tube stared into their drinks with practiced indifference.

"I'm going home," Yuse concluded, theatrically.

"Sleep it off, my friend," Jack called, laughing into the rim of his glass. "I'll be back, tomorrow."

"Aggrieved!" Yuse shouted to no in particular, stumbling from the car.

Jack left a few parts on the cable top for the trouble, wishing Gramercy a 'fine evening.'

"Be careful on the tracks," the bartender warned.

"A subway hasn't run through in ages," Jack chuckled, buttoning his peacoat.

"Yes, but you're walking in that special way of yours," Gramercy winked. "You'll just as soon break your neck. I'm sure you'd never forgive yourself if you took the pleasure from Mr. Paschal."

"Good man," November smiled. "I'll watch my step." He paused in the doorway and felt the warm air on his cheeks. Satisfied with what he smelled in the air, and the general satisfaction of having gotten Yuse's goat, he jumped from the platform and onto the darkness of the tracks. Like a nocturnal subterranean explorer, he used the distant fires of distant rail towns to guide him home, whistling a tune he remembered from his youth.

Strawberry Moon, just a little more

Our clothes in piles, in the corner, on the floor

Who knows what comes next week?

For now, its tangled sheets.

Just you and me,

My Strawberry Moon...

Rather than retire for the evening, he followed the echoes of his offbeat tune towards the Clearing Crew's recent progress north of the Hyginus Terminal. Though red signal lights along the rail flashed ineffectually, large boulders lay amongst the steel beams and cold, stale air. Jack pressed his hands against three parallel pipes fixed to the wall and imagined the tunnel as a slumbering beast with its bloodline strangled. He patted them, casting one last glance at the steadily clearing tracks. "Soon," he whispered in an affectionate tone. "You'll see," he promised. "Cheese and Seline will get you going in no time."

On the way, he walked past the dormant generators and spotlights used to give the crew light. At the bend in the tunnel, Jack slipped into a long corridor he visited often. Despite his ability as a storyteller, and the enjoyment he derived from entertaining Yuse, he often kept his own counsel. With its miles of tracks, ventilation shafts, and hidden walkways, the underground system was the perfect hiding place of all manner of secrets.

He exited the corridor into a room crisscrossed with pipes. In the center of the room, was a dusty pillow, which he sat on with a quiet grunt, unbuttoning his coat, and pushing the vent beneath his ass to keep from getting cold. Beside the pillow, was a headlamp. He put it on his head and clicked on the light.

Much like the world above, secrets were eventually passed to a select few. The vocabulary expands into an entire lexicon of precious things; people, places, truths. Though he would try to convince you he'd found the room himself, the pillow Jack November sat on had been dimpled by several asses before him; batteries replaced on the headlamp by several hands when necessary. And what did they fix their spotlight on?

An extensive mural recording the Seven Trials of Seline Moonchild. The palimpsest mirrored the room it was tagged in. Its artwork varied in quality and style, depending upon who wielded the cans when the painting was altered. Graffiti and stencils. Wide swaths of vibrant neon color, a counter melody to the more subtle tones. Realistic body contours morphed into cubic shapes, and back again, a perfectly choreographed dance of design. Through each scene, the Moonchild, fighting to reconcile lost children to their mother.

Much like Cheese, Jack November hadn't had much faith in the Old Stories. He viewed them as a collection of fantasies created to explain the current situation in Frigoris. Yet, now that he was aware of the events transpiring around him, his opinion was shifting.

He leaned forward and looked at the mural's second panel. The scene depicted...

Seline and The Red Stranger

Despite having left The Sun Lion seemingly triumphant with the promise to persevere held closely to her chest, as the day burned bright and clear, it soon became apparent that Seline Moonchild was ill-equipped for the harsh environs atop the soil. While her head throbbed, and sweat trickled down the small of her back, she longed for the refreshing safety of the soil she had been born into. Dark, cool. Each word

taunted the Moon's daughter as it fell from her parched lips. With cheeks the shade of morning song, and skin torn by passing brambles she had inadvertently offended, Seline collapsed in a cove of trees, sapped of energy. With her vision doubling, and redoubling, she whispered a silent prayer to The Moon, requesting a strengthening of will and strength.

Meanwhile, The crafty Mountain Lion chuckled overhead. He'd used his celestial powers to bewitch one of The Moon's wayward sons to do his bidding. With a carefully timed sundog, He had bewitched them into thinking that an enemy from a neighboring tribe was close at hand. When The Mountain Lion heard the approaching footsteps of the bedeviled human tromping through the brush, He hid behind a cloud.

If all went according to plan, the Stranger would discover the unconscious body of Seline Moonchild and mistake her for his mortal enemy. Believing to have the upper hand, The Stranger would draw his knife and plunge the blade into her sweet, celestial heart. With His bidding done, and Seline Moonchild's life extinguished, The Sun would drink of her blood and gain dominion over the world, entire; light and shadow alike.

The Sun watched as the Stranger appeared in the clearing, staff in hand. Across his broad shoulders, he wore a colored tunic of rich ochre. A sheathed knife was wound around his waist with a strap of thick leather. With staff in hand, he regarded Seline with a furrowed brow and angry, clouded eyes. He looked past her flaxen hair, unblemished skin, and delicate bone structure, and saw instead a bare-chested man smeared in gray war paint.

The Red Stranger crept across the foliage towards Seline Moonchild. As he approached, he drew his knife.

The Mountain Lion grinned expectantly, ready to pounce.

And, yet....

The Red Stranger paused, reconsidering.

The Sun, in his excitement, had come out of its hiding place. Dappled shadows danced across the ground, and Seline's fair frame. As it glinted off her silver locks, a fading burst of celestial magick shattered The Mountain Lion's spell.

The Red Stranger sheathed his knife, all thought of murder, banished. With all the gentility he could muster, he removed a waterskin shaped like a legume from his shoulder, and gently lifted Seline Moonchild's head from the ground. He could see the flutter of her eyelids and the flow of blood along the veins in her neck. Without further hesitation, he poured some of the water from his jug into her mouth.

Seline coughed. "Thank you."

The Red Stranger uttered a word of thanks. An incantation he had not uttered in ages. "The Moon willed it."

Seline sat up, restored. She edged away from the Red Stranger in a display of modesty. "My mother sent you?"

Sunlight fell upon The Red Stranger's back. For a moment, he was tempted to conceal the spell he had fallen under, but her honest gaze would not allow it. "I'm afraid I intended you harm, my lady."

Moonchild looked to the sky, knowingly. "You were not yourself."

The Red Stranger stood, extending his hand. "I am in charge of my faculties, once more. On that, you have my word."

The celestial accepted his support and stood. "Do you give your word the spell has passed?"

"On my honor."

The Red Stranger never supplied his name and Seline did not inquire. She followed several paces behind the burly hunter as he led her through the wood. Along the way, he further proved his fealty dispatching a feral sundog, and leading them to safety through a fiery patch of solar flares.

Overhead, the Mountain Lion snarled, unhappily.

As day turned to evening they came upon a well-used tunnel burrowed into the side of a hill. Torches lit the earthen hole.

Seline paused, astonished. She leaned her hand against the top of the hole, peering inside. "What is this strange place?"

"It is where my people live," The Red Stranger replied, standing behind her. "It shields us from the ongoing battle between The Moon and The Sun."

A thought struck Seline. A nascent memory. The sound of digging and whispered conversation. "I have heard your people before," she admitted, before remembering to conceal her celestial origins.

"My people?" The Red Stranger's face betrayed confusion, a brief renewal of The crafty Mountain Lion's spell. Once more, he saw her not as an invading combatant, but for her true self. Her vibrant 'Otherness' her mother had taken pains to conceal in humanity, lest her children refuse her message of peace and reunification.

"Stories from my youth," Seline covered her mistake. "My mother imagined our race as great warriors from another realm; to transport me further from our own dugout."

“This is not a dugout,” The Red Stranger corrected with pride. “It is a vast network of tunnels.”

“Show me,” Seline smiled. “I’m very much fatigued. The mere thought of refreshment restores me, already.” She walked into the mouth of the cave.

The Red Stranger, having saved her thrice, looked to the setting sun. “I’ve upheld my part of the bargain.”

The Sun flared briefly, before the crimsons and marigolds yielded to the gloaming.

Cheese woke the next morning on tracks of the Ghost Station beyond the earth-covered subway car. Before fashioning a pillow of dirt and, wrapping himself in the warm confines of his trench coat, he had tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Seline to join him. He explained that if the Grays or Gloam found the concealed entrance to the station, the cars would be the first place they looked. Though he considered himself an accomplished operator, he felt he somehow failed to convince her. She expressed her reluctance by extending her death-dealing-Gloam hand towards him, and shrieked, “You! You! You!” as she cowered against one of the benches, as if hoping to melt into the plastic.

He admitted defeat, hands up, palms out, inching onto the platform. With his sword as a cane, he leaned against a dust-covered turnstile and sighed. “What the hell am I going to do now?” his voice echoed against the concrete.”

Her fingers grasped the bottom window ledge as she peeked at him through the dirty glass. “Did you hear me? What am I supposed to do *now*!”

“You: go!” she mimed a walk with her index and middle fingers towards the steps beyond. “You!”

Cheese smiled. “I’m afraid that option is off the table for the both of us, Seline.” He paused. “Is that even your name?” He drew a hand across his forehead. “I didn’t even believe the bullshit until tonight. I’m still not sure that I do, yeah? What do you think, Girl-Who-Might-Be-Seline?” he chided. “GWMBS? Gwimbs? Are you even on the level?”

She stared without replying.

Cheese removed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the steel dust from his hands. “Like it or not, Gwimbs: you’re stuck with me. So, until you start answering my questions, I’ll hand on to these.” He picked up the bag she’d packed before escaping Foxtrot’s apartment. “What

have you got in here?" he pulled open the cinched mouth. "Journals," he removed a small, leather bound square, "Journals. *More* journals. Well, there you go, huh? We're both readers."

Her eyes followed Barvo as he hopped the "Do Not Cross the Tracks" line and hopped down. "If you change your mind, I'll be over here, okay? Hey," his voice calmed, all playfulness gone. "I'm serious. If you hear anything—see anything—wake me up. I might be a little worse for wear," he winced at the pain in his throbbing leg, "but, I'm here if you need me."

She stared.

"What the hell am I saying? She killed a Gloam," He shook his head, and muttered rhetorically. "*How* did she kill a Gloam? The Moon only knows. She won't say a goddamn word." And, then to the question mark of a girl: "Goodnight, Gwimbs."

"You," she whispered, but he'd already limped out of earshot.

He found her sleeping in the rear car, curled up on a bench, draped in Mr. Foxtrot's bathrobe. A sleeve was pressed to her nose, and a pile of black notebooks surrounded her head.

"You've got to be kidding me," Cheese slapped at the pockets of his trench coat in search of the diaries he'd confiscated the night before.

His voice and movements startled her awake.

"When did you steal those?" he asked, as he leaned down and took one away before she could knock his hand away.

"No!" she said, as she attempted to pry it from his fingers.

"Look at you," Cheese smiled, leafing through the pages. "You've tripled your vocabulary." He looked down and noticed detailed schematics and maps on each page, written in Mr. Foxtrot's meticulous handwriting. The margins were a forest of ink, dense with the dead man's thoughts.

Gwimbs held out her hand. "Please!"

He shook his head. "You and I are going to be down here for a while and—no offense—you're not exactly an accomplished conversationalist. I'm going to need a little reading material." He gently shook the journal. "That is—assuming you don't steal it from me again. Which, I assure you, will be much more difficult the second time around." He pocketed the book, and said, "We should see what's down here, don't you think? Maybe find some food; figure out a way to escape. We can't exactly go out the way we came," Cheese pointed towards the stairs. "I'm sure they'll have officers watching the commons."

Gwimbs stood, cinching the bathrobe closed at her waist. She pointed her finger at him, then towards the tunnel beyond the subway car. “Go,” she said.

“Perfect,” Cheese smiled. “I’d say get changed into something more appropriate, but that really isn’t an option.”

She straightened the collar of the bathrobe and smoothed her white-blond hair. “Fine,” Gwimbs nodded, grimly. She pointed towards the darkness of the tunnel, and raised her eyebrows as if to say, “What are you waiting for?”

Before the pair ventured into the tunnel, he hoisted her onto the roof of the train car and picked the morels that grew on top. When she hopped back down, her mouth and pockets were full of the ridged and pitted mushrooms.

“Did you save any for me?” Cheese laughed.

He found a lonely can of fruit cocktail in his coat and made a modest breakfast for them. As they ate, Cheese stared at the girl’s otherworldly beauty as she wolfed down her food as she emitted small sighs of happiness and pleasure, a small smile turning the corners of her mouth.

She paused mid-bite, noticing his attention. The smile faded, and her haughtiness returned as she paused. “Go?” she asked, which he interpreted as “What?”

“I’m just trying to figure you out?” he admitted, without dropping his gaze. “One minute you’re killing Gloams and evading the Grays, the next it’s like—I don’t know. It’s like you’ve never eaten a mushroom before. Like you’re experiencing things for the first time.” Cheese paused a moment considering the things he’d seen, read. “What *are* you?”

The-Girl-Who-Might-Be-Seline swallowed, as if considering the question. Her silver eyes became an ocean of storms, as she looked into the middle distance and pointed with fear.

Cheese turned, gripping his sward, which sat beside him, as his adrenaline began to churn. There were no Gloams slowly marching down the stairs, and jackbooted Grays pointing their weapons. Instead, there was an empty stairwell. When he turned, his potion of fruit cocktail was gone, and the last of his mushrooms had disappeared.

Gwimbs’ mouth was full. She shrugged, innocently. “Go?” she suggested around a mouthful of stolen morels.

“A thief,” he laughed, plucking a mushroom from her nimble fingers. “That’s what you are.”

Cheese led the pair into the tunnel towards the front of the subway. Unlike the rest of Frigoris, the Ghost Station walls were largely absent of graffiti, affectionately known by Down Belowers as Truth Tags: small poems, philosophical musings, or vibrant artwork depicting the Moon and Seline Moonchild. Anyone caught with cans of Spray Paint on the streets were summarily imprisoned. The war against Truth Taggers was so merciless, those caught in the act of vandalism were publicly executed, their bodies left to rot in front of their artwork to serve as an example. Of course, Truth stagger rarely demonstrated above given the harsh punishment. It wasn't uncommon to find the tags tucked away in a shadowy corridor, fixed on ceilings well out of eye sight, or hidden in the most dangerous parts of the subway, before the electricity was cut, near the blood and bones; the red and white strips of tape that warn of no clearance between the subway and the walls; if a train appeared while the Truth Tagger worked, four hundred pounds of steel would wipe them from the tracks.

The most prolific Truth Tagger was an artist by the name of 'FIX TRUTH' or FXTRTH, as his tag read. The Grays searched for him for years, as his tags went up throughout the Underground and the streets above. So far, Cheese had personally found over three hundred pieces of the outlaw's work. Always hidden. Always black lettering against a canvas of white paint. Searing words that fixed themselves like a brand in Barvo's mind: *If the Moon is for us, who can be against us, except ourselves?* or *If the subways ran again to tomorrow, would we recall our station? Would we fight? Or blindly run the rail?*

Cheese returned to the beam of his torch as Gwimbs tugged on his sleeve. She pointed to the trails directly in front of them. The tracks ahead appeared to be blocked by a slumbering beast, sleeping with its tail curled around itself. His heartbeat hammered a moment, before he realized what he was staring at.

"It's nothing," his voice echoed against the walls. "A cave-in from long ago." He limped ahead with Gwimbs in tow, held hands aloft. Despite his bravado, Cheese tightened his grip on the handle of his blade. While it had been years since anyone had visited the Ghost Station, who's to say the something wasn't trapped inside? Yes, the tracks were covered in a layer of undisturbed dust, but one could never be too careful, especially given the celestial pickpocket walking beside him. Frigoris was a strange place, growing stranger with each passing second.

The-Girl-Who-Might-Be-Seline has this to say to Cheese's cautiousness: "Go!" she pushed him from behind, exasperated. "Please, go!"

"Hold your horses, sister," he answered irritably, attempting to hold her back with an outstretched arm. "We don't know what's up ahead."

She knocked his arm away and stomped ahead, bathrobe swishing with each clod-hopping step of her oversized boots.

"Fine," he threw up his hands. "*Get* yourself killed," he muttered to himself, but followed all the same.

They stepped into a large chamber with a collapsed roof. The beam of his flashlight revealed a darkened floor overhead. The pile of rubble created a perfect entry point.

Gwimbs paused at the bottom. She looked from Cheese to the pile, to the ceiling. "Go!" she pointed excitedly.

"What's up there?" Cheese asked. As the question left his mouth, he realized that he believed she knew the answer. As if she were privy to secrets of Frigoris down here in the dark.

To answer his question, she mounted the collapsed ceiling of concrete and rebar, and began to climb.

"Will you—" he limped to the base of the pile, extending his hand to help balance her ascent. "You're in a goddamn pair of pajamas," he warned. "You're going to hurt yourself."

She paused and flashed a patronizing smile laced with celestial arrogance or youthful stupidity. "Please," she rolled her eyes.

Cheese followed behind as best he could as they crisscrossed the pile of shifting debris. Several times he had to pause, and adjust his footing, as she scrambled up like an experienced climber. Not once did she stop to catch her breath or look behind. Once more, the task fell to Cheese to keep up as best he could. At the top, she leapt up, and shimmied on to what remained of the collapsed floor.

She helped up once he finally got to the top.

Doubled over, and holding a stitch in his side, he examined their surroundings; a room lined on one side with abandoned holding cells. The wall that bisected it from a locker room served as the ladder they'd just climbed. His eyes widened with excitement when he realized where they stood.

“We’re in the old precinct,” he managed, as he stood to his old height. “When they were first building the subways years and years ago, several structures collapsed as they zeroed in on the best method to build,” he explained to Gwimbs. “For a while they tried boring holes beneath buildings and streets for long stretches of the tunnel, but people didn’t know what they were doing. A bunch of bureaucratic bullshit. Grays granted government contracts without a lick of experience. Buildings collapsed all over the city.’

Rather than raze the damaged building when the ground collapsed beneath them, they would bury the old structure, and start over.” Cheese paused as he let his hand trail across the rusted bars of the holding cells. “Of course, The Grays changed their tune when the first precinct collapsed.” He turned, smiling. “That’s where we are, now. The belly of the beast.”

The Girl Who Might be Seline shrugged, letting herself into one of the cells. She plopped herself down onto the cot within, and said, “Go?”

Cheese shook his head. “This is as good a place as any to hide for now. Who knows?” He walked to the ancient shower and turned a knob on one of the stalls. A brown stream of water spluttered from the showerhead. After several minutes, steam began to rise, and the water cleared to a murky gray. Cheese laughed. “Moon above. I can’t even tell you the last time I had a shower.”

Gwimbs sat up on her elbows and watched him from across the room as he turned on each shower head in kind. Soon, that side of the room was a chorus of steam and streaming water.

He left them running, went up and down the painted lockers, throwing open the rusted doors, and tossing cans of food and clothes on the tiled floor. She held out a hand of warning towards him as he approached, holding a jumpsuit in a plastic bag. “It might be a little big, but it’s clean,” he gestured for her to take it. “Go on. It doesn’t have blood on it, either.”

She slipped out of her robe and peeled off her pajama tops and bottoms before he could protest. Cheese averted his eyes, and turned, quickly but not before he was reminded that despite her seemingly limited vocabulary and innocence, Gwimbs was a young woman. “Moon above,” he blushed. “You certainly aren’t shy, are you?”

“Please,” she answered after a moment of rustling fabric.

When he turned back, she wore the gray jumpsuit. She’d turned up the cuffs of the pant legs, and rolled the sleeves, but otherwise, it fit. She’d replaced her bathrobe, and ignored the boots, instead going barefoot as she sat on the bed.

Cheeks still flush, Cheese handed her what remained of the morning's meals, a tin of corned beef hash, his spoon, and can opener. "I'm going to look around," he stood in the doorway of her cell. "Maybe take a shower. Will you be okay by yourself?"

She nodded.

"I think we should talk when I get back," he said. "Explain who you are, and what you were doing in Foxtrot's apartment. Would you be up for that?"

She stared at him, blankly.

As he walked away, she removed one of Foxtrot's journals and opened to the first page.

As he suspected, the old basement of the Gray precinct was sealed up tight. He found several blind corridors that led into the darkness but did not have the energy to explore them. When he returned to the main room, Gwimbs was asleep beneath the cord scratchy blanket. As quietly as he could, he unbolted the lockers from the cement floor with a socket wrench he carried in his boot and rearranged them to create a privacy wall around one of the communal showers.

With more excitement than he realized he felt, he turned on the shower, and let the water run from brown to a cloudy gray, from cold to hot. He removed his clothing, taking pains to keep from groaning against the frigidity of the air and the pain in his leg. Beneath the torrent of steaming water, he lathered with a flaking bar of soap he'd salvaged from one of the lockers and watched as the grime of the subway disappeared down the drain at his feet. He stood there until he felt a man, until the pain in his leg eased, and the world seemed a brighter place.

Cheese found a jumpsuit his size, and dressed himself, leaving his clothes, freshly laundered, on a line he'd strung himself. His sodden coat, an empty, steaming scarecrow. When he returned to The Girl Who Might Be Seline, he observed her through the bars. She'd fallen asleep, book open on her chest. He found the identical copy he'd taken from her that morning and settled into the adjoining cell beside hers. Skin pink and shining, he watched her rhythmic breathing, as an image of her bare flesh flashed through his mind, unbidden. He pushed the thought aside, and opened Mr. Foxtrot's journal. However, given the excitement of the day, he found it impossible to focus on the detailed schematics or guess at their importance. Instead, he limped to the locker privacy curtain, and found his copy of *The Seven Trials of Seline*. Before diving into its pages, he spared one more glance at the girl.

Seline and the Silence

The Red Stranger led Seline into the bowels of the Underground. The deeper they went, the more serene Moonchild appeared. It was as though, after having been born of the same ground, nourished by her Mother's moonbeams, she was, at long last, going home. Within the earth, she felt a calm she could not experience above ground. She felt she understood humanity's need to burrow, not to hide themselves, but to get closer to the heart of the earth, and its mysterious pull.

"You enjoy it down here?" Red Stranger smiled. His features danced in the light of his torch. They were colored a deep red by the reflected light of the ochre walls.

Despite her inner tranquility, a strange thing happened as she opened her mouth to reply: nothing happened. It was as though the earth had swallowed her voice. She touched her throat with confusion. Her silver eyebrows knit together in consternation.

"The earth and its secrets," The Red Stranger replied, enigmatically. "It's not an uncommon occurrence in these hills. Every so often, the earth reclaims the voice of someone in the tribe until they can find the words."

Why was Seline's unspoken question.

The Red Stranger shrugged his broad shoulders. "It is a mystery," he answered. "But, the price we must pay to call these caverns our home. At times, the earth allows our voice to multiply in echoes when we raise our voice. Occasionally, it brings silence and introspection. We do not question its fickle whims. We simply try to find the words it has taken away." He handed her a tablet of paper and a charred stick. "For now, you will communicate with these until the earth releases your tongue."

Seline Moonchild looked at the tablet and scribbled her question. The Red Stranger knew the query before it was written. "It lasts longer for some. It could be an hour, or a fortnight. Until the truth you need to express sits perched on the tip of your tongue, it will remain as a piece of lead. Heavy and inoperable." He touched the side of her face, tenderly. "Do not look so troubled. The earth does not silence indefinitely. "Consider the truth that needs spoken."

Seline followed The Red Stranger into the winding tunnels as she turned over her thoughts. "What did she need to say?"

The passage terminated into a large room with branching tunnels. A hole in the ceiling sat above a blazing fire, lighting the room a deep, blood red. Sitting around the blaze was a group of hunters and their spouses. Men and women alike. Children played at their feet, brandishing charred sticks in the air.

"Who is your acquaintance?" One of the women around the fire asked.

"A stranger I've rescued from certain death," The Red Stranger replied, slinging his bow from his back. He labeled stew from a cauldron resting in the coals of the fire. He handed Seline a bowlful of the fragrant stew.

"Well, what pray tell is your name, child?" she continued, shifting her focus from The Red Stranger to the celestial beauty.

"Alas," The Red Stranger poured himself a bowl and sat on one of the empty logs. "The earth has swallowed her voice," he explained. "She can no more answer your question than sing a tune."

Days passed within the confines of the tunneled community. She had not forgotten her mother's edict but did not believe her conciliatory mission could be accomplished without words. Instead, she wandered dark corridors and listened to the subterranean murmurs, ghostly echoes of voices carried in the darkness. In the evenings, she ventured out when the moon rode the sky, to be replenished by its silvery beams of light. The act confused The Red Stranger's tribe, who despised the Moon's interference, and hid their faces from her inquisitive face. Seline tried to do so in the dead of night so as not to disturb or offend, but the Red Stranger always seemed to take notice, watching her with resentful eyes.

"Have I offended?" she wrote with a flourish.

The Red Stranger read her words, and shook his head, quietly. "You have vexed," he answered. "If your mother used to tell tales of us as might warriors, did she not paint the Moon as a capricious influence, sent to beguile and destroy our livelihood?"

Seline shook her head.

"Then I know not from where you come?" He answered, remembering the first day he laid eyes on her. While The Sun's spell was broken, the cave's darkness concealed her celestial beauty. "What is your name?" he asked for the hundredth time.

Seline looked down at the tablet, helpless. "I cannot satisfy your curiosity."

"Why?"

"It might be the unraveling of your hospitality," she wrote.

One night, after sitting on a hillock overlooking the valley, she felt her mother's presence beside her. Her light fell on her shoulders like a caress, smothering her hair with maternal love. "Why do you fear the truth?" she asked in a voice suffused with affection.

Seline communicated nonverbally through the language of love which coursed within her veins. "They are my friends," she replied.

"Is their friendship so fickle that it cannot withstand the truth?" The Moon replied. "Before you can reconcile my children, you must reveal yourself."

"What if they reject me?"

"Like they've rejected me?" the Moon countered. "Has embarrassment driven you to such shame you've allowed the earth to steal your voice?"

"I'm afraid," she admitted, wordlessly. A single tear spilled down her porcelain cheek. "I'm not as strong as you, mother. I fear that I will not be able to stand their rejection."

"My child," She crooned. "You'll never know until you have tried, but I will say this. You are my daughter. Just as ancient rivers flow in the hidden recesses of my body, so too does strength flow through yours. You are a celestial. You possess hidden strengths even I am not privy to."

"You believe I should speak up?"

"I believe you should do the right thing, my love."

With that, she felt the moonlight shift towards the valley, flashing silver and shadow across the pockmarked land.

She stood, quietly resolved. As she entered the large, communal chamber, The Red Stranger entered after. "The Moon is full tonight, is it not?"

She felt a churning within the earth, a faint rumbling reverberating in her feet. As ochre dust fell from the ceiling, she looked at the Red Stranger, and felt her tongue untie. She took a breath and spoke the words she knew she must.

"My name is Seline Moonchild," she paused. "And, my mother misses you, terribly."

The sound of scraping metal woke Cheese a couple hours later. Through the bars of the adjoining cell, Gwimbs sat cross-legged on her cot, with a screwdriver and the dismantled parts of a scavenged folding chair surrounding her. When she noticed Cheese's movements, she turned her helmeted, headlamped-head towards him—another find—and blinded him.

She removed it as he cursed and set in on the bed, pointing at a slight angle, illuminating the space between. “S-S-Sorry,” she stammered, and returned to her work, lifting a small soldering iron to the painted gray chair.

“You’ve been busy,” Cheese noted the tools. “How long have I been out?”

The-Girl-Who-Might-Be-Seline shrugged. “Hours.”

“Loquacious as ever, I see,” Cheese sat up. “Did you find any more of those?” he pointed to the headlamp.

Gwimbs nodded, sending a cascade of sparks across her blanket. She patted out the embers before they could erupt in flame.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked, curiosity piqued. He stood, unsteadily and limped towards the bars to inspect her work.

Along with the disassembled folding chair, she had removed springs from the foot of her bed as well as the hinges from her cell door. She turned and looked at Cheese. “Leg,” she answered. “Go,” she mimed an imperfect gate with her index and middle finger. He was momentarily warmed by the care the construction of the brace demonstrated, when she spoiled the moment with: “You,” and “Slow,” and then watched as she drew her thumb across the base of her pale throat.

“I’m touched,” he replied, sardonically.

“Please,” she shrugged, oblivious to his sarcasm.

“Listen,” Cheese returned to his cot. “It’s time you and I had a chat. What were you doing in Mr. Foxtrot’s apartment? Did you have something to do with his death?”

Gwimbs threw the back of the metal folding chair at his head. At the last moment, it caught a current of air, and changed course, slamming into the bars beside him.

“No!” Gwimbs screamed. “No! Did not!”

“Moon above! Why does everyone keep throwing things at my head? Fine,” he answered, believing the vehemence of her denial, the purity of its response. “What the hell were you doing there?”

Gwimbs opened her mouth to speak, thought twice, and shook her head. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Were you there when he was murdered?”

She nodded.

“Did you see who killed him?”

She nodded, once more.

“I know you’re having a hard time trying to talk, but I need some answers, here. A man I know—the leader of my town—is trying to liberate the Down Belowers, do you understand? He believed that Mr. Foxtrot might know something that could help us escape your Mother’s Harvests.”

Gwimbs wiped her nose with the back of his hand. “Not my mother,” she managed with effort.

“Then it’s true?” he leaned forward, excitedly. “The moon we see in the sky is—what? Some kind of weapon? A way to control the population? Your Mother, the Moon-Moon,” he recalled his conversation with Foxtrot, “Is outside this world?”

She touched her chest and pointed to Cheese, and then the air above. “Go,” she nodded.

He laughed in disbelief. “You can get us out. We have to get to Semper. To let him know. To prepare the Underground!”

Gwimbs held up the completed brace, a tangle of leather straps, metal joints and springs. She smiled, hesitantly.

Later on, Cheese finally convinced Gwimbs to take a shower, and burn her old clothes, well, the pajamas, at least. She clung to the bathrobe as Cheese approached with a lighted match as if it were her newborn child he was threatening with the pyre.

Cheese brushed her aside and set the pale blue pajamas alight. “Take the jumpsuit and that damned bathrobe and get in the shower. You’re covered in the Down Below, and we’ll need to blend in when it’s time.

Satisfied, she gathered up the extra journals she was reading and jammed them into her pockets, extending her index finger towards Cheese in a surprisingly apt imitation of the grizzled Deebee. “Go,” she said with a look of utmost seriousness and a tone that brokored no arguments. Gwimbs pointed to the small black diary she’d relinquished lying on Cheese’s cot as if to say, “That one is yours. These are mine.”

Cheese laughed. “Will you go?”

Her absence allowed him a second to breathe. To exhale. To forget about her celestial origins, the Moon, the Grays, or the murder. Cheese laid down on his cot, imagining himself in

his hammock with a book salvaged from the library, and Delta and Juliet on the opposite side of their curtain. He was quickly engrossed in Mr. Foxtrot's journal.

Outside of looking like a serial killer's personal diary, crisscrossed with heavy black lines with ink that often bled through several pages at a time, Cheese was amazed at the artistry caught within the spider webbed ink. It was hard to explain. Mr. Foxtrot had drawn detailed blueprints of the Underground that even Semper Moses would be jealous of. There were stations absent from any map Cheese had ever seen, beautifully rendered sketches, arrival and departure times, and secret exit and entry points throughout Frigoris unknown to any of the Grays, uncontrolled by the Veil of Truth. As an urban explorer by trade and necessity, the journal was a treasure trove of all that was hidden. He knew it would take hours to parse through a handful of pages alone, and that's exactly what he did long after Gwimbs returned from her shower, new and shiny.

“I knew you had it in you,” Yuse smiled, smoothing the ends of his pencil moustache, smiling. “It took you long enough.”

“What can I say, my friend,” Jack shrugged. “You can’t rush greatness.”

The pair leaned against a steel dusted wall. Both sat on the long-dead third rail, which suited them fine. They would die content in knowing that death would find them flat on their asses. The Tube was closed up for the night. Despite his gruff exterior, Gramercy was as fussy as an old house cat when it came to his health. Each head cold or snuffle was treated like a jet of water from a spray bottle. It left him scampering back to the conductor car with the shutters pulled, and doors locked.

“Where’d you get this, by the way?” Yuse shook the mason jar of Kombucha they passed between them.

“Moses sells it by the jar,” Jack answered.

“It works in a pinch,” Yuse sniffed at the liquid and took another drink.

“If you have half a mind, and a little money, you can get drunk on almost anything.” Jack answered.

Yuse pursed his lips, contemplating Jack’s aphorism. “We have spare parts, and the minds are questionable, at best. Where does that leave us?”

“Drinking kombucha from a chipped jar at two in the morning in an abandoned tunnel.”

“Is it abandoned if we’re sitting here, now?”

“Ah,” Jack smacked his lips. “A philosophical question. Like, ‘If a tree pees in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, is it still considered syrup?’”

Paschal nodded as the pair lapsed into silence. “So, this Fidelis: how does he fit into this crazy jigsaw puzzle?”

“It’s ‘jigsaw—jigsaw,” November stood, and danced on the balls of his feet, as he slapped the cold from his face. “I haven’t gotten to that part, yet. I’m introducing characters, piece by piece.”

“Are you through adding characters?”

Jack nodded. “I think so, yeah. We know all of the players, now. There might be a couple along the way; bit parts, but the meat and potatoes are all there.”

“All that’s left is for you to fork around the plate?”

“It’s—

“I meant “fork.”

“Moon above,” Jack took the jar from Yuse. “This is strong stuff, huh?”

The bear sighed, impatiently.

Thinking about Seline—or Gwimbs, or whatever the hell Cheese called her; Jack was having a hard time keeping the bullshit straight at the moment—imagining her hiding under the bed, watching as Mr. Foxtrot was brutally murdered, and with a large assist from Semper Moses’ kombucha, He put a hand to his chest, as the jar rested unsteadily at his side, and began a rendition of a lullaby his mother used to sing to him before she disappeared. Sitting at his bedside, she told him it was her grandmother’s favorite song before *she* was harvested, Back then, music existed as a way to express heartache and desperation, long before living in their world was expression enough:

“Lady sings the blues

She’s got them bad

She feels so sad

Wants the world to know

Just what the blues is all about...

He pictured the sound of the piano as a shadow sliding against a wet, subway wall, the shuffle of the snare drum as the motion of the car along the rail, the guitar, as the listless people, swaying to the rhythm in their puffy coats with their hangdog expressions. An entire symphony of imagined sounds, the squealing cars on a tight curve, the blinking blue feel of it all, a long dormant past, and Seline, at a boxy microphone on the platform, a white orchid tucked behind her ear, singing:

Lady sings the blues

She tells her side

nothing to hide

Now the world will—”

“Jacko!” Yuse bellowed.

“What?” he yelled back, not to be outdone, but to hold onto that fleeting atmosphere, but it was too late. He was back in the dead tunnels of Frigoris. “The hell do you want?”

“What was that?”

“Billie Holiday!”

“Where do you take a ‘Billie Holiday?’ Can you go ‘swimming’ there?” he asked, suddenly interested.

November looked at him with incredulity. “You don’t know who Billie—How do you *not* know who Billie Holiday is? How have you gone—what—thirty-some years without knowing who—” his physical strength outpaced his disbelief. He collapsed onto the third rail beside Yuse. “You’ve disappointed me as a friend, and as a person in general.”

“I can’t remember the last time I heard music on a…” he faltered. “What do you call it, again?”

“A record player.”

“That’s it,” the bear nodded.

Jack’s eyes were far away. “My mom used to sing that to me. One night, she told me her name when I asked if she made up the song herself. ‘Billie Holiday,’” he tasted the peat and smoke of it on his tongue. “I think her name was why I fell in love with words,” he paused. “It sounded so magical.”

“My mom used to thrash us behind the ears.”

“Mine’s better,” November drained the rest of the mason jar.

Yuse grabbed his shoulders and shook him, affectionately. “You know what’ll take your mind off this?”

“Getting out of this moon forsaken shithole?” he motioned to the subway.

“And, who knows?” Yuse shrugged. “Maybe our departure is close at hand. Go on.”

They woke to the sound of footsteps echoing in the dark. Across the room, Cheese heard Gwimbs frantically fumbling with the headlamp she’d fallen asleep with. Before she could click it on with trembling fingers, he quickly slipped out of his cot, and bridged the short distance between

them, reaching through the rusted bars, and placing his hands on her gloved ones. He shook his head slowly, whispering, “Shhh,” in a barely audible register. “The Gloam,” he concluded, grimly.

For a moment, the plodding footsteps stopped.

Cheese reached beneath his cot and picked up his sword. When he righted himself, crouching beside Gwimbs, he gently bounced on the pads of his feet, giving his braced knee cautious pressure. No pain. Shielding the torch from his trench coat pocket with his cupped hand, he turned on the red light, and motioned for her to follow. They met at their cell doors.

The footstep began anew.

Step.

Step.

Step.

“Your gloves,” he whispered. Cheese mimed the gesture she’d done to dispatch the Gloam on the Lunar Mont.

She swallowed against the fear choking the darkness and stepped in front of Cheese. He held her hand, with his other gripped around his sword. They walked down a long hallway in a pale patch of red. He tugged on her hand before rounding the corner.

One... he gestured.

Two...

Three...

They burst into the room.

Cheese started to laugh as the balled fist of his insides unclenched.

A steady drip of water leaked from the cracked ceiling onto a dusty blue tarp. It thudded against the file cabinet it was tossed over.

Step...

Drip...

Step...

Drip...

In spite of their fear a moment before, Cheese and Gwimbs began to laugh. In a moment of fellowship, she placed her head on his shoulder, hand over his mouth, as her giggles bounced off the walls. It sounded like music to Cheese, ethereal. He felt like the Red Stranger catching glimpses of the celestial beneath the carapace of feigned humanity.

In the morning, Cheese took a second shower, appreciating full well that the opportunity may not present itself again. After luxuriating in the warm water, he slipped back into his Gray jumpsuit, and revisited Foxtrot's journals. To his surprise, he found a crude drawing of the precinct basement they currently found themselves. They indicated a network of vents, and where they'd exit in the remodeled precinct above.

After their brush with the File-Cabinet-Gloom, he'd moved his roll-up mattress and blanket, and laid on the floor beside Gwimbs. They couldn't afford to be separated if real danger actually struck. He excitedly shook Seline's foot to wake her.

Her eyes shot open, and she scrambled into the corner of her cell. With her shoulder blades pressed to the bar, her breathing slowed as she remembered where she was.

"Sorry," Cheese held up a hand to calm her. "I didn't mean to startle you. Look," he shoved the journal into her hands. "Foxtrot knew about this place." He pointed to the hash marks used to indicate their cells, and the others on the block. With the tip of his finger, he traced it down the hallway they visited last night. "There's a vent pretty close to the leak. If we can climb up, we can get into the Gray precinct."

She looked at him like he was insane. In his defense, she seemed to have a resting panic-face for most of her waking hours.

"We'd have to disguise ourselves. Tuck your hair into your suit, wear helmets to cover our faces. It'll be pretty dicey, but we can't stay here, right?"

Seline reluctantly handed the journal back to Cheese, though her eyes watched it greedily, until he replaced it to his trench coat pocket.

She pointed towards the ceiling. "Go," she stammered, nodding. "We...need to go."

"That's right," he patted the leg of her cot. "The brace you've made will hide the limp enough to get the hell out of there without being noticed."

Later that day, after shoving his trench coat, and Foxtrot's robe—which Seline refused to leave behind—into a duffel bag from one of the lockers, Cheese and Moonchild pushed the filing cabinet beneath the ventilation shaft the journal indicated as an exit. With his torch in his mouth, Cheese led them through the winding tunnels, until they arrived at a dead end.

The room beyond contained the precinct's boiler. A dense forest of sweating pipes greeted their arrival with a rattling 'hello.' Outside of the network of metal, they were alone.

Cheese wished he was armed with his Swoard, but it was lying beside his trench coat of goodies in the duffel bag against his back. Hopefully, they could escape without drawing the attention from an entire building of Grays who were actively searching for them in every nook and cranny of Frigoris.

He pulled the visor down on his helmet, craning his neck to look back at Seline. "Remember," he whispered, "Act like you belong."

She nodded her head twice, pointing towards the vent.

"All right, All right," he muttered. He removed the duffel bag from his shoulder and extracted Mr. Foxtrot's bathrobe. Seline made to grab it, but Cheese swatted her away. "I'm not going to pitch it," he placed it against the grate. "We don't want to announce our presence, either." He brought his heel against the fabric with a muffled thud, again, and again, and again, until—

"We're in," he scooted into the room, and stood, helping Seline to her feet. He brushed the dust from her jumpsuit, adjusting the helmet. Tapping the side once, he gave her a thumbs up, and knelt to retrieve the duffel bag.

She pointed to his leg and mirrored his thumbs up. "Good?"

"Yeah, it's fine," he wiped the dust from his shoulder, and crammed the bathrobe back into the bag. He touched her shoulders, and said, "Remember: we belong here, alright? Walk, don't run. If anyone tries to stop us, or ask us questions, keep moving. Do not stop, Seline. Do you understand?"

Cheese watched his reflection in the visor of Seline's helmet as it bobbed up and down. She flashed another thumbs up to prove her point.

"Okay," he took a deep breath, hand on the doorknob. "No matter what happens: stay close. If I say run, you run, okay? If we get separated, Semper Moses lives in the north of the city in the Solitudinus terminal. He'll be able to help," he released his breath. He turned the knob, and said, "Let's go."

They stood at the closed, frosted glass doorway of the boiler room. Cheese had his ear pressed to it, listening for activity, an errant patrolman on his way to a filing room, or to check on a prisoner. Foxtrot's schematics indicated the Red lock-up was on their floor. Even though he was

tempted to find it and liberate his comrades, Cheese and Seline's immediate needs already entailed too much risk. They had to escape, hopefully unseen.

Cheese looked at Gwimbs and paused before turning the doorknob. "I have my Sward in the duffel if things go sideways. Keep those gloves of yours ready, too. I may need your help, yeah?"

Seline nodded.

"Any last words?" he whispered.

"Go," she pushed him, gently.

"Remember," Cheese said. "We belong here." He turned the knob and stepped into the Mountain Lion's den.

They found themselves in a dingy, dimly lit hallway. Like the rest of Frigoris, infrastructure had never been a priority since the Rebuilding. With the last piece of plywood, and fresh coat of paint, hands became more preoccupied with seizing power and retaining it. Cheese long suspected that the Grays at the top had their hands in The Harvest Selection; which caste was taken and who. It didn't matter if it was a Gray Year if the people culled were the paeans in charge of tax code and housing selection. As long as City Hall and The Precinct brass were safe, they looked the other way. Regardless, whatever kickbacks or longevity they received it did not go towards the precinct.

Cheese was reminded of the derelict office buildings near the center of town. Once bustling signs of bureaucracy, they lay dormant now, a haven for Truth Taggers. Sometimes, Cheese would find Fix Truth's work, always with some veiled references to the Oceanus Procellarum terminal, or a philosophical knife to the heart, cutting through Frigoris' layers of bullshit: *None of this matters. Find the Oceanus.*

Seline tapped his shoulder.

A uniformed Gray was walking down the hall with an open folder in his hands. His head was down. He was whistling, and humming a few discernible bars:

"Strawberry Moon, just a little dum... Our clothes in piles, duh, dum, dum, duh, dum."

Cheese made to unzip the duffel bag and remove his Sward. Gwimbs grabbed his arm as she shook her head.

Hearing the movement, The Gray startled. "Moon above!" A couple of papers drifted to the floor. "You gave me a fright!" He was stocky with a meaty toaster for a head. The rolls at the back of his collar were pink and bristled with blonde hair. As he harrumphed into a kneel to pick

up the papers, his eyes lingered on Cheese and Gwimbs' outdated uniforms. "Whose shit list are both of you on?" he chuckled. "I know they've put a hold on uniform reappointments until after The Harvest, but those are positively ancient. Can you give me a hand?"

After exchanging a look with Seline while the Grays attention was engaged with the Sisyphean cascade of paperwork, Cheese shrugged, and knelt alongside the fumbling Gray. He gathered up papers, and feigned nonchalance. "My supervisor said that if a coupla Grays get torched, I can have one of theirs, but for now, to shut my yapper."

"Sounds about right," The Gray used the flat of his hand against the wall to push himself up. "It's always the dickheads who get the promotion, huh?" He looked from Cheese to Gwimbs, then up and down the hallways. "What about the helmets?" he asked, slowly, reflexes coiling. "What are you two doing down here, anyway?"

Before Cheese could formulate a response, Gwimbs punched the man in his solar plexus. As he doubled over, grasping his chest, Gwimbs clasped her hands together and brought them down atop the Gray's purpling, toaster head. He collapsed onto the floor, unconscious.

"G-g-go," Gwimbs began to walk down the hallway towards the stairs.

Cheese found his tongue. "Moon-above!" he knelt down and cupped the man's armpits. "A little warning next time would be nice. Help me with this galoot."

Gwimbs hesitated, indecisively.

"If we leave him here, we won't get far, I can promise you that." Cheese dragged the Gray towards the boiler room. "*He* didn't kill Foxtrot, all right?" Cheese grunted, irritably. "You can't go hauling off on every Gray you come across. It's a fact of life: the sun and moon rise every day, and bodies need cleaning. Now, get your ass over here and help."

Gwimbs unglued herself from the floor. After they moved the Gray into the boiler room, shoved a sock into his mouth, and handcuffed him to a pipe. Standing over his unconscious body, Cheese removed his helmet. "We can't go upstairs dressed like this. At least, not both of us." He flattened his hair and looked at Gwimbs. "How do I look?"

She pulled a face.

Cheese grimaced. "Doesn't matter. We need to blend in, and people are going to notice two Grays dressed in rags from another era. They don't know what I look like," he wagered, "Just a general description. "With my limp gone, and your hair hidden, we might stand a chance as long as ol' lumpy here doesn't wake up," he tapped the unconscious man's leg with the side of his boot.

He grabbed the file the Gray was looking at before he met the business end of The-Girl-Who-Might-Be-Seline's fury. He headed towards the door. "Come on."

Upstairs, the main floor was an open area populated with rows of desks in various forms of tidiness. Some were manned by detectives studying paperwork or chatting on black rotary telephones. No one paid Cheese and Seline any mind as they walked past their workstations. The snippets on conversations they overheard focused primarily on them. Loose physical descriptions, possible motives behind Foxtrot's murder. He even heard Semper Moses' name mentioned, but he couldn't linger, lest they draw attention to themselves.

"Keep moving," Cheese whispered to Seline as she kept pace with his quick stride. As they passed a kitchenette, he touched her arm. "Hang on," he said, pausing near the refrigerator. Looking to the left and right, he opened the refrigerator door to restock their provisions. It was a risky move, but there was no telling when they'd get back to the safety of the Underground, and their provisions were low; a couple of cans of beans, at most. Cheese handed her the duffel bag as he dipped his head and shoveled whatever he could get his hands on; labeled containers of leftovers, jars of olives, pickles, pudding, and packages of cheese.

Gwimbs repeatedly tapped his back.

"Okay, okay," He closed the door, and jammed a couple of loaves of bread from atop the fridge, and a jar of chunky peanut butter. He zipped the bag, slung it over his shoulder, and motioned for Gwimbs to follow. Before the pair could leave the kitchen area, a deep voice boomed near the staircase. "Hey!" it screamed. "Wait right there!"

Detectives looked up momentarily before returning to their paperwork. Despite his insistence that they'd run if they were noticed, both Cheese and Gwimbs remained glued in place, their hands caught in the proverbial cookie jar.

A Gray approached. He wore a white button down, khakis, and a look of stern disapproval which he pinned on Cheese over his aquiline nose. He shook his index finger at the pair as he drew closer. "You," he said.

"Me?" Cheese replied, innocently.

"Yes, *you*," The Gray stopped, arms akimbo. "I saw you, don't try to lie."

The-Girl-Who-Might-Be-Seline tugged at his sleeve. He discretely splayed his fingers, a gesture that said: *wait*. To the irate Gray, he kept his voice neutral, and said, “You saw what?” while everything in his body told him to strike, to run, to escape.

The Gray officer shook his head in disbelief. His hand rested above his holstered gun. “You think you can just *waltz* through here like you own the place?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he countered.

Go!

Go!

Go!

“You can drop the act,” The Gray mistook Cheese’s flop sweat and dilated pupils as guilt. “Someone has been stealing my pudding now for months, and I finally caught you in the act.” He held out his hand. “Give it up.” He lowered his voice, and leaned in. “Unless you want me to cause a stink and tell *everyone* what I just saw? Mine wasn’t the only food you lifted.”

Cheese stomach unclenched. He fought the urge to laugh. Instead, he feigned embarrassment and unzipped the duffel. He pulled out the chocolate pudding cups and handed them over. “Sorry,” he said. “Had to stock up for our stakeout,” he gestured to Gwimbs.

“A man’s pudding cups are a sacred thing,” The Gray replied, seriously. “Don’t let it happen again,” he jabbed Cheese in the chest before turning, and stomping off.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he whispered to Gwimbs, guiding her by the elbow. They reached the exit without further incident and stepped onto a wide concrete dais overlooking the east side of Frigoris Commons. Directly to the north was a small cluster of rundown restaurants that catered to the Gray officers on their lunch breaks. An entrance to the Underground—the yellow line, which traversed the river Down Below—was located in the alleyway behind a hole in the wall diner. Unfortunately, there wasn’t an active Veil of Truth nearby. The one near the Lunar Mont was scheduled to shift, and Cheese hadn’t heard where the new location would be since they’d gone into hiding. So, even if they were able to get to the manhole cover, it would dead end in the sewers; they’d be trapped like rats.

While he turned over the problem in his head, he replaced his helmet, and forced himself to walk calmly at Gwimbs’ side. He was sure it was his imagination, but he could feel the looming concrete edifice of the precinct scrutinizing their every move. “Slow down,” he tugged on Gwimbs’

hand. "We don't want to arouse anyone's suspicions." He also left another truth unspoken: the Gloam could be nearby. They left the concrete, and jogged across the street, entering the well-tended sidewalks of the Commons, passing beneath the orange sodium glow of overhead lights made to look like antiquated lamps from a bygone age when lamplighters lit them each night. They were about to walk beneath the desiccated foliage of a parched blossom tree, when the doors of the precinct burst open. Cheese turned at the commotion even as he pushed Seline onwards.

Beefy Toaster Head and Pudding Cup stood just outside the doors, eyes searching up and down the street. Toaster Head locked into their position first. He pointed his Vienna sausage finger at Cheese, handcuffs dangling from his wrist, and screamed, "Don't move!"

"Always with the running," Cheese hissed under his breath. He dropped pretense and began to match Seline's hurried pace. "Let's go! Towards those buildings!" He pointed to the cluster of restaurants just ahead at the perimeter of the park. Cheese looked back, once more, and noticed a handful of Grays charging across the street. From the sides of the building stepped two Gloams, who joined the chase in their own ineffable stride.

Cheese and Seline ran through the park towards the crumbling section of abandoned businesses near the waterfront to the south. Despite the adrenaline coursing through his body and the blooming pain in his leg, he could smell the acrid water of the river, a combination of pollution and decay. Against the tops of the greasy spoons, he could see the enormous bones of the suspension bridge looming in the distance like a sleeping giant, highlighted by the faint luminescence given off by the water below.

Cheese tossed the duffel bag on to the ground near a manhole cover behind one of the restaurants, unzipping his jumpsuit. "Keep an eye out!" he pointed around the corner, as he peeled the jumpsuit down to his waist. "How much time do we have?"

Gwimbs peered around the corner as Cheese frantically searched the area for a crowbar.

"Not long," her tongue untied itself, momentarily.

Cheese jogged to her side and watched as Toaster Head and Pudding Cup outpaced the officers at their rear. Another pair of Gloam joined their dark compatriots. They had somehow taken the lead without changing stride. Their fiery eyes painted the ground at their feet an electric blue. The sound of swishing leather met their ears as a death sentence.

“Can you do your—” Cheese mimed the gesture she had done on Lunar Mont to dispatch the first death dealer.

Gwimbs pinned her elbows to her side, while her body thrummed with tension. A thin film of sweat stood out on her brow. When she forcefully brought her hands forward with a scream—palms outstretched, fingers splayed—nothing happened. Breathing heavily, she clapped her hands together, trying to get the gloves to cooperate. Finally, she cast Cheese a hopeless shrug. “Nothing.”

“Okay,” he looked at the outline of the (Something) bridge to the northeast. His breath quickened as it swam in his vision. Even with the Gray and Gloam on their tail, a primal fear clutched his chest, threatening to turn his bowels into water. **(Establish his fear of heights earlier in the story)**. He hooked his arm around Gwimbs’ waist and pried her from the mouth of the alley. They ran past the manhole even as she looked back, wondering what had changed, realizing—without her powers—they were as good as dead.

Pounding footsteps echoed in the alley behind them as they sprinted towards the water, zigzagging as they moved to keep from getting shot or left as a pile of clothing. As they ran onto the bridge, steam from the river drifted in between abandoned cars populating the road. Some were still locked in decades old accidents, hoods crumpled, windshields shattered. Oddly enough, they formed a barrier in the center of the road, extending to the sidewalks, preventing easy progress.

Cheese helped Gwimbs onto the hood of a car and was about to join her when the sound of gunfire tore the fabric of the night. He froze, shoulders hunched, jaw clenched, expecting to feel pain, as cries reverberated throughout the streets. When he opened his eyes, he saw that Gwimbs was looking to the sky. Muzzles flashed from the towers overhead as corresponding gunshots brought down Grays foolish enough to venture towards the pair.

The Gloam stood at the seam where the road ended, and the bridge began. They flinched as bullets pierced their bodies from above, but they did not advance. Their faces remained inscrutable even as the one on the far left was shot through the eye. Its helical flame wavered momentarily as the caved in structure of its face rebuilt itself. When its corpse-like flesh and muscles returned unblemished, the creature’s inner forge rekindled the bright blue fire.

“Why did they stop?” Cheese wondered, wide eyed. “Why aren’t they evaporating us?”

Gwimbs smiled, mysteriously as gunshots continued to rain down, and the Grays retreated. “It’s the water,” she replied calmly. Her voice, calm, sure. “They can’t hurt us on the bridge.”

Before Cheese could marvel at her unimpeded speech, two half-body climbing harnesses were lowered from the bridge’s tower by a thick cable.

“Strap in!” A cheerful female voice called from above.

Cheese hesitated.

“You have two options,” the voice reasoned. “By now, the Grays we’ve left alive are radioing to those in Frigoris North. They’ll blockade the other side and wait for you there while they summon reinforcements. The Gloam won’t venture onto our bridge.”

“Why?”

“They’re afraid of the water.”

“How do I know you’re—”

A sniper bullet took down an injured Gray crawling towards them from the street.

“Apologies,” the voice continued. “You were saying?”

“How do we know we can trust you?”

The voice’s high laughter echoed across the turbid water. “You can’t trust *anyone* in Frigoris.

Cheese looked at Gwimbs. She’d removed her helmet. Her silver blonde hair fell across her shoulders. “What do you think?” he asked.

In reply, she slipped into the harness, and tightened the straps around her waist and thighs.

“Okay,” he shrugged, peering into the shadows above. “We’re coming up.”

“*Air straddlers?*” Yuse spit on the dead third rail. “They put their trust in Air Straddlers?”

“They get a bad rap,” Jack replied, evenly.

Yuse widened his eyes. “Nothing sacred to them, that’s why! They won’t live on the land, or below it. They don’t even believe in the Moon!”

“They believe in the moon,” Jack rolled his eyes. “You’re being melodramatic.”

“No,” Yuse shook his head, drunkenly. “They think it’s just a dead hunk of rock in the sky.

“Everyone’s entitled to their own beliefs,” Jack shrugged. “As long as they’re not hurting anyone, what difference does it make?”

“What about all the Grays they gunned down, Jacko?” Yuse replied. “Don’t you consider murder ‘hurting someone?’

“Straddlers refuse to grant The Grays Eminent Domain,” Jack answered, testily. “They won’t tolerate the law tromping onto their land and pretending like they own it like they do the rest of Frigoris. Listen to yourself,” Jack shook his head with disgust. “You want to talk about ‘sacred,’ Yuse? They could raid the Underground *tonight*, and we’d be arrested for trespassing. We’ve been down here for decades! This is our home, and it would be gone like ‘that,’” he snapped his fingers. Silence enveloped the pair. Jack’s carbide headlamp illuminated one of Fix Truth’s countless ‘pages’; black cursive against a white background. It read: *The path to freedom lies in the Ocean of Storms.*

Jack continued in a subdued voice magnified by the underground tunnel. “I don’t feel sorry for those who lose their lives while they’re trying to make others worse. I don’t care if they’re Gray or Red. Down Belowers or Air Straddlers. It’s hard to live your life with a boot against your back.”

Yuse lifted his eyebrows with a cowed expression. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

“Forget it,” Jack clicked off his lamp. Just, shut up a minute, okay? Let’s sit in our own private darkness awhile. Say a prayer that they can’t take that from us, too.”



Following the revelation of her identity to The Red Stranger and his tribe, Seline knew that it was time to leave. Whereas a warm atmosphere of conviviality existed before, it hardened to a carapace of distrust and hostility.

One night, The Red Stranger slipped into her bed chamber, a carved out hollow in the hillside, and knelt before her: "The time has come for you to leave us, Seline Moonchild. It is no longer safe for you here."

Seline looked into the Red Stranger's inscrutable eyes. "Has something transpired of which I am unaware?"

The Red Stranger scoffed. "Unaware, or unwilling to see, perhaps. You make my people uneasy."

"Why?" she replied.

"Your birthright," The Red Stranger stood. "Your mission," he stood. "We have spent years enlarging our tunnels to remove ourselves from the Moon's intrusive interference, and you walk into our home without incident. Without invitation."

"You invited me," he corrected her.

"A mistake," he replied simply.

Seline stared at her hands. Shadows from the firelight danced across the walls, a living thing. A series of tunnels dug into the walls drew the smoke from the chamber, dispersing it above ground in ways that kept it from gathering as a column, a smoke signal revealing the tribe's location to The Moon. That is, until Seline brought Her there with her presence. Perhaps revealing her identity was a mistake. Even with her voice returned to her, if no one listened, or recoiled from the message, what good was it after all?

"I will leave," she said after a time. "I did not mean to cause problems for your kith and kin."

The Red Stranger softened at the sincerity in Moonchild's voice. Despite having been an emissary for The Sun, he held no ill will towards the silver-headed stranger, even if he was still in the fiery Mountain Lion's employ. "I will go with you to assist in navigating the dangers. They are numerous and varied."

"Your kindness warms me more than the fire," she smiled, observing the smooth walls of her chamber. "I will be sorry to leave the confines of this hill. It has reminded me of the safety of Mother's womb, like a warm embrace."

"If you do not leave by first light, you never will, Seline," he whispered. "There is a plot against your life. Pack your belongings. We will leave before the rising of The Sun."

Seline nodded without another word.

The Red Stranger left her.

In the morning, the landscape was a wash of blacks and blues. The hillocks were wreathed in a blanket of cottony mist. Seline stood beside The Red Stranger, both dresses for the chill.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked as they stood in the mouth of the caves.

The Red Stranger shrugged. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "I do not agree with your mission, nor do I yearn for reconciliation with your mother."

"Then, why?"

He turned the question over in his mind. After a moment, he said, "Perhaps I feel a responsibility towards you. I cannot explain it."

"My mother is extremely persuasive. Maybe she's softening your heart without your knowledge."

"No," he shook his head, simply. "I have seen you in action on the plains, Seline Moonchild. Without my help, you would die."

"I know that you do not believe, but my mind is fixed on the certainty. Your kindness is due to the intervention of my mother."

The Red Stranger's anger flared. In order to dispel the celestial of her foolish notions, he revealed his harsh truths. "You know not of what you speak! When I met you the other day, it was not by happenstance! I was sent by The Sun to deliver you from his machinations."

Seline's eyes remained untroubled. "Because The Moon willed it. You cannot convince me otherwise."

He stomped off down the hill, vexed, muttering, "Foolish girl," to himself. When a considerable distance opened between them, he paused, and turned back. "Are you coming, or not?"

She smiled. "I am coming."

Through the day, the sky blazed overhead bringing color to The Red Stranger and Seline Moonchild's cheek. It burned off the chill of the morning and blazed above. At times Seline thought she could hear The Mountain Lion purring nearby, whispering, "You cannot trust him...he revealed the truth himself, child. He is deceitful. Even now, he leads you into a danger you cannot see."

She kept her eyes fixed on his muscled back. His battle axe glinted in the sun like a handful of coins. "You cannot fool me," she answered. "I trust him with my life. My mother wills it."

“Then your life will be forfeit,” sunlight dappled the ground, tauntingly. “Before the day is through, your life will be cut short, and he will abandon your body. It will return to the earth and feed the worms.”

She paused and bent her legs, her arms pinned to her sides, hands primed to unleash her celestial power. “If you continue to taunt me, I will make you bleed. I’ve done it once before.”

Chastened, the Mountain Lion disappeared behind a scudding bank of clouds. “I warned you, girl. You cannot trust him. You cannot trust anyone.”

“Who are you talking to?” The Red Stranger paused. A line of sweat soaked the back of his shirt. He paused and passed her an animal skin of water.

She took a drink. “I was talking to myself,” Seline lied, convincingly. “Practicing the words my mother wants me to deliver.”

As he capped the job and marched ahead, she watched him. A hint of suspicion bloomed in her chest.

Later that day they came to a violently rushing river. A rope bridge connected the banks. It was flanked by two large trees with drooping crowns, which brushed against the grass. Even though it was near midday, the Sun continued to hide its presence, bathing the world in an eldritch half-light. The limbs of the trees swayed invitingly in the faint breeze.

The Red Stranger held his fist in the air, a gesture of caution. “This passing is unfamiliar to me,” he sniffed at the air.

Seline, however, did not hear the note of caution in the hunter’s voice. Instead, she watched the dancing limbs transfixed, entranced. The longer she peered into the tangled skeins of arboreal life, the more certain she became that the rustling leaves were speaking a language she had somehow forgotten. If she could only get closer, to bend an ear and draw a veined leaf to the fine porcelain of her ear, it would impart mystical secrets to help her complete her quest.

Rather than walking the well-worn path leading to the bridge, she chose another. It was equally worn and led to the trunk of the willow on the right-hand side of the bridge before The Red Stranger realized what was happening—for he was trying to ascertain the nature of danger he sensed.

The moment she stepped through the tendrils of leaves; her hair whipped around her face as the pads of her feet were lifted gently from the ground. She leaves susurrated around the soft contours of her face, while her hands were drawn upwards in a graceful pirouette.

A voice sounded in her head: "What is the nature of your heartbreak?" it said.

She answered internally, hovering in the air, carried by the foliage. "I am not heartbroken," she replied, surprised more so by the question. In truth, she was oblivious to her place in space and time, transfixed by the spell of the Weeping Willow.

A limo vine twined around her face and pierced her heart, probing. "You lie to us, girl. Why should we let you pass and add your unshed tears to the rushing river? It is already engorged with the sorrows of this world."

"You are the one questioning my reply. Shouldn't you, then, provide the answer?" Her face was wet with unexplainable tears.

Meanwhile, the Red Stranger used the sharpened blade of his battle axe to attack the branches holding Seline in place. Unbeknownst to him, the willow's twin to the left of the bridge was inching a branch towards his ankle.

The willow tightened its grip around Seline's waist. "The nature of those you've come to save saddens you. You long for their trust, and affection, yet you do not know how to engender it."

"You speak the truth," she answered, dreamily. "I want the Stranger's trust, yet he only gives me brute force and silence."

The willow twitched once more. As it probed the inner chambers of Moonchild's heart, it came across a rush of celestial quicksilver. A quickening, an onslaught of love hidden by The Moon. It recoiled at the terrible warmth. It dispelled the sadness it was slowly poisoning her body with.

Seline stirred from her torpor as the heightened sadness retreated from her veins. The willow shattered. She tore her arms loose from the branches that bound them and summoned the crescent blade from her chest. It sliced through the tendrils and lodged itself in the bole of the tree.

Falling to the ground, she rounded on the trampled grass beneath the decapitated willow and observed the Red Stranger, similarly bound. His eyes were glassy as the tree slowly heightened his sadness, drew it out of him to poison his blood with despair. With vision doubling from exhaustion—for it took a great deal out of her to summon her celestial strength—Seline cast her blade one more.

The Red Stranger fell in a heap, coughing, face wet with tears. He scrambled from the tree onto the path in the center.

The felled branches writhed on the ground and were still.

"What did you see?" she asked as she knelt by his side and helped him to his feet. "It caused visions of disquiet and mistrust."

"I saw you wandering the woodland alone." The answer seemed to startle him. He closed his mouth and let his face return to stone, lest he say anymore.

"Well," she kept the smile from her face. "The nightmare is over, now. Let us cross the bridge."

The Red Stranger began to chuckle. "We are about to cross into unfamiliar territory, Moonchild. It could serve host to terrors I have never encountered. The nightmare is just beginning."



A hand pulled Cheese onto the platform of one of the gothic-arched suspension bridge's two towers (**describe the bridge in greater detail before arriving on top of the tower: think Brooklyn Bridge**). Three separate barrel fires burned equidistantly atop its surface in the center of a space roughly one hundred and twenty feet long, and sixty feet wide. Shadows gathered around them for warmth, or to feed the flames, against Frigoris' gusting wind. Those not tending to their chapped hands were stationed at sheets of steel, buttressed by welded metal, wooden pallets, and whatever else could be scavenged to secure the surprisingly durable perimeter walls. Wide rectangles had been removed from the metal, or spaces left open in the wood to allow snipers a wide range of few. Four sat crouched and waiting, eyes pressed to scopes, in case Gray patrols returned—or worst—The Gloam. However, if the Gloam conquered their unaccountable fear of water, bullets would be useless.

Gwimbs stepped to his side as he freed himself from his harness, adjusting the brace Gwimbs had constructed for him through the fabric of his pants. The leather straps bit into his leg.

"Welcome," the female voice greeted them. The body it belonged to stepped towards the fire, revealing a woman in her late forties. She blew into her hands, rubbing them vigorously, as she removed an olive green scally cap, revealing a cascade of smooth, salt and pepper hair. Her eyes were wide set, with a Grecian nose perched between. The woman's shockingly black eyebrows above contracted, imbuing her gaze with a shrewd, glittering quality of intelligence. She wore a tight black sweater and pants, the legs of which were tucked into oil-spill polished, steel-toe work boots. Knee and elbows pads completed the impression of a guerilla soldier; a capable one at that. Sufficiently warmed, she invited them towards the barrel with a sweeping gesture and a smile. "Please. Make yourselves comfortable. But, keep your heads down," she tilted her head towards

their makeshift walls. “The Grays can’t shoot for shit, but we live in a land with a murderous Moon and Zombie foot soldiers, so anything’s possible,” she shrugged. “Name’s Onkalo. Onkalo Fidelis.”

Before Cheese could reply, she added, “You must be Chaz Barvo.” Onkalo turned to Gwimbs. “Which would make you the beguiling ‘Jane Doe.’” She sat down on a plastic bucket, chuckling at the looks of surprise on their shadow-dancing faces. “I’m not clairvoyant, I promise you. Your names are the talk of the town. Wanted murderers,” her eyebrows jumped in appreciation. “Tip of the cap to you both.”

Cheese and Gwimbs sat down on upturned plastic buckets beside Onkalo. They’d discarded their helmets on the bridge, as their disguises were useless now. He still had their duffel bag, but, at the moment, the thought of food at those heights turned his stomach. He tried to ignore them, and said, “Thank you for saving our lives.”

“First and foremost, I was protecting our land,” Onkalo corrected him. “No offense. I’m sure you and yours were worth saving, but our home comes first.”

He answered with a shrug of acknowledgment, surveying the platform. “Not a lot of space to speak of.”

“Be it ever so humble.” she answered.

Cheese snapped his eyes shut as they reached the end of the platform.

“Fraid’ah heights, huh? No judgement here,” she laughed, a floorboard creak of a thing, full of dusty corners you’d want to curl up in. “What about you, ‘Jane?’” Onkalo measured Gwimbs, appraisingly. “Having any *vertiginous* thoughts?”

The Girl Who Might Be Seline glanced at Cheese, who had tucked his head between his knees. She shook her head discreetly, mouthing ‘No.’

“That’s good,” Onkalo stood. “I don’t think it’s particularly wise for you to leave tonight,” she stood, and walked to the edge of the platform with her hands in the pockets of her pants. “You’ll stay with us.”

“I’ll take our chances,” Cheese stood, uncertainly.

“You’re looking a little green around the gills, Cheese,” a playful voice resolved itself from the shadows. A figure stepped from around one of the barrels. A man in an avocado green peacoat, with a tattered book tucked into one its pockets. He wore fingerless gloves and a playful smile.

“Jack November,” Cheese returned the smile, momentarily forgetting his altitude sickness. The old friends embraced as Gwimbs looked on.



“That’s you!” the bear of a man exclaimed, delightedly.

“Yeah,” Jack nodded with quiet satisfaction

“You’re in the story!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!”



“What’re you doing up here?” Cheese slapped the sides of November’s coat. The pair knew each other from countless afternoons sifting through the remains of the bombed out Public Library. They’d spend hours lifting up books from the rubble and flashing them to the other to see if they were interested in the find. A mutual appreciation developed over time that manifested itself in the occasional daytime scavenger hunt or a drink at Gramercy’s bar in November’s terminal.

“When your name started bouncing around Frigoris, I went looking for you in Solitudinus,” November the terminal Cheese called home. “With Gray reports, you never know how much true, and how much is fabrication. When I got there, I ran into Semper Moses; he knows we’re friendly. Plus, I’ve done some work for him in the past. Delivered a couple messages. Got information that needed getting. What?” November smiled. “You’re not the only one that Semper trusts.”

“Your friend arrived a few hours before you did,” Onkalo added. “He had the gall to waltz under my tower, and yell, ‘If anyone’s interested, I’ve got a bridge to sell you!’ By then the sun was setting,” she smirked. “I had to let the rake stay. Besides, he’d said he’d haunt me if he died being turned away.” Even in the half-shadow and swaying firelight, Onkalo’s look of abject lust was impossible to miss.

November feigned nonchalance, for the moment, ignoring the Air Straddler’s affections. His eyes fell to The Girl Who Might Be Seline. “Your partner in crime?” he asked Cheese without looking away. “And, who might you be?”

As the question left his mouth, the full moon slipped from a cloud bank and a gust of wind buffeted the platform. Her hair whipped free from the collar of her jumpsuit. In a flash, her features were highlighted with a patina of silvery moonlight. Her eyes transformed to a pearlescent gray as she stood to her full high, momentarily inhabiting a celestial posture of forbidding grace and surety.

“Gwimbs,” she replied.

November looked at Cheese. “She glows.”



He lowered his voice for November’s benefit. “She might do *more* than that.”

November arched an eyebrow.

“Let’s find a corner,” he indicated the crowded platform. “I’ll do my best not to throw up and tell you what’s been going on for the last few days.”

“No can do, gents,” Onkalo shook her head as she walked over from the fire barrels. She offered a smile towards Gwimbs, and said, “The Tower is crowded enough as it is.”

A sinking feeling gripped Cheese’s stomach. “What did you have in mind?”

“We might be Air Straddlers, Mr. Barvo, but we have our own slice of Down Below, too.” Onkalo beckoned the trio towards the edge of the platform. A moment later, Cheese was shocked to find himself at the edge with the rest. He couldn’t remember how he’d gotten there when he became aware of The Girl Who Might Be Seline’s arm linked with his. When she caught him looking at her with a mixture of surprise and suspicion, she smiled without guile.

He caught November looking at them, grinning. Cheese freed his arm, at the same time noticing a system of ropes, carabiners, and harnesses carefully arranged at their feet. The granite wall was marked with spikes driven into the cement at equally spaced intervals, offering places of purchase the entire way down.

“When the bridge was first constructed,” Onkalo’s voice battled the wind. “They added storage units at the base. This was before the war. After the bombs dropped, those plans were scuppered. We use them as shelter, now.”

“We don’t want to put you out,” November replied, diplomatically.

“You can put me out any day of the week,” She playfully slapped his face, and pinched the small declivity on his scratchy chin. “As for my *people*, they’re a hospitable bunch, and we have plenty of room.”

Ignoring their flirtations, Barvo felt more chalk than Cheese. “Once I’m down there, I’m not coming back up,” he imagined climbing the Tower’s three hundred feet a second time.

“You won’t have to,” she handed him and Seline a harness. “Like I said earlier; The Gloam and the Grays will be waiting for you on the other side of the bridge. “You can’t leave through the front, as it were.”

“How, then?” Cheese insisted. “We’ve got to get back to Semper Moses,” he pointed to the full moon. It hung in the air going from a subtle shade of pink to a deeper shade of blush. “The Harvest is days away.”

“*And?*” Onkalo lifted the brim of her scally cap to get a better look at him. Her voice took on an edge finer than granite precipice they stood on. “We all have to die sometime. The ‘whens’ and ‘whys’ are just details.”

“Spoken like a true Air Straddler.” Cheese answered with a hint of disgust.

November opened his mouth to smooth the sudden tension when Gwimbs tugged on Cheese’s arm, impatiently. A trace of irritation calved her glacial eyes. “Go,” she pointed towards the edge. She stepped into one of the harnesses and jammed another into his chest. “You! Go!”

Onkalo’s perpetual smirk widened to an honest grin. “I like her.” The smile faded as her eyes dropped to his leg. She lowered her voice. “Will you be okay to climb? I noticed a hitch in your step while you were running on the bridge, and unless your joints creak like metal and leather, I’d guess you have some sort of brace. There’s no shame in my men lowering you down.”

“If you think there’s no shame in it,” Cheese cocked his head, “then, why are you whispering?” His eyes met hers, challengingly.

Gwimbs glared at Onkalo as Cheese stormed off to put on his harness away from the ledge. Arms folded; she drummed the gloved fingers of her left hand against the side of her right bicep.

Onkalo, oblivious to the mysterious power in those sheathed hands, shrugged and turned to flirt with November.

Their descent was without incident. Onkalo went first to navigate the familiar terrain, followed by Jack, Gwimbs, and Cheese. Onkalo’s men stood on top of the platform, securing the rope to belay the tension in case of an accidental slip, but were largely unnecessary. Surprisingly, Gwimbs turned out to be an expert climber, moving along the sheer granite drop like a fish through water. Not the water below, mind you; the Frigoris River. As they neared it, they could smell the sulfur belching from its turbid surface, permeating their clothes, and burning their eyes. Their momentum was halted several times by Cheese cleaving to the rock, with his hands tightly wound

around the gritty, rusted spikes. Above the wind, Gwimbs voice carried, vacillating between soft and stern, as she cajoled and chided; a steady stream of “Go, go, gos.”

For once, it was her who calmed *him*.

They dismounted on the Tower’s piers below. The granite foundation was stained with the river, the lifeblood of corrupted Frigoris, a dense, sulfurous slime. Onkalo pulled a handkerchief over her nose. Cheese, Seline, and Jack pulled their shirts up. The Air Straddler pointed towards a docked rowboat outfitted with a small outboard motor, as she slipped on a pair of gloves, and handed an extra to November. “Help me get Charon’s anchor up.”

A glimmer of recognition slipped through November’s eye like scum along the river. “Where have I heard that name?”

“The old world,” Onkalo replied, pulling up a soiled chain from the depth of the water. “A bit of a joke, really. Another myth; like your people’s Moon Mother and her messianic daughter,” she laughed, missing the furtive glance Cheese gave Gwimbs. Onkalo continued, “He was a twisted man who ferried the dead and damned towards the underworld.”

“You really know how to welcome a guest,” Cheese replied in a humorless voice.

Onkalo heaved the anchor into the hull of the boat. A laugh escaped her lips on the tail end of a grunt. She gestured towards the river. “If this isn’t a river for the damned, I don’t know what is, Mr. Barvo. Get in. And watch your feet. The water will stain your shoes worse than Gloam shit.”

“Is that a thing?” he looked to Jack for confirmation, who pulled a face and shrugged.

“Careful,” Onkalo steadied the vessel. “You don’t want to fall in. It’s—”

“Worse than Gloam shit, yeah. You said that. Surprisingly versatile stuff, huh?” Cheese muttered. He held The Girl Who Might Be Seline’s arm as she gingerly stepped into the boat. *Moon Mother and her messianic daughter...*

After settling between Onkalo and Jack, she looked back at him with something akin to longing. A look that said: *It’s your turn. Don’t abandon me.*

A soul like all the others making the journey

It chipped at his breastbone. “Alright, alright,” Cheese grumbled, brushing it aside. He also tried his best to conceal the throbbing pain in his leg. He didn’t want to vindicate Onkalo’s insinuations about his physical abilities.

November untied the boat. Onkalo engaged the motor, navigating through the murk towards a promontory of rock beneath the south side of the bridge.

Over the low hum of the motor, Jack tapped Cheese on the shoulder. He leaned forward as Cheese turned at the waist to listen. "Where's that famous Sward of yours now?" Jack laughed. "Cut through this shit in a minute."

Cheese offered a distracted smile and a small nod. With Jack, Onkalo, and Gwimbs seated behind him, he was offered a rare moment alone, free of imminent danger. Gloams weren't chasing. Grays weren't shooting. A Moon Girl didn't require saving. Drawing a hand across his weary head, he sighed, removing the duffel bag from his back. Laid on his lap, he unzipped it to take stock of their supplies.

Whatever the morning might bring on this hellish landscape of sulfur and boiling black slime, they were set on food. He removed his Sward and set it on the hull of the boat at his feet. While his fingers brushed the side of his Sward and the bent manilla folder they'd taken from Toaster Head in the basement of the precinct, they came to rest on the cool, smooth surfaces of Foxtrot's extra journals, the ones Gwimbs had so zealously guarded until earlier. Having replaced his trench coat atop the Tower, he discreetly slipped them into an inner pocket, and vowed to read them that night after Gwimbs fell asleep.

The boat docked beside a rocky promontory beneath the bridge. A row of steel-doored storage facilities were built into the bluffs.

"When the Grays outlawed the Down Below, they saw to everything. *Almost* everything," Onkalo smiled, disembarking from the boat. The remaining three followed, with Jack and Cheese pulling the boat onto the. "Once we reclaimed the bridge and cut off their access points down here, we made some *minor* improvements," she said, approaching a passageway cut into the limestone. It was blocked by a thick, handmade door of foraged metal. A slot had been cut near the top with a sliding plate to allow a guard inside to see who desired admittance.

While Onkalo knocked, Cheese removed his Sward from the duffel bag. The weight felt true in his hand as he gripped it.

The slot opened. A pair of close-set black eyes stared back.

"Little pig, little pig: let me come in," Onkalo called in a singsong voice.

The door creaked open.

Onkalo removed her scally cap, twirling it in circles, before bowing and humbly placing it on her stomach. "After you."

November called over his shoulder in a playful tone. "Ready for an ambush?"

"Always," Cheese gripped the blade. Even Gwimbs cracked her knuckles as the three stepped into the door entrance hall of the cave system.

Onkalo patted Gwimbs on the shoulder and followed after.

Inside, a long, darkened hallway led into a chamber with fifty-foot arched, brick cathedral ceilings. A light embedded in the walls lit the room in ghostly atmospherics.

Several of the storage units' sliding doors were open inside. The windowless rooms were twelve feet by twelve feet with concrete floors and a single outlet, powering lamps, hot plates, and in one instance, a record player, which Cheese eyed jealousy. The occupants nodded their greetings as the quartet walked past.

"You have electricity," Jack marveled as they followed Onkalo through an arched doorway at the end of the room, which led to a wrought iron spiral staircase.

"If I had my druthers, we'd cut the power, but my people come first, and they've grown accustomed to the finer things in life."

"When heat and electricity become 'finer things,' it's time to take stock of your life," Cheese answered dryly.

"That's Frigoris for you," Onkalo shrugged. At the base of the stairs was a long hallway with a pair of storage units on each side. At the end of the corridor, was a heavy doorway of reinforced steel. A radiation pictogram was stenciled across the surface in faded black and yellow. "When they first built these, they made a bomb shelter down here in case the enemy dropped 'the big one,'" Onkalo explained, tugging on the doorway. "When my people first found this place, it had been abandoned for years. The fallout shelter was still packed with supplies; MREs, medical supplies, blankets and bunk beds."

Gwimbs stepped into the room after Onkalo. The shelter was largely empty, now. All that remained in the large room were a few beds and a tall lamp with a bare bulb. "You and Jane will sleep here tonight," Onkalo told Cheese.

"What about Jack?" he asked.

"We have...other things to discuss," she smiled seductively.

“If we’re leaving first thing in the morning, I’d like to get him up to speed about what’s happened to us the last few days,” he looked at November who was unabashedly appraising Onkalo’s form-fitting black outfit. “Will you *focus* a second?”

“Of course,” Jack answered.

“I’d like you to go ahead of us and let Semper know we’re coming. The Grays don’t know we’re together. You’ll be able to navigate the city topside.”

“What should I tell him?”

Onkalo leaned against the doorway and watched the three with interest. Her shrewd gaze unsettled Cheese.

“Tell him...” Cheese looked at Gwimbs, who had joyfully found a bed, and was bouncing on its mattress to test its firmness. Her smile widened when she noticed Cheese looking at her. A certainty bloomed in his chest for that strange, other-worldly girl. “Tell him he was right,” he continued, feeling the knowledge spread throughout his body. He thought of the stories he’d read about Seline, and the correlations to their own journey. “About Foxtrot. About certainty and belief. Tell him he was right about *everything*.” For a moment, he felt his presence doubling, as if he were at once Chaz Barvo, but also The Red Stranger from the stories of long ago.

“Will he understand what that means?” Jack answered.

Cheese nodded. “We’ll talk again in the morning.” He looked from Jack to Onkalo, adding, “Get out of here, yeah?” A sly smile twitched the corners of his mouth. His eyes locked on Onkalo. “The finer things, right?”

She touched the side of her nose. “Goodnight. If you need anything, I’m the room on the left closest to the stairs. But, Barvo?”

“Yeah?”

“*Please* don’t need anything,” she walked out of the room as Jack followed.

“Understood.”

Cheese turned as the door creaked shut behind him. Gwimbs sat on the bed looking at him, expectantly, as if waiting for the next phase of their plan. He wondered what she’d done before arriving in Foxtrot’s apartment the night of his murder. Was she biding her time underground as she’d done before the Moon woke her from her slumber and tasked her with humanity’s reconciliation to the estranged celestial body? Cheese had yet to finish the tales recorded in *The*

Seven Trials of Seline Moonchild; he didn't know how they ended. Had she succeeded? Did the Red Stranger bring her to safety and help her finish the task, or had The Mountain Lion Sun accomplish his goal to cut her down? Cheese wanted to dive into the book to get to the end, but Foxtrot's journals seemed more important for the time being. For Cheese, knowing was enough, but the truth made him awkward, deferential.

"How are you?" he sat on the bed across from her. "Tired?"

She crossed her legs and nodded, stifling a yawn with her balled fist.

"You've earned the right," he lowered his eyes. "You were fantastic. Thanks for this, by the way," he tapped the side of his braced leg. "I wouldn't have been able to keep up with you, otherwise." Cheese untied his boots and lifted the pant leg. "But, it hurts like a sunuvabitch," he laughed, softly, undoing the straps, and flopping the contraption beside him on the bed.

She leaned across the gap, her index finger hovering above the knee, uncertain. "What...happened?" she asked. Her white-blond hair came unhitched from her ears, framing her face in silver parentheses.

"It was a long time ago," Cheese replied, pulling down the pant leg. When he saw the vague response didn't satisfy, he continued. "When I was a kid—maybe two or three years old—my mom was carrying me home on a Harvest night. She had me in one arm, a bag of groceries in another; some canned goods a neighbor donated to us." Cheese paused, remembering the soft curl of his mother's chestnut hair. The soft curve of her cheek against his as a wind picked up and screamed began up and down the street, and then— "The next thing I knew, My arms closed around nothing. I fell with the groceries. My leg smashed against the curb." He smiled, "Lucky for me, Semper Moses was on the way back to the Underground."

"He saw what happened and scooped me up. I wasn't sure what was happening. He suffered through me screaming in his ear as he brought me Underground. The next morning, he walked around the neighborhood asking questions. I was too young to remember, but apparently my dad went the year before. Didn't have any other family, either. So... yeah," he cleared his throat. His eyes snapped back into focus. "Anyway, that's how my leg ended up all hinky. Semper did the best he could, but it didn't heal right."

Gwimbs nodded silently. After marshaling her tongue to cooperate, she forced the word, "Sorry" past her lips.

“It was a long time ago,” Cheese answered, quietly. He unzipped the duffel bag and tossed her Foxtrot’s ratty bathrobe. “Here,” he smiled. “You seem attached to this.”

In lieu of a thank you, she slipped her arms into the sleeves, and bunched the collar up around her nose, breathing deeply.

“One of these days you’re going to tell me what happened in that apartment,” he said.

She looked at him uncertainly, suddenly smaller.

“How is it you can dust a Gloam and sneak out of a precinct full of Grays, no sweat, but when I ask you who you are, or what you were doing in the Lunar Mont, you clam up?” Cheese peered at her, intently. In a softer voice, almost to himself, he added, “Why won’t you let me help you?”

Cheese stood to find a quiet corner to read Foxtrot’s reclaimed journals. Gwimbs reached out and slipped her hand into his. “You are,” she said.

He turned, surprised.

The lamplight imbued the glacial blue of her eyes a cuticle of gold. He sighed, frustration leaking away. “It suits you; you know? Talking more,” he explained. “It suits you.” He pulled his hand away and turned off the lamp between their beds. “I’m going to be up a while longer. Get some rest.”

Her bed springs creaked in the dark as he moved away. Cheese imagined her nestled in Foxtrot’s bathrobe with a sleeve pressed to her face. Clicking on the flashlight in his pocket, he smiled at the thought. It reminded him somehow of Juliet, and her newborn, Maria. That magic hour when the bustle in the adjoining cars slowed and lights dimmed. The intimacy of heightened quiet pressed against the dusty glass of the subway, as each sound vibrated in the dark, disrupting the gossamer web they’d drawn between their compartments in the form of a bedsheet curtain.

He found a line of empty bunks against the wall about thirty feet from Gwimbs. One of them had a rolled-up mattress, twined to keep its form. With the blade of his Sward, he cut the ties, unrolled it, and eased himself down, his leg protesting the entire time. His shoulder blades rested upon the gritty limestone, as he unzipped the duffel bag and removed one of Foxtrot’s unread journals.

Unlike the other, which was filled with rough sketches and maps of every corner of the Down Below, the second was packed with cramped handwriting; bland observations about soirées to the Underground:

Found a previously undisclosed service shaft. Filled with equipment left abandoned by long dead metro workers. Possibly Deebes (I'm going to make this a slang word for the Down Belowers earlier in the piece) who have moved on to other terminals, looking for fresh walls to bomb...

Came across a dead-end layup tonight (this will go in earlier, too. A layup is a location where they keep subways that aren't running). Three empty cars sat there, illuminated by my carbide headlamp. I cannot explain it, but my skin crawled with the dread quiet of the place. I knew if anyone found me, I would be cornered. Stayed a few minutes at most; enough to get the job done...

After pages of similar entries, Cheese became aware of a sense of familiarity that did not square with the punctilious man he remembered. The well-trimmed moustache, the shrewd eyes of a Gray. Reading in the beam of his torch, Cheese realized he felt a growing kinship towards the man. Some of the passages were almost poetic:

Sitting beneath a sidewalk grate. Overhead, the jangle of keys. Reverberating footsteps and snatches conversations drift down to me. Ahead: atomic yellow, electric green. Scrawling black and the blank white of epiphany.

Decades before, bombs away...

Decades later, bomb away...

Cheese furrowed his brow. There was something oddly familiar hiding in plain sight, yet he could not put his finger on it...

He turned the page, and came across a passage that set his heart racing:

Having lain dormant for decades, Foxtrot wrote, I worried about the machine's efficacy to complete its originally prescribed task, let alone the one I had hypothesized for it. However, based on my extensive research, and after years of looking in the tunnels in the dark, I found it: The Oceanus Procellarum. Rather, I found the machine within Oceanus Procellarum. It wasn't easy.

Time will tell if it was worth it.

I pray that it is.

There it was.

Oceanus Procellarum.

Like a mirage that resolved itself upon closer inspection, Cheese's heart rate quickened, somersaulted upon itself. He flipped through the rest of the journal, searching for confirmation. When he didn't find it, he skipped back to the front. His breath caught on the first page where Foxtrot has written his name:

Henry Foxtrot

Cheese let the journal drop, mouth agape. "Henry Foxtrot," he muttered to himself. "Henry Foxtrot, Henry Foxtrot, Foxtrot, Henry, Foxtrot, H."

He removed the stub of a pencil from a trench coat pocket and rearranged the letters on the remaining white of the page, removing the vowels. The resulting name shined in the dark like black cursive on a stark white background:

FXTRTH

"You're 'Fix Truth,' he whispered to the darkness. Breathing shallow with excitement, he flipped back to the page he had dog-eared and continued reading on an entry dated several weeks later.

In combination with the maps drawn in my companion journal, I've succeeded in penetrating the ghost station, O.P. The journey was fraught with danger. In fact, several times throughout the last few weeks, I've felt shadows trailing my every move. Eyes in the darkness. Temperature differentials. Something familiar commingling with the scent of damp stone and steel dust. At the precinct, conversations halt when I enter a room. Alone in my office I can sense their whispers. In my apartment, I know with utmost certainty the neighbors are listening with ears pressed to the wall with bated breath. A growing paranoia steals over me. Then again, fear is a natural byproduct of living in Frigoris. The False Moon,

an all-seeing eye, targeting the base terror within us all, blood red and vigilant. The Gloam, patrolling in corpse-like skin suits. The fear is within and without.

The rational part of my brain tells me I'm being foolish. But, just as the first Truth Taggers overcame the voice of preservation in order to hop the platform and descend onto the tracks to bomb the walls with dynamic colors and electric truths, there comes a point in every man that the stomach overrides the brain; that the gut must lead the way.

My gut tells me I am being followed, but I fear that I cannot stop, even though it may lead to ruin. O. P. draws me onward.

With good reason.

I went alone, obviously. There may come a time when I bring another, but during the initial explorations, I felt it necessary to travel independently, unencumbered with worry for another's wellbeing.

More later. My soirées in O.P. are time sensitive lest my superiors figure out what I'm up to. When my superiors find out what I'm up to. It's inevitable when all of Frigoris is an elderly woman in her housecoat peering through the curtains for a choice piece of gossip.

If I'm apprehended or—let's face it—murdered, it will be up to her to save the rest. If she's not up to it—and how disastrous that would be—I've been peppering the Underground with my research for years. Little clues. Enough to whet the appetite. Though time seems to be stacked against me with another Harvest imminent, I'll redouble my efforts in the tunnels; make it impossible for the Deebees to miss my alter ego.

There's work to be done.

FXTRTH

Pages rustled in the flickering light of his torch. He put the journal face down, slapping the side of the metal casing to return it to its former brilliance.

The machine is vast.

A relic of a time when expansion was the ideal, rather than self-preservation.

Working in the O.P. It's odd to find walls free of spray paint, truth tags. The tiled walls of green and cream are pristine—albeit dusty—untouched for decades. Then again, after the Frigoris became a river of industrial slag, crossing became nearly impossible. I don't understand—given their fear of water—

why the Gloam congregate above the forgotten ghost station. Perhaps the machine's vibrations attract them? It's a mystery.

Thankfully, they are oblivious to my presence. A little technological wizardry in an age of relics.

The time has come to call her to the fore, as it were. I pray the time is right, though I've abandoned prayer long ago. In closing, for the briefest moment, I'll indulge the Old Beliefs with the simple phrase: If the Moon wills it, SELINE will succeed.

FXTRTH

He gently lifted the beam of his torch and let it fall on Seline's sleeping form. There in the dark, his eyes lingered as she stirred, her private dreams as distant as the day ahead.

Jack stood from the ledge they were sitting on. His knees cracked with the motion sending echoes down the empty tunnel. “Well?” he asked. “What do you think?”

Yuse looked up at him with momentary confusion. The question brought him back to the blinking present. “About what?” he responded, slowly. His fingers smoothed down the pencil moustache, mechanically.

Jack's eyes widened with humor. “What do you mean, ‘About what!’ *Action, excitement, adventure; everything!* We’re in the thick of it now, aren’t we?”

The bear nodded, deliberately, still experiencing a sense of displacement. “When did all of this happen?”

“When did Foxtrot get murdered?” He squinched an eye, sending the spotlight of his carbide lamp swinging to the ceiling in thought.

By now, his name, and alter ego, were common knowledge, as well as his untimely demise. The stench of freshly painted tributes fogged the air and mixed with the cold and dirty. The Truth Taggers mourned the loss of a fallen brethren, while the rest of the Deebees looked on, dazzled by the artwork. Above, Foxtrot was vilified in equal measure. Branded as a turncoat privately, publicly the Gray’s propaganda machine elevated him to near mythic status. *An exemplary worker, a model citizen, his memory will soar as high as the Moon...*

“Cheese and I split up,” Jack ticked off the days on his half-gloved fingers. “A few days ago? It’s hard to keep track. I haven’t exactly been sober since I got back.”

“Trying to forget your little Bridger minx?” Yuse chuckled.

“Maybe,” he shrugged, returning to the cold concrete beside the bear. “Or maybe I’m trying to get enough courage to go back,” he wiggled his eyebrows.

The smile faded from Pascal's face. He tapped him on the side of the leg. “What happened next?”

Cheese woke the next morning with Jack nudging him awake. He opened his eyes to find the lamp between his and Gwimbs' bed shining in his face. She was already awake with her bare feet anchored to the floor; her arms looked deflated in Foxtrot's robe.

"Hey," the nudging continued.

Cheese squinted an eye against the light. His vision sharpened as he looked up into the face of Jack November. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Early," Jack replied, simply. "Let's go."

He fell asleep in the early morning hours. After reading the entirety of Foxtrot's second journal, Cheese was no closer to understanding how the machine worked, or where Oceanus Procellarum was. Now that the world was shuffling into place, he remembered dozing off reading the file they'd lifted from Toaster Head in the precinct.

The revelations returned forcefully, shaking off the remnants of sleep. Cheese sat up suddenly. "The folder!" he exclaimed.

Gwimbs looked at him curiously, while Jack took a step backwards, uncertainly. "The folder?" he repeated. "What folder?"

Cheese dug it out of the duffel bag and jammed it into Jack's hand. "It's a list of undercover operatives stationed in the Underground."

"What do you mean?" Jack began to open the manilla jacket to peruse the file.

Barvo snatched it away in a flash. "You can't read it."

"Then what do you want me to do with it?" Jack countered.

"Give it to Semper," Cheese leaned forward. The bed springs creaked with the movement. "He'll know what it means. I certainly don't," he added in a whisper only Gwimbs could hear.

She tilted her head and furrowed her brow.

Jack pried the folder from his reluctant grip, rolled it into a tube, and jammed it into the inner pocket of his avocado-colored peacoat. He walked towards the heavy steel door, calling over his shoulder, irritably. "Get your asses moving. Onkalo is taking us across the river in a few minutes."

When they were alone, Gwimbs reached over and touched the top of his knee, gently. "What?" she asked quietly.

"It's nothing." Cheese shook his head.

But, it wasn't nothing. The folder contained pages of Gray detailed field notes. Dates and times of rendezvous points and topics discussed. Veil of Truth locations. Terminal descriptions and the Deebees who frequented them. One of the names caught Cheese's eye. The agent's observations went back years...

"We might have a problem," Cheese spoke again, more to himself than Gwimbs.

The name was Semper Moses.

"Hang on!" Yuse interrupted. He gripped the side of Jack's arm with a meaty bear claw. "Semper Moses?" the name traveled down the empty tunnel.

"Keep your damn voice down!!" Jack hissed, shaking himself free of Pascal's grip. As he adjusted the lapels of his coat, he continued, angrily. "I'm telling you this stuff in private. I don't need you breaking every damn secret I've got like a bear in a confidence shop!"

Yuse jammed his finger against Jack's chest. With furrowed brow, and a reddening face, he opened his mouth to speak, yet reconsidered at the last moment. "What in the name of Frigoris is *that* supposed to mean?" *Confidence* shop?" He carefully handled the shards of the unfamiliar phrase. With narrowed eyes and voice laced with suspicion, he asked, "Does it have to do with swimming?"

"For the love of the Moon!" Jack stood. "I've just told you that the arguable leader of the Down Below is an undercover operative of the Gray, and you want to know about swimming?"

"No," Yuse folded his arms against his massive chest. "I wanted to know you if *you* were talking about 'the arguable leader of the Down Below,' but then you got all pissy about how loud I was talking, and started throwing around your seven-dollar phrases, and it got me thinking about swimming again." He stood, towering a head above November.

The pair stood, posturing, puffing their chests, hostility vibrating between them. Their faces lit in the pale blue wash of a signal light. Jack reconsidered his position, making mental calculations of Yuse's weight and mass multiplied by his ferocity.

"Soooo," Jack's voice rose, as he quickly wet his finger and wiggled it in The Bear's ear before he could react. November returned to their ledge, which was rapidly losing the warmth from their parked asses, and said, "Yes: I'm talking about Semper Moses, okay?" He slapped the space beside him. "And, no. It's not about swimming, all right?"

Yuse harrumphed his massive posterior beside Jack. "Was *that* so difficult?"

“Well, which *other* Semper Moses would I be talking about, huh? ‘Nope, not the leader of the Deebees,” he pretended to have a conversation with himself. “I’m talking about the *other* Semper Moses. You know: the one who steals hubcaps from the cars in front of the Rimae Junction?”

“You’re *pushing* it, again.”

“Fine,” Jack’s tone quieted, losing its playful edge, as he looked up and down the empty tunnel. “But, you need to keep it down. Seriously. Anyone could be listening down here in the dark and dirty.”

Yuse nodded. “I thought Cheese asked you not to read the file.”

“He did.”

“But, you read it anyway?”

“Of course,” Jack shrugged. “Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course.”

Silence stretched like an ellipsis.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“If you ever put your finger in my ear again, I’ll break it.”

Jack nodded, digesting the promise. “That seems fair. In my defense,” he grinned, “I thought you were going to beat the soul out of me.”

“The thought crossed my mind.”

“A short trip on a foot, huh?” Jack’s smile broadened.

“Keep it up.”

“Okay, okay,” Jack extended his palms in defeat. “I’m done.”

“No. The *story*.”

“Oh, right...”

Cheese drummed the tips of his finger against the front of his teeth. “There’s gotta be an explanation for this,” he quietly talked in circles, repeating arguments he’d made for the three hundredth time since reading the truth. “He’s done more for the Deebees than *anyone*” his voice trailed off, remembering instances when Moses offered food, shelter, guidance, support; the rhythmic thumping of his PVC staff thumping in time with his sympathetic heart. His cloak of stitched together subway schedules, rustling with each step. Breath, smelling of raw kombucha and the

scent of pipe tobacco Cheese pretended not to notice given his mentor's instance that he'd quit; a simple act of kindness given everything he'd done for Cheese since his mother's harvest.

Conversely, Cheese also thought of the random Gray strikes in the tunnels. How they always seemed to know the random Veil of Truth locations with ease, picking off Deebees for criminal trespass and vandalism, the raids far from the Solitudinus Terminal, Semper's home base.

Cheese became aware of the steady warmth of Gwimbs' hand atop his knee. It remained constant as he tortured himself with questions. "Semper is the one who sent me to Foxtrot's apartment that night in the first place. The way Foxtrot was talking," Cheese paused. "Moses wanted me to see if there was any truth to the rumors; that he knew where you were. Why would he send me if—" he stopped, abruptly, remembering Foxtrot's dig the night before he was murdered.

Have you ever stopped to wonder why he sends a cripple to do a man's job?

I haven't been caught yet, have I?

So cocky. So sure.

And, Foxtrot's response?

All in due time, Cheese.

As a sergeant, Foxtrot has access to the same files Cheese had absconded with. Had he known that Semper was a double agent? If so, was he trying to warn Cheese of trusting his mentor. Then again, Foxtrot was a double agent himself, posing as a Gray while maintaining a life as a Deebee Sympathizer. Yet, the challenge returned again and again in his mind:

Have you ever stopped to wonder why he sends a cripple to do a man's job?

If Moses was truly a Gray, maybe he'd alerted his handler about Foxtrot's betrayal. Told them about Selene's presence. Wouldn't a true Gray want to keep the status quo in place, the Reds safely under their thumb in the dark and dirty, scurrying like rats underground? On the night of the murder, Semper could have gone topside to the Lunar Mont to confront Foxtrot. Since Selene was hiding, the meeting grew heated, violent. Semper murdered Foxtrot in cold blood and left before Cheese arrived. No one stopped him because he was one of them, possibly just following orders as a loyal Gray...

Gwimbs took his face in the parentheses of her hands. She looked into his eyes, intently. Her glacial eyes calved with compassion. "Stop," she said, softly tapping his forehead with her index finger. She moved the hand to her heart. "Trust him."

"How can I *do* that after what I've seen?" His face was a mask of anguish.

She moved her hand from her chest to his.

A snippet of conversation returned to Cheese; something Moses said the night before the murder. *Signs and wonders surround you, yet you fail to believe.*

Cheese looped his finger around her wrist. He moved her hand away, nodding. "Fine," he relented, though far from convinced. "I believe in *you*, Gwimbs. I *trust* you," he corrected himself, hastily. "If you think I should give him the benefit of the doubt, I will. You were the only other person in that apartment that night."

Her blonde eyebrows knit together, uncertainly. Gwimbs brought her hands to her lap, fiddling with them nervously.

"What is it?" Cheese leaned forward, eagerly. "Is it about that night? Outside of Moses and Foxtrot, we *were* the only ones in that apartment, right?"

Gwimbs blinked, brows furrowed. Her shoulders bobbed as she marshaled her tongue. Before she had a chance to speak, the bomb shelter's door squealed on its hinges.

Jack popped his head inside. "Moon above! Move your crippled ass. We're getting ready to go!"

They met Onkalo and Jack above ground on the rocky promontory outside of the storage facilities. Above, the full moon had ripened to a deeper shade of pink. It cast its half-light on the smoking hellscape of the river, a combination of sulfuric smoke, and a heavy fog that clung to the surface like blue bottle flies to a corpse. Onkalo and Jack were indistinct outlines in the haze. The distance between the pair had evaporated, as Jack whispered intimately in the Air Straddlers ear. Her laughter traveled on the moisture in the atmosphere, throwing the sound in unexpected ways.

"There you are," she gently pushed Jack away with a smile after Cheese cleared his throat to announce their presence. "Here," she handed him a dented thermos. "For the road."

"Thank you," Cheese nodded, accepting the gift.

"There's more," Onkalo replied, picking up a heavy, waterproof backpack at her feet. "Take these. You'll need them where you're going."

Gwimbs accepted the backpack and unzipped it. She removed two pairs of black waterproof pants with shoulder straps, and gumboots.

Cheese looked over her shoulder. "Why will we need those?" he asked. "I thought you said you'd take us across the river?"

“I’m going to,” Onkalo smiled, sardonically. “But, they’ll be expecting you on the other side. You won’t be able to climb the bluffs and walk the streets. You’ll have to sneak into the north side of the city.

“Where are we...going?” Gwimbs whispered. She was already putting the smaller pair of pants over her jumpsuit.

“The Empire of the Dead,” Onkalo replied, as she untethered Charon from the rocks.

Following the Past War—buried in the folds of Frigoris’ indeterminate history—legend holds that the victors wanted to ensure a method to keep the city’s inhabitants from rising up, once more. What caused the battle to begin with? What infraction occurred to plunge them into war? No one knows for certain. Some of the Old Timers in Gramercy’s pub suggest the Reds and Grays unified against a strange race of creatures, which later became known as the Gloam, their undead wardens of the damned. Others, deep in their cups, claim the story balderdash; the Gloam came only after the subjugation was complete. While still others, slipping from the bar and onto the floor, suggest it doesn’t matter how or why The Barrier came into being. It existed around the perimeter of the city, locking everyone inside, and that was that. Though the exact reasons have been lost to time’s erasure, everyone agrees who constructed it: the survivors of The Past War; Red and Grays, alike.

At one point in its ancient history, Frigoris was largely submerged within an ancient body of water known as Oceanus Procellarum, or The Sea of Sorrows. The old stories claim when her children abandoned her, and the world smoldered following her volcanic anger, a dreadful melancholia overtook The Moon. Her inconsolable grief led to massive floods that covered great swathes of land. After a millennia, the ocean drained, leaving a mineral rich area within the strata. Now, some of the Old Timers—Hands to heart—claim Frigorisites did nothing provoke the enemy. Instead, the enemy invaded for their coveted mineral deposits; valuable in construction and exceeding rare. Whether the story is true, at the conclusion of the war, They forced the survivors into existing quarries, and excavated the mines to the point of depletion. Parts of the rubble-strewn, pockmarked city began to collapse, killing hundreds. For those who avoided the unlucky fate of live burial, had the Gloam to contend with. At least, that’s what one story contends. Their flames painted the walls blue, offering those within meager light to work.

Those who were too weak or injured were vaporized on the spot. Their clothes were heaped into a pile and left as landmarks of progress as the tunnels expanded beyond them. When the wall was built to Their satisfaction, sealing Frigorisites inside the city, The Enemy vanished, leaving their prisoners penned in with the Gloam, and a peculiar new moon, which the Frigorisites frequently commented on for its captivating beauty; its strange color and size. Only after the first Harvest did they realize their mistake.

Shaken by the cull, the subway tunnels no longer seemed deep enough. A further removal from those malevolent skies was necessary. A group Reds and Grays escaped to the quarry tunnels. Away from both the sun and moon, they supposedly came to resemble The Gloam; at least, that's what the gossip mongers claimed. With gray, puckered skin, large, translucent eyes, and a shock of white hair atop their skeletal features, they roam the mines with a congenital hunched back, developed after years of squeezing through the narrow tunnels and ducking to avoid the rocky ceiling. Years of mythologizing left them less than people, something akin to living vampires, creeping wraiths that prowled their graveyard of rock. Their images were invoked almost as frequently as the Gloam to terrify wayward children into submission; yarns of kidnap and torture kept the littles safe in their beds at night, far from the places they shouldn't play. *If you don't listen, they'll come and take you away...* Branches scritch against the window, trickling in distant dark down an empty tunnel; the mind conjured their wasted images. At some point in their children, all littles imagined them just beneath their feet, licking their wasted lips, hoping the flimsy crust of earth that separated them would crumble: The Mole Rats.

Sightings were infrequent above ground; they kept to the dark better than the Deebees; could melt into shadows with preternatural ease. Their sense of hearing sharpened after decades in the dark. It was through this nocturnal kingdom that Cheese and Gwimbs had to traverse in order to evade the Grays.

Despite living in the Down Below, The Empire of the Dead gave him the creeps. It was the one place in Frigoris he had yet to set foot in. He'd had no reason to before, and he wished he didn't have one now.

Jack touched his shoulder, observing him sympathetically. "I'm sure they're not as bad as we've made them out to be," he said. "They're just people, right?"

"Care to switch places?" Cheese replied sarcastically, pulling on the waders and slipping his feet into the rubber boots.

“If I could,” Jack replied, eagerly. “I wouldn’t mind seeing what all the fuss is about.”

The pair watched Onkalo ready the boat as she chatted with Gwimbs. The two were nearly indecipherable in the mist and smoke cast by the river.

Cheese shook his head. “I need you to go ahead of us like we agreed.”

“I didn’t agree to anything,” Jack answered, removing the folder from his back pocket. “Why is it so important that Semper read this? What,” he began to open the file. “Does it say how to stop the Harvests?”

He snatched it out of November’s hands, and gently whacked the side of his head. “This isn’t yours to read, Jack. Only Semper,” he lowered his voice so it wouldn’t travel on the backs of the lingering moisture, leapfrogging into unwanted ears.

“*Well?*” Jack’s nostrils flared. “*Is* it about the Harvests? You’re being awfully secretive about what’s inside?”

“I can’t tell you, Jack. I wish I could, but I don’t understand it, myself. Trust me, okay? Can you do that?”

“I can barely tolerate you,” he answered begrudgingly. “Trust might be damn near impossible.”

Cheese lowered his voice even further. “I can’t tell you what’s in the file, but I *can* tell you something equally valuable.”

Jack arched an eyebrow. “A piece of gossip?”

“Better still. Something I need you to pass along to Semper,” he paused. “When you tell him, try to gauge his reaction, yeah?”

“How do you mean?”

He thought for a moment. “Whether he seems happy about the news. Angry. Try to read him.”

“*What* is the news, Cheese?” Exasperation strained Jack’s voice.

Cheese stepped beside Jack and placed an arm around his friend’s shoulder. With his free hand, he pointed towards Gwimbs. “Tell him I’m not traveling alone.”

“Okay, you’ve got a girl with you. What difference does that make to Semper?”

Gwimbs stepped from the boat and approached. The fog seemed to part in her presence, dissipating as if by magic.

“*That* is Seline.”

She waved her hand, awkwardly and shrugged. Her waders and rubber boots undercut the dramatic appearance. “Hi,” she said, and wandered back to Onkalo.

“Oh, aren’t you a bold stump?” Jack scoffed, playfully knocking Barvo’s arm away. “Who are you trying to kid?”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re crazy.”

“More and more, each day,” Cheese agreed. “The more I see from her. The more I read,” he stopped. “A few days ago, I was in the same place as you. A bunch of fairy tales. But, she killed a Gloam, Jack.”

“You’re full of—”

“Believe what you want!” Cheese snapped. “But tell Semper. She’s the reason he sent me to Foxtrot’s apartment that night, anyway.” What he failed to mention to November was that it might have been a set up all along. He had to find out, and in order to do that, he had to employ Jack to wind Semper up, and watch what happened when they met again.

“You’re not kidding,” Jack’s eyes narrowed.

Cheese opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by the Onkalo. “Come on,” she called through the haze. “Enough chit chat.” He rolled up the file and pressed it against Jack’s chest. “Tell him,” he said, flatly, and walked towards the shore to join Seline’s side.

With the bridge towering high above, Onkalo removed oars from the hull of the boat, handing one to eat. “We won’t be using the motor this morning,” she instructed. “We’ll have to move quickly, and in unison to combat the current. Is that going to be a problem for you, Mr. Barvo? I’m not worried about Jane,” she winked at Gwimbs. “She clearly has some grit to her, having made it this far.”

“What’s from stopping the Gray from entering the Empire of the Dead from above?”

“Common sense?” Onkalo offered. “From what I understand, they’ll go in if they have to, but even they’re not wild about it. They walk with the devil and are still afraid of a few ghouls. Go figure.”

They loaded the boat with Cheese, Gwimbs—and their growing number of supplies—took the front, with Jack and Onkalo in the stern. Despite the toxic appearance, their oars cut through the water with ease.

With each stroke, the slimy water dripped from the blades like tar.

“How can you tell where we’re going?” Cheese whispered, halfway across the river. Occasionally, eldritch sounds splashed in the water; random splashes of unaccountably resilient creatures in the deep. He imagined them with rows of sharp teeth and chemically cadaverous appearances.

Onkalo pointed in the direction of the bridge. Through the fog, Cheese could see the supports were painted yellow and fixed with lights of the same color. “Bright enough to be our guides,” she replied in a hushed tone. Like breadcrumbs through a forbidden forest.”

A splash sounded off of Charon’s stern.

Despite his earlier bravado, Jack’s attention pivoted nervously in the sound’s direction. “When they decommissioned subways in the past, they didn’t repurpose the steel. Do you know that?” his voice was low and taunted. “They dumped them into the river after the Putrefaction, hoping to filter it in some way.”

“What’s your point?” Cheese rowed in time with Gwimbs.

“I’ve heard stories; on mornings, when the fog and smoke lie thick and heavy,” Jack swallowed, “some claim to have seen a subway car on the river, traveling between the banks, picking up the damned souls of Frigoris.”

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“Ridiculous,” Cheese scoffed.

“Is it?” Jack countered, pointedly. “I’ve heard stranger things.”

“I agree with Mr. Barvo,” Onkalo continued to row. “Ghost stories. Enchanted moons, and malevolent forces,” she shook her head. “Deebees and the Grays. You both come up with such fantastic stories about the shit in your life even though it comes ‘round twice a day. Flush it and jog on.”

“Lovely,” Cheese replied.

“Quite the scatological theology you have there.”

Gwimbs turned abruptly and shushed the three of them. “We’re close,” she whispered.

Their skin prickled as a sepulchral breath emptied onto the river. The sheer cliff face resolved itself from The Girl Who Might Be Seline’s; a geological ‘abracadabra:’ *She will create as she speaks*. Or, Cheese and Jack were bickering like an old married couple and were too preoccupied to notice. The bluffs captivated their attention, now.

A forbiddingly black door stood before them; the yawning maw of a subterranean monster. Above the arched door, which was inlaid with brick, weathered words had been inscribed on a plaque of rock; *The Empire of the Dead*. The brick cascade crumbled into the water, along with small boulders that had fallen from above.

“This is your stop,” Onkalo handed Gwimbs the waterproof backpack and Cheese the duffel bag.” She stepped from the boat and pulled it up against the small peninsula of debris. After tying the boat, she wiped her hands, fished in her pocket, and handed Cheese a rolled map. “My people are always looking to extend our kingdom,” she smiled disarmingly. “Actually, we trade with the Mole Rats, from time to time. They’re not too bad; a bit skittish, but they have the best mushrooms in Frigoris.’

She placed the map in Cheese’s outstretched hand. “The blue ‘Xs’ mean the passage leads to the surface; the red ones means you’re getting closer to hell, or whatever imagined horrors you Deebees have concocted for yourselves.’

“Most likely, you’ll hear the Mole Rats before you see them. Like I said, they’re mostly harmless, but watch your torches,” she warned in a stern voice. “The light will agitate them, and they’ll attack, blindly. Understood?”

Cheese nodded his head, turning to Jack. “Remember what I said.”

“I will,” he promised.

“Jane,” Onkalo called, as she stepped back into her boat, preparing to take Jack to another location where he could safely disembark, safe in his anonymity. “It was a pleasure to meet you. Maybe next time don’t take so much, okay?” she winked.

Gwimbs smiled as the boat disappeared into the fog and smoke, leaving her standing at Barvo’s side.

“Well,” Cheese took a deep breath, smelling the cold and stone from the quarries in the darkness ahead. “We should get to it, yeah? We’re on a timeline.”

“Are you afraid?” Gwimbs asked, free of hesitation or stutter. Now that they were alone once more, her shyness vanished.

“No,” He tipped his chin, staring at the mouth of the caverns. “Are you?”

She took his hand in her gloved left. “Yes.”

He squeezed it, reassuringly. “I am, too. But, we’ve got each other, right? Plus, this is like going home for you, isn’t it?” he added. “The stories I’ve read: born of a moon beam and the Down Below.”

She cast him a furtive look before hesitantly nodding her head.

“We also have your Gloam Gloves if we run into trouble. And *this*,” He unzipped the duffel and removed his Sward. “If anything goes pear-shaped in there, scream, okay? Better yet, scream *and* run.”

“You’re not helping,” Gwimbs smiled, weakly. A gust of sulphurous wind warmed the air momentarily, gathering tendrils of her white-blond hair over her shoulders. “Your leg?”

He touched the top straps of the harness she had made for him. “It feels fine, right now. Hopefully it won’t tighten up in the damp. It would be hard to keep up if we have to run.”

“You’re not helping.”

“No, I suppose I’m not,” he agreed. “Let’s go.”

Despite his personal feelings about The Mole Rats, Semper always tried to maintain a healthy trade relationship with the denizens of the Dead. The partnership was hardly reciprocal, however. Every few weeks, the leader of the Solitudinus Terminal enlisted Deebees to bring them fresh supplies: jugs of his famous, home-brewed kombucha, clean, hand-me-down clothes, free of mold and damp, as well as any tinned provisions other Deebees were willing to part with; typically creamed beef tips, water chestnuts; and the ubiquitous cans of creamed corn, which generally gathered dust in their makeshift pantries. Along with fresh-baked bread from their finest bakers—folded with tempting swirls of cinnamon, raisins, and dates.

Some of the Deebees tools umbrage with the comestible gifts, grumbling about their own mouths to feed. *Why are we feeding the Mole Rats? Let ‘em chew on the rocks they love so much.* But, Semper Moses was willingly oblivious to the gripes, thumping through his conductor car, and tinkering away, content in the majority’s willingness towards compassion and self-sacrifice.

Cheese kept his feelings to himself, often aiding with the minority, while Semper perused his cupboard on subway car visits, plucking tins of tuna and cannellini beans—Barvo’s personal favorite—from his possession, as if it were his idea. “You’re very kind, Charles,” Semper would smile, his train schedule coat whispering, reflecting the grizzled hippie’s pleasure. As Semper left, thumping along with his PVC walking tube, Cheese would try to square his irritation with the sacrificial willingness he’d allegedly offered it with.

Despite their muted grumblings, Semper’s gifts were always accepted. Direct contact was never made, but the crates of goods were always empty the next day. In its place, the fattest, most succulent mushrooms, and small figurines carved from precious quarry stone, sometimes made to resemble the Deebees who had made the drop that week.

More to himself than Gwimbs, Cheese repeated Jack’s words aloud as the darkness swallowed them: “They’re just people, right?” A question formed on the back of Barvo’s false bravado: If Semper was a double agent, why would he forge unnecessary relationships with social pariahs like the Mole Rats? In what way could it benefit the Grays? He imagined scenarios in which his superiors used the relationship to get at the untouched mineral deposits below; a wealth of missed opportunities. It didn’t strike Cheese as possible. That greedy opportunism didn’t jive with what he knew of the man.

He ran into Gwimbs, who stared at him intently. “What?” he wondered defensively, ashamed at his lack of focus. He was sure the thoughts were loud enough to escape his head, reverberating off the walls, alerting every Mole Rat, Gray, and Gloam to their location.

As if reading his thoughts, she shook her head, put her gloved index finger to her chapped lips, and then touched his temple. “Enough,” she said. “We’re here.”

It was as if a bolt of electricity traveled from the tip of her finger into his brain. His doubts vanished like shadows in sunlight. Unsure if the gloves were revealing a yet undisclosed power, or whether it had more to do with that strange, young woman gently touching his face, he couldn’t be sure. He was quick to banish that thought, as well.

Pressed on by the imminent arrival of the next Harvest and his eagerness to confront Semper, Cheese removed the red flashlight from his pocket, clicked on the beam, and told Gwimbs to, “Stay close.”

Rocks gave way to sand, making their footsteps uneven. Graffiti lined the outermost walls in a wide tunnel, allowing Cheese and Gwimbs to walk comfortably side-by-side. The passage

was lined with refuse, and the embers of a long dead fire. The surface of the stone was gritty and clammy. As it narrowed, the pale light of approaching dawn dimmed, the vandalism giving way to raw, pockmarked walls, as if the Truth Taggers' resolve vanished upon the prospect of confrontation with the Mole Rats. Apparently, there were places even the truth couldn't penetrate.

The passageway narrowed, forcing the pair into an awkward duck walk, until it terminated at a point where the tunnel split in three directions. By then, the flashlight's weak beam was their only light. The sound of the churning river had fallen away. Cheese motioned for Gwimbs to join him on the earthen floor, while he unshouldered the duffel bag from his shoulder, and helped Gwimbs remove the backpack Onkalo supplied. Damp and uncomfortable, he removed the piece of red cellophane rubber banded over the beam, exposing a stronger beam, which he used to examine the map.

The chance of running into a Mole Rat seemed unlikely; he shone the beam of his torch down the trio of tunnels that branched to the right. It revealed an impossibly tight space in which crawling would be the only option. "That's the way we need to go," he announced in a hushed voice of disappointment.

Gwimbs began to hyperventilate. "I can't," she shook her head and hands nervously.

"Hey," he touched her shoulder. "I don't like it either, but it's the only way. The other two passages lead to lower passages in this blasted maze."

"We won't fit," her voice pitched, momentarily, before she remembered the omnipresent threat of Mole Rats. "We won't *fit!*" she hissed.

"Yes, we will," he replied with more certainty than he felt. "I'll tie our bags to my good leg and drag them behind, so we'll fit? You'll follow behind. If I get stuck, you can crawl back the way you came, and try to get help from The Air Straddlers when the smoke and fog from the river clears. I'm sure Onkalo has someone watching the entrance from the bridge."

She took a deep breath, eyes closed tightly. Finally, she nodded.

Cheese found a nylon strap in Onkalo's backpack. After tying a knot around his ankle, he looped the strap through the packs and secured them. "Come on, now," he kept his voice upbeat to quell her anxiety. Even as he did so, his subconscious poked at the back of his mind with a dull stick. He knew he should be worried about something, but he didn't know what.

After two hours crawling in silence— punctuated only with bouts of cursing when the fabric of his trench coat got snagged on the overhead rocks, and the hurried reassurances he whispered to Gwimbs when the resulting panic attacks his outbursts caused left her crippled with fear—the low ceiling began to climb. With a whispered thanks to the Moon, Cheese moved into a crouch. The movement made his joints crack audibly. “C’mon,” he took The Girl Who Might be Selene’s hand. “There you go,” Cheese helped her out. Standing to his full height, he cracked his back, offering a wide smile of relief. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Gwimbs shivered. Her breathing came in short, feathery bursts. “It wasn’t *good*.”

“It’s behind us no,” Cheese offered sympathetically. He untied the packs from his leg and unzipped the duffel bag. For their breakfast, he settled on leftover meatloaf from the precinct fridge, sandwiched between pieces of white bread. They chewed quickly in silence, hypersensitive to the unfamiliar sounds that came from the darkness ahead.

Wiping his fingers on the back of his coat, he covered the lens of his torch with the red cellophane, and directed the beam towards the map.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“Somewhere beneath Riverfront Park terminal,” he answered, making swift mental calculations of their relative position when they entered The Empire of the Dead. “Onkalo marked a path that leads us to the southern edge of Frigoris Park; that’s where we should service if all goes according to plan.”

“Has that happened before?” she wondered. “According to plan.”

“Not yet,” he smiled. “There’s a first time for—”

Someone coughed...

With his eyes wide, and a sudden flop sweat on his brow, he slowly drew his index finger to his lips as Gwimbs clamped down on his arm in a vice-like grip tighter than the passage they’d come from.

A shuffling movement approached. Sandpaper against the skin. A whisper of breath.

Cheese swung his torch into the tunnel ahead. The weak red light flirted against something pale, a flash, a hint of movement. It melted away like smoke. The pair stood motionless, holding their breath, waiting. The sudden silence gathered weight. Heft, suffocating with nothingness.

He removed his Sward from an inner pocket and vowed to keep it handy for the duration of their time in the Empire. "We can't stand here forever," he whispered into the delicate curvature of her ear. "Whatever it is. Whatever's ahead, we'll have to face it."

"Why?"

"Because if we stay here, we'll die."