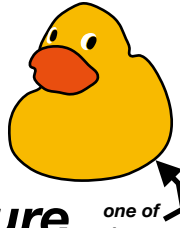


ducc (noun)

A small, yellow, plastic duck figure.



one of those

contains almost 100,000 real words*

***pumped to
the brim
with
characters to
wander
in
lots of lands
spans***

a tale of deserts, bravery, foolishness, miscommunication, and most importantly, plastic yellow ducks.

no expectations are better than good expectations



“Pretty good.” - Duck Enthusiast Magazine

“Well, it exists.” - you, probably.

exercised



“quack” - get this duck out of my interview

neck is well

sure your

just making

hope I'm being cool rather than pretentious

there's a lot of things to read here, and I wholly understand if you want to take a break from holding the book at a funny angle. break over.

comes with a free hand-drawn ducc, whether you like it or not. you can trade them or something.

enriched with vitamins a through f

* words may not be coherent

for more information please reread

Disclaimer

Absolutely none of these people, in any way, shape or form, in any manner, with any of their traits, mannerisms, ways of speaking, ways of moving, likes, dislikes, favourite books, quality of eyesight, ability to make the 'hitchhiker's thumb', taste/distaste for cakes, pastries, muffins, etc..., level of intelligence, level of useful intelligence, disposable income, favoured method of commuting, personal thoughts on the environment (cultural and political as well as physical), ability to fold sheet metals, liver damages, predispositions for certain card games over others, favourite foods, least favourite drinks, number of arms on living relatives (rounded to the nearest decimal place), total length of phone calls made to a nearby pizza restaurant at 3:00am, weight of the last physical object they bought online (if any), bank passwords, PINs, phone codes, telephone numbers, registration numbers, favourite numbers, handedness, footedness, ability to distinguish real English words from fake ones, likelihood that they are still reading this, likelihood that they have skipped this bit entirely and just want to read the book already, likelihood that they just skipped it right then, number of ears they could deal with losing, place of work, latitude of the bed they have spent the longest in, place of education, place of birth, length of the furthest range they have travelled away from said place of birth, grendliness, short term memory strengths, and most importantly, names, are based on real life individuals.

What is a Ducc?

A Ducc is a small yellow plastic duck, with a squeaker in the bottom.

Ducc is a topical joke which fizzles out in days, with effects subtly lasting years, until some kind of crescendo.

Ducc is an idea for a story, a sort of ethereal concept, floating around for a year and a half, until finally coalescing into an undeveloped mess.

Ducc is a word for perseverance, a lack of wanting to give up, and then the finish being so close it's worth just going for it in the end.

Ducc means a religion, authority, rigour, stability, security, ignorance, knowledge, the banning of false idols, the prayer that goes on each and every day all over the world, and the message behind them.

Ducc means good within bad, bad with good intentions, a desire to shield people from truths they cannot know, filling the void with lies they shouldn't.

Ducc means sitting down and listening to people around a campfire, and when you break up and part your separate ways, it means a time for self-reflection, and to think about what you were; what you will be. Remember, there are always bigger things to worry about.

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Prologue, but a thankful one.

Thank you to everyone who worked with me on this, and thank you especially to those people who made the real life duck incident which, for lack of a better term, inspired this mess.

Thank you to the Ducc Project team for vaguely supporting me over the past year, and giving me encouragement when I needed it, during the GCSE period and after, and during the summer, when everyone thought it had gone, but no, it suddenly had thirty thousand words, and was no longer a joke.

Alright, maybe it still is a joke, at however many thousand words. But it's a good joke, at least one that has had a reasonable amount of effort put into it. And I understand fully that that doesn't make it good.

Thank you to all the teachers who unknowingly read extracts from this book, and the exam marker who read a near word for word copy of chapter 6 for one of my creative writing answers. I do hope I get to see that one day, just to see what the differences were.

Thank you to you, for presumably buying this book, or if you're just reading a little online, or maybe even in a bookstore, then that's okay too.

I don't mind.

I - Ritual

Reverend Williams looked down from the congregation, reading his scrawling, hand-written notes.

“And the first shall be the last, and the last shall be the first. All people, one day, will be able to travel to the oasis, they will be able to revel in the sight of the holy scripts, they will. One day. When the evil forces that surround our land are vanquished by a higher power, one which we believe in with all our hearts, and one that will lead us back to the oasis, where we can all be the first, and never the last.”

Tarek looked up from the floor, after mumbling the prayer, only vaguely in time with the rest of the congregation. He was bored, bored of these endless events that he was forced to attend, bored of the seasonal rituals which all seemed to bring nothing but bad fortune to the town; he was even bored of boredom. An existence so based on rites of passage and existences based on crop harvests and phases of the moon that there was scarcely any time for self-improvement. No one in the town had dared venture outside their self-defined borders. Even the people who drew the physical lines in the sand never dared to cross them.

Outside that circle, there were evil forces. They were safe right here, in their circular circle. They had been for generations. It was all well and good, except for where it wasn't. And that was all outside. They made sure of it.

Tarek knew everyone in the village, but then again it happens consequentially, when you all live within a literal stone's throw of each other. Once, he had thrown an actual stone around to test this theory. But despite being an advocate for the scientific method, testing and recording, old Doctor Kalivas was not too pleased about the results. Not that there were any objects of value to break.

Tarek had lost many stones to the circle.

He sometimes threw stones outside the circle, only to see them get covered up when sand blew over them, slowly hiding any trace of their existence. Some of these rocks had been forcefully taken away from him, mainly by Doctor Kalivas. He claimed to be an advocate for law and order, but threw Tarek's rocks away without a fair trial. Many of the people in the town advocated for things which they didn't seem to follow. Reverend Hall said that all members of the town should attend his services, but he hadn't been to a service in a few days. In fact, Tarek hadn't seen him in a few days, either.

"And the holy- hey, you there! In the second row! Are you listening to me? I said, stop looking at the floor, boy! Are you listening to me?"

Tarek kept mumbling and repeating what Reverend Williams said, as if it was the normal order of service.

“Tarek!” said the reverend, “Do keep your head up! Show some respect for the dead.”

Tarek looked up at the casket - “Rest in Peace, Reverend Hall.”

At least he was at the service.

The hypocrite.

II - Maybe

The light was blindingly bright as Tarek walked out of the assembly hall, refracting off the various layers of warm air that floated just above the surface. Doctor Ullathorne had taught him of that, in their various and disparate lessons together. Tarek had been taught by all the teachers in the town that the world was all explained, and that everything that they knew was all there was to be known in the world. It was unquestionable, just like the circle. Nothing had ever gone past the circle and come back. For all he knew, it was a lonely, empty abyss. Maybe it was just more sand. He wasn't going to risk it just to find out. That's why he threw the stones over the border, a small act of protest. Maybe if he drew more lines, he could extend the border. Maybe it was best not to think about.

Lessons weren't on today. Something about a festival, one of the story-telling ones. As if the hour long session of droning on about scripture he just sat through wasn't bad enough. No, today would be the sixteenth time that the ancient tale of Ducc would be recounted to him. He knew the story well, and tried to take the boredom of the event away by imagining the scenes in his head. It would be like watching a play, to an extent. Perhaps the cast would be his friends and family, and his teachers and leaders. Of course, all his worldly imaginings were based on what he had seen in this small circle, but he could extrapolate from the words of the Ducc Scripts. Of course, one of the few things he could not imagine was

the form of the ducc itself. These statues they had in their houses were merely imitations, he had learnt. He staged the story in his head, getting ready to imagine his way out of yet another service.

But this would be a different tale to the one he was used to hearing today.

“Hello, Tarek. I see you are preparing for the story later today.” said the reverend. “It’s good to see the youth of today are so invested in their stories. I’ve heard you recounted verse... nine hundred and seventy six last year?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ah, yes, quite a verse. Do you know much about the meaning behind it, as you’ve clearly studied it closely?”

“Well, I think the...” Tarek said, not knowing what half-baked nonsense was going to fall out of his mouth.

“Go on, I’m interested to hear what you have to say.” said the reverend, simultaneously in an angry and soothing tone.

“It... it shows the importance of the Ducc in our lives.” Yes, that was it, the perfect catch-all statement.

“Oh, of course! The ultimate philosophy which we aim to spread! Not that there’s anything past the circle, you know.” said the reverend. Tarek was not entirely

convinced that that statement didn't carry an air of concealment about it, as if the reverend was trying to hide something from him, from all of them! Maybe he knew what was beyond the circle! Maybe not.

The reverend continued, "Tarek, this is your sixteenth recital, correct?"

"Yes."

"Well then, you will be happy to learn that everyone's sixteenth recital is a little different! And I don't mean you get to read out a chapter rather than a verse, but you'll be pleasantly surprised by what's in store. Hopefully no one will have spoiled the surprise for you just yet."

Tarek thought that statement had a different air around it, a much creepier one. Maybe... maybe not.

He walked out to the far reaches of the town, where the sun was setting below the dunes on the edge of the border. Over the past few years, he had watched as these great orange hills drifted over the landscape, changing the horizon as they did so. It was a shame that the border was currently set halfway up the tallest one. It looked incredibly fun to slide down, or throw rocks off of, or maybe even climb to the top and watch the sun set.

On his way there, he was passed by Mr Stockdale, who lived on the edge of the town, separated by his bountiful crops, which kept the town running, albeit with little

room for failure. There was always enough to eat, though. It seemed that all the bad fortune that seemed to befall the rest of the town avoided Stockdale. He was well respected by most people in the town, including the teachers. Yet, he never seemed to come to any services. Tarek had rarely seen him set foot in any of the assembly halls.

He was the man who set the border, too. Tarek saw the rake, leaned up against the side of his house, which was free from sand and dirt, unlike most of the other houses in the town. Stockdale was a shining light in their circular world.

“Hello, Mr Stockdale! How are you?” said Tarek, excited to hear what he had to say.

“Oh, I’m good. Not much has been happening recently with me. I’m just... good.” he said, “Hey, I’ve heard it’s your new recital thing today!”

“Yeah! About that, do you know what goes on in it? Rev was being kind of cryptic but I knew you’d tell me.”

“Well... how do I put this... I’ve never actually been to this recital. Something about-”

He stopped abruptly.

“I’ll tell you another day. Maybe afterwards? Actually, that doesn’t make sense. I can’t help. But it sounds like you need to prepare for it.”

“But I haven’t been told what’s going on, much less how to prepare for it! I don’t know what is going to happen. No one has ever told me about this!”

“Calm down, it’s just another thing you have to do. Like Duccmas. Or Ducc Tuesday. Anyway, I was also going to ask you if you wanted to talk about taking over some of my jobs. You need to learn a skill. Maybe one day, you could set the borders!”

“Oh, okay. That’d be fun!”

“Tarek, it’s not fun, it’s hard work, dragging a rake around the whole town once a day, every day.” said Stockdale, looking down at Tarek with a slight frown. “It’s part of the daily Duccship ritual. I do it so the crops grow well.”

“I guess not.” he said “But I’d be happy to help!”

There was a pause, just long enough to be painful.

“Well then. I guess you should be getting to whatever it is you have to do.”

“Thanks for talking with me, it means a lot to me. We don’t see you a lot in the centre of the town.”

“Oh, really? I thought I was a regular presence there?”

“Well... I guess you are. Alright then, have a good evening, Mr Stockdale.”

“And you, Tarek.”

Tarek continued walking to the edge of the town, choosing to sit down and contemplate his career choices he could make. Rake bearer, priest, teacher, merchant or farmer. He had never really found being a farmer appealing, nor did he want to become a teacher or a priest, which left rake bearer or merchant as the final choices. His father had told him about the stresses of merchant life, even in this small town, so he erred on the side of rake bearing, despite the low opportunity.

Not much else was needed in this town, as Stockdale provided for them all. He was the greatest believer in Ducc there was. He made tall stone statues of the ancient ones. Reverend Williams, however, did not always approve of his carvings, sometimes opting to give lectures on how they were ‘disrespectful’. Stockdale should be the reverend, Tarek thought.

And with the setting of the sun below the horizon, the ground began to cool, and so Tarek headed back towards the town. On his way back, he noticed that the rake was gone, and so was Stockdale. He wasn’t anywhere in sight, or on any of the dunes on this side of the town. Maybe he was raking somewhere else.

Maybe not.

III - Recital

The light grew dimmer as the sun began to illuminate less and less of the sky above Tarek, as he walked back towards the now-glowing heart of the town. A feeble heart, only able to pump enough blood to keep itself alive, as was no need for a brain, or sensory organs. It was as if the circle was their cell wall, and the town their nucleus, and Stockdale's field their mitochondria - Hartley had taught him that. He was one of the teachers, but he didn't always seem like one. He felt more human than most of them, in the sense that he had shortcomings.

Hartley often recounted of how he used to farm and pick potatoes where Stockdale's farm currently is. According to his vaguely self-aggrandising yet pity-seeking tales, there was a surplus of potatoes when he was the town farmer. According to everyone else, there was a lack of everything else, frequent failures to rake the boundary, incorrect verses spoken at rituals, turning up fifteen minutes to every lecture he held, on the dot, without fail.

Regardless of what time Hartley came to lectures, Tarek was going to make it to the ritual on time, as the entire subject of his day had revolved around this mysterious event. He was not sure if it was a recital, a ritual, or just some lecture that Stockdale had inadvertently got him animated for. Hopefully, it would be an evening to remember, and not for how incredibly long and boring it was - it was possible for these events to last for days, and

some would pass out from hunger but still be made to sit in their seats, unconscious as the rest of the audience.

No one had given him any information about the time and place of this event, so he was stuck, wandering around the town listlessly, as if trying to wear tracks into the sand, like Stockdale did. He shuffled his feet in such a way to create as much of a track as possible, not caring too much about the sand which filled his shoes in doing so, and not caring of the glances that the junior rakers gave him. After all, he was helping them by giving them work, or perhaps a better phrase might be 'some menial activity to pass the time'. He walked over to the men, not too much older than he was, and asked them about the 'event' that was taking place.

They walked away, muttering something about the ritual behind his back, and began to flatten out the small valleys he had crafted with their rakes. So much for a small, friendly community. No one else was in sight in the town centre, and so he went to the only place guaranteed to have something going on in it, no matter the time. The hall.

Entering the hall, he brought a cloud of sand with him, kicked up by the movement of the large doors, which caused some members of the back row to cough and turn around. The members of the rows in front of them turned around to see what the noise was, and the rows in front of them turned around to see what all the shuffling noises caused by the rows behind them were. Well, each and every one of those people were now

staring at him as the doors of the hall closed behind him, watching every slow and measured step he took towards the front of the hall. The only seats left were at the front, and so as he walked towards them, he could feel each staring pair of eyes (or in a good few cases, singular eye) slow him down, as if creating a wall of thickened air he had to force his way through, against his will. He had made it more than half way towards the front; there was no turning back now, as it was apparent he had committed to trying to sit down. He fought against his better nature as he was about to take a seat in the front row, and just when he was about to signal to someone to move up a bit so he could fit on the bench, the reverend spoke.

“Tarek. So glad you could be with us today. It’s your sixteenth recital, and today, you’ll learn more of the story that our Duccology is based upon. Sounds harmless, right?”

“Yes.” He paused for a moment. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good, well then, come up here and recount the tale of Ducc as you know it. Be brief, we haven’t got all day. No, in fact, we’ve got all night and all day!” Said the reverend, which elicited a disheartened laugh from the congregation. “Do please come up to the stage and speak of what you know.”

He walked to the stage, being followed by the same sets of glazed eyes that seemed to also glaze the floor in heavy tar, making him nervous and unable to walk very

fast, and under the glaze of the many gazes set upon him, he shuffled his way up on to the lectern, and began recounting the Tale of Ducc as they had taught him so in his numerous lessons on the subject. There were to be no interpretations or personal anecdotes or opinions attached to this reading, though, the raw facts of the tale would be recounted, almost like someone reading directly from a book.

“After having followed Ducc through the desert to find the Oasis, they built caves in order to hide themselves away from the forces that opposed Ducc, and to store their precious scripts. They had made these laws in order that more men and women would follow the ways of the Ducc in time. However, the caves did not last forever, and as dark forces drove them out of the caves, some of them were captured by those dark forces and put to use as minions of evil, forming the town of Wren. And we founded the town of Dryden, where we keep the laws of the Ducc to this day. The boundary is drawn each and every morning to ward off the evil forces of Wren, and to stop them from gaining power by feeding off our lands, which are full of fertile soils and water, thanks only to the force of Ducc.”

Tarek had collapsed almost sixteen years of Ducc teaching into a few reasonably long sentences, not before recounting the whole story in a lot more detail. But as the evening turned into night, Tarek felt that even the most stoic of hall-goers were on the border of consciousness. Eventually, the story was brought to a close as he spoke of the founding of the town of Dryden by the ancient Ones, and their family lineage. While

speaking of who begat who in this family tree (which was arguably more like a family bush, given the small gene pool the settlers had to work with) he mentioned briefly of an outlying branch, stemming directly from the ancient Ones, down to nothing.

“Thank you Tarek, that was amazing. Now, what if we told you there’s more to that story. Well, not more to the story, but more to the future. Ducc Scripture says there is a prophecy, of one who will come and bring us good fortune, from within. And recently, we have had a lot of good fortune, food wise. Now, I will welcome to the front, Stockdale!” said the reverend, gesturing to the man sitting by the door, who opened it.

In came Stockdale, with no sign of slowing down his pace despite the even greater number of eyes focused on him. The force which these admiring eyes had on him seemed to speed him up, and he strode towards the lectern, moving the reverend aside as the doors slammed shut, creating a crescendo of noise to accompany his dramatic entrance, the first of which Tarek had ever seen. The man himself, stood there in front of a congregation, now thoroughly perked up after having to sit through a mind-numbing recital, as whatever Stockdale had to say would have much more bearing on their lives than the stories of old.

“Hello, everybody!” said Stockdale in an unusually charismatic tone, with a single cheer from the audience to accompany it. “I have come here today, on the day of this special sixteenth recital, to tell Tarek the story of the

Prophecy of Ducc! Now, all of you know it, because to be in here today is to be wise to the prophecy! Isn't that right, folks?"

A hundred heads nodded in unison, more in sync than the reverend could ever coax them to be, no matter how much energy he tried to ooze into his lectures.

"Well then, let's get started. So, after the town of Dryden was founded, it doesn't matter about the lineage or any of that drivel our young man here just told us! We've all heard it a hundred times! Everyone begat everyone and such and such, but the prophecy states that none of these begat-ers will ever be the crucial part of the prophecy. An outsider will be part of the prophecy. And I am this outsider. It says so, right here, in one of these scrolls. Now, it doesn't matter which one, the only proof you need is to look outside and see how much better this town has become since I've been here. Pipelines, delivering water from a well into each house. Bountiful crop yields. The lot. It's... honestly incredible. Ducc has helped me achieve this state of luck. Ducc, and Ducc alone, has helped me."

Stockdale proceeded to tell the tale of the prophecy, and how he, and his descendants, would help the town grow and thrive in their little pocket of existence, safe from the outside world from which he was banished. Allegedly, he had been banished from Wren after realising the superiority of Ducc at a young age, sixteen, to be exact.

And the night turned into day, as Stockdale passed the lectern back to the reverend, and he proceeded to recount the Ducc Prayer, which everyone followed as usual. After, there was almost a stampede to get out of the hall, as the people wanted go back into the comfort of their own homes and sleep, for they had stayed awake all night, listening intently to Stockdale's teachings on the prophecy, as it was rare for him to come into town.

And as the sun rose, Tarek slept.

IV - Follower

The sleep cycles of many of the people in Dryden had been thoroughly obliterated by the many night services they attended, and this contributed to the general feeling of lethargy amongst the populace. This tiredness would inspire almost nothing to ever happen in the town, as if someone had cast a spell over them, forcing them to only do the absolute minimum to eat, move, and in some cases, do their assigned job. There would be rest-based festivities which gave the people energy from time to time, but the celebrations that ensued both depleted their food supply and their energy, returning them to the same state as they were before. This wasn't a bad life to live, far from it, actually, as most people in the town were thoroughly content with their lives, the way they lived was dictated by Ducc to keep them alive, and the circle they drew was to keep everything else bad out.

Tarek had woken up at around midday, after a reasonably restful nap on a pile of sand inside a tent. There was still a light dusting of sand over his clothes, which he swept off, getting to his feet. He then exited the tent, thinking no one would be outside. No one was outside, they were all asleep, with the exception of a single figure right near the border. It was Stockdale, raking the border as usual. Tarek could only just make out the dot, walking with his rake, up the side of one of the sand dunes, to carve out the border. Yesterday, the border was set at the midpoint of this hill, where Tarek had been talking to Stockdale yesterday.

But the dot kept going up. The border was clearly below the position of the dot! Tarek began to walk, and then jog towards the edge of the village, watching as the dot became a line, as he approached the dune, and as Stockdale climbed to the top of the dune, the line resolved itself into a less blurry figure.

“Stockdale! You’ve gone past the border!” shouted Tarek, against the sound of the midday breeze, shielding his face from the occasional updraft of sand. Stockdale didn’t respond.

“Stockdale! Hey! You are past the border!” he shouted, even louder, and more frantic than before. “If rev sees this, he’ll banish you!” Stockdale, slowly turning around, faced Tarek.

“Tarek, how are you? Don’t worry about me, because the head raker doesn’t have to stay within the boundary. Otherwise, how would I rake it?” said Stockdale, in a passive-aggressive tone.

“Er, well, I guess you could...” Tarek trailed off as he thought it would be better not to try and debate him. Maybe he’d take this to the reverend. Surely, he’d be able to tell him what was what, and whether you could rake a circle properly while standing inside it the whole time. “Well, have a good day. Hope to see you at the post-recital feast later.” said Tarek, leaving the hill to continue. He walked back to the centre of the town, not realising that Stockdale had continued to walk up the

dune, continuing over until he could not be seen. He increased his walk to a jog, and then back to a walk again as the soft sands depleted his energy for running faster than the paths at the centre of the town. Why couldn't they have installed these paths further out? They had the resources to, surely, Tarek thought.

The town was quite something to behold when no one was around, no hustle and bustle of the market, no religious prayers, nothing to be seen. When Tarek was younger, he remembered how the town used to be a lot more active, and how he could never find any alone time. There used to be a lot more people, he thought, but even though they had less, they were happier. Perhaps it was not all better in these 'halcyon' days that he imagined, maybe it was all better with the power of hindsight, or maybe he never remembered the bad things. Speaking of bad things, where had Stockdale gone? He looked behind to try and see the dot on the dune, but saw no such thing. Instead, the rake was just barely visible, planted in the top of the sand as if to resemble a crucifix. Or, more accurately, as Duccifix, which the reverend had taught them about.

Tarek, mind now fully occupied with the reverend, decided it would be a good idea to go and find him to warn him of Stockdale's clear violation of the rules. After all, they had been taught that rule pretty much since birth, and this outsider comes and ruins their sacred boundary. It seemed almost 'typical' to Tarek, despite the fact that no other single person had ever come from outside or left from inside, as far as he could recall.

The buildings, which were all no taller than a single floor, (except, of course, for the hall) were all completely silent as Tarek walked around them. He could feel people inside them being disturbed as he kicked up sand behind him, and could feel their tar-like stares sticking him to the ground once more. He took a route down a side path, to get to the hall quicker. He had to walk almost sideways, between the two houses, careful not to bump into a wall for fear of it collapsing, or snagging his shirt. These were the two houses of the Allen family and the Sevin family, who hated each other with a passion.

The place where the houses were used to be a single house, before they were forcibly separated after both the aforementioned families moved in. And they didn't hate each other due to massive ideological differences (after all, there was none of that in this town) or family payback (there were generally no murders either), but the most inconsequential and menial of things. Oh, a sand pile formed outside my doorstep and not theirs, let me just quickly burn their food supply and break their water supply, and then you'll do the same to me, and then we'll both be back to square one, but it's more like square negative one, because we're both worse off now, and it's your fault for putting that sand pile on my doorstep to begin with, so I'll put one on your doorstep. And the whole process repeats, ad nauseam. At least it gave Stockdale something to do in-between farming and teaching, fixing the pipes. He was a master with pipelines, and rightfully so. He had prayed to Ducc for knowledge of pipelines, and had been given it as he lived

in the most sacred of places, Dryden. He had rejected Wren to live in the better, more holy place.

A solitary chicken crossed Tarek's path, brushing past his feet as he walked by, clucking once and scuttling over to the far corner of its pen. The solitary cluck was heard by one of the Allens and woke them, for a single second, before they fell asleep again - at least, that's how any person who wasn't locked in a war of pettiness would react. They shouted, "Hey! Stupid chicken! Shut up!", which woke up the other members of their family, and in turn the Sevin family. Before Tarek had even set foot outside the front of both of the houses, insults were flying like crudely manufactured bombs, yet the curtains had not even been drawn. The houses continued to create a domino effect, slowly waking up the people in the houses beside their own, and then once the magnitude of raucous talk had reached a certain level, the people on the other side of the street heard them too.

As Tarek walked through the town, people had woken up properly and were starting their daily routines, watering cacti, having a meagre morning meal, some were walking around, trying to get their daily exercise in before the festivities began. But not before that, Tarek would have a single lesson to go to, one with Kalivas. Kalivas, according to everyone in the town, was the most skilled mathematician of them all, and had created many theorems that were based in higher dimensions. Allegedly, he could think in four dimensions. Tarek could barely comprehend three at times, let alone the addition of a fourth. Every time Tarek asked him how he knew

this, he brushed it off, saying something along the lines of, “I didn’t come up with it.” He supposed Ducc had given Kalivas this ability.

Either way, Tarek still had the reverend to find before he was to attend any sort of lesson, and Tarek knew exactly where to find him. Running round to the hall, Tarek saw the Reverend Williams walking out of the hall, after presumably having finished the mornings’ prayer.

“Rev- er... Reverend Williams! I’d like to ask you a question about-” Tarek was interrupted by the Reverend coughing and asking Tarek to come closer, as he could not hear him. “Well, you see,” Tarek continued, “I wanted to ask you something about the border of the town.”

“The raked border?” said the reverend, “Oh, that’s an area I’m well versed in. Ask away.”

“Can Stockdale go outside the border? He is the head raker, after all... How else would he draw the circle?”

“No one can cross the border at any time.”

Tarek paused for a second, despite that being the answer he assumed he was going to get. “Well, I think Stockdale has crossed the border just now.”

“Oh, really? That doesn’t sound like something he would usually do.” said the reverend, who promptly departed in the direction of Stockdale’s house, with an expression

Tarek had never seen on his generally neutral face before.

“Sir! What are you doing?” asked Tarek, raising his voice a bit more than would have been necessary for any other person.

“I’m going to have a chat with him.” the reverend said, sternly. “That’s all.”

Tarek walked off behind him, and weaved around some walls to avoid being seen by the reverend, who was still marching forth with a serious excess of intent. He ducked behind another wall, which belonged to the house of Doctor Kalivas, who was due to see him some time that morning. And just so, it happened that Doctor Kalivas opened the curtains and saw Tarek, leant up against the wall, stuck to it in a peculiar pose.

“Hi, Tarek.”

“Hi, Doctor Kalivas.” A long pause followed, and Kalivas stuck his head out the window slowly.

“Tarek, what are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you here for a lesson?”

“No. Well, not yet, I think I’ll be ready in 15 minutes, I don’t know yet though.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Well, the reverend’s about to storm into Stockdale’s house.”

“What’s he mad about?”

“Come and see, I have no idea what he’s going to say.”

“Well, I guess it’s more interesting than waiting for a quarter of an hour.”

Tarek unstuck himself from the wall, and walked round the house, having a look around to check for the presence of the reverend, and then walking to the front door to wait for Kalivas. It was a bit of a wait, and Tarek was just itching to go to hear what the reverend had to say to Stockdale, but his moral compulsion (and the fact it would be awkward in 15 minutes if he had abandoned Kalivas) kept him from slinking off.

“Sorry I kept you”, said Kalivas, “Now let’s go and see what Stockdale has to say!”

They walked to Stockdale’s house, not speaking a word for fear of disturbing the delicate conversation inside, which was clearly meant to be private. They pressed their ears against the wall, looking like a more contorted version of Tarek’s earlier wall-pressing. The thin wood and clay mixture that the walls were constructed of created a muffling effect that made it hard for either of

them to hear the voices, but Tarek had spent many hours perfecting the art of ‘trans-lutu-ligum-audio’ (roughly translated through broken Latin as ‘through-clay-wood-hearing’.)

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise I was breaking a rule.” said Stockdale, rather sorrowfully and low compared to his usual tone of voice.

“Don’t worry. After all, the border’s there for a reason. Don’t want any more missing people.” said the reverend, calming the conflict, as ever.

Tarek, taking a risky move, poked his head up over the windowsill, to peek inside the room.

“Ah, okay. I’ll rewrite the scrolls a bit.” said... the reverend?

Tarek quickly ducked back down again, not quite having processed the information.

“What did they say? I can’t hear through the wall so well.” said Kalivas.

“Well, Stockdale apologised for going over the border-”

“Going over the border? Well he’s going to get an eye out if I know the rev like I think I do!” said Kalivas, raising and then lowering his voice as he became aware of the conversation inside.

“And then old rev accepted his apology, and said the borders were there for a reason, and then he said he’d... rewrite the scrolls a bit.”

“Wait. So the reverend said he’d rewrite the scrolls, and also...” said Kalivas, pausing for a second. “Tarek, look over the windowsill again.”

Tarek did so, duly and with great enthusiasm.

“And here it says - Ducc said the head raker shall have permission to venture beyond the borders, for purposes of exploration and scientific endeavour.” said the reverend, and this time it was definitely the reverend. Not that it mattered, because there was clearly the sound of quill pens scratching the parchment, and it looked like some-

“Who’s there?”

Tarek ducked down, and ducked down with force, almost hitting his head into the earthy sand below.

“What happened?” asked Kalivas.

“Who’s there?” said Stockdale.

“What happened?” asked Kalivas, now a lot quieter.

“Stockdale rewrote the Ducc scripts!”

“No way! Actually, hold on - no way? That’s the extent of my anger? But I’m feeling the will to throw myself through this window and give him a piece of my mind! Why is he doing this?”

Tarek looked incredulous, he’d never seen Kalivas so angry before. “I wouldn’t recommend that.” he said, trying to ease the mood.

He laughed, still somehow angrily. “No, of course. But I know that he’s done things like this before. Changing festival times. Creating more festivals. Lumping festivals together into these energy sapping super-festivals! But he’s never tampered with the laws. I see that as a step too far.”

“Should we confront them?”

Kalivas put his hand on the windowsill, tentatively, wondering if he should go in now and get it over with. Slowly retracting the hand, he despondently said, “No, bide our time. It’s not like we have a finite amount of time here. Actually, I know what. Let’s get friendly with Stockdale and Williams at the feast tonight, and then we can hopefully coax the truth out of them with some drink.”

“Drugging our respected elders? Sounds great.”

“Well, they’re not really my elders...”

He paused. “It’s a plan, anyway.”

“Oh, and about your lesson. Consider tonight a lesson in social dynamics, and the effects of alcohol on the human body.”

The door on the other side of the house could be heard closing, ever so quietly, as if the person who closed it wanted to not be heard. Tarek’s mind was racing with ideas about the feast tonight, and continued to produce inane, self-affirming thoughts about Stockdale and Williams.

“Okay then. Well, I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll stay here and... check up on them.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

Tarek was not the best at ending conversations.

V - Feast

“Hi there, Tarek,” said Nirav, fixing the hall door open with a small wooden block under it, “You ready for some serious chulking?”

“Huh?”

“It’s when you eat copious amount of rich and dense foods. It’s cutting - but also bulking.” said Nirav, wielding some rather unwieldy cake.

“And then what?”

“Does there have to be a what? Come on, we’ve prepared cakes in the shape of duccks!”

“Isn’t there a rule about making icons of Ducc?”

“Not any more, Stockdale told us it was actually a rule added in by Wren to stop us from celebrating Ducc festivals to their fullest extent. Plus, it tastes-” he stopped, to put some cake in his mouth, “Exactly like you’d expect!”

“How did you expect it to taste?”

“Like Ducc.” said Nirav, eating some more. “It just tastes good, that’s all.”

“Can I have some?”

“Yeah.” said Nirav, and Tarek reached out for some.

“I think you’ll find the cake table is over there, Tarek.”

Tarek walked over to the cake table, and took a hefty slice out of one of the cakes. At the same time he got hold of the knife, a familiar figure appeared on the other side of the table, out of the shadow casted by the windows at the top of the hall.

“Hello, Tarek! How are you?” said Stockdale, in an even more pleasant tone than his usual one. “Let me cut it for you.” He took the knife out of Tarek’s hands, and Tarek became quite frightened of him all of a sudden, as he had seen how he could distort the strongest of ducc scripts - there was no telling what he would do to Tarek with an actual weapon. Maybe he was no good with weapons, and instead had adopted the pen as his sword, and was ready to cross him out of the town as soon as he found out that he had been snooping, and had learned of his tampering.

“Er... Tarek,” said Stockdale, waving the hand with the knife in it to try and get Tarek’s attention, who was staring past Stockdale, thinking the above paragraph over and over in his head. Stockdale continued, “How big of a slice do you want?”

The sun reflected off the knife into Tarek’s eyes, and he moved sideways, before Stockdale lowered the knife once more, having fully regained Tarek’s attention.

“Uh, I’ll have a big slice please.”

Stockdale hovered his knife above the ducc cake. Tarek, who thought he was trying to find him a bit with more sugar on the top, decided to try and conjure up some small talk.

“So, how have you been? Is the new border all set?”

Stockdale looked up, and rotated his knife inwards, to give Tarek a measly slice, and then looked down again, pressing down gently to make sure Tarek’s slice didn’t collapse. Halfway down, he thought there were too many people waiting for the cake to be served, so the end was rushed with a quick chop, ruining the presentation of an otherwise perfect slice.

“The border is fine. And, there’s a rule that I found in the old scripts that says the head raker can go outside the border. It says they can only do so for the purposes of science and exploration. Reverend Williams and I looked for it earlier.”

Stockdale handed Tarek his slice of cake with a single glare that made him feel like he did when a hundred people were looking at him, as if his feet were in quicksand or tar, unable to move but sinking helplessly at the same time.

“Tarek, do you think it’s any good?” shouted Nirav, from across the room. “Does it taste of duck?” he continued,

laughing. Tarek walked over to the other side of the room, his plate of cake being elbowed by people sitting on benches getting up to serve themselves more food.

“Oh yeah, well, not that we’ve ever had duck, but yeah, I guess that’s what it would taste like. Sweet, and with a hint of... sweet, I guess.”

“I made it pretty much all myself. I’m just trying to get everyone to try it, but I do need to keep some to chulk, of course.”

“It’s good. Loads of people have some. I can see Kalivas going up for a second helping.”

“That’s second since you came in. I’ve been here for ages and he’s been back nine times. And he was here when I walked in, so...”

Tarek and Nirav laughed. Tarek then remembered his lesson that he was supposed to have, and that he needed to speak to Kalivas in order to hatch an alcohol-infused plan.

“I’ve got to go and talk to Kalivas for a bit now, something about my lessons.”

“What did he say to you?”

“It’s about Stockdale.”

“What about him?” asked Nirav, drawing a bit closer, but keeping his cake at the same distance.

“Okay, you have to promise not to tell anyone I told you this, but Stockdale crossed the border and then wrote down a new rule in the ancient scrolls that lets him go outside the border.”

“No way!”

“I know, right? He changed the scripture! Just like that.”

Tarek tried to click his fingers, but failed to do so and almost lost control of his plate of cake; Nirav seemed more worried about the cake hitting the floor than Tarek (the current guardian of the cake) was. Both of them were silent for a good deal of time longer than they both thought was appropriate for a moment of re-evaluation, even of this magnitude.

“It’s crazy. Well, see you in a bit, when you’ve had time to... process that.” said Tarek.

Tarek walked towards Kalivas, and then decided to take the longer, but less risky and congested route, around the benches and the food tables set up along the side of the hall. He was about to reach Kalivas and squeeze through the gap in the cake table and the meat table to be able to talk to him, but then Stockdale looked up from serving his nth slice of cake.

“Tarek, you can’t be on this side of the buffet. You’ve got to go round. The queue system would be in shambles if we just let people go wherever they wanted.” said Stockdale, in a manner stern enough to make Kalivas turn around.

“Oh, don’t worry, he’s here to talk to me about a lesson.”

“Very well then.”

“Come on, Tarek, I’ll speak to you at the end of the hall once I’ve finished getting some things to eat.”

Tarek walked past Stockdale, and he could have sworn he felt the sharp edge of the knife trail across his back as he walked past. Probably the blunt side, Tarek thought, as cutting someone for violating queue order felt a little bit overboard.

Kalivas was now at the end of the hall, and waved to Tarek through a sea of food and appendages grabbing at whatever was still left on the tables. He had to fight his way through the queue system, no longer caring of the glare that Stockdale was presumably throwing at him. As he looked round, he saw Stockdale turn away from him, and begin to smile as he served the other people cake. Their slices were much bigger, and given the massive quantity of cake, much more sensibly portioned.

“Tarek,” said Kalivas, “we need to try and get Stockdale and Williams to drink now, and quick. It looks like the remaining reserves are being put down fairly quickly. Oh,

look, over there. That's Boris, he makes strong alcohol. Let's see if he's brought any of his private supply."

Boris, it seemed, had brought his aforementioned private supply, and was currently lying face down in a puddle of it, which had already been in and then out of his system, one way or another. Hopefully, whatever Tarek could scrounge from the bottles would be enough to mix with other drinks in order for it not to taste too acidic, so they could get the allegedly teetotal reverend tipsy.

"I think he's got a bottle in his coat."

"I'll check." said Kalivas, kneeling down, rummaging around in Boris's coat pockets. He soon procured an infeasibly large bottle from one of the top pockets, and nodded to Tarek. "Now, let me tell you a bit about alcohol. I'm not a chemist."

"Oh, you are." said Tarek, knowing that Kalivas knew as much about chemistry as the chemistry teachers.

"Well, regardless, alcohols are hydrocarbons. And the part of the alcohol that gets you drunk is the ethanol, and these individual molecules are so small that they can get in-between neurotransmitters in your brain, and interrupt the signals, causing interference, and a loss of motor co-ordination." Boris raised his head, mumbled, then reached for the bottle, threw up, and collapsed, arm outstretched, in the new pile of vomit.

“As you can see,” Kalivas continued, “Boris here has had far too much. As you shouldn’t know the feeling of being drunk, I’ll try and gauge how much the reverend and Stockdale have had to drink, and keep them at the point of psychological susceptibility. Then, I’ll ask questions, and hopefully, we’ll get the answers we want!”

“So, just how strong is this stuff?” asked Tarek?

“Let’s wait and see. I’ll mix it with some water so it tastes less... melt-your-tongue-y.”

Kalivas mixed the contents of the bottle with some water, and shook the bottle to mix it, creating a white foam which looked rather unsavoury. He took the bottle over to the table where both Stockdale and the reverend were sitting, talking away to their far more inebriated guests.

“Hi guys! Why don’t we have a toast to Ducc with this stuff? It’s quite good. Just drink it nice and quick.” said Kalivas, going round the table, pouring a small amount of the liquid into each cup he saw. “Alright, Stockdale? You want some?”

“Not really.”

“It’s for Ducc.”

“Oh, alright then. I love Ducc so much, so why not?”

“And Reverend Williams? Will you have any?”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“Go on, just one, for Ducc.”

A long pause followed, far too long to be a pause that would end in anything other than no.

“One.”

“Great! Here you go!” Kalivas said, pouring some into the reverend’s cup, fully expecting this to be the first of many drinks he would have ‘in the name of Ducc’ tonight.

“Smells quite odd. Oh, er... the toast! To Ducc, and everything he has brought us!”

His drunken congregation followed, slurring the line back to him in a weary echo, and they all drank. Several cries of disgust and pain were shouted from some of the diners, who writhed in agony as the aftertaste of the drink hit them like a brick wall made of bricks that were made of pure acid. The first head made contact with the table, rattling the plates and cutlery that were near it. Then followed another two, and Stockdale looked around with a greatly panicked look on his face. The reverend hit the table as well, and Stockdale looked around the room, in search of water, and then he ran out of the hall, shouting as he went.

“Boris!” shouted Kalivas, running over to Boris’s body, (corpse might have been a more appropriate word for this point in time) “What the hell even is this stuff?”

“Why didn’t we try it first?” asked Tarek.

“Me? Drink this guy’s weird concoctions? I mean, I’m not a big fan of alcohol to start with, but this is too far.” said Kalivas, turning to Boris’s face. He then shouted, “Boris! Can you hear me?”

Boris replied with a noise, not quite discernible to the human ear, but still a noise that Kalivas took as a sign of consciousness, and therefore conscious decision making.

“Make that noise once for yes, twice for no, was the stuff in that bottle safe to drink?”

Boris made a noise, followed by a long pause.

“Oh, good, it’s safe, it’s just horrible.”

Boris made another two noises.

“W- what does that mean?” shouted Kalivas, reaching for the scruff of Boris’s coat, and then lurching back as he realised it was covered in a horrible mixture of his concoctions in various states of digestion. “BORIS!” Boris somehow slumped even further, despite the fact he was already lying face down, flat on the floor. Kalivas continued shouting, “What does it mean?”

Tarek looked back at the table, and every single one of the heads was slumped down onto the table, just like Boris. No good would come from this, no possible spin could be put on this to make it look any less like an attempted mass poisoning. Maybe they'd forget it due to alcohol induced amnesia, or maybe the hangover headache would be so bad they wouldn't care for retribution, only painkillers.

"Goodnight, Doctor Kalivas," said Tarek, leaving the hall and panicking intensely, still thinking about the retribution that the elders of the town could exact upon him.

Walking outside, the sun was almost completely down, and the dunes surrounding the town created a wall-like look to the border, which made Tarek feel much worse about the whole Stockdale border situation. However, he spied Stockdale, drinking from a well in the town square, trying to rid his mouth of the taste of whatever substances Boris had put in the drink. They didn't seem to be going away, either. He hid behind the door of the hall as Stockdale turned around, and began walking back towards his house, and as he decided he was going to follow Stockdale, he heard Kalivas fall over and hit the floor behind him.

"I just had a sniff to see what it was like. I'm pretty sure this stuff is like chloroform or something, and we fed the town elders shots of it." said Kalivas, with his face pressed against the floor, slurring his words even more

than they would have been slurred due to his exposure to the drink.

“I’m going to follow Stockdale and see where he goes. Even if he crosses the border, I’ll follow him.”

Kalivas made a noise similar to Boris’s, probably in response to Tarek.

“Okay, I’ll see you later.”

Kalivas made another noise, and slumped ever further, almost as if he was phasing through the floor. Tarek walked out of the hall once more, seeing the hanging fire that had been lit to signify the end of the festival. He was soon followed by a horde of inebriated partygoers, who slurred their way out of the hall in the least organised way possible, presumably to find refuge in their own homes, or in some cases, a soft enough pile of sand outside. Stockdale was just exiting the visible area that was properly lit by the fire, so Tarek decided to try and follow him back to his house once more. Yet, Stockdale did not stop at his house, merely picking up the rake leaned up against the side of it.

Tarek stayed well back from the rake bearing figure, which melted in and out of the darkness as the rising moon was obscured and then revealed by passing clouds. The steps the both made in the sand were completely silent, and as the soft sand beneath their feet became harder to step through, Stockdale slowed down, and Tarek slowed down as well to keep his distance.

As the xeriscape became the sloped, featureless face of a dune, Tarek continued following Stockdale, only one thing on his mind. To kick this clear falsifier out, and make Ducc great again. He would personally (presumably with the help of Kalivas) go through the ancient scrolls and correct any corrections that Stockdale had made over his time as leader. Who knew what other traditions he had changed or added? Only the reverend, and due to his current unconscious state, he wasn't going to be the best source of information for Tarek right now.

As Tarek approached the top of the dune, he looked down at the border, who's ridged shadow he could just barely discern in the moonlight. That had been the limiting factor of his whole life, and he had just crossed it without realising it. Tarek felt tense. He felt a wave of emotions wash over him, freedom, yet nervousness. Surely, a small crime against the holy border of Ducc was a small price to pay for restoring order to the town, he thought, mind still racing.

The top of the dune was everything he had ever thought it would be. A beautiful view of a town, and the nucleus was clearly visible, even from this height. The fire in the town square lit the paths in a pattern that reminded him of all the festivals of light he had attended, and all the bonfires he had helped build. And yet this action, one which broke the laws of the ancient scrolls, would show his reverence to Ducc far more than any of the traditions he thought were the only way to celebrate Ducc. And Tarek was truly happy in that moment.

Stockdale had reached the bottom of the dune after sliding down the side, in a way that was so skilful it looked like he had practiced hundreds of times - which he probably had done. Tarek thought tripping and falling down the dune was a bad way to reveal himself to someone he was illegally following, so he made his way down as he would normally, shoes covered in sand with every semi-leaping step.

Stockdale walked on, and dropped his rake at the base of the slope, leaving it to be buried by the sand carried by the light winds which were sweeping a gentle dusting of sand over everything not shielded by a dune.

Tarek walked, following Stockdale for at least half an hour, walking in no discernible direction. The moon was unmoving, and as silent as both of them, looming over them, illuminating them via reflection of the sun's rays (one of Ullathorne's teachings) and leading Tarek, the hopeful prosecutor to follow his prosecuttee. He watched the moon in front of them as Stockdale led him, unawares, to wherever he was going.

A solitary cloud drifted over the moon, diffusing the light so much Tarek could not see Stockdale any more, and once it had passed, Stockdale had vanished. Tarek, undoubtedly, was lost.

VI - Lost

Apparently, the ancient Ones wandered in the desert, being led by Ducc to the site of the Oasis, where they had built the caves in order to store their scrolls, which contained the teachings of Ducc. They had worked for many hours, both when they were walking, and when they were digging, but alas, all this work was to be thrown away when Wren came along, destroying the caves and many of the scrolls in the process. Only one of the scrolls still remained in the town, and the rest were likely to be buried underground in some collapsed cave, somewhere in this seemingly infinite desert in which Tarek was now inexorably, utterly lost.

There were no stars in the sky, and only the vague blur of the moon behind the clouds to illuminate his surroundings. If there were stars, it wouldn't have mattered, because Tarek had never learned how to navigate by the stars, and no one, not even Kalivas, knew how to navigate by the stars, because they did not need to, they were never required to leave their bubble, and only needed to remember to find their way back to the fire in the town square, which was the only bright non-celestial object most nights.

The sand began to pick up once more and collide with his legs, which made him increase the height of each step he took. He was acutely aware of every sense, despite the lack of stimulation for each one. The world was two equally dark halves, pierced only by a blurry

moon, the world was silent, except for the rattle of sand along the floor, the world smelt and tasted of nothing, except the tepid air, seemingly without temperature, and the world felt of only the vaguely numbing pain of sand grains being carried into his legs.

A distinct lack of feeling spread from his legs, up through his body, and then to his head, as if he had become thoroughly disconnected from reality. And to an extent, he had. His reality was the circle, his group of friends, his teachers, the teachings they had made him study, everything he knew existed had existed inside that circle, and for all intents and purposes, there was no reason to leave that circle. Many generations of people had lived and died in Dryden knowing nothing of the world beyond them, and because asking questions about their boundaries was beyond their boundaries, so they stayed there, lifeless and hopeless, but unquestionably content.

He now understood there was solid ground outside the circle, but not much else had shown itself to prove that the circle really was not the end of reality. Clearly, the fact that Stockdale came from Wren implied that there was more out there, but no one had actually checked, because it was assumed that it wasn't worth checking out.

The vacuous thoughts of nothing replaced the empty but happy feeling of boredom he had experienced before, and this was... different. Not better, or worse. Just different.

But it was a bit cold.

And maybe that was good, seeing that the temperature highs and lows of Dryden were almost the same, and the nights and days had roughly the same temperature. Maybe feeling the cold would prove himself to Ducc.

Up in the sky, above the desert, Ducc waited silently, not giving Tarek a sign, or a message, or anything. He walked and waited for a sign.

He continued walking for quite some time when his foot struck a solid object. Checking around the area, he felt the object, half-buried in the sand, and it felt malleable and almost familiar. Placing the object up towards the moonlight showed an unquestionable silhouette of a ducc. And not just any old duck, but a ducc. A (presumably yellow) relic of a ducc. There were many mentions of these in the ancient scrolls, and some of the replicas of these duccks were strewn about the homes of almost everyone in the town. Their beaks were red, sometimes smeared, or chipped, and their eyes were often misplaced, sometimes all the way over on the backs of their heads, and they held their most valuable possession, squeakers.

The squeaker was an object that was placed in the base of a ducc figure to turn it from a simple relic into a utility tool. None of the duccks around the homes of people had squeakers, for they were too hard to produce. When a ducc with a squeaker was squeezed, the resonant tone brought forth by the wind going through the squeaker

would call upon Ducc himself, and he would aid the person with the squeaker to safety. The squeakers were incredibly precisely tuned, and it said only the steady hand of the ancient ones could produce squeakers with such tone.

However, they came at a cost. The tones they sent out also drew the attention of dark forces, if they were played loud enough. They were said to disturb the dark forces of Wren, and the squeaking noises drew their attention to the caves, after the ancient ones relied too heavily on Ducc for help while building them. They believed in Ducc so much they did not believe in their own power, invested in them by Ducc himself.

This ducc was a 'virgin' ducc, one with an original squeaker still firmly in place, ready to call upon Ducc with a single squeak. Ducc would rescue him from his situation, and guide him back home, as he couldn't be more than two hours walk away from his town by now, even if he had walked in the wrong direction since he lost Stockdale.

Tarek squeezed the ducc, strong and hard, like he was taught to do in his lessons.

But nobody came.

Slowly falling to his knees, he grew tired of walking, and decided to sleep, as the wind slowed down, as if to let the sand rest for the night.

VII - Found

“Look! Look! A corpse! Wonder if it’s from Wren...”

“There’s no chance. Wren hasn’t sent any missionaries out in years. It’s probably an escaped Drydenite.”

They both laughed, and continued walking towards Tarek, still very much fast asleep, and surprisingly enough, not buried in sand.

“Well, you know that Drydenites can’t leave their circle.”

“Yeah... I’ve heard rumours of that. Why is that?”

“A Wrenite missionary went there and started changing their laws, making them docile and fat so they wouldn’t pose a threat against Wren if they wanted to take over some of the kingdoms.”

“Why not do it by force? Dryden is the least imposing kingdom I’ve ever heard of. They don’t even have a king.”

“Publicity move. It’s so they can brand themselves as a kingdom whose ideologies are so good people just submit to them without any force.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

“Absolutely. Couldn’t have thought of a better one.”

“So what about this corpse over here? Do you want to bet to see if it’s a Drydenite? 5 niocs says it is.”

“Deal.”

Tarek woke up as some sand blew into his face from a light breeze, and stood up, looking over the horizon for some trace of a dune, which would presumably lead him back to Dryden.

One of the people was getting their 5 niocs ready, when they saw Tarek rise from the ground and begin walking in the opposite direction. They shouted, “Wait!”

Tarek turned around, hoping that the voice was Stockdale’s, ready to admit all his secrets to Tarek, and then lead him back to Dryden where he would be imprisoned, and then Tarek would become the head raker, and stay inside the border, but expand it so much he needed 10 junior rakers to aid him each day as he re-raked it.

“Hey, you there! Are you okay? Can you understand me?”

Tarek thought they must be Wrenites and therefore were going to take him back to Wren and torture him, perhaps doing what they had done to the ancient ones - it was best not to think about, in order to improve his morale.

“We’re not going to hurt you. We’re from College.”

“College? There’s no kingdom with that name.” Tarek said, assertively, and confident in his assertiveness. “You are agents of Wren, do not try and fool me. I have the power of Ducc on my side.”

“Ducc? Okay buddy, sure, just come with us. We’ll get you back wherever you came from.”

“I’ve come from Dry-” Tarek stopped as he thought they could use this against him and should probably try and reveal as little information about himself as possible.

“Did you say Dryden?” asked one of them.

The other one laughed, “Oh, that’s an easy 5 niocs. Nice one.” he said, continuing to laugh and gesturing to the first one, demanding his 5 niocs. Tarek refused to nod or shake his head.

“Excuse me, are you from Dryden?”

“I can’t say.”

The first one whispered to the other one.

“Come on,” he said “Come with us. We won’t hurt you.”

“No.”

“Well... hey, what’s that you’re holding?”

“It’s a ducc.”

“Well yes, it is a little yellow plastic duck.”

“No, it’s a *ducc*.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The religious iconography in this ‘little yellow plastic duck’ as you put it, is so immeasurable you could not understand it. Only Drydenites, Ducc’s chosen people, can understand this.”

“So you are a Drydenite?” one of them asked.

“No. I was just using that as an example.”

A long pause followed, which was something that Tarek hated, despite the fact he created so many of them he should have been very accustomed to them, and how to end them swiftly.

“Look, just come with us, you weirdo. We swear to Ducc nothing bad will happen. You can keep your ducc with you, too. Just come with us. You’re going to die out here if you don’t find your way back home.”

As much as Tarek hated the idea of going to Wren, he thought it would be better than guaranteed slow and painful death, and going down with a fight in Wren was probably a better sacrifice to Ducc than starvation.

Tarek spoke up as he began to follow the two, “So what’s Wren like?”

“We don’t know. We’ve never been there.”

“Oh. But then where do you come from?”

“As I said, College.”

“So there’s more than Wren and Dryden?”

“Oh yeah, there are eight more that you don’t know.”

“Eight?”

“Yes, there are eight more kingdoms. And a whole host of other places too, but only eleven registered, proper kingdoms. I mean, not that Dryden is a kingdom anymore, but you’d know why that went bad, right?”

“Okay, two questions.” said Tarek, “One, why are there only eleven kingdoms, and two, Dryden has always been this way since its founding.”

“One,” one said, “there used to be twelve, but due to their monarchs inbreeding so much, they both essentially became one kingdom of mutants, and then they both collapsed. Due to the land becoming cheap where they used to be, market forces made sure there was another kingdom, because there was demand. And supply followed demand, and so the eleventh kingdom was made. That’s Milne.”

“I don’t believe you.” said Tarek.

“What else do you have to prove otherwise?”

“I’ve never seen it with my own eyes.”

“So if you see it, you’ll believe it?”

“Sure.”

“Have you seen Ducc?” one of them asked, with a smug aura.

Tarek didn’t really know how to answer a question of such magnitude, and decided to keep quiet. The two of them resumed conversation after a while, and they talked to themselves for the whole way back to the city they came from, and Tarek trailed behind further and further, as there wasn’t any chance of the sun being blotted out so he would lose his new ‘guides’.

On the horizon, Tarek could see a large, brown and white smudge with tall towers that stuck out far above, and even with little to no detail, he could feel the scale of the city and how it compared to Dryden. Perhaps they had a circle, too, but it was so big he was currently standing in it, and therefore the two people, still chatting away to one another, were not breaking their own laws. Perhaps their circle went fully around Dryden’s circle, and he had lived his whole life in an enclave of Wren. It

truly was an embarrassment that the border wasn't bigger, he thought.

Once they had reached the outskirts of the city, the buildings were similar to the ones in Dryden, but he could see towers that were at least ten times as tall in the distance, that seemed precariously balanced and could fall over if a child was allowed to wander to the top floor. The size of the buildings made the Dryden hall feel insignificant, and that Ducc hadn't taught his chosen people how to build more than a single floor.

The sign at the inner city wall read, 'Welcome to the Democratic Walled City of College. Enjoy your stay.'

"I've always wondered why we say to have an enjoyable stay, but we've got this giant spiky wall to keep Wrenites out." said one of them.

"Wait, so you hate Wrenites too?" said Tarek, "Why didn't you say earlier?"

"I would have, but you would have dismissed it as pretending to hate Wren, and so I was therefore a Wrenite and going to kill you for taking that duck around with you." he responded.

"It's *ducc*." Tarek said, angrily, but also relieved he wasn't in Wren, but also annoyed he wasn't in Dryden either.

"Well then, let's get you to the immigration office and see if we can find you a place to stay." said the same one,

and Tarek now realised he should have found a way to tell them apart ages ago. He would call this one, 'Helmet' and the other one 'Sword'.

"Oh, by the way, my name's Joe." said ~~Helmet~~ Joe, just as Tarek had firmly implanted the name 'Helmet' into his head. The last thing he needed now was for Sword to introduce himself as-

"Yeah, my name's Sword." said ~~Sword~~ Sword?

"I knew that already." said Tarek, not really properly processing the coincidence.

"Well, my name's actually... ah, it doesn't matter. Everyone calls me Sword because I carry a sword around."

~~Helmet~~ Joe approached him and whispered in his ear, "It's actually s-word, but he thinks we mean sword because he doesn't really understand pronunciation. Or hyphens, for that matter."

Joe looked back over to Sword and said, "Don't worry, I was just telling him about where the immigration office is. I'll take him there. Oh, you'll need to fill out some papers there, even if you're not staying."

Tarek followed Joe to the office, and there, he was greeted with an old lady, clearly fed up with having to deal with the public and projecting her hatred for all living matter to the eight corners of the room.

“Have you given him the forms, Joe?” she said.

“You’ve got copies, right?”

She sighed, and got out of her chair, following the only path she could take between the piles of wooden tables and metal boxes containing virtually every kind of file and document anyone could ever want, and it just so happened that those particular forms they needed were in a hard to reach area. She sighed more, looking at Joe and Tarek with a stare that made them feel guilty for her own poor organisational skills, while climbing up a wooden ladder she had slowly dragged over from the other side of the room. Another person watched her from a corner, stacking these boxes, presumably in order to find something.

“They don’t pay me much.” she said, as an unrelated side note she mentioned only to gain more pity from her onlookers. “It’s barely enough to cover my living expenses.” She handed the documents over the counter, and Joe handed Tarek a metal pen and some ink to begin writing. The other person behind the counter took a rope out of a box and began climbing up a ladder.

The old lady coughed. “Could you please use one of our quill pens? The metal ones are very expensive, and if you break them it comes out of my pocket.” she said, in a very matter of fact tone.

Tarek filled out the form, and in the space that asked him to fill out his kingdom of origin, he had put Dryden.

“Dryden? Excuse me, you’ve filled this form out wrong. This man doesn’t know where he came from. We can’t give you a bed if you don’t know where you came from.” said the lady, thoroughly unaware of the person trying to catch the rope on one of the rafters. Eventually, he landed the shot, and began to tie up the other end in a complex knot.

“I am from Dryden.” he said, unwavering against the steely stare of the lady.

“Are you sure? We haven’t had a single Drydenite apply for a form in almost twenty years.” she replied.

Joe stepped forwards, and said “Oh, we found him in the desert face down, probably asleep. Definitely a Drydenite.”

“Asleep in the sand? Face down? Sounds like we either have a drunk or a mental case on our hands.” said the lady.

“No, he’s not a drunk. But, you see that little yellow duck he’s holding - he thinks it’s a religious thing. Obsessed with it.” said Joe.

“Oh, those ducks. I used to know someone who worked at the factory where they made those. He said they had made loads of defective ones with badly coloured paint

and eyes on the backs of their heads. They just dumped them outside the city.” She paused waiting for Tarek to take this information in. “The wind must have carried them to Dryden or something.”

She had just stamped on the very core components of Tarek’s existence and was now in the process of smashing up the individual pieces into fine dust. However, during this metaphorical destruction, she was thoroughly unaware of the person threading their head through the rope.

The lady, who could see the shock on Tarek’s face, continued “Oh, and those ducks are just plastic replicas of real ducks. Have you ever seen a real duck? Have you?” She paused for a second, revelling in the his continued disbelief. Joe realised this, and stopped trying to think of stories that would remove the thin facade of Ducc, instead trying to preserve what self-belief Tarek had and thinking of excuses to move him out. “Now that I’ve had a second to think about it, which apparently is a second more than you’ve had, what are you doing worshipping a duck anyway? It’s just plain odd. I just don’t understand Drydenites. Never have, never will. Anyway, go home and tell all your village friends, because you can’t stay here.”

“Excuse me,” said Joe, “Why can’t he stay here?”

“I control who stays here and who doesn’t. It’s my job, and it doesn’t matter how much I hate it, it is my authority.”

“Fine then,” he continued, “I’ll take him home.”

Joe looked around, and Tarek had already ran out of the door, and was presumably trying to run back into the desert. Joe ran after him, and shouted, running in-between stalls of food, “You’ll need a map!”

Tarek came to a halt, walked back to Joe, took the map, and said thanks in a quick, but heartfelt manner, and departed, running once more.

Ducc still never came, not for Tarek, and especially not the person who had just jumped off the ladder, and very shortly after, hit the ground with a resounding thud. He shouted in despair, and the woman told him sternly to keep it down so she could fill out some forms.

VIII - Back

Tarek followed the route on the map, noting the various rocks and points of 'interest' that would be used to fix his trajectory, and the contours of the dunes in the distance, behind any one of which Dryden could be nestled behind. The thought of incriminating Stockdale and finding out the true story behind their religion kept him motivated to keep moving, and as day turned to evening, he began to walk slower and slower, but still determined not to stop. His mind turned to thoughts of the wider world, of the eleven kingdoms, and the possibilities of him being able to visit them all. He then thought of all of the people whose entire lives would be shattered as his was, but their shattering would be much more traumatic, as one minute they would be praising Ducc and thanking Stockdale, and the next they would be crucifying Stockdale and roaming outside the borders.

They would not have been subject to the gradual process of wearing down their faith in Ducc that he had been subjected to, but instead have their whole world turned upside down almost instantaneously. He had had the luck to see Stockdale manipulating the scripts of Ducc, which Wrenites had created to quell Dryden. Ducc wasn't the force that helped the ancient ones build the cave. There were no ancient ones, there was no cave, there was nothing that he had ever seen that indicated the existence of anything he had been told of.

If Ducc had existed, and was all-powerful, where was he when his ancestors were slaughtered by the Wrenites, where was he when a scuffle broke out between two people in the streets of Dryden, and where was he when Stockdale had crossed the border? He was nowhere. And it was becoming clear to Tarek that Stockdale intended to use his power over Dryden to subdue it and rid it of its former glory, while telling everyone inside the tiny border that it was being restored, and that Dryden would be a glorious, Ducc-worshipping nation once more.

The dune that signified the border of Dryden came closer as he picked up his stride, using every ounce of his energy to try and nip Stockdale's power grabbing in the bud as soon as possible, before it blossomed into something more sinister. The slope drained his energy, as stepping up the steep, slippery sands back into the town was a more daunting task than facing up to Stockdale himself. As the sun went down over the dune on the other side of the town, the sleepy Dryden was... wide awake?

Directly in the centre of the town, in lieu of the fire that lit only the square near the hall, it seemed there was a festival taking place, that lit up the long path that led from the town hall to Stockdale's plot of land, and round the back of his house. A procession of dots marched down this path as he ran down the other side of the slope, making sure to not trip and fall. The last thing he needed when confronting an entire town was to have a limp, or sand over his face.

The procession became louder and brighter as he approached it, and soon, the subject of the ceremony was apparent - Stockdale, perched upon a sedan, was being carried by four people down the path, which was lit by fires and decorated by crops. Figures of Stockdale and Ducc created a pathway for the procession to move down, and as he drew closer, the final destination of the path became clear. Stockdale's house, which was lit up and decorated with decorations that made the house seem more like a pile of decorations with a house-shaped lump beneath it.

This was unacceptable - he was gone for one day, and the residents of Dryden had let Stockdale ruin their social order? Well, he thought, for all they know, and for all I knew until recently, Stockdale is basically Ducc himself, and deserves as much praise as him, as he keeps us all going with his crops.

In all honesty, Stockdale wasn't that bad, as he supported the town, and kept the pipelines running, as well as generally doing most of the jobs the residents would have had to do, and for that, he was at least partially grateful for. Maybe it was best to leave them in silent ignorance?

But, he heard a voice.

"Hey, Tarek! Where have you been?" shouted Kalivas.

"Oh, at home. I was ill." he said, moving closer, trying to hide his breathlessness.

“I checked at your house, and you weren’t in. You didn’t come to the post-feast feast either. Well, I can’t blame you for that, neither did I.” said Kalivas, lowering his voice and laughing.

“Look, I want to tell you something very important.” he said, gesturing for them to hide behind the very same wall that they had used to spy on Stockdale the first time. “It’s about the border.”

“What?”

“Well,” he said, checking over his shoulders to make sure no one was listening, or even had the vague notion that the two people who basically poisoned the town leaders were anywhere near each other, “I went over the border to follow Stockdale, as I told you I would.”

“I don’t remember you saying that.”

“You were drunk.”

“I didn’t drink!” said Kalivas, “Maybe it was that stuff Boris had?”

“You sniffed it to test it, and fainted. So you weren’t drunk, you were more...”

“Drugged.”

“Yeah, that’s a better word.” he said, “But I followed him and got lost.”

“So you spent a whole day getting back?”

“Not quite, I went to another kingdom first.”

“Kingdom? What’s that?”

“There are eleven of these kingdoms, Dryden is one of them. Stockdale has manipulated us to become docile and is planning to take over Dryden so that Wren can expand their kingdom without fear of resistance. And, I visited one of the other kingdoms, College. You should go there, it looks really advanced compared to here. All you have to do is fill in this form, and you can live there.”

“Hold on a second, you’ve been to another place and lived?”

“Well yes, but that’s besides the point. I’m really having doubts about confronting Stockdale because of his position of power.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll do it for you. It’d be a massive waste if he declared you an enemy of the kingdom and tried to kill you.”

“An enemy? Of the kingdom?”

“Well, he is the king now, or at least he’s going to be in about a minute or two if the ceremony’s going to plan, so he can make enemies of the state if he chooses to.”

“Oh, he’s definitely going to do that. Absolutely.”

“Yeah, you should have seen his face as he drank his shot of Boris’s drink. He had Boris hung earlier this evening. He introduced his manifesto and basically hung him to solidify his position. It’s... are you okay, Tarek?”

They stood in silence, and contemplated this hanging while they peered round the corner at the ceremony taking place. A crown of what looked like melted down ducss was being placed on his head. The pause for silence was one that Tarek was absolutely permitted to take, as his life was possibly at stake here. A newly-crowned, power-hungry tyrant that could kill him if the mood took him so, against a single dissident who knew of his web of lies, and could pull back the facade of ducc to reveal a bare framework of social manipulation and Wrenite power-hungriness.

“Hung? Actually hung, properly killed to death?” Tarek said, with a sort of manic, half-laughing, half-panicking laugh.

“Yep. I didn’t go and see it. Boris was a good friend of mine before Stockdale took his position as head farmer, and he was driven to drink, which was only compounded by his love for chemistry.”

“Wow, that’s...” he trailed off, watching the crown being put on Stockdale’s head with a stare that would have outstared the entire crowd gathered around Stockdale, ready to shower him with confetti-esque shreds of fabric and flowers which they had grown for this event in their own gardens.

“I’m going to have to leave for good. Perhaps that way, Stockdale will think I got lost somewhere and died in the desert, so he won’t... go for me.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I won’t tell Stockdale anything. I hate him as much as you do, he’s prised a good friend of mine away from me and made us all redundant and fat with all these feast days and rest days. I get about twenty days of teaching each year now, in-between all the festivals and their respective pre-festival and post-festival preparations and feasting.” said Kalivas, growing more and more angry with each word.

“So what should I do?”

“You should go back to wherever you went, and tell them about Stockdale. Try and get him shut down.”

“Okay. See you, Kalivas.”

Tarek left the wall, thinking only of how to get the College people on his side, and how to escape from the future tyranny of Stockdale. He was walking past the ceremony, trying to stay well out of sight, and just as the

crown was lowered onto Stockdale's head, he saw Tarek run off into the distance and saw him cross the border.

"This child has crossed the border! That makes him the state enemy number two, after our friend Boris here! You see what I did to Boris? That's what's going to happen to you." shouted Stockdale greeted by a cheer from the onlookers. No one seemed to question him, even as he shouted for them to 'get him at any cost'.

Many of the strongest Drydenites went right after him, chasing him up the steep slope of the dune, and they stopped, just at the border, where Tarek was safe from their reach. He slowed down, and kept climbing higher as he watched them milling about.

"Okay, new rule, there is no border." shouted Stockdale.

The faces on the chasers turned from one of confusion to one of slight nervousness as they trod over the border, hoping to find solid ground on the other side. As soon as they did, the chase was back on, and Tarek continued to run into the night, not stopping to check his map until he was far out of the sight of any of the people who now wanted him dead. He remembered catching a glimpse of his own family members cheering on the chasers, as they hunted him down, like dogs set upon a fox, a fox who wanted to prove that the dogs' social system was based on lies and there was no such thing as the great bone in the sky.

As he kept running, he began to tire and he decided to rest for the night, and as the winds calmed down, he laid next to a large, concave rock that sheltered and hid him, safe in the knowledge he would live at least one more night.

IX and a bit - Interlude

“Ah Kalivas, I’ve called you into my hall today to talk to you about the event which occurred during the Ducc feast, two days ago. As you know, I’ve already had Boris hung for trying to poison me. And you, as far as I can remember, were the one to give me the drink in the first place.”

“That doesn’t matter, Kalivas, we’ve been through times like this before. What does matter is that I need to know where Tarek is. One of my informants says he saw you duck behind the corner of my house to talk to Tarek. What do you have to say about this?”

“Now now, there’s no reason to get anxious. Oh, guards, come here please, swords nice and gleaming. Now there is. Tell me where Tarek is or it’s pretty obvious what’s going to happen to you.”

“In another kingdom? Well, Kalivas, we all know there’s only Wren, and he certainly isn’t there. Therefore, I know he’s not in another kingdom, despite what you’ve said. And even though I insist you tell the truth, you keep lying. Like you’ve always done.”

“Well, if you insist. Guards, ready your swords. It’s time to go to Wren.”

IX - Forth

The next morning, he was still alive, which was priority number one for him since Stockdale had suddenly gone tyrannical to the extreme. The sun was shining from a low angle directly into his cave rock, which blinded him as he lifted his head, looking around for rabid Drydenites that wanted nothing more than to return him for the glory of the kingdom, not even expecting a reward in return. Maybe there was a reward in it - but he thought it wasn't going to be the best use of his time to ponder what his imprisonment and likely death would mean.

On the horizon, he saw College, now illuminated in the warm, but not hot sun. The haze also distorted the tall towers, making them seem even less stable than they already seemed to him, and he could also see a dot, moving closer towards him. The dot turned into a line, and as he got to his feet, the dot became a line, and this line was clearly running towards him with a lot of force.

He heard a muffled cry emanate from the line, "I'm lost! Ducc help me, I'm lost!"

Tarek hid from the line, sitting back down and moving further inside the rocks' cave. The line called again, drawing nearer.

"Why did I even leave Dryden? It's not like Stockdale was going to give me a reward. I hate Stockdale and his... crew."

The line was talking to itself, presumably mad from spending the night in an alien environment and getting poor sleep, but the line also had a familiar voice. Nirav's voice. Tarek moved further back out the concave section, hoping that Nirav would properly show his face before he invited him over, and that he was sure he could convince Nirav not to instantly turn him in to Dryden. Nirav approached the cave and shouted, "Who are you? I can't see you properly."

He drew closer, continuing, "Are you a Wrenite?"

Tarek thought it was finally time to bite the bullet and show Nirav who he was, and so he walked out of the rock fully, and said, "Hi, Nirav."

"What are you doing out he- oh, of course. You're fleeing to Wren." said Nirav.

"I'm not! I promise. Look, that place over there, it's College."

"What's a College?"

"It's one of the eleven kingdoms."

"There are only two kingdoms, Wren and Dryden."

"Look, we're good friends, right, so can you just come with me to College before you die out here in the desert because you don't know what's going on."

“Well, this place better not be Wren, or I’ll smite all the Wrenites I see, for Ducc.”

“Well, we’re going to College so that’s not a problem. Also, what’s gotten into you about killing? Why does he want everyone dead all of a sudden?”

“Actually, yeah. Why does he want everyone dead? Oh wait, to protect Dryden and make sure it is returned to its former glory as an empire.”

The sarcastic remark from Nirav shut both of them up as they walked towards College, and Nirav thought roughly the same thoughts about the tall towers inside the city wall, about how they were unstable. Another familiar face appeared when the duo approached the immigration office, and rose to greet them happily.

“It’s Joe, right?” asked Tarek, met with nodding. “Hi Joe, how are you?”

“Good, how was the deposition of the Wrenite?” said Joe.

“Not so good.” he said. “Also, where’s Sword?”

“Fencing practice.” said Joe. “And who’s this with you?”

“This is Nirav, he’s a Drydenite like me.” he said, drawing close to Joe, “He still believes in Ducc properly.”

“Like, how much?”

“As much as I did before I saw Stockdale ruining it. I don’t think it’s right to tell him about Ducc just yet.”

“Tell me what?” said Nirav.

“Don’t worry yet. Anyway, so why have you come back?”

“I’ve been declared an enemy of the state, and this guy chased me out of Dryden, but I didn’t want him to die in the desert so... We put aside our differences - which were clearly made by Stockdale - and came here to escape.”

“So you’re public enemy number one? Sounds cool and risky.” said Joe.

“Well, it’s less fun when there’s fifty crazed Drydenites running at you just to capture and hang you for personal gain.”

Joe didn’t really know how to respond to that, and instead called Tarek and Nirav forward to fill out their forms. The lady gave them their forms with the same air of snobbiness and inhumanity that she did last time, and snorted at their kingdom of origin, but then reluctantly handed over their meal books and some tags, coins and other related paraphernalia that they would need to live here for a week or two.

“Have a good day.” she said, sounding like the last person in College who would do such a thing or even wish someone one.

The trio, now fully engrossed in conversation about College, with Nirav fully satisfied that this place was Wrenite-free, (even though it wasn’t completely, there were a few who had spoken against the relentless sending of missionaries to smaller kingdoms who had been exiled, and found homes here) kept walking around the town, spending small pieces of their allotted money on pieces of food that was alien to them, but staple foods for the people of College.

They walked around until dusk, when they sat down on top of the inner city wall, after having walked almost half the diameter of it during their travels around this comparatively cultural and bright city. And, just like in Dryden, there was a great fire in the centre of this city, but much more controlled, and they watched it down one of the spoke-like roads which branched out from the centre, from the high wall, eating skewers of all kinds of food. Dryden, despite being their entire lives for their entire lives, was nothing compared to this, even factoring in sentimental value for their families and everything they had experienced beforehand, in that isolated town that they thought was the centre of the world. And yet, the cultural shock was dampened by the friendly nature of everyone in the town, everyone except the office lady, that is, and so the whole experience felt like getting into a wonderfully warm pool.

And the resulting attitude of not wanting to get out of it for fear of freezing, came to Tarek and Nirav, even despite the latter's devotion to Ducc. After finishing their food, the trio went down into the centre of the city, where they walked around for a while, before heading into Joe's house. His house was in the basement of one of the taller towers, and he said he got it because he worked as a border monitor, which prompted some more talk about rakers, and then the topic eventually turned to Stockdale as they sat down and rested.

"Tarek, your shirt's got a tear in the back." said Nirav, leaning back.

"We'll get him a new one, tomorrow." said Joe. "At the market, maybe."

"Cool. So, tell me again, do you... monitor the borders Do you have like, a rake or anything?"

"Well, no it's just me and Gilbert, we walk around the desert, looking for anomalies and stuff like that." said Joe.

"Who's Gilbert?" asked Tarek.

"Oh, that's Sword's real name. He's a bit stuck up on the whole new nickname thing, so I play along with it while I'm with him." said Joe.

"Who's Sword?" asked Nirav.

“The guy who- ah, it doesn’t matter, you’ll meet him tomorrow. I’ll let him do the talking. Except that I won’t, he’s not very smart and not particularly interesting. In fact, he’s so uninteresting that I said no to a much larger, well lit, two person apartment on the fourth floor of this building because I really didn’t feel like sharing with him.”

“So this is your place? Well, it looks like you take good care of it.” said Nirav, standing up and walking over to one of the shelves, picking up a figurine.

“Don’t touch that!” said Joe. “It’s Sword’s, I stole it because he was annoying a few weeks ago, but I don’t want to break it because I found out it’s worth lots of money.”

“By any chance, was that weird guy with the long beard the one who told you this?” asked Tarek.

“Which one?” said Joe.

“The one with all the crystals, back in the market.” said Tarek.

“Ah, yeah, that guy.” said Joe, with a slightly disgusted look on his face as he remembered the scene.

“He looked really dodgy. He just smelt bad, and that’s coming from the son of an ex-farmer Drydenite.” said Nirav.

After a long pause, a type of pause which Tarek should clearly have gotten used to now, they decided to sleep, and it was decided without words that Joe should get to sleep on his own bed, and that Tarek and Nirav should sleep on the floor.

Nirav, Joe and Tarek woke up, having slept surprisingly well for their location, and also given the noises that emanated from the floors above and through the ventilation holes. The smell of market foods flooded the room, seeping in through the small holes at the top corner of the room. Sunlight also streamed through them, and one of these beams of light shone directly on Joe's face. He got up, rising slowly and stretching, and then walked over to the corner of the room with the holes, and pulled a slider he had made over them, and was just about to sit back down on his bed when someone knocked on the door.

The knocking woke Tarek and Nirav up, and before Joe had quite opened the door, Sword came walking in without having been formally let in, pushing Joe's arm back and almost walking over Tarek, who was getting up. He stopped in the middle of the room, and only then did he ask Joe if he wanted to go to their post to report for morning duty.

"It's Sunday, Sword. Go home." said Joe.

Sword left as ungracefully as he came, almost tripping over Tarek again after turning around on his blanket with his heel, pulling it off Tarek, who then got up and

closed the door after Sword had left, stumbling back out into the corridor.

“Well, I guess it’s time to properly get up now.” said Joe, putting on his nicer clothes and picking up the figurine and showing it to Tarek again. “Do you know anything about this? I think maybe it might have something to do with your whole ‘basing religions on trash you find’ thing.”

Tarek wasn’t particularly pleased with this comment, but nonetheless he responded, “No, not really. It does look weird though. We should maybe see that weird guy in the market.”

“No, we can’t do that. He’s just too much of a nutcase. It’s worthless.” said Nirav, who was already up and ready, waiting by the door with Tarek. Joe opened the door for them, and walked out into the corridor, greeting his elderly neighbour who sat with her door open, categorising books which occupied almost all of the available space in the room. They walked upstairs into the main lobby of the building and were greeted by the cleaner, who was likely taking the day off to go around the market, as this was the peak day for it. The smells wafted in in much greater quantities through the front door, and they stepped outside into the pleasant sun.

“Oh, that’s convenient. He’s moved his stand to directly outside my building.” said Joe. “I bet he’s going to look at me and judge me.”

The strange man was definitely judging Joe. In fact, his stare, even though it was not aimed at Tarek directly, made him feel stuck in tar like he had been so many times before, but with an added heap of conflicting emotions. Eventually, they could bear it no longer, and walked over to the stand.

“Hi. What do you want?” said Joe.

“Hello. My name is Norm, and I am a wizard.”

Joe paused. “Nice. What do you want?”

“I seek the treasure you possess. It holds great power, and is worth a lot of money.”

“Okay, how much?” Joe said, with a great eagerness to be finally rid of this admittedly ugly figure.

“Oh, more than I can give you. Its worth is so great, but yet so specific. Only certain people can use its powers.”

“Powers?” said Joe, incredulously, and less eagerly.

“Yes. There is allegedly a stone inside it, a stone of so much power it cannot be wielded for it kills all it touches.”

“I’m calling rubbish. How much for the figure?”

“As I said, I cannot take it.”

“But you just said you ‘seek this treasure’ or whatever.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Well, you’ve been a great help. See you around, Norm.” said Joe, walking away from the stand, still carrying the figure. He passed it to Tarek, who held it closely.

“It’s quite heavy, Joe. What’s it made of?”

“If it’s that heavy, lead, probably.”

“Or it could be gold!” said Nirav, “Maybe that’s why he said it’s worth money.”

“Tarek, try and scratch the statue with one of the coins you have.” said Joe.

“It doesn’t scratch too easily.” said Tarek, being cautious to only scratch it on the bottom side, so it wouldn’t be cosmetically damaged. “But it still scratches.”

“Well then. It’s probably lead.” said Joe, disheartened.

They walked around the markets for a while longer, and all of a sudden, Sword came charging down one of the alleys with little regard for the people around him, sending the occasional basket of fruit flying.

“You’ve got to see this. A load of Drydenites turned up and they think this place is Wren, and they’re trying to

burn it down and make this guy called Tarek reveal himself.” he said.

“No way! Well, looks like we’ve got a fugitive on our hands. The immigration lady won’t like that.”

“Well, Joe... that’s not really my concern right now. Hey, can I borrow your map? I really need to get to a different kingdom to avoid these idiots. You know, public enemy number one and all that.” said Tarek.

“You’re actually public enemy number two.” said Nirav.

“Look, I might be burned alive along with the rest of the people in this kingdom because of these people, and you want to discuss what number public enemy I am?”

“I’m sure he didn’t want to discuss it. Now, let’s get you out of here.” said Joe, with a great deal of anxiety.

All four of them continued walking, moving past the roving band of Drydenites by using all the back streets that Joe knew, and sneaking their way in and out of buildings. None of the Drydenites had any fire to burn anything with, so their threats were as empty as their heads, as they only thought of Stockdale and the glory that burning ‘Wren’ down would give the *Empire Of Dryden*. That’s right, empire. Much better than kingdom. It implied power that reached beyond a small circle, which they aimed to get.

Burning down an innocent kingdom may not have been the best way of going about that, though.

The four fleers found their way to the edge of the city, after a while of darting around, winding their way around the Drydenites. Tarek was then faced with a dilemma of whether to take anyone with him on his journey to the other kingdoms in order to escape the advancing tide of brainwashed Drydenites. He needed someone else to help him, but he presumably couldn't take Joe because of his job, and Sword was too much dead weight for him to carry, even though he may have known some of the other kingdoms well enough to navigate them.

That left him with Nirav, who he almost had to take with him, as if Nirav was left to his own devices, he would either re-join the Drydenites or die fighting them - either way, the outcome was not going to be good for either of them. So, Tarek was forced to take Nirav with him, but leave Joe and Sword as they wouldn't fall to the Drydenites (the alarm calling them to their posts hadn't even been sounded due to the lack of a threat they posed to College.)

"Well Joe, see you around," said Tarek, as Joe handed him a slightly better map, one with the nearby kingdoms labelled and routes to them plotted. "Thanks for having us, and showing us around yesterday."

"No problem Tarek," said Joe. "You can come back any time you need. Oh, you can also take this pack I have to

carry the figurine around. And yes, you can keep the figurine.”

And as Sword waved the duo goodbye, they walked out into the desert, followed by the sun, high in the sky.

“Do you want to go and push those Drydenites out now?” said Joe.

“I’ve got my trusty sword.” said Sword.

“Yes, you have,” said Joe. “Of course you have.”

“Hey, didn’t that guy take my statue?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Not quite X - Interlude II

“What do you mean you didn’t find him? I cannot believe you could be so incompetent.”

“No, I didn’t send you to the wrong kingdom, that was Wren, College is just a front for Wren. And so is Grant’s, the next place I’m sending you idiots. Not that I can trust you anyway.”

“Kalivas, plot a course for Grant’s. You’re going with them.”

“Oh, and Williams is on the list, so he’s to be dealt with too.”

“Yes, that does mean kill him. I can deal in absolutes, you back-talker! Leave at once! Leave!”

“Now, Kalivas, have you learnt the national anthem yet? I’ve added it to your syllabus, so you’ve got to teach it along with all the other things we’ve told you about. And if you don’t, well, say goodbye to your other arm.”

Later on that day, after meeting with Kalivas, he wandered into the town square, drawing a crowd with him as he went, which is quite unlike what would have happened before his takeover of Dryden.

“Okay now, everybody. I’ve gathered everyone here today for a special message. As well as running away from the

Empire of Dryden for treason, Tarek has stolen another one of our weakest soldiers, Nirav. He's weak, and that's why he has succumbed to Wren. Tarek was weak, and he was shown an incorrect way of life, and encouraged by this man, Kalivas. Kalivas has since repented of his crimes under oath, but not before we, well, you can see what we've done. He's all good now, that part of him was holding him back - he was, in a way, pinning himself down. He's making our territorial expansion maps as we speak. And due to the power of Ducc that flows through him, not even a 25% reduction in limbs can stop him! And yes, that is a joke. You are allowed to laugh."

He paused for a second.

"And what I meant by that is laugh - imperative. And for those of you who don't know what that means, well, I can only recommend you go and see Kalivas about that. Oh, and by the way, he's also working on decoding the language used in the ancient scrolls, so you can teach your children it! And only it. Okay then, the final note for the day, before I forget, the team of our valiant warriors in Wren have managed to convert one of them to Ducc! Of course, they killed everyone else who didn't submit to Ducc."

Stockdale saluted, and the crowd wearily replied -

"All hail Ducc."

X - Grant's

"Tarek, why are we walking through the desert again?"

"Look, we don't have a lot of choice, Nirav, the Drydenites would have tried to take us back home if we stayed in College."

"But they were completely inept! You should have seen the way they walked around the town, acting as if they owned the place but in reality, they'd never seen anything like it before!"

"You hadn't seen anything like it before, Nirav. You were just as enthralled when Joe took you around the city walls, and you learned how to do that sword fighting thing."

"Oh come on, even Joe thought that was cool."

"Only because he used Sword's pass to get in. Hey, speaking of that, where did you put it?"

"I think you've still got it."

"Oh, so the one person who can use the pass hasn't got it? Great, it's worthless. And it's only worth anything in College, which we aren't going back to for a while now."

"Well, Joe used it, so clearly more than one person can use it."

“Oh, shut up Nirav.”

“Well, it’s not like we’ve got anyone else to talk to.”

On the horizon, presumably running towards them, was a person who was screaming and calling for help, and the duo picked up into a run, as they wanted to see what there was to scream about. Tarek ran for a while, but stopped to do up the sack properly, as he didn’t want anything to fall out.

The person came up close to them, and it became apparent that they were yelling to the two of them to ask them to help them, and whatever this person was running away from certainly wasn’t going to get any better if they threw Tarek and Nirav at it. Especially since they had the combined worldliness of a child, and they owned virtually nothing as well.

“Oh, please, travellers, help us!” screamed the person.
“Our town is in great danger!”

Tarek considered walking around the person to try and avoid this confrontation, but as she came nearer, she ran towards them with more vigour.

“You have to help us! We’ve tried everything! It’s rats, they’re everywhere!” she said, becoming increasingly incoherent.

“We can’t help. We don’t have anything to help with.” said Tarek, walking around the woman who was slowing down, trying to catch her breath. “I’m sorry, but if you can’t fix it, we can’t either.”

“Oh? Really?” said the woman, stopping. “So where are you going then, with all of your nothing?”

“We were hoping to stay over there,” said Nirav, pointing directly towards Grants, which seemed to have smoke rising from it. “Just for a day or two before going back to College.”

“Well, you can’t stay unless you help.”

“I’ve already said, we can’t help.”

“So,” said the woman, “where are you going to stay tonight? It’s going to be sunset in an hour or so, and you’re at least a day’s travel away from College. And with your lack of camping gear, I’d say you definitely aren’t prepared for a night in the desert.”

“Well, both of us have survived at least a night in the desert very recently.” said Nirav.

“How brave of you.” said the woman, “You do know that the ambient temperature is pretty much the same all day and night, there are no natural predators or venomous creatures, and sandstorms are not at all common in this area. We have to go out in the desert as part of our survival courses when we’re seven years old.”

“Yeah, but anyone can find a rock and sleep under it for a night.” said Tarek. “They’re the only features in the whole desert and you can see them everywhere.”

“A night?” said the woman. “I had to do a week. Had to find my own food, as well.”

“Okay, but you just said there weren’t any predators or creatures, so...” said Nirav.

“You... you dig for these things! You have to dig to find food.”

“What kind of food?” asked Nirav.

“Sand worms.”

“Sand worms?” said Tarek.

“Look, I’ll show you how dead this desert is,” he said, digging away at the sand with his hand, placing his bag down next to him. Material kept slipping into the centre of the pile, rendering his sustained attempt at digging futile.

“See, there’s nothing here!”

At this moment, a rat poked its head out of the bottom of the hole, and shook its head to get rid of the sand. It looked around for a second, before quickly scurrying out

of the hole, straight towards the woman, who ran away from it, screaming.

“It really looks like they do have a problem.” said Tarek.

“She’s got a problem, too. I don’t see anything wrong with this guy,” said Nirav, looking at the rat up close. It seemed to look back at him for a while, before running back towards the hole, and burying itself back through.

“Regardless, I think we should help them. I mean, there’s not much we can do.” said Tarek.

“What about the power rock Joe gave you? Maybe we could test that out on the rats?”

“Well, sure. She was right about the whole ‘not having anything or anywhere to stay’ thing.”

They began to walk towards the town, and due to the fact they had already spent a day walking with almost nothing in sight, this uneventful walk was terribly interesting to them, as they finally had something else to talk about after a day of talking mainly about Stockdale and Ducc in general, and even despite his best efforts, Tarek still hadn’t been able to convince Tarek of the non-existence of Ducc.

“So what do you think is going on in Dryden right about now?” said Tarek.

“Well, I don’t know. I left Dryden a minute after you, so there’s not much I could have gathered, standing on the dune, looking at the border in awe as I stepped over it.” said Nirav.

“Felt good, didn’t it?”

“It felt like I had abandoned everyone, to be honest.”

“But those people had changed since I left. I don’t know how, but Stockdale flipped the people in there from as neutral as you can be, right to people who were chasing me to death at his command. Something must have happened the night where I was gone.”

“Boris was hung. Just out of the blue, no one knew why, no explanation was given. Still can’t think if a reason. I mean, he was a drunkard, he wasn’t exactly contributing to anything in Dryden.”

“I know why he was hanged, at least I think I do. He made this drink which Kalivas and I tried to get the town elders drunk on, and it turned out it was a poison of some sort, so Stockdale had him killed for trying to poison him.”

“You tried to poison Stockdale?”

“Well, I tried to get him drunk so he’d tell us what he was doing. It’s more good than harm, if you know what I mean.”

“But Stockdale said drinking was against the Code Of Ducc in his manifesto, how did anyone convince him to drink?”

“Sorry Nirav, hold on there, the Code Of Ducc? I’ve never heard of that.”

“Oh yeah, Stockdale found these new scrolls and presented them to us, reading all the commandments they listed.”

“You didn’t seriously believe that, right?”

“You doubt Stockdale?” said Nirav, getting slightly more agitated.

“You believe in Stockdale?” said Tarek, with a slightly higher than necessary increase in agitation.

“You don’t? I bet you don’t believe in Ducc either.”

“I don’t.”

“How? Literally how?”

“Look, I didn’t want to confront you about this because I thought it would upset you, and it clearly-”

“It’s not upsetting! It’s just that the only reason I didn’t turn you in to that roving band of Drydenites back in College is because you’re my friend, and a friend who

shares my belief in Ducc. And now you don't have that any more, I don't see why I should let you live."

"Oh, what are you going to do, take me back to Dryden? Didn't you hear what the woman said? You can't survive out there."

"I already survived a night. Bring it on, then."

"I don't want to have to fight you, especially over Stockdale."

Another, slightly lower pitched shouting noise came from the other direction, towards College. Joe came running towards them, and kept on shouting.

"What is he doing?" asked Tarek.

Nirav walked over to Tarek, facing him closely. "Look, we'll settle this Ducc thing some other time, alright? I will admit Stockdale does have his flaws, but he's human. Actually, come to think of it, he isn't really anymore. Not since his manifesto. Oh, whatever, you're wrong and you know it. I'll ask Joe."

As Joe approached, he started trying to shout something, but Nirav attempted to ask him whether he believed in Ducc at the same time, and so both of them stopped until they were much closer together, and yet again, they both started trying to speak at the same time, not that Joe could speak too well, as he was catching his breath.

“Hey Joe, do you believe in Ducc?” said Nirav, finally winning the game of conversational chicken.

Joe couldn’t respond with a proper word, so he just shook his head, which was facing towards the ground in a low crouch, which rolled over into lying down.

“No,” he said, between breaths, “I don’t, and I didn’t know that it existed before... before Tarek.” he trailed off, slumping further into the sand, which, unlike Kalivas and Boris, was entirely plausible due to the nature of sand.

“Well, he’s gone, so what do we do with him?” asked Nirav.

“I’m not gone, I’m just tired after having to make my way here.” said Joe.

“Why did you have to make your way here?” asked Nirav.

“Oh, College was being ‘invaded’ by a wave of these angry Drydenites. They came in, smashed up the market a bit, and then set a house on fire. Which was immediately put out by our fire department.” said Joe. “Well, not immediately. At least a part of one building burnt down.”

“You have a set of people to deal with fires?” said Nirav.

“Actually, to be honest it was just a guy with a bucket of water who just happened to be walking by. You Drydenites really aren’t good with fire.”

“That’s clearly not correct. We’ve had a fire pit in the centre of the town burning for years.” said Nirav.

“Has it ever been put out? Do you even remember who lit it to start with?”

“No, it’s just been burning in the town centre, and we don’t even have to put any fuel on it. It’s a beacon for Ducc to come to us whenever we need him.” said Nirav.

“No fuel?” said Joe, incredulously, “None at all? Maybe it was an oil fire underground. Those happen out in the desert sometimes, you know. Lightning strikes oil patch in the occasional thunderstorm, and voila, burning oil keeps going for a very long time. Perhaps that’s what happened?”

“Seriously? An oil fire? Nah, it’s a Ducc thing. You wouldn’t get it.” said Nirav. “Not that you would either, Tarek.”

“Hey, you said you wouldn’t bring that up. We’re friends-”

“Separated by Wren. You know you’ve let him in.” said Nirav.

“Look, let’s just get to Grant’s and settle this there.” said Joe.

“But what about the rats?” said Tarek. “We’re going to have to get rid of them to stay there.”

“It doesn’t matter, you can’t stay out in the desert anyway.” said Joe. “You might as well get whatever you have to do over with. Oh, that reminds me, the Drydenites are coming this way because some tourist info board gave them a map to Grant’s. That idiot’s going to be made to work as the immigration office lady’s helper for a week. That’s worse than death in my opinion. In fact, technically it is because the last person who ended up there actually died of boredom. Not literally, of course.”

The trio began to walk to Grant’s more quickly now, spurred on by the evening turning to night as the sun sank into the sand, at first shading the slowly shifting dunes in patterns which resembled waves, and then transitioning into darkness.

“Oh, Joe, by the way, what happened to Sword?” asked Tarek.

“He was convinced about the whole Ducc thing and joined the Drydenites.” replied Joe.

“Figures.” said Tarek, not quite laughing.

As they approached the gates of Grant's, someone was staring at them while also trying to shoo a large group of rats out, however, compared to the seething mass of rats that was behind him, this group of rats was comparatively tiny. There was more smoke rising from some of the buildings behind him, which presumably were people trying in vain to get the rats out with heat, which did more harm than good as they were quite literally burning their whole houses down. I mean, not that they would want to live with a living carpet of rats underneath their feet, but burning your entire wood-constructed house down right next to a whole row of other equally flammable houses was definitely too far. They heard the screams from inside one of the houses - "I'd rather die than live here with these rats!", and then someone outside the house retorted with, "Well if you stay in there you're going to spend the rest of your life with rats!" which was very clearly a reference to how this faceless screamer was going to inevitably die if they locked themselves in a burning house, filled with rats who don't really have a concept of death.

The scene before them was like one from the ancient scrolls, which told tales of entire lands that were burned down and plagued with rats, done so because Ducc disapproved of them as a city, mainly because of their terrible cooking. They walked forwards, Joe shielding his face from embers coming off the house, which looked as if it was going to topple over any second now. The woman from earlier came up to them, and half glad, half smug, she said, "Oh, you're here! It's good to know you

wanted to help out, and you're not doing this because you have nothing else to do."

"Thanks, we wanted to help you lot." said Nirav.

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Hey, it looks like you picked up a straggler on the way back. What's his problem?" said the woman.

"Oh no, this is Joe. He's our friend from College." said Tarek.

"Well then, he's probably not good with dangerous situations, then, is he? Just sit back, you can't solve your way out of this one with maths." said the woman.

"I don't intend to solve this one. I intend to get out of here before you burn yourselves to death in here." said Joe, rather attacked by the needless insults. "Besides, you're a choosing beggar, and it's definitely not in your best interests to insult the only people from outside of town who are willing to help you."

"If only the rowers were around at this time of day, then we wouldn't have to rely on you guys to help this place." said the woman. Joe stepped back from the group to think for a second.

"Well then, since you need our help, we'll give it to you. First of all, put out the fire. Secondly, I'm going to need that-" Joe was cut short by the house behind him falling down, catapulting a set of debris over his head. The

burning logs created a ring around Joe which he couldn't get out of, but he was so deeply engrossed in thought that he barely even noticed it.

"Sorry there, er... where was I? Ah yes, now you have to get the food supply that the rats are presumably eating, because there can't be any other thing that they are eating, due to the arid conditions of the area." Joe said, the crackle of the wood surrounding him almost blocking all the words he said. Still either uncaring or unaware of his situation, he continued. Nirav went to go and get some food, anywhere he could find and preferably of as low quality as possible.

"Next, you want to get that statue that Tarek has in his bag, and open it up. There should be a rock inside." said Joe, who then returned to thinking, and waiting for a response from the other side of the circle, which was quite unlike a raked circle in that Joe was firmly locked inside it.

Tarek placed his bag down on the ground, only for rats to almost instantly swarm into it, making away with the statue. Tarek threw his bag up, catapulting some of the rats into the air, and then he began to chase the rats that were somehow holding the statue well enough to dodge and weave through obstacles, all while more and more embers rained down from the burning buildings above. The rats glowed a dark red in the bright red and orange that illuminated them, solely brightened by the fire as the sun's effect finally wore off. They wove themselves around beams of burning wood that had splintered off of

the buildings, and then they went inside a house. Like a clumsy dog chasing a more nimble cat, Tarek followed the rats into the house, rather ungracefully, as he had watched the rats enter though the doorway, but not fully registered that the door was still shut, and the rats had simply slipped under it.

Regardless, the door was made of a flimsy material and Tarek managed to break through it, causing him a great deal of unexpected pain, but he kept running as Joe's plan wasn't going to work if he didn't get the statue back. Also, he liked the statue, and despite the facts that it wasn't his, it was stolen and he had only had it for less than two days, he still really wanted to get it back because of the sentimental value it posed to him.

The rats continued to dart around, and some of them climbed up the walls, still carrying the statue in such a way that made Tarek's subconscious question how they were doing it, but nonetheless, his conscious mind was entirely focused on getting the statue back from the rats. As the rats carrying the statue disappeared down a small hole in the corner of the room, the statue exceeded the height limit of the hole, and it slipped off the top of them. As Tarek grabbed it, his hand was bitten by one of the rats, and he recoiled in pain. He walked back to the table, and opened the statue, and opened another compartment inside which he assumed contained the rock. The rock rolled out on to the table, and the rat, which was on the table, tried to take a bite from it, but shortly after doing so, died. He used a stick that was on the table to put the rock back into the statue without

touching it, and left the building, trying not to injure himself on the broken pieces of door which he had made.

“Tarek, are you back yet?” said Joe, who could barely be heard over the crackling of the fire, still unaware of his situation. Tarek came running back, picking up his bag along the way, and telling Joe he was back, despite not having heard Joe at all.

“Well, that’s good. Now you need to crush up the rock into the food pile and dump it right in the centre of the village, and wait for the rats to come and eat it. Oh, and you won’t need the whole rock. Just a few tiny bits will kill them.” said Joe.

“How do you know what the rock does?” said Tarek.

Joe didn’t respond, presumably due to the building next to him collapsing too, despite the best interests of a man with a bucket of water, trying in vain to stop his house from burning down.

“Stop trying to put the fire out!” shouted the person inside the burning house, “The only way we can get rid of the rats is by moving ourselves and burning the place down while we’re at it!” Which, by any measure, was not a phrase that a sane person could conjure up.

“So now, after the rats start eating the food, they should die. After a while, move the rat corpses away so new rats can make their way to the food, and they’ll die too. Repeat until there are no more rats. Also, lure the rats

into the main pile with trails of food. I'm sure you don't want to waste all this on rat control, but you have to lose the battle to win the war in this scenario." said Joe.

Nirav returned from getting food with an armful of wheat and several fabric bags full of other things which didn't look appetising to humans, but perfectly good for rats. He dumped the lot onto the sand, and rats came flooding towards it.

"Nirav! Not yet, I have to make the rock into powder!"

"Oh, and I should mention that you can shake the statue to make the rock into powder. I think so, anyway." said Joe, somewhat more audible now. Tarek shook the rock in the statue, and then tipped the entire thing out in one go. The powder settled on top of the seething mass of rats, and a good few of them died almost instantly from it. The main mass of the rock also came out of the statue, and Tarek used the statue to scoop it back up, making sure none of it touched his hands. The rats kept piling on, and they kept dying as if by magic. The plan had worked, and it was all thanks to Joe. However, the burning buildings had to be taken care of.

"Joe! Your plan saved us, and the rats are dying!" said Nirav, which made Joe suddenly aware of his surroundings. Joe screamed and almost fell over trying to leap over the burning logs that surrounded him, and he came crashing down outside of the burning ring.

“What... what happened?” said Joe. “How long was I standing there for?”

“About five minutes.” said Nirav. “You were pretty brave to do that, with all the burning buildings and stuff. I guess you just went to your happy place or something?”

“Happy place? No, it wasn’t a happy place, it was more of a-”

“I didn’t ask you for the whole explanation. Come on, Joe, let’s go and help them put out the fire.” said Nirav.

“Well, if you’re going to ask me a question, at least let me-”

“What did I just say?” said Nirav.

“That-”

“You’re not meant to answer that.”

“Okay, sure. But can you make it clear when you want a response from a question next time?” said Joe.

Nirav walked alongside Joe, completely silent.

“You can answer that one if you want.” said Joe.

XI - Book

After putting the fire out with a great deal of combined effort from Nirav, Tarek and a few of the villagers, spurred on by Joe's comments on inefficiencies in their bucket transfer system that could be ironed out in order to achieve full fluid throughput capacity - in the words of Joe himself. Joe had tried to blank out the traumatic experience of earlier by focusing on the great advice he gave to Tarek that allowed him to deal with the rat problem so easily. What wasn't going to be so easy was taking care of all the rat bodies that were piled up on one of the streets. He thought it would be a better idea for the locals to deal with it after they had gone.

During the putting out of the fire, Joe had found a book, and he used this book to take notes on the ways that they moved the buckets around, attempting to find some balanced ratio of well-pumpers to bucket-transferrers, and he had scribbled vaguely in it with calculations of the sort. Now, in the aftermath of the fire, he found himself writing in it out of a lack of anything else to do, as Tarek and Nirav were off, being celebrated by the locals. Joe realised he could probably relish in his fair share of the celebration if he turned up and made it known he was associated with the two of them, but he wondered if it was even worth it. He went back to the pages where he had made the calculations before, and attempted to calculate whether it was worth it.

Yet, he soon came to resent the fact there was no equation for interpersonal dynamics. There was no formula that allowed him to derive any sort of higher meaning, or personal bonding. In some ways, people were like atoms. They were individually small and bonded tightly to a few people, but lost in a sea of similarity if you chose to see the bigger picture. They were complex, yet simple. Static, yet unpredictable. No other force in the universe could come close to creating the intrinsic randomness that arises from relationships, not even a topic as hard to master as quantum physics, or even Bistromathics for that matter.

Joe flipped the pages back over again and found himself writing on the subject of how he viewed Tarek and Nirav as if it were a scientific paper. However, the imaginary spotlight he had placed them under was harsh, and white. Trying to explain their behaviour in a clinical, exact way didn't do them justice, as they were people who looked best under the sun and stars. They were meant for this adventure, and Joe began to question whether he was even needed. He was certainly along for the ride, as the journey back would be boring, and he would almost certainly come to regret it if he passed up on the adventure of a lifetime.

The first page slowly filled up with words that reflected on Tarek and Nirav, the stone cold lexicon which he had employed slowly turning to more human words, which displayed their true colours as people. They were simple town-folk, and yet so complex. He began to write about Grant's and how it was very different from College,

noticing the way in which people acted towards others, and trying to extrapolate their whole lives from simple, perhaps one or two word interactions. But, after all, people weren't graph points.

Joe closed the book and began walking towards the crowd which was centred around the other two, and watched them eagerly answer questions about life in Dryden. Every now and then, a wave of laughter would wash over the small crowd, and eventually find its way back to him, well after the crest of this wave had broken. As he walked closer, the subtle feeling of interpersonal bonding became stronger, and stronger, and as he walked to the side of the crowd, where there were a few gaps, as soon as he placed his hand through the gap, Tarek dragged him in to the centre, where Tarek told everyone he had remained 'dead calm' throughout the whole situation, and prompted Tarek to use the magic rock. Tarek got the statue out, and passed it to Joe, who thought to hold it above his head, as if it were a trophy.

And to an extent, it was. He was finally somewhere where all of his previously unused skills would become useful. No longer was he to trawl throughout the desolate desert with someone who he didn't enjoy talking to, he would stick with this lot until the end. The very end, he hoped.

Joe lowered the statue and slowly slinked back off the stage once the attention had been drawn back to its natural resting point, and he sat down once more, and began to write up the account of what had happened

that day, for posterity. He had always wanted to keep a diary of sorts, but the limiting factor had never been time, it had always been that nothing interesting ever seemed to happen to him.

As Joe was writing, some people walked past him, chatting amongst themselves in a very outspoken manner, pushing past the back rows of the crowd and making themselves known. The people cheered them as they replaced Tarek and Nirav in the centre of the circle, and one of them began to try and quell the shouts and cheers of the ever-growing crowd.

“Hey, Grantites! We’ve just come back from our latest competition, and we won at pretty much everything.” said the central one, which elicited even more cheering from the crowd. “So we’re going to need a pretty amazing feast to bring us back down to the ground. Not that that’s possible. Anyway, you guys set the bar so high last month that it’s going to be hard to beat this time.”

“I’ve got fireworks!” shouted a person from somewhere within the crowd. “I’ve made soup!” cried another.

“Well, you know what to do now. It’s time for the rowers feast!” shouted the central one, who then walked forwards and pushed back out of the crowd, only to be followed by the other eight. The crowd was also in the process of dispersing rather hurriedly, each running to prepare their own little segment of the meal. Some were running towards the edge of the town, and were seemingly turning the wall of the town into pillars which

would hold up a giant tent roof. The long wooden segments which made up the walls of the town were turned so that they extended maybe ten meters into the air, using a system of pulleys and ropes installed on the nearby buildings.

These nearby buildings also had pillars on them, and they went up very quickly, almost flinging the fabric sheets of the roof up into the air in a graceful fashion. They unravelled, creating mesmerising patterns with the wind currents that made them move as if they were waves, floating in the air. The ends of these waves were caught by people who were standing on the outer row of raised planks, who then fixed the sheets to the outer ring. This process of raising, throwing, and fixing was repeated many times until the central spire was raised, and the final sheets were extended to the edge of the inner circle. The rate at which this occurred was so startling to Joe that he wrote it down and tried to document this breakneck pace.

The entire town had been covered with these sheets now, and many of the people below were still too busy preparing their own items for the feast to even look up and realise the sky was now obscured by this great striped and patchwork cover. Perhaps they had just got so used to this happening that they didn't need to look up, it was just a common occurrence for them. Regardless of the amount of people who appreciated it in that moment, Joe could certainly see the amount of precise work and practise over many years that went into making this as fluid as possible. Maybe it was a ritual, just like the feast days which the Drydenites had

celebrated, but it was an active festival, rather than a half-hearted celebration for no apparent reason, which inadvertently embodied all the negative attributes the Drydenites had: sloth, gluttony, sometimes even lust.

Joe walked back towards the centre of the town, where he was asked several times by people running past him to “Help out!” or “Stop lazing around!” Most of these people weren’t even expecting a verbally confirmed response because of their own business. They didn’t even have time to glance over their shoulders to check whether Joe was actually doing as he had been asked. Others simplified their interrogations further, they simply stared at him, almost trying to guilt him into working.

Eventually, Joe caved to this unending guilt-tripping and decided to pick up a box of glasses, and then unfortunately, performed some actual tripping, and fell over almost instantly as his foot snagged a rope support for one of the tent uprights, throwing all the glasses down. Most of the glasses in the box were broken, and as Joe attempted to separate the glass shards from the sand, looks of heavy disdain fell upon him, heavier than they were before. At least he was doing something now, surely they should be happier for it?

“Hey, Grantites, you’ve got just a bit longer until we’re ready for the old feast... thing.” the main man said, turning to one of his associates. “What do they call this thing, again?” he asked quietly, but only quietly relative to his previous volume. Tables and chairs arced through the air as the people of Grant’s threw them towards their final resting places, each wonderfully choreographed movement resulting in a smooth flow of furniture in the

direction of the town centre. How they threw the tables, many of which were sturdy and looked like they were made out of solid wood, was unknown to Joe, and pretty much unknown to anyone else in the town, too. They just threw tables as well as the Drydenites drew circles.

The area of the town where the houses had been burnt down hadn't been affected too badly, but still, the reconstruction efforts of the townspeople were fascinating to watch. They pulled out charred, load-bearing struts in the structures, only to hold their burdens single-handedly while they placed another beam below it, and then fastened them together with rope and a few nails. As for the charred wood, that was all being thrown towards the bonfire at the centre of the town at alarming speed, by the same chains of people who were throwing tables about like they were made from the air they somehow gracefully flew through.

The rowers began walking to their predetermined places where they always sat, but at this point, the tables which they were going to sit at were still being moved towards them by the Grantites. They stood in two perfect rows of nine and eight, and just as they were lined up, a tables came soaring through the air, and landed between the two rows. More people came running through, depositing various foods on the placemats that yet more people had placed before them, and even more people were running around with trays and dishes, and then, a long string of people carrying benches came and placed them below the rowers, who were still standing. They all sat down at the same time, producing a surprisingly

pleasing, almost harmonic creaking sound in the benches.

The feast was ready.

“Hello all! And, as I can gather, you have all registered our presence here today in your lovely little town! And each and every time we are here, we sample some of your finest cuisine, and we grace your town with our existence in return. Well, dig in boys, we’ve earned it!” shouted the main rower, who sat in the middle of his row of nine, and the main rower on the other side passed him a knife - well, it was more of a ceremonial sword than a knife, but it served the same purpose. And it also served a lot of severed bits and bobs from various creatures that Tarek and Nirav hadn’t seen before, and they definitely wouldn’t have assumed that people eat them from their first glance. Joe, however, knew a little bit more about the culinary arts than the Drydenites, so he wasn’t as shocked when the head rower laughed as congealed blood came dripping from the neck of the cooked whatever-bird.

All the people of Grants filed in from the sides of the area where the tables had been laid, bringing yet more food with them. A circulatory network of dirty-plate-carriers and food-bringers was beginning to form, and as the rowers chowed down on their food in what Nirav described as ‘extreme chulking’, they threw plates behind them, which often landed on other tables. However, the locals didn’t seem to mind.

Meanwhile, Nirav and Tarek had managed to blag themselves onto the center table with the rowers due to their earlier rat-related fame, and both of them were talking about it, and somehow the stories had gone through a chain of exaggeration in their own heads, so now the fires were much bigger, the beams much more dangerous, and the rats were, well, the size of cats, according to Nirav. He wasn't good with clichés.

“Say, what's your name?” said the rower sitting at the end of the bench of eight.

“Nirav.” said... ah, is there really any point in saying?

The rower turned to him. “How's about you join us for some training. You seem like you've done a lot here and we need a new fifth man, our previous guy retired because he's doing some work for an advertising agency. He was also getting pretty old, to be honest.”

“He wasn't that old! He was the best of us! He was a hammer with the grace of any one of us!” shouted another, with a mouthful of food and a very distraught look on his face.

“Anyway, despite the tragic departure of Phil, we have to be strong. And you look like someone who could fill his spot one day. Or at least, you can fill someone else's spot while someone more experienced takes his spot.”

Tarek leaned across the table, “Wait, they're actually letting you go with them? Over this whole rat thing?

Nirav hasn't even seen an ocean, you see. We're both Drydenites. Dry. It's in the name."

"Oh, don't worry. We'll use the ergs to get him used to the technique, then send him out into the wild rivers to get him used to the real world. After all, ergs don't float." said the rower next to Tarek, and this elicited a laugh in the other rowers, some of which were drunk beyond any reasonable measure.

"Okay, so the course of training doesn't really have a fixed timetable. You train as fast as you train. So, tomorrow morning, we head to Busby's for a couple of boat related things, and then we'll get you used to the ergs when we go to Haklyut's later on." said the same rower. The drunken laughing had only just died down.

"I have... no idea what any of those places are." said Nirav, pausing to try and develop his response.

"You don't have to go if you don't want to, Nirav." said Tarek.

Joe had been caught in part of the circulatory traffic due to his desire of not to get in anyone's way, and after being moved around the tables by these currents of people, he was deposited down on to the table in an ungraceful manner, right next to Nirav.

"I think I'll... oh, hi Joe. Uh, yeah, I'll go with you guys." he said, looking between Joe, Tarek and the rowers.

“You’re going?” said Joe, “I didn’t realise you would go so soon.” He began writing in his book some more, noting down the various rowers and their attributes, plus their varying states of sobriety. “Oh well then, I should probably say goodbye to one of the only people who I’ve been with for more than two days who actually seems to like me and isn’t Sword.”

“Hey, don’t worry, you still have Tarek.” said Nirav.

“Well, sure.” said Joe, who meant it in a meaningful and nice way towards Tarek, but the way he had been looking at his book for the entire duration of Nirav’s last sentence and his own two words made it seem like he didn’t mean it so much. Either way, Tarek got up from the table and left, presumably trying to find his way to a bed, which he didn’t know the location of. It didn’t matter, after all, Joe didn’t care about him at all and he was just a simple town man, rather than an actual human being.

“Goodnight, Tarek.” said Joe, only marginally less harshly than his previous comment was. Nirav had resumed talking with the rowers and was now in the throes of their terminology-laden chats about technique that felt like they lasted hours, even to the most veteran rowers. Then, Joe, decided to try and walk around the town to see if he could find somewhere to stay, and more importantly, Tarek. He remarked about his own book, about the words they used which even he couldn’t fathom, even as an enthusiast of esoteric terminology.

XII - Rigaud's

Joe decided to go to sleep after spending at least an hour looking for Tarek, in vain. However, the problem of where to sleep was still unavoidable, and Joe didn't want to have to sleep outside, an action which he was not accustomed to, quite unlike the desert-wandering Nirav and Tarek. Waking up, not remembering where he had collapsed, he realised that the sandy floor had given him a sleep significantly less restful than his own bed in College, and that he felt groggy and did not particularly want to leave town again to go on another walk through the desert. Wiping the sleep and sand from his eyes, he walked around the town once more, and found Tarek and Nirav, sitting almost alone on the waste-laden tables of the previous evening, eating breakfast. They glanced at each other round pillars of plates and food.

The remains of animals lay strewn about in such a way that evoked a feeling comparable to a slaughterhouse, and as his newly sleep-free eyes scanned the long rows of benches, he spotted a few bodies, slumped down as if they were dead too.

"Morning!" Joe cried out, hoping the others would hear him. They didn't, or at least pretended to ignore him.

"Hi guys..." he added, trailing off as Nirav turned his head towards him, mouth full of porridge.

“How was your sleep, Joe?” Nirav said, in a tone that was not exactly neutral for him. “Could you rest easy?” The emphasis on both of the final two words signalled that something more was off.

“Fine.” Joe said, sitting down beside Tarek, all the while maintaining eye contact with Nirav, round a stack of dishes. “I slept fine.” he continued, emphasising the final two words of his sentence as a form of retaliation. The three of them sat in uneasy silence until Tarek, almost unaware of the tension, decided to comment on the quality of the porridge. His noble attempt to rouse conversation in the other two was met with continued eye contact and stony silence. Eventually, Nirav took a large spoonful of porridge and ate, all while maintaining his stare. Joe eventually laughed, and Nirav did too.

“Look, I’m sorry for last night. I’m sorry I came across as... callous.” said Joe.

“Oh, that’s fine.” said Nirav, trying to guess the meaning of the word callous based on its context within the sentence, “I felt bad for leaving you two because of the whole rowing thing. Maybe I shouldn’t go, but they’ve already prepared my stuff and I’m supposed to leave for Haklyut’s after breakfast.”

“Well, I think you should do it because...” said Joe, not sure how to finish the sentence, “Because you’ll love it. I’m sure you don’t want to be stuck with us the whole time, anyway. We should probably go before any Drydenites come along. I mean, any other Drydenites,

not you guys. In fact, we'll go to Busby's to try and enlist the help of the Busbite King."

"Great. Well then, I'll see you round." said Nirav.

"We shall." said Joe, speaking for the almost silent Tarek.

"Bye." said Tarek, being almost as cold as Joe had, maybe on purpose, but maybe because he was intently focused on his bowl of porridge, trying to pick out certain uncooked grains. Tarek remained seated, however, not realising that Joe had actually called him to go. Upon repeating his itinerary to Tarek, Joe left, Tarek following closely behind with an almost full bowl, which he disposed of in a large bag full of bowls at the edge of the tent.

"Why do we have to go so early?" said Tarek.

"It's not early. It's way after breakfast. Look, these people are probably filing in for lunch now." Joe said, walking past a line of people being handed out bowls from the large bag, and collecting their lunches.

"Uh, Joe, we should go quicker."

"Why?" said Joe, looking over his shoulder as an unlucky individual fished out the bowl with Tarek's porridge in it.

"Is that yours?" asked Joe.

“Yes.” said Tarek. “Now, I think we should go before anyone tries to get us.”

“Well, you saw how fast these Grantites are on sand last night-”

Tarek began jogging as the people behind him began to point and, to them, the culprit was obvious. They began running faster, and due to their head start, they avoided all of the people. However, Tarek did not avoid being hit in the back with the very same bowl, splattering his leftovers over himself in an annoying but kind of fitting way, a true eye for an eye punishment that didn’t involve death.

Scraping the bowl clean, Tarek put it into Joe’s bag, along with some food Joe had taken the previous evening, and the statue.

“Hey, Joe, look over there. What’s that?”

“That’s a palm tree. We’ve already had this conversation, Tarek.” said Joe, tired from Tarek’s inane attempts at conversation and unsurprising lack of worldliness, wishing the journey would get easier.

“No Joe, I know that it’s a palm tree.” Tarek said, squinting into the distance with considerable effort. “No, the ground. It’s no longer sandy. Well, as sandy as it used to be.”

“So it is.”

“You really want to kill every conversation you have, don’t you?”

“Well, at least it’s better than not being able to start one properly.” snapped Joe, still vaguely bitter about having to wipe a splatter of porridge off of his only pair of trousers. “Hey, we’ve kept a conversation going for more than a few lines. How about that?”

Tarek decided not to respond, somewhat out of fear of proving Joe right, and thus having to have yet another conversation.

As they walked on only really pausing to sleep once or twice when the day got late, they both noticed the changes in the flora and fauna of the world, the sand faded into dirt and clay, and finally, grass. Joe took off his shoes, sighing as he walked on the relatively cool grass. Little did he know, back in his hometown of College, two Drydenites had tried to enter the town by legal means, much as Tarek and Nirav had done. However, as the woman behind the counter searched for the necessary papers to sign them up, a stack of files that had yet to be filed came crashing down on top of her, making her the first workplace fatality in the College Offices since the deaths of two people who burned to death trying to find fire hydrant usage permission forms. The collapse caused a domino effect, causing more and more stacks to fall, until finally, a Drydenite was crushed. Ironically, it contained his immigration forms, but seeing

irony in such events is hard when you're under a filing cabinet. The other Drydenite immediately reacted to this by attempting to lift the cabinet off of his partner, but a drawer slid out directly on to the first one's head, knocking him fully unconscious. Seeing this self-caused event as a terroristic act of aggression that should be escalated into a full scale war, the Drydenite grabbed the nearest weapon-like object near him, climbed to the tallest point he could at a moments notice, and shouted for all Drydenites to 'rise up' and 'heed his call'.

Of course, standing on top of a toppled filing cabinet brandishing a pen isn't the most threatening look, but the three other people still in the room ran out shortly after. More Drydenites arrived right as he finished the song, 'O, Dryden', which further proved to him that he could believe in the power of Ducc.

The takeover of College was said to have been fairly slow compared to how they thought it would have gone. In fact, Hawken, one of the lead Drydenite strategists, said it would have been simpler to just wait for the next election cycle and use their sheer numbers to just vote themselves into power, rather than go through the lengthy procedure of declaring a coup, getting the paperwork for the structure of the coup signed, signed again, lost, found, almost incinerated when an torch-wielding mob decided that they would just rather burn it all down and move on, and then finally handed to the current leader of College, Mann, who decided it would be better to not make too much of a fuss about the Drydenites by 'giving them the attention they wanted',

and he resigned using a silenced pen, also making sure to wear spongy shoes and close the door to the town hall as quietly as possible, as to not disturb the incumbents. When the Drydenites took power, they celebrated in the streets, which were still mainly full of normal people going about their everyday lives, so they were forced to go and celebrate in some other way. They had covered every reference to College on the signs on the outer wall with just one word, “Wren”, and now, they began tearing these self-made signs down gleefully, then placing Drydenite signs and banners around the town instead, and raking borders around the town in a ritualistic manner, much like there was at home. They also imposed a sunset curfew on the town for all non-believers in Ducc, but this was almost entirely ineffective as almost all College people were asleep well before the sun set. Then, they required them to go to events in the town square, even the midnight bonfires Hawken had implemented. The College people had to simultaneously be inside in their curfew, and outside to celebrate the lives of the Ancient Ones. So, the Drydenites decided to try and compromise, and built a bonfire indoors.

Needless to say, this was not a good idea.

But, there are only so many diversions we can take from what our heroes, if you can call them that, are going through. In fact, at this very moment, Tarek was beginning to wonder why they didn’t just stay in Grant’s until they had seen more Drydenites coming, as it wasn’t like it was guaranteed they were going to make it that far anyway.

“Joe, why are we walking even further? Do you even know where we’re going?” said Tarek. “I mean, why don’t we just wait for the Drydenites? Or go with Nirav?”

“Oh, we’re heading to recruit the Busbite King in Busby’s. I thought I told you that.”

“Well, yeah, I guess so, but why aren’t we walking towards Busby’s over there?”

“That’s Rigaud’s. We don’t really want to get involved with them.” said Joe, readjusting his bag. “I’ve been told they’re a bad sort over there.”

“A bad sort? How is that?”

“Well, the Rigaudites...” said Joe, trying to find a better demonym for them, “or people of Rigaud’s, decided they would implement a system in which everybody did what they were best at. And, while I’d love to say that job satisfaction would probably have been very high, general satisfaction wasn’t great with mountains of rubbish piling up inside the city. Half of the citizens wrote songs and poetry about how bad the smell had become, and when, inevitably, no one read their malformed prose, it just became part of the problem. Buskers littered the streets, begging for money no one could give them. I think at least one good song came out of it, and that was Trash Chant.”

“What’s it like?”

“I have no idea. All copies of the song were destroyed when an enraged man decided to throw a burning bottle of his neighbour’s craft gin at the tallest building in the city, a publishing company, after his half-written novel loosely based on his dreams was rejected for the fifth time.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Well, before I worked as a guard with Gilbert, I had an internship as an archivist, and that was incredibly fun. You see, most other areas that we are friendly with send their important in to us to be organised and analysed. In fact, we predicted the outcome of the most recent Rigaud’s elections just by studying their past and how their voters tend to vote. Not that you could call them democratic by any means, there’s a lot of evidence that points towards a corruption within their ranks.”

“Do you think it could be Wrenite missionaries like Stockdale?”

“Well, I never really looked into that, but I did look into the election results and found out the turnout for the south district was over one hundred percent. Also, the gerrymandering is just ridiculous, too!”

“What’s that?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just let me talk to you about this, because Gilbert wouldn’t stop talking for long enough for me to get a word in.”

“Well, maybe if you talked about something more interesting I would actually listen? For someone who spent their entire life in Dryden up until a week or so ago, I’m not that interested in knowing this kind of stuff. What about Busby’s? What’s interesting in Busby’s?”

“Busby’s is brilliant place. I’ve never been, but I have always wanted to go. Ever since I was told of the tour groups they arranged to see the gigantic halls of Busby, and also their luxurious housing. You see, their main export is-”

“You’re losing me, Joe.”

“Okay then, they can afford these luxurious houses because they sell lots of things. Oil. Gold. Diamonds. You name it, they have lots of it. And as a result of this, most Busbites are relatively rich purely by being there. Also, it’s very well suited to be safe from enemy invaders, with its extensive underground tunnel system and large mountain ranges surrounding it.”

“So how are we going to get there?”

“Well, most tour guides use the sponsored Busby’s Balloons, but we’re... we’re going to have to use the tunnels.”

“So, not the mountain? Surely the mountain route will have camps and places to eat and things like that?”

“Well, the tunnels are still maintained to this day, so they should be stocked. Maybe they’ll be inhabited! Maybe they’ll have all their precious materials down there and we can take a look on our way there.”

“Are you sure the tunnels will be good? I mean, I can see one of those balloons right up there.”

“Oh no, Tarek, they cost a hell of a lot to charter.”

“How much?”

“Multiple times what we have, especially after we bought some camping equipment at that little stop yesterday.”

“Ah, alright then. Let’s go the the tunnel.”

“Yes, let’s.”

Not quite XIII - Interlude III

“Ok, this is going to sound crazy, but what if we were to try and use the pipelines to escape? I know I’m not the most mobile of people, and with my arm and all... But don’t worry. I do actually have a plan.” said Kalivas.

Ullathorne and Hartley nodded. The situation in Dryden had so massively deteriorated in the last few days, that they thought that the only way Stockdale could have achieved this was through heavy premeditation. The amount of effort he had put into manipulating the platform of Ducc was only possible by a true Wrenite. He was not a holy man of Ducc, and should be cast out of the town. But, the ratio of supporters to rebels was not exactly in their favour, as almost everyone else had fallen to Stockdale’s iron-clad, sugary-sweet ideology.

Hartley sat in the corner, watching Kalivas and Ullathorne discuss the best method for using Stockdale’s pipeline boring technology to dig their way out of the town. Eventually, he got up and walked up to the board, but his mind was very much still in the corner, idling, as if he was willing to wait for the problem to solve itself. Suddenly, a few neurones fired somewhere deep within his mind.

“What about if we go towards the Oasis once we’re out of the town?” he asked.

“Hartley! We have to work on getting out of the town. Let’s actually finish the basics before we move on to what we have to do after.” said Ullathorne, looking over his shoulder as Kalivas etched diagrams of the town on the chalkboard.

Hartley slunk back into the corner of the room, watching the frantic chalking up ahead, choosing not to contribute. Despite the fact he liked the workload he got (pretty much nothing), he got tired of watching the other two do all the work for themselves. Sitting, hopelessly alone in the corner, solo, was not good enough. After all, he thought, everybody needs something to do. He thought he shouldn’t just be complacent, he knew you have to put work in, and if he didn’t, the only person he would be cheating was himself. He thought of his students, and how under him, all of them had passed their exams - he didn’t want the uncharismatic Stockdale to lead them through their lessons, as he thought he wasn’t qualified enough. Even though he had no plan, no idea of what to do once he was outside of that fine sand line, he wanted to go, and could not wait a minute longer. The wonder of the outside world called to him, and he stood up.

“Boys.” he said, asserting his dominance over the chalk-scratchers. “Come on, it’s time to go.”

“We’re not going for ages yet. We need to calculate the heat load on the front of the drills, and if the diameter-” said Kalivas, as Hartley walked out of their meeting room, completely silently. Whether it was because of his

will to do something, regardless of its actual use to escaping, or pure boredom, or some hybrid, he was determined to leave. The sand-tumbled air billowed in to the room, displacing the stale air that had built up from them being in there for so long without leaving, as Stockdale had suspended all other classes for several days now, teaching the New Ducculum by himself, leaving all the other teachers to sit by themselves.

As he walked towards the border, hesitating briefly to contemplate the finite nature of their existence, he all came to the realisation that death was not certain, far from it, and as he crossed the fine sand line, his determination did not waver.

And that was all he needed.

XIII - Tunnel, Part One

“Alright, Ullathorne. We are officially go for Plan T.”

“T for tunnel right? Not T for ‘terrible that we have to do this, and we’re probably going to die’, Kalivas?”.

“The T means whatever you want it to be. The only thing that really matters is that we get out of here. The tunnel borer should be able to hold both of us, and then steer towards the pipelines under the town, and then we’ll be able to move quickly from there.”

“Are you sure it’s safe? The last thing I would want to do is suffocate to death several meters below ground.”

“I mean, if we do die, no one will ever find our bodies, at least not for a long time, and you can think of it as a free funeral as well. At least a free burial.”

“I get that, it’s just that I would like to know if it’ll be safe for us to use before we use it.”

“Don’t worry, Ullathorne. Every single aspect of this device has been thoroughly checked. I even got Chidgey to check the final product out, and she didn’t immediately scream at me, which is quite rare for her.”

“Doesn’t she have some kind of weird aura around her that curses every mechanical device she inspects? You

should try and remember what happened to Boris's chemical stand. That's why he's got-

"The scar, I know. At least he had the scar before he died. Can't believe they burned his body after hanging it too. Seemed like unnecessary insult to injury."

"Hanging is hardly injury though."

"Look, enough of this. We need to get out of here to warn the other kingdoms of Stockdale's doings as soon as possible, in order to stop his strangely successful takeover of the other kingdoms."

"Do you want to get in first?" said Ullathorne, gesturing to the metal cylinder which they had built out of repurposed parts from Stockdale's old tunnel boring machines.

Both of the men climbed in, laying down flat, looking forward as the machine sat in the middle of their meeting room. It pressed against the ceiling, causing a slight bulge in the roof, and the pointed end sank into the hole in the floor further.

"Alright, are you ready?" said Kalivas.

"No, but I honestly don't think that's important right now."

"You're right. We've got a world to save."

“That might be bigging up our scenario a bit, but I get where you’re coming from.”

“Ullathorne, the button isn’t working.” Kalivas said, moments before they were plunged into the earth by the machine, which had worked around ten times better than both of them had anticipated, due to their complete over-engineering of every conceivable component and circuit which went into it. Not that there were many circuits in there, due to the fact that most of the metal and rare materials in the town had been repurposed into shields and swords for the largest employer in the kingdom - Stockdale’s New Army.

The tunnel boring machine flew straight through the pipe it was intended to follow, and as Ullathorne and Kalivas began to scream in terror, they had already passed under the border without knowing it, breaking the rule they had followed their entire lives. The meeting room in which they had built the machine collapsed under the lack of support, and many people in the town who were going about their daily lives ran over to see what was going on. They discovered nothing, even the hole which the machine had dug was covered up by all the tiles from the roof, which fragmented and fell into the hole, hiding any evidence of the deed underneath a pile of rubble.

However, deep underground and hurtling towards College, being caught was the last of Ullathorne and Kalivas’s problems, as even if they were found out right at this very moment, it was unlikely anyone other than

Stockdale would catch them due to their hard to reach location and frightening speed, and even then, Stockdale wouldn't risk his own life to catch mere traitors. That task would likely be reserved for the Special Unit of Stockdale's New Army, a task force that had received four hours of training a day instead of the usual three, thus making them ever so slightly more qualified to catch enemies of the state. The lack of training time had stemmed from the fact that almost all of the leaders within the ranks of Dryden had been forced to flee after they had been put on Stockdale's list. Admittedly, the list wasn't very long most of the time, because exiling any more than about three people at a time would seriously decrease the morale of most Drydenites for whatever reason.

The machine kept boring through the ground, almost randomly veering from side to side as Kalivas kept his one hand on the control stick which had the loosest possible form of control over the direction the machine headed. As the machine smoothed out, still racing along at a reasonable pace, they passed College. Eventually, the stability in the ground increased as they traveled past the sand and soil near Grant's, and heading away from Rigaud's.

"How long would you say we've been going for?" asked Kalivas.

"No idea. The fact I'm hungry now says about four hours."

“Knowing you, that should mean ten minutes.” said Kalivas, causing them both to laugh.

“In all seriousness, when is this thing going to surface?” asked Ullathorne.

“Whenever I feel like we’re far enough. By my guess, we should be just approaching College by now.” said Kalivas, not knowing they were rapidly approaching the foothills of the Busby’s Mountains and any attempt to pull up would leave them firmly in the mountain range, stuck under solid rock rather than loose soil.

Another two hours passed, with the machine slowly slowing due to the increasing density of the soil they travelled through, and Kalivas thought now would be as good a time as any to pull up and resurface. Expecting to come out around the College area, he attempted to change the angle of attack using the control once more. The machine slowed more and more, the cogs and bearings having to bear more and more load as the material became denser as they entered the foot of the mountain. Tarek and Joe, despite being in the same area and above ground, did not feel the vibrations created by them, instead continuing to argue about whether or not that was the door to the Busby’s Tunnels ahead of them, or another disused entrance like the last four they had encountered and tried to open in vain.

The machine clunked more clunkily, the gears whirring at rates far beyond what they were originally designed to take. If it hadn’t been over-engineered, then it likely

would have given up now, dooming the duo to a slow death, presumably by suffocation. But alas, it kept whirring until there was nothing left to whirr upon. The nosecone drill broke through the surface of the ground, and smashed down to a halt as it toppled out of the hole. They got out of it, dazed, and impressed about the journey, and they let their eyes adjust to the light, which they had seen none of in the last few hours.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, they had emerged from their burrow in the middle of a disused tunnel, leading towards Busby's. Kalivas had fully rolled out of the capsule, letting his eyes adjust some more. Yet, there was nothing to adjust to, aside from a very dim orange light, occasionally flickering on and off.

"What was that?" shouted a high-pitched voice from one end of the tunnel.

"What was what?" shouted another, "I didn't hear anything."

"How could you not have heard that? It's like there's a bugbear down there." replied the first one.

"Oh yeah, sure. A bugbear. Nice way to scare me to death!"

Kalivas stood facing what he thought was the tunnel end and shouted "Guys! It's just me and my friend. We're Drydenites, trying to escape."

“Are you being persecuted for any reason?” said one.

“No, we just want to try and enlist as many people as we can to help stop Stockdale. He’s already taken over College.” said Ullathorne.

“Well that’s not hard.” said a voice. “College could be taken over by any old fool if they even lift a finger. Look, come with me, at least there’s not a bugbear, eh?” she said, flicking a switch and making the remainder of the lights in the tunnel turn on, harshly illuminating all five of them, including the bug beast which had suddenly appeared between the woman and the duo’s machine.

“Told you it was a bugbear.” said the man.

“You didn’t tell me anything about there being a bugbear.” said the woman, walking towards it, slowly, brandishing some kind of implement resembling both a mace and a hammer.

“Should we really be focusing on who told who what right now? Look at that thing, it’s huge.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s huge, that’s barely medium size at best.”

“Oh no, don’t start with this again. Are you going to try and record this one’s height so you can prove me wrong? Or I’ll just save myself the hassle and throw myself into its jaws instead.”

"I'll just kill this one anyway." said the woman, running at the bugbear, brandishing her 'ham-mace' and screeching at a pitch which briefly fell outside of Kalivas's hearing range and caused the bugbear to keel over in pain, almost recoiling at the noise. Ullathorne ducked as the bugbear's head went sailing down the tunnel, splattering red blood over the walls in such a way that would have made the 'pain'-ters of post-rebellion Rigaud's impressed beyond belief. As it splattered to the floor, the man walked over to it and picked it up.

"Want this one on the mantelpiece, eh, Farr?"

"No, I don't really think that's appropriate, especially next to all our other stuff."

"We can move the hell-hound head if you want to."

"No! That was our prized catch of the year! Took me half an hour to actually cut it off, too. This one was easy, look, you took its head clean off."

Kalivas and Ullathorne were both cowering behind the machine, moving further behind it as the blood pooled slightly, almost of its own will. Farr, and the man who had not yet identified himself, had walked to the middle of the corridor, and were now looking down on the two Drydenites. The man stuck out a gloved and armoured hand, and lifted Kalivas up.

“Hi, the name’s Curran. Pleased to meet you.”

“Kalivas. And if you don’t mind me asking, where the hell are we?” said Kalivas, flustered.

“Oh, we’re in the Busby’s tunnels,” said Curran, lifting Ullathorne up as well, “Well, at least they used to be the Busby’s tunnels. They were recently shut down for what the king calls ‘maintenance’, but somehow, maybe because of the complete lack of contact for five months, I don’t think that’s the case. We’ve been locked in, and we’ve had to survive down here, blocking up bugbear infested tunnels, eating only rations that have expired, and just generally trying not to die.”

Farr interjected, “Oh no, but it’s our job to do this sort of thing. We are Busby’s tour guides. I used to fly those balloon things that are all over the place now, but we got moved here about six months ago.” She paused, beckoning them all to start following her as she walked along. “Come, we’ll show you to our... um... base of operations. We should hurry, there might be more bugbears down here.”

They walked along a series of long, dimly lit corridors, some of which were boarded with wood and stone, others were just carved into the earth. As they turned another corner, the ‘base’ was in sight. What looked to be a tourist bureau had been de-renovated into what can only be described as ‘desperation’. Another woman sat in the corner, feverishly shaking as she emptied bags of sauce into a bowl, presumably for mixing with whatever

food they had left. However, the four onlookers were horrified as she drank the sauce, raw, on its own. There was a dead body in the corner, too.

“Welcome to our home for the last few months! And yes, there is no exit that we have found, as you can see up here on this map.” said Farr, pointing to a wall of complex interlinked lines, each ending in an increasingly angrily drawn cross. “We haven’t been able to do them all yet, not since Pyatt died.”

“I mean, he wouldn’t have died if he hadn’t tried to eat the bugbear.”

“Well, someone would have had to find that out at some point.”

“I wish it could have been Murphy sometimes.” said Curran, looking at Murphy, still feverishly eating sauce, muttering something about irony.

“Okay, let’s pick up some more supplies and then head for the next exit.” said Farr, with an air of optimism.

Curran smirked. “Next *possible* exit.”

Meanwhile, Joe and Tarek were still standing outside the fifth hatch they had encountered, attempting to open the hatch. Snow was falling, but never making contact with the ground. Joe was using the metal handle they had wrenched off the previous hatch in an attempt to wedge this one open, while Tarek stood open-mouthed,

incredulous of the falling white powder which rained from above. It tasted of nothing, and melted into nothing, and it needed a name to fit this almost nothing-y existence. Silence. Nothing. Stop. None. No. Snow.

Snow.

What a wonderful thing it was.

XIV - Rowing

“Okay, we’re almost there.” shouted the cox, who’s voice was tired from incessant screaming for more power, “Once we get there, we’ll have won, and then we can head back to Liddell’s to celebrate.”

The eight rowers kept pushing on, despite the fact they had already rowed almost the entire length of the river which stretched all the way from the sea, past Haklyut’s and Liddell’s, and all the way inland to Dryden. Somehow, no one from Dryden had chosen to venture in the direction that led them to water, perhaps by chance, more likely it was due to the fact that a series of large sand dunes blocked the view of the sea to any Drydenite. However, Hartley had chosen to ignore these obvious warning signs in favour of getting as far away from Dryden as possible. He had initially self-protested because of the serious effort of having to walk up a sand dune, and the risk of having to slide down one, but something in him had persisted, determination still unwavering despite the lack of food and water. Somehow, unlike other Drydenites, he had proved himself to be an excellent climber, and he had scouted out surprisingly safe routes. Lingered underneath the enthusiasm which he had for leaving Dryden behind, there was a slight resentment of the fact he had left everything he had ever seen behind, only to try and topple the regime that offered them housing, food, and plenty of time to relax in-between teaching sessions.

Besides, the teaching had gotten a lot simpler since Stockdale had cut the syllabus heavily last week.

The sea came into view as they went over the final dune, which slowly slumped into the sea in a graceful way, curving gently into a soft, sandy beach. Not that he knew what a beach was, let alone an ocean.

“Is this all water?” thought Hartley, out loud.

It was beautiful, and very much unlike anything he had ever seen. He saw a boat on the water, reflected in the gentle ripples that the oars dug out, and a gentle shouting sound, rounded by distance, rolled up the hill. There was also a small group of people sitting on a wooden pontoon that was floating off shore, waiting for the boat to come in, in order to record its finishing time in the course.

Nirav and the rest of the rowers continued to power on, realising that if they expended their last remaining bit of energy now, they could pass out on the shoreline, thus saving at least a few precious seconds on their ten-hour voyage. The lactic acid began to build up in their muscles, and wheezing and the occasional cough spread, all while the cox almost passed out from screaming at them, continuing to motivate them, not by normal means, but by fear. Now, as the cox was little more than four foot tall, and with weight near enough single digit numbers, he was not a force to be reckoned with. But somehow, sat upon the stern of the boat, he was the strongest out of the nine, at least vocally.

Hartley had reached the water's edge, and decided to keep walking to see what it was like. He sank further and further into the sea, wading deeper and deeper as she became slower, encumbered by the weight of his clothes dragging in water.

His brain caught up with him, and began to revel in the strange feeling of being submerged in something he couldn't see. However, he recoiled quickly, thinking that the water may have been poisoned by Wren, and that maybe they were inside the Wrenite border, and that everything was rigged to kill him.

"Am I dead yet?" he thought. "I don't want to die yet."

He waded back out and started walking away from the shore, getting faster and faster, pointing towards the rowing boat which approached the shoreline, thinking "They're coming to attack me! Run! They're going to get out and kill me! Look at their spears that they're going to kill me with! Run!" He tripped over a root in the sand and screamed once more, saying it was a trap that he had activated.

He told himself to calm down, as he was sure once they get closer to him, they'll realise he has the power of Ducc on his side, and leave. He got up, and tried to rip the root out of the sand in a slight burst of anger. It didn't dislodge.

The boat passed the finish line, and the pontoon marked their finishing time, and cheered as they slid to a halt on the glassy flat lake.

“Well, that was pretty good for a newcomer.” said the cox, pointing at Nirav. “You’ve got a career here. Now go and have a rest!” he said, causing all of the rowers to slump out of the boat into the lake, floating on their backs, relaxing.

“They’re bathing in the Wren water. Clearly it gives them some kind of power.” thought Hartley. “Okay, don’t worry, I’ve got a copy of the original, untampered-with Ducc scripts. Before Stockdale corrupted it.” He got the scroll out of a bag he was carrying, and then started reading from it.

“Yo, Nirav, what is that guy doing?” said one of the rowers, floating next to him, looking up at the increasingly irate man who was reciting strange tales of a Ducc on the shoreline.

“Is that... Hartley?” said Nirav, standing up in the water. “Hartley! It’s me, Nirav!”

“Don’t talk to me, weak student!” shouted Hartley, recounting more tales. “You are the only defector out of all my students!”

“No, look, I’m still a Drydenite. I believe in Ducc as much as you do. There’s nothing about me that’s changed, well, sort of. I haven’t even been to Wren!”

“I don’t believe you.” said Hartley.

“It’s me. I promise. You can come with me to Liddell’s and we can-”

Hartley began chanting, “Weak student! Weak student!” in a strange, non-rhythmic way. “You don’t believe in Ducc and therefore you are a weak student!”

The rowers slowly stood up out of the water, one by one, telling Hartley to shut up, which didn’t exactly help Nirav prove his point.

“Hartley! I have my Ducc here!” said Nirav, wading back in the water to remove his ducc from the boat, and held it high for Hartley to see. Upon seeing this, Hartley immediately stopped shouting. As if nothing had happened, he started introducing himself to the other rowers, and called the other two teachers over to greet everyone.

“Aren’t you going to apologise for shouting at them?” Nirav asked Hartley.

“Oh yes, I suppose I should get to that later.” he said. “Hi, my name’s Hartley, I’m a Drydenite. Biology teacher.” he continued, immediately turning away from Nirav to introduce himself to the remaining rowers.

“So, how is Dryden?” asked Nirav, expecting some kind of response, or even a dismissal. Yet, he was not

fortunate enough to receive either of those from Hartley, who was shaking hands, re-introducing himself to everyone, despite the fact they had probably heard his introduction already. The clouds that had blocked Hartley's charisma from shining through had parted, much to the dismay of the now-ignored Nirav.

Once Hartley had made his rounds, he started asking the rowers questions about what they did, and how Nirav was getting along. Despite not including him in much of the conversation, he spoke very highly of Nirav, in a way that he had never spoken of a student before.

"Look, I'm just happy to be away from Dryden for once in my life. I've never been outside Dryden ever before! Can you believe that?" said Hartley, expecting a unanimous 'no', but getting a confused 'yes'.

"I just hope I can find somewhere to live." he continued.

"So why don't you come with us? We'll get our other boat from College, and in a few days time we can row all the way back to Liddell's. I'm sure they'll have room there." said the cox, who was just about able to stand up in the water. "But in the meantime, let's get our celebratory crate!" The rowers cheered and began to swim over to the wooden hut to feast and drink, as was to be expected from them.

All this time, Nirav had been silently celebrating finding someone else he knew outside of Dryden. It meant that they could reunite, and use their belief in Ducc to take

down Stockdale and his corrupt views. He swam up to Hartley, who was being pushed to the hut in the boat, so as to not get wet, and asked if he knew if anyone else was escaping, or at least trying to.

“I think Kalivas and Ullathorne developed a plan to get out. But I’m not sure if they really need it, I mean, I just walked out of Dryden, no problem. Broad daylight. No idea why no one came after us.” said Hartley. “Actually, maybe that’s because most of the population is over in Wren, occupying it.”

“Wait, they took over Wren?” asked Nirav, amazed that they had got so far past College. The conversation continued, as Hartley told Nirav second-hand stories of the new Drydenite occupation, although he tried to distance himself from the Stockdale-following Drydenites, instead referring to them as ‘impure and extremist Duccists’.

The conversation turned to life outside the small confines of the boundary, and Nirav talked about Joe and Tarek, and where they presumably were by now, recounting the stories of College and Grants, and the fact they had seen things which the Drydenites had never seen anything like before.

“Oh, I think they’ll be nearing Busby’s now. They said they were going there in order to recruit the Busbite King or something, so that they could... stop Stockdale? I think that’s what the plan was. I’m sure Busby’s’ll be

cool, I heard a lot about it from the rowers. They say it's a good time." said Nirav.

"It was a good time." said the cox. "Was. There's been a few changes recently which seem odd. The king was such a bright and cheery guy, so his decision to stop the balloons was uncharacteristic. How are they going to make their money if they stop people coming in?"

"I think there's something going on with that Page guy. Ever since he left, way before Phil left. He said he wanted to go into politics or something. Wanted to try and run for Busbite president." said another rower.

"He'd just get distracted in Busby's. There's so much to do there, he'd never get around to applying to vote, let alone running for president. And anyway, who would vote for a washed-up ex-rowing coach?" said another.

"He wasn't washed up in the slightest. We just treated him badly because he was unorthodox." said the first.

"Unorthodox? I'm sure you mean old-fashioned. There's a reason why we keep getting new, younger people." said the cox.

The first butted in again. "But you're getting old now, and every one of us will get old. Don't get angry with him, it's not his fault."

"Death comes to us all." said one of the more drunk rowers, already inebriated on whatever unintentionally

aged wine he found in the large chest inside the hut. The conversation swiftly moved on to less serious topics after that.

Nirav and the rowers told the newly free Hartley about the vast world that was out there, and as they slowly grew tired, the rowers exited the hut, and lay down on the sandy shoreline, using their boat as a bed for some of them, the others sleeping in the offshore hut. At the same time, Joe and Tarek were desperately trying to sleep, the snow now blasting into the side of their makeshift tent, which was beginning to dampen as more and more snow melted through, with one of the walls of their enclosed space being the rusty door they had tried and to open for hours. Neither of them spoke, due to residual anger over the opposing methods they had had to open the door, and also due to not wanting to waste precious energy on speaking, energy which could be spent on keeping themselves warm.

XV - Entrance

“Alright, Curran. The only doorway we haven’t checked yet is along here. Oh, Kalivas, what time of day do you think it is? We don’t have any clocks down here.” said Farr, leading the group along, ham-mace wielded firmly.

“I think it’s about midday.” said Ullathorne. “It’s only been a few hours since we got here, and we left very early in the morning when we got the tunnelling machine.” The group walked along in silence for a minute or two before Ullathorne came to a realisation.

“Why didn’t we use the tunnelling machine to get out of here?” he said.

“Oh, it was broken when we got out of it. Must have just used its last bit of power coming up through the concrete. Plus, even if we could use it again, it would only take two of us out. And crawling through the tunnel isn’t really an option, because it won’t be able to dig through rock that’s solid enough to leave a tunnel behind it. And it’s pretty much laying height, so not even Farr would be able to crawl through.” said Kalivas.

“I’m sure we could have used it on one of the jammed doors.” said Curran. “I think this door will put us on the wrong side of the mountain to get back to Busby’s, but at least we’ll be outside.”

“No, the doors are metal. There’s nothing to catch on. We could use it as a battering ram, but you’ve already got one of those.” said Kalivas.

“A metal pole strapped to a Busby’s Balloons drinks cart does not really carry the same momentum as the tunnelling thing.” said Curran. “Look, there’s the door, right there. Check the map, Farr, just make sure this is the right place.”

“I think we’re here. And this door doesn’t look as gummed up as the last one, so maybe we won’t need the cart battering ram.” said Farr, looking over to Murphy, who had been pushing the cart along for the whole multiple-hour long walk. Murphy let out a small sigh, and a small dribble of sauce returned from the depths of her mouth, in a way that made the four others recoil in second-hand embarrassment. The metal wheels of the cart rattled heavier as the mountainside debris that had piled up inside the tunnel became more and more coarse, and eventually, Murphy was forced to abandon the cart.

“Okay, everybody. We just have to push on this handle, like the other times, and hopefully, due to the relatively low amount of rust on this side, we might actually be able to wrench this one open without having to go back for more supplies. Don’t want to have to waste another day and go back to sleep.” said Curran, bracing himself against the door handle, ready to wrench. He pushed down with all the force he could muster, and the door came unlocked almost immediately, sending Curran

falling right on to the ground, briefly screaming. He straightened himself up, looked towards the rest of the group, and while dusting himself off, he said “I think we might be in luck, everybody.”

He pushed on the door once, and it momentarily went outwards before going back in. Curran stood back from the door, looking at the other four as if to say, ‘come on, I can’t do this alone’, and as the small wave of guilt swept over the rocks below them, they trudged forwards. Joe and Tarek were currently panicking on the other side of the door, wondering what just gave one bash on the door and then screamed so strangely. Surely only an animal could do such a thing?

Their newly formed notions of what the inside could hold were shattered once Curran came flying out of the door, landing on top of Joe, after having pushed far too hard, rolling over in the confines of the makeshift tent. Tarek screamed, and stood up, pulling the tent off of its fixings, letting it fly into his face, and when he clawed it off, into the wind, never to be seen again. Joe was rubbing the back of his head due to the impact with Curran, and Farr was looking out incredulously, but not as much as Ullathorne and Kalivas, who were both astounded that another set of Drydenites had escaped and survived for this long. Curran got to his feet and looked around, while Kalivas stepped closer to the door.

“Tarek! Joe!” shouted Kalivas, “Come inside! How have you guys made it here?” Joe was still stunned, but walked inside of his own accord, still rubbing his head. Tarek walked inside, shivering from the cold, trying to

muster up the energy to speak in-between onsets of freezing up his jaw. Eventually, he managed to spit out, “Fine, you?”, which wasn’t really the answer that Kalivas was looking for, but to be honest, he had stopped caring at least ten seconds ago. At least he was proving he could make small talk while on the verge of hypothermia, which wasn’t something many people have, or have had to prove.

“We walked here via a few other places, College, Grants, and now we’re here, and we might have frozen to death due to the lack of heat up here.” said Joe.

“What’s this white stuff though?” asked Ullathorne. “I’ve never seen anything like it, it’s like rain, but soft.”

“Snow.” said Tarek and Curran at the same time, with Tarek not really registering that he had inadvertently invented the correct name using the complete wrong etymology.

“I’m sorry, who are these people?” asked Curran, closing the door behind him, stopping the wind from chilling the tunnels down even further.

Kalivas patted Tarek on the shoulder. “This here is Tarek, one of my best students, and the first one to leave Dryden once it went a little weird. I’ve mentioned the Stockdale guy before, right?” Curran and Farr nodded, waiting for Kalivas to explain Joe. “So what about the other kid? You know him?” asked Curran.

“Oh no, he’s Tarek’s plus-one on his adventure. At least, I think.” said Kalivas, looking at Joe, meaning for him to continue the explanation.

“Oh, yes, um... I’m a College citizen, and I just wanted something to do while my holiday was going along. But somehow I don’t think I’ll be back in time.” said Joe, looking back at Kalivas.

Ullathorne suddenly asked, “I’m sure your holiday doesn’t matter any more. Apparently College has been taken over by the Drydenites.” He paused for a second. “I have no idea, just trust me. It’s the kind of thing they’d just do somehow.”

“It’s not midday. It’s midnight, Kalivas.” said Curran.

“Well, I’m just happy that you’re alive, Tarek. I thought the Drydenites would have found you and killed you.” said Kalivas, ignoring Curran.

“Well, only Nirav found me in the desert, the others must have gone back as soon as night fell.” said Tarek. “I’m sure at least one of them is still out there, lost. It seems to be a thing with us Drydenites, we’re not good in the desert, despite living our entire lives in it.”

“Hey, can we cut the chat? It’s getting very cold in here, there must be some other open tunnel somewhere near. I’m sure you want to be warm, right Joe?” said Farr. “Oh, and Murphy, please try and fix the trolley next time. The squeaking is driving me insane.”

The seven of them walked on slowly through the tunnels, and Kalivas recounted the recounting of the College takeover to Tarek. He had been told it early, since Stockdale thought he could be trusted after the incident which caused him to lose an arm. The fear of perhaps losing another appendage should have kept him firmly in line, but in the days after which he had lost his arm, Ullathorne and the other three teachers had tried to console him, and in doing so, had learnt the real reason behind his loss of limbs. They wanted to avenge their friend, despite him still being alive, and all that they knew that the message of Stockdale's Ducc being a force for evil had to get out faster than the message itself.

Joe was vaguely left out of this, due to Tarek being engrossed in conversation with his teachers, recounting his own personal tales, and obviously exaggerating the part he played in putting the Grant's fire out. And so, as he was accustomed to doing in times of severe boredom, he began writing in his book. At first, he wrote by balancing the book on his arm, but then he tried placing it on the trolley so it would be more stable. Murphy, however, hissed at him whenever he did this, for whatever reason she had. Not that she could articulate her reasons very well. Joe noted that Farr and Curran were engrossed in conversation about the tunnels, and how the entrance that they had found had been on the wrong side of the mountain. Tarek was also trying to convince all four of them to come along with him to try and talk to the Busbite King, Botton.

“But there’s definitely something up with the Busbite king. He hasn’t sent us any messages for days, and the tunnels have been shut off. We’re basically sitting ducks here, just waiting to either find an exit or die.” said Curran.

“But we’ve already found an exit.” said Ullathorne. “Why didn’t we just go out there and walk around the mountain?”

Curran stopped and sighed. “Well, you saw how horrible the conditions were outside the door, didn’t you? It’s just not possible to make it round the mountain, even if we wanted to. We would die, alright?”

The group walked along in silence for a few minutes, shocked at Curran’s small irate outburst. He had moved to the front of the group, and was switching the lights on as he walked down the tunnels, until they came to a section of tunnel in which the lights didn’t work. Curran switched them on and off a few times, and just as Kalivas reached out to try and say something to help Curran fix the light, a large spark flashed through Curran’s arm, and all the lights in all the tunnels around them went out.

“Has anyone got a light?” asked Kalivas, only to be met with an ear-piercing screech, the sound of a bugbear realising they were there. Farr screamed back, saying something had caught her leg, and Curran got out a knife from his belt, and asked Farr to try and move the creature towards him, so he could get a good stab at it.

As Curran wound up his arm, the creature mumbled something about a bugbear, and thus revealed itself to be human, likely Murphy. Farr shouted at Murphy, and she let go of Farr's leg, but as soon as she did, her mumbling became more distant, and the sound of her body being dragged along the floor became apparent.

Kalivas lowered his voice. "Alright, how do we fix the light so we can at least fend off that thing?"

The beast screamed once more, making all six of the remaining people move back, and as Murphy's screaming became louder and louder, drowning out the already loud bugbear, Kalivas began to walk over to the last place he had seen the light switch. Bumping into a wall, he began to shuffle around it, touching all the surfaces to make sure it was around there.

Farr, however, had already found her way back over to the light switch by pure chance, and had her hand over the switch. "Should I press it?" she asked, not expecting anyone to try and stop her. Curran, however, who was still feeling the effects of the spark, said that the current would still likely be live. Curran has also lapsed into a state of inactivity, nursing his arm, leaning against a wall.

Farr moved further along the wall, and bumped into Kalivas, who she thought was a bugbear sneaking up on them, and she fell back along the wall, hitting the switch-box and breaking the switch inside. A short circuit caused a high-voltage arc of light to form between the

two contacts, illuminating the area around them, revealing a bemused Kalivas, and behind him, an actual bugbear, which began screaming as loud as Farr had started screaming. A chain reaction of screaming had gone around the group, and Ullathorne took Curran's knife and plunged it into the head of the bugbear, in an action which felt quite like anything he had ever done before. He stood there, paralysed by his own action, watching as the bugbear, which was easily his height, collapsed and fell. It had died of his own doing, and the others had presumably survived because of his quick action. Curran was still paralysed from fear, as were Joe and Tarek, and Farr was most likely unconscious from her head hitting the switch box. So even though the bugbear was dead, it didn't exactly mean the situation was over for anyone.

And then, the switch melted, and the arc disappeared, plunging them all into darkness, only ten seconds after it had appeared.

"Well everybody, let's try and get out of here." said Kalivas, calmly, but only calmly in a way that conveyed the terror he had overcome while killing the bugbear in such a way. "I'm sure you want to get out of here, too?"

Curran sighed. "I'll go and look for Murphy, but since Farr is unconscious, I'll need at least one other person with even the slightest bit of worldliness in them. Or just experience. So Joe, you're coming with me for now. Just down the tunnel, don't worry, you're just backup. You don't have to stab any bugbears. At least I hope not."

“Well.” said Kalivas. “Should we just stay here?”

“Oh no, you can find your way back. The lights leading back to the base have got a little bit of red paint on them.” said Curran.

Joe looked at the light. “Are you sure this isn’t just Farr’s blood?”

“Well this one may be.” said Curran, walking down a tunnel, leading Joe on. “But the next one isn’t. Just go along now, Kalivas.”

The backup power flickered the lights on, producing a monotonous hum, which was a low noise by all means, but its muffled tone eventually became like a sharp screeching, a clawing at the eardrums for each and every one of them, except Farr, who was actually unconscious. They loaded her on to the trolley after removing the metal pole on top, and began to cart her back towards the base of operations, lead by only the red painted lights.

Tarek, already having had his fair share of near-death experiences, decided to sit this one out, instead choosing to be alone with his thoughts, which helped drown out the noise. He was there in body, but not in spirit. He almost wished he could be in Dryden, oblivious to all that had happened, being happy, celebrating their festivals. He wanted to believe in Ducc again, but

nothing ever gave him the chance to. No more miracles. No more sights. No more Ducc.

Kalivas had always been a weak believer in Ducc, and Tarek sometimes mentioned it in their lessons. Every time he had brought it up, Kalivas always seemed nervous. Uneasy about being questioned, about going against the grain of virtually everybody else in the town. Yet he still went to all the events. He was one of the most consistent attendees to feasts and bonfires, to everyone's recitals, and outwardly appeared a firm believer in the Ducc world. And now, now he had stepped outside the circle, Tarek thought he would have thrown his shackles off and said what he wanted to say, but this hadn't been the case so far. Tarek saw Kalivas walk along, with his bloodstained shirt and heavy head, and wondered how he must have been feeling, alone with his thoughts. Tarek picked up his pace a little bit to be beside Kalivas, and as he did so, he saw a contorted expression on Kalivas's face. An expression that felt like it had the power to scream a thousand screams, yet was not able to do so, due to the guilt which appeared to hang around every part of him.

Tarek moved closer to Kalivas. "Are you okay?"

"I honestly didn't think I would end up having to do this. Any of this. Not even walking outside the border."

"This?"

“All that I’ve had to do. Right back to sitting behind his house, listening to what he had to say. I listened to him in that house before, and I believed what he said. He taught me a lot of what I taught you, and Ducc.”

“Stockdale, right?”

“Yeah. When I was first getting into teaching, he arrived, and as a town, we welcomed him with open arms. We’d never received a visitor before, as we’re quite a small town. Well, he said we were quite a small town compared to the others. Oh Ducc, I believed him when he said that, too? What else did he say that I just blindly took on? What else?” said Kalivas, starting to cry.

Ullathorne, the current leader of the group, decided to slow down his pushing of Farr, and allow Tarek and Kalivas to have their conversation further away from all the others. He walked closer at first, but when Kalivas turned to him, he knew that this was not his conversation to have, at least not now. So for now he trailed just a bit behind, listening as they went along.

“So Stockdale was a Wrenite missionary. I knew it.” said Tarek.

“Oh yes, Stockdale is from Wren. Well, at least that’s what he said. But why would he criticise Wren so much in Ducc?”

“I have no idea.”

“Look, I always thought he just had a charm. He came at a bad time for Dryden, and then the rains just came, and he grew crops, and then he... just... he just built us up from the ground. And we were desperate for an answer, and he gave us Ducc. These scrolls that he had found, and gave us. They had given us hope, and then once we had accepted them, he began to find more and more scrolls. They kept bringing us fortune, food galore. Then the restrictions came. Sometimes he would go for a day or two, and he said he had just been out raking the border. I saw equipment which came from far away lands arrive in his house. He kept us in a circle for our own good, but that was just for his good. So we didn’t realise that we were being boiled alive.”

“So he invented Ducc to try and keep us under while he built power for himself?”

“No, he didn’t invent Ducc. He just corrupted its message. And that bit doesn’t make sense! He was such a nice man, he used to give us knowledge which we couldn’t have gotten ourselves. How did we know that the mitochondria was the powerhouse of the cell? He told us, and he told us lots of other things like that, facts to keep us sated, to keep the lies covered up. We treated everything he said as gospel because most of it was. But like a razor blade in an apple, he got it past us. Until we were too docile to do anything about it.”

“But he must have invented Ducc too, right? You haven’t got proof of Ducc, or anything like it.”

“But... if he... if he did that... then...”

Kalivas paused for a minute, and took his arm out from behind him.

“You see this. This is a wooden arm. I have a wooden arm because he ordered it to be taken off. All because I was concerned about his web of lies. I wanted him to keep telling everyone these things, because he was giving us all hope. He taught me to teach. He was wise beyond everybody’s years. I loved him, and all that he did for us. I just wanted him to stop corrupting Ducc. I wanted it to always be how it was. Just the plain old Ducc. But now I see that that’s just another thing he said. Everything he said, I had to trust him and let him tell me. And I thought I knew where the boundary of corruption lied. And now my head is filled with fake facts and a fake Ducc to go with it.”

“But the facts aren’t fake.” said Tarek.

“How do *you* know? *You* haven’t got any proof, or anything like *that* either! You can’t accept anything from him!”

“But you can’t discredit it all... I mean...”

“That’s right, we’ve been lied to our whole lives.”

“But what about all the nice things he did for us? The houses, the pipelines? Surely there must be a tiny bit of goodness in him?”

“I have no idea what to think. I have no idea of what to think about anything anymore. I’ll just forget it all and bash my head against this wall to help the forgetting.”

Kalivas walked over to the wall, and the group stopped around him, waiting for him to continue. “I have no idea of what to say. He killed Boris. He killed Reverend Hall for speaking up against his reform plan. He killed Reverend Williams for trying to stop him from changing the Ducc Scripts. He made us all fat, and lazy, and unwilling to do anything about it because he was so nice on the outside. We overlooked why Hall, a man never before ailed by illness in even the slightest way, just fell over and died one day. Never did we question anything he told us. Never. Not once. And I don’t think I can take that.”

Tarek moved forwards, and as Kalivas wound his head back, preparing to slam it into the wall in a futile attempt to rid himself of Stockdale’s influence, Tarek grabbed his arm.

“No! Even if you have been lied to your entire life, then you can just learn more things, right? You can learn the truth of the world from others who want to help you!”

“But what about all the Drydenites I’ve taught? They will sit in their bubble, all innocent and not corrupted by the world beyond them, and yet so corrupted by the world they live in. The bubble stagnates, and grows old. Stockdale lives on, and continues to corrupt everyone. To

lie, but then to cover up his tracks so well that I suspect no one will notice for years to come. And no one noticed for years before me, either. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who was close enough to him to be able to see his lies, but far enough to live to tell the tale. All those years spent preaching his words. It's enough to make me want to... want to die." said Kalivas, tearing up, resting his head against the wall, on top of his arm. "There's no point anymore, I can't unlearn anything he's taught us."

"But you could go back and free everyone else from him."

"But how? There's only one of me and at least a thousand other Drydenites. They're even more set in their ways than I was. There is no hope."

"But you made it out alive."

"Once, maybe. But going back in, saving everyone and going back out again? Impossible. I'd die, and nothing would happen, and if I told anyone about the truth behind their lives and then died, then they would become more disheartened than I am right now. And I don't want to put false hope in anyone."

"But it wouldn't be false hope, exactly, you'd be telling them what Stockdale refused to tell them - the truth."

"It's not quite the same. Maybe I should just live in Busby's or whatever and let Stockdale do whatever he wants."

“But you can’t just give up on those people. Any message at all you could give to them would give them so much hope.”

“I can’t give them anything.”

Ullathorne stepped forward. “You know those balloons they were talking about?”

“I... yes. But what does that have to do with Stockdale?”

“You could drop pamphlets off of them. You could tell people that Ducc commands them to follow him, and that the scriptures have never changed.” said Ullathorne.

“But they wouldn’t know what the original, unaltered scripts were. Not that that even matters, because Stockdale told us about Ducc to start with.”

The three of them, just a moment ago contemplating giving up entirely, were now hunched over the trolley, Farr still dead asleep in the centre, discussing ways to make the Drydenites give up their Stockdale-obsessed ways.

Tarek took a step back. “Alright, hear me out. Ducc is not going anywhere in Dryden, pretty much nothing except one on one conversations can convince anyone, so we’ll do something different. Instead of getting rid of Ducc, let’s replace it with something better.”

“Like what?” said Kalivas, intrigued but skeptical.

“I don’t know, what’s kind of similar to ducks but not quite?” said Ullathorne.

“Geese?” said Tarek.

“What’s a geese?” said Kalivas. “Oh, yeah. It’s like a small duck, right? Stockdale told us about them.”

“Oh no, they’re much bigger. I saw some around the base of the mountain we’re in right now. Big, vicious things.” said Tarek.

Kalivas de-hunched himself. “So we can’t trust everything Stockdale says, can we?”

“Alright, fine. But still, we need to find a name for this thing.” said Tarek, beginning to pace up and down the tunnel.

“What about the quack of a duck? We could make quacking noises from the balloon. I’m sure the Drydenites would be so freaked out they’d believe in a quacking balloon.” said Kalivas.

“And stylise the name like Ducc, with two c’s.” said Ullathorne, laughing gently. “For added effect or something like that.”

“Sure. And what else, other than the posters, should we drop from the balloons?” said Tarek.

“I think we’re getting too ahead of ourselves here.” said Kalivas. “We’ll get to that later. But we need to actually get out of these tunnels, and then actually get a balloon. Do you know if they cost anything, Tarek?”

“Lots. Several times what Joe had.”

“Do you have anything in that bag that you could sell?” asked Ullathorne.

“Oh, there’s this rock that kills things.” said Tarek. “But I might keep hold of that for now.”

“Well, we’ll take it and see how much it’s worth.” said Ullathorne.

“The guy who sold it to me said that it was worth more than anything. More than money.”

“So it’s worth a lot of money.” said Kalivas. “That, or it’s worthless. So are you going to sell it or not?”

“Hey guys, let’s sort this out later. Getting to the base should be our number one priority.” said Ullathorne.

Just at that moment, Joe and Curran came walking round a corner near them.

“Don’t ask what happened back there.” said Curran, Joe looking visibly shaken. “Let’s say that we know where Murphy is now.”

“But?” said Kalivas.

“We don’t want to go back there.” said Joe.

“Well, onwards it is.” said Ullathorne.

“Indeed it is.” said Kalivas, turning away from Joe and Curran, leading Tarek and Ullathorne, who were pushing Farr along.

“We’re almost there, anyway.” said Curran.

Not quite XVI - Interlude IV

Stockdale looked out from his podium, ready to speak to the people of Dryden, who were cheering, ready and waiting to hear the confirmation of the rumours of a Wrenite loss. They had been waiting for this speech for half an hour, just after another feast.

“Drydenites! Let us call upon Ducc for helping us in these hard times, and celebrate the power he has given us. Power to conquer a Wrenite outpost, that is. We need to go forward, far and fast. We need to spread our message of Ducc all over the lands. Lands that have not been touched by Drydenites, or the message of Ducc. And we should take over these lands, for the good of the people in them, and the good of the people here today. And we love Ducc, and he loves us.”

The people celebrated in the street of Dryden, and began celebrating their new victory, which many of them thought would be the first of many. However, the reality was far from the ‘truth’ of Stockdale’s speech. Instead of finding College, the Drydenites had set up a fake camp disguised as College, as to not fail their mission and anger Ducc and Stockdale.

Hawken was the leader of this strange Drydenite camp, located further away from College than Dryden itself. After failing to even find College a second time, they sent back messengers who told Stockdale about the takeover, and then, they proceeded to get lost in the desert, just as

all Drydenites seem to have to do at least once. The camp was constructed with materials taken from a forest about five hours walk from the base, and despite everybody's best interests, Hawken refused to just move the camp closer to the forest, due to the fact it was 'just fine right here' and 'scenic'.

Stockdale entered his house again, which had been extended and a second floor added to it, which did creak ever so slightly due to the fact Kalivas and Ullathorne hadn't been there to engineer it. The upper floor was mainly dedicated to parts of the Ducc script which he was creating, and creating the core stages of the Ducculum. This was a room that proved Stockdale to be playing the longest game possible. World domination, child indoctrination. All the hallmarks of a full-blown cult were beginning to shape up in that room, and now all of the opposition, however quiet, had dissipated. Everyone who had ever been told about the altering of the Ducc scripts had gone, and erased all hope for the innocent, yet willing to kill remaining Drydenites.

Hawken was nervous, deep inside. He felt he was doing a disservice to Ducc, and all the people who followed Ducc, too. He was in too deep with his mistakes at this point, and almost wanted to admit to his mistakes by walking back to Dryden and confronting Stockdale. So in the evening, as the campfire was being lit after having spent all day gathering food and wood, Hawken announced they would be returning to Dryden to admit their failure. Most of the people didn't realise that they were failing, in fact, most of the people hadn't even been

told what their mission was. They began to self-doubt, and the doubt grew worse and worse throughout the night.

They decided to walk the following morning, in the direction they thought they came. As they walked throughout the day, the storm which had ravaged the Busby's mountains came hurtling towards them, and Dryden too. But that didn't matter, since they had no idea where they were. Lost in the desert, with no hope of recovery, and no trees to even consider building a campsite, they were doomed, presumably to death. And so they began praying to Ducc, the very same entity which had commanded them to come out here, to stop the storm. They kept praying to Ducc for longer and longer, until they lost hope throughout the day, and then the evening came.

Hawken decided to compliment Ducc on an attribute that prayer usually overlooked, the quack of his voice. The storm began to stop, very quickly, as if Ducc was pleased with someone finally bringing his quack up, and the sand began to lose momentum, and it began to be less and less painful as time went on. The storm parted, and as visibility became clearer and clearer, their wandering had inadvertently led them to College, their intended destination.

And after a short speech to rouse morale once more, Hawken gathered the thirty or so people in the group and declared Quacc the logical successor to Ducc, after Ducc had so callously abandoned them in the desert.

And what better time to test out their new found deity than to secede from Ducc and Stockdale, and try and conquer College for themselves. The routines for the people of College that they had dreamed up over the past few days would soon become a reality.

To Quacc would go the spoils of this new conquest.

Ducc is dead, long live Quacc.

XVI - Quacc

“Alright everyone, are we all ready to please Quacc with what we are about to do?” said Hawken, atop a small wooden box, just slightly overlooking his thirty or so followers. Most of the people in the group responded with enthusiasm, but some responded with itching rage, as if they were ready to tear College to pieces. Hawken smiled at this reaction, “And I see you are ready. Now, don’t go overboard, but if it’s anything as easy as when we told Stockdale how we did it, it’ll be a piece of Quacc-shaped cake.”

Another round of cheering erupted, provoking some heads on the border wall of College to turn. One of these heads was Sword, who was walking around, looking for someone else to talk to in place of Joe, who had abandoned him after Joe said that he just ‘wanted some fresh air’, and went out for a walk, forever. Sword was still pretty angry about that, so he had spent most of his time in College talking to the only two people who would talk back, Norm and the lady from the immigration office. Neither of which were the best when it came to conversation, but he was willing to put up with it when the only alternative was having to eat his meals alone. So when he saw the Drydenites outside, with their typical Drydenite nature of screaming and not really being prepared for any real danger, he ran down the stairs to the closest gate, wanting to try and accommodate them, and maybe make some friends.

“Groups one, two and three will take the main gate, and the other groups will stop people from exiting from the other gates. Once all the exits are on lockdown, the remaining people can come into the city centre, and from there we can find their town hall, and go in, and hopefully the king will resign.”

One of the people chirped up. “But they don’t have a king.”

“Well, yes whatever. Just threaten everyone you see. Together, we can do this.” said Hawken, looking over the group as an individual came running towards them, which was precisely the opposite reaction he wanted.

“Hello Drydenites!” screamed Sword, running along the sand. “Don’t worry! I’m safe, I couldn’t kill you even if I wanted to!” He laughed, slowing to a walk as the group began to turn and face him. His laughter quickly dissipated into nothing as the Drydenites stared him down.

“Uh... hi, my name is Sword, and I love Ducc, Drydenites. I know you guys do too. Ducc is great. Yeah. Love him.”

The Drydenites continued to stare. “Look, kid, we don’t do Ducc anymore. We’re Quaccists, and we think Duccists chose to abandon us to die out here in this desert. So we’re claiming this kingdom for Quacc. And I’m assuming you lot are just pretending to be Duccists, as you’re Wrenites.”

Sword stood there, speechless. “Well, that’s not exactly-”

“Go! Get them all! Do our plan!” shouted Hawken, not caring that Sword would likely get trampled upon. When the crowd parted around Sword to head towards College, Hawken stopped Sword from running away by grabbing his collar.

Hawken turned Sword around to face him. “Don’t get in our way, okay? You get me? And from today, you’re a Quaccist. Boom. You’re now officially a Quaccist. Just made you one.”

“How exactly did you do that?” asked Sword, moments before being pushed to the ground by Hawken, who was already running by the time Sword could look up again. He wished he hadn’t asked.

The group system fell to pieces almost immediately, as most of the Quaccists had forgotten which one they were in, and so the front gate was crowded by their clumsy shrieking and mishandling of weapons. The first injury from this attack came from an accidental bumping of a sword into the wielder’s friend’s back, caused by their complete lack of handle discipline, and also regular discipline. But then again, that came naturally to most Drydenites, and might not actually be a disadvantage in this scenario. Regardless of their complete lack of self-control, they pushed on and on, fighting their way through the town. Despite the little resistance that the College people put up, they managed to prolong the invasion for a surprising amount of time, mainly by

simply existing. The Quaccist Drydenites, not knowing how to deal with such threats as buildings more than one story tall and the movement of market traders' wagons, decided to stay near the exits, claiming that if no one can leave, then they have essentially lost and should immediately surrender.

However, Mann, the leader of College, had a different plan. He would simply give the Quaccists what they wanted, and thus hand over the running of College to them. He stepped out upon the balcony overlooking the town square, and demanded that the leader of the invading tribe come and see him.

"I promise I will give you your demands. I know what you want," said Mann, proudly and slightly too enthusiastically. "Your people want our city, do you not?"

"Oh yeah, that'd be great. But you want something in return, right?" said Hawken, slowing to a halt, sword in hand.

"No."

"Then Wren is ours?"

"Well, this city is yours, and it's whatever you want it to be."

Hawken dropped his sword. "Seriously? Oh, brilliant. I'll have to tell the guys about this. Are you sure you have the authority to just give this thing over to me?"

“Yes.” said Mann, walking back from the balcony edge. “But you should speak to Norm if you want to settle in properly.”

“Where’s Norm?” said Hawken, squinting into the sun, trying to get the attention of Mann once more. “Where’s Norm!?” he repeated, louder.

“What’s this all about?” said one of the Quaccists.

Hawken picked his sword back up. “This guy wants me to go and talk to Norm about taking over this place. Where would I even-”

“Hi, the name’s Norm. How are you?”

“Uh, hi Norm.” said Hawken. “So I’m supposed to-”

“Talk to me, yeah. About... You want to take over College, right?”

“Yes.”

Norm stepped away from his market cart, and moved closer. “Well, you’ve come to the right person. So, in College, we have a series of people who keep everything in check. Like Minister of Sanitation in Zone 5, things like that. So we appoint those people usually, but since you’re here, you can choose who you want to do certain jobs.”

“Oh, that’s great. So like King, or something?”

“No, not quite.” said Norm, reaching back into his cart to find a book. “Here I have a list of all the positions that aren’t already taken. And you don’t want to reshuffle everyone else, that would take far too long and be such a hassle for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Well, we want to make your ruling of this place as easy as possible, right? So if we just do our jobs and you do yours, you can rule over us and it will be all good. Okay?” said Norm, putting down his book on the cart.

“It’s massive! Oh Quaccists, come and have a look at this!”

“Yeah, you could be the Lord of Grape Distribution.”

“That sounds great! Is it taken?”

“No, but-”

One of the surrounding Quaccists shouted, “I want to be the Lord of Sand Collection! I saw it first!”

“That’s the spirit!” said Norm, procuring a pencil and ticking off the position accordingly. He then handed Quaccist a slip of paper and told him to report in at the head office, which he would find somewhere over there, where he pointed to.

“Oh, also, if you run into any other of your people, then tell them to go to the town centre so they can get to ruling already.” said Norm, pushing several eager Quaccists away with his other arm. “So, who wants to be the... let’s see... King of the Water Well?”

The Quaccists began to scream and shout, all of them wanting that apparently prestigious position. Norm explained their duties as the king of the water well, and they still signed up heartily.

“I can’t believe I’m a king!” shouted one as he ran towards the head office, waving his paper slip in the air frantically. Norm forced them to form a queue, and that not only would they do their jobs, they’d get housing and food and all sorts of things, as the kings, lords and emperors of the town. One by one, they worked their way through the remaining positions, and as the last Quaccist took his slip and set off to kingship, Norm placed the book back in his cart.

“They never learn, do they.” said Norm, pushing his cart.

“Norm! Good job out there...” said Mann, walking alongside. “That was our best run yet.”

“Well, they are Drydenites.”

The two laughed, and went inside the main hall, having thoroughly defeated the invasion through the power of false kingship.

“Want to grab a drink, courtesy of the new King of Drink Service?” said Mann.

“Absolutely.”

XVII - Exit

After everyone had barely woken up inside the tunnel base, Curran attempted to rouse them by getting up and going.

“Alright, everyone. Grab what you think you’ll need to eat while we make the journey all the way through the tunnels back to the other side of the mountains. But try and keep it relatively light, as there’s only so much weight the trolley can carry. Also, Ullathorne and I had a conversation earlier, and he thinks we can disassemble the tunnelling machine and drill through a door, with some minor modifications.” said Curran, in front of the others. “And hopefully we can find our way out to Busby’s, and from there, Farr and I will go back to our jobs, and you four can go and find Botton. I mean, I could help you find him because you’ll have no idea where to even start looking. But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

The six of them began to pack their food for the journey, which Farr had assured them would not last more than four hours. But if so, why had Curran asked them to bring food? It was probably just preparing for the worst, and rightfully so considering their encounter with the bugbear earlier, and then the alleged second encounter when they had attempted to look for Murphy.

“Alright, Curran. We’ve come up with this idea for a revolution in Dryden, and all we really need now is the

funds to buy a balloon. How much would you say they cost? In fact, don't answer that, I don't really know the currency. Instead of buying one, could you guys maybe take one over to Dryden and... uh... let us drop our leaflets out of it?"

"They're really expensive to charter. But, since the king forgot about us in the tunnels, I'm sure he'll compensate us with a holiday, and if that's the case, then I wouldn't mind taking you guys over." said Curran. "Oh, and to clarify, the Drydenites won't try and shoot us out of the sky, right?"

"No. Well, I'm pretty sure they couldn't, even if they wanted to." said Kalivas.

"Good. Just wanted to make sure, nothing against Drydenites or anything." said Curran, with a little laugh and a jokey facial expression. "Okay, everyone else, are we good to go?"

Everyone wearily replied yes, despite the fact most of them weren't, and they had got a terrible nights (or days, considering none of them knew the time of day) sleep. They hadn't felt the best, not since last night's meal of canned beetroot with a side of canned broccoli. Because they lacked the means to cook or prepare food, each meal was essentially eaten as separate ingredients, which meant that they weren't looking forward to the pancakes they could have prepared.

But, they kept pressing on, as they needed to do, since the remaining food in the base was only good for this

trip, and then another trip later on, but even then, the food seemed to be lower than it should have been. Perhaps bugbears raided the place when they were out, even though they couldn't have told that there was food in the cans due to their sealed nature. That, and Curran hoped they didn't have the knowledge or dexterity to enable them to operate a can opener. He hoped.

"Well, what are we going to do with the trolley? I think one of the wheels gave up last night when we were carting Farr around." said Ullathorne.

"That's no problem." said Curran, picking up a tin of red paint. "You can fix it."

"I'm not sure if I can just fix it." said Ullathorne, partially mad at Curran for using him as the go-to mechanic when even the smallest thing went wrong, and also partially happy with him for recognising his ability to fix things. A hard emotion to properly convey in one tonal response, so Ullathorne continued. "But I'll try." Just to smooth things off a bit.

"Cart or not, we should get going once Tarek's loaded up his choice of cans." said Curran. "Come on, Tarek, you don't really need to choose between broccoli or beetroots, they're both awful."

"No, I can't choose which one I like more." said Tarek, not having tasted either of these foods before. "I don't get why you hate this stuff. It's great. Where do you get it?"

“We don’t just get it, it’s not even for sale, that’s how awful it is. It’s made for the workers of Busby’s. Cutbacks, Botton says. Only message we got before going into the tunnels.” said Curran, leading the group on with the cart in hand, squeaking away, producing a discordant rhythm to the background hum.

After the group had sealed the doors to the base as best they could to protect the remaining rations, which they hopefully wouldn’t end up needing, they walked for what seemed like hours, the concept of time lost to them, as they trudged through the endless, unkempt corridors of the tunnels. Where the tunnel became less orderly, the pipes did too, strewn across the floor, leaking all sorts of fluids onto the ground. The lights were an anchoring point, a reality check for this increasingly distressed world, something which would always lie consistent at the end of each section. They had devised a system in which the navigators (this time, Farr and Ullathorne) would turn on the lights for a section, and then the others would follow a long way behind, and leave the lights off to prevent overloading, which seemed to be what caused the lighting issue last time. And Curran was at the back, red paint bucket in hand, streaking signs across the lights and walls, marking arrows as they went. It wasn’t exactly the neatest signing job any of them had ever seen, not even the neatest Curran could do, but he said it was better red paint painted roughly than red blood splattered loosely. After all, the human body does contain quite a lot of blood, a fact which Joe recounted to Kalivas.

“Hey, that’s something that Stockdale told me. How much, exactly?”

“About five litres.” said Joe.

“Huh.” said Kalivas, taking a moment to contextualise this new, reliable info. “That’s what he told me.”

Tarek patted Kalivas on the back, almost as if to say, ‘I told you so.’ And, being the master of subtlety, he followed it up with saying, “I told you so.” This led to Kalivas losing the expression of pleasant surprise on his face, and it being replaced with one of contempt for Tarek.

Not too much was spoken after that, and as the group recollected at their destination, the last door, they encountered Farr, counting.

“Four thousand, four hundred and ten.” she said, then turning to see the group. “Oh, hello everyone! And I, I suppose you want an explanation for the counting. Well, it’s a good way to time how long things take. So I was at about ten thousand just then, and so that should have taken me about...”

“Wow, four thousand? That must be an entire day or something. Time flies when you’re... uh... not having fun. Or whatever.” said Tarek, fully wishing he could stop speaking moments after he started the sentence, due to Kalivas glaring at him once more.

“Come on, Tarek. Four thousand seconds is like an hour and a half. It’s been almost no time whatsoever.” said Kalivas. “You were a good student, too. You can’t just forget everything I taught you.”

“But Stockdale told you about that, right?”

“Uh...” said Kalivas, reconsidering. “Well, I guess he did, but there’s a demonstrable truth with that one. I can test it, and it’s probably right.” Neither party was particularly happy with this explanation, but anything that helped them get to the bottom of what was true and what was a multi-generational lie was a step in the right direction.

“So, we’re here now, having... not picked up the machine. Did we just forget that one, or what?” said Curran. Farr and Ullathorne looked at each other.

“During one of the route tests, we saw that the machine was slightly... infested.” said Farr. “Bugbears everywhere. Too many to just fight off. Pretty sure they saw us, might be following us. Probably not a big deal with the light strategy.”

“So we’re going to have to hope that this door just opens by itself?” said Curran.

“Well, I suppose hope is the only thing we’ve had for a while now.” said Farr.

Curran roused himself and the group once more. “But there’s more than just hope keeping us going! We don’t hope to get out, we want to get out. We strive to be, to live, to never have to die unnecessarily. To never have to-”

A bugbear screamed at the end of the tunnel, blocking them in to the end of the tunnel, causing Curran to immediately turn around and go for the door, wrenching the bar once more. The others rushed to help him as the bugbear took a conveniently long time to rear itself for the charge down the corridor. As the others reached onto the large handle, it snapped off, leaving Curran on the ground, clutching the rusty bar of metal.

“Just push against the door. If this broke off, then you’ll be able to smash it open. It’s brittle.” said Curran, then turning once more to face the bugbear, now screeching as Farr once had done, and running towards them, shifting its pitch up ever so slightly more.

“Push against the door!” shouted Curran, bracing against it. “Use the trolley or something. Apply force as far away from the hinge as possible.”

The others leapt into action after the original stunning, and bashed once against the door, fairly uncoordinatedly. Kalivas counted down from three as the six of them braced for impact a second time. Some metallic cracking came from the door as they hit it as hard as they could. Kalivas grabbed the trolley and readied it in time for the next push, which happened right as the bugbear

screached once more, as if to alert them even more of its proximity. Not that they needed a reminder, it had been scarcely ten seconds since the last one. Curran turned away once more to face the bugbear as Kalivas counted down once more, facing it as the trolley rolled forwards, everyone pushing as hard as they could. It clattered against the door, and the bugbear came running up to them, but was ward off at the last second by Curran's frantic waving of his bar.

"One more time! I think we can make it!" shouted Curran, trying to turn his head to shout towards the group, but also not wanting to break eye contact with the bugbear for a moment. Not that eye contact was their weak point or anything like that, it was just out of fear. And that, in this scenario, is probably quite understandable.

The trolley came crashing against the door once more, and it opened, but came crashing shut again, crushing the trolley in the gap. Tarek and Joe managed to squeeze through and roll out ungracefully onto the grassy hillside. Kalivas and Ullathorne had more difficulty leaving as the weight of the door crushed the trolley thinner and thinner, and as Farr left, one of the wheels gave in, presumably the broken one, and the door was shut once more. Screaming from both inside and outside continued, the bugbear joining in. But there was no handle on the outside.

All they could do was listen and wait. Wait as someone who challenged them to do, to try and escape, was the

only one to not make it out. The severed half of the trolley fell out of the doorframe, twisted and mangled by the weight of the heavy door. And no one knew how twisted and mangled anything on the inside was.

“Curran?”

It didn't really matter who called out, the only thing that really mattered was the response. And there was none. Not even the screaming of the bugbear, which had since disappeared into nothing. Nothing at all. The door was still closed, and un-openable from the outside, and so all they could do is wait. Wait for whatever they expected. Not that they expected anything.

XVIII - Kingship

“Excuse me, King of Drink Distribution, I would like another round of drinks. For the table, on me.” said Norm, having spent a few days relaxing, courtesy of the new recruits.

“I thought it was going to be a bit of stretch to make the Drydenites your personal servants, but it’s worked very well.” said Mann, relaxing back on his chair after seeing away the random Drydenite.

Norm collected his drink. “Well, I’m sure they’re happy with their jobs. I mean, why haven’t they started a revolution yet?”

“Because they’re happy.” said Mann, “Like they all are.”

Meanwhile, down in the immigration office where one of the Drydenites had been stationed, at first according to his will, and then very shortly after, against his will, a dispute had broken out. According to the office lady, some of the Duccists had forgotten to sign several forms that would sign over their consent to the city of College that they would stay within their jobs. The Duccist behind the counter had decided enough was enough, and began to attempt suicide. After all, he had lasted quite a long time, almost two whole days there.

Hawken, displeased, walked up to the counter. “We’re doing our jobs just right! Norm just signed us up and that was supposed to be it, right?”

“I’m just as annoyed about all this paperwork as you are. As much as anyone can be.” said the woman, not noticing the person behind her miming the words ‘It’s all true!’

She stepped forwards. “Look, do you know where Hawken is? So I can sort this out with someone who actually knows what they’re doing?”

“I am Hawken.” said Hawken.

“Oh, really? I thought you’d be more... leader-y. Well anyway, come round over here.” she said, pointing to the door which led into the room separating the two halves of the office. “I know things aren’t right, and you were supposed to have more power as king. I mean, you can still vote in the elections, but that’s not really the same thing. Well, I’ve needed a leader like you to try and help me stage an uprising. I’m Leader of Information and Services Administration, and just like you, I thought that everything was peachy. And to an extent, it is.”

“Yeah, it’s terrible here.” said Hawken, closing the door behind him.

“I mean you have to give them credit for the free meals.”

“But they’re not so good.”

“Yeah. And the free housing, which sucks too.”

Hawken got a new burst of enthusiasm. “Yeah!”

“So do you want it to change, right? I’ve been stuck in this job since the first day I got here, almost thirty years ago, and I hate it. I hate my job. I hate everyone who comes in here, as optimistic as I once was. But no one ever sees through their treachery, right?”

“Oh yeah, but I see it.”

“I like you, Hawken. We’re on the same wavelength. I think we’re going to get along very well. And we’ll have an advantage over the likes of Norm and Mann, because we have the info. The records of everyone in the city. All this information, this data at our disposal. Imagine what we could do with it!”

Hawken really couldn’t imagine what they would do with the data, except maybe arrange people by kingdom of origin every once in a while, or send people messages on their birthdays.

“Yeah!” he responded, not fully on board with the concept, but liking the enthusiasm.

“So you’re from Dryden, right?” she said. “So you do the whole Ducc thing?”

“Oh no.” said Hawken, not really getting a chance to explain Quacc to the woman before she excitedly continued.

“Well, you see, my plan is to essentially vote ourselves into power! All ballots in the city go through me, and so I can rig the count and get ourselves in!”

“Sounds good.”

She stepped closer to Hawken. “I know what you’re thinking.” (He wasn’t thinking of anything.) “Why haven’t you already done this? Well, the short answer is that I need cover in order to do it. Someone to blame, someone to push in the well if it all goes wrong. And I don’t mean you, by the way. How close are you to the other Drydenites?”

“Uh, well, I-”

“I don’t think you are, really. You’re in here, talking with me, now, and they’re not, so obviously you’re not that close to them. Physically too.” She chuckled, and then snapped back into conversation. “Well, what do you think? Yes or no?”

Hawken didn’t really know what she was specifically saying yes or no to, but the mood said ‘yes’ and he just let it go, saying yes remarkably enthusiastically for someone who might have just sold their soul unknowingly to a strangely hyperactive plotter.

“Alright, I think I have to go and deal with the others now. But we’ll start working towards king and queenship immediately! Starting with the Drydenites. Should I exile them yet?”

“Uh, no. I mean, if you think it’ll help your plan.”

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t do anything so radical yet. Yet.” she said, closing the door to the office side of the room behind her, leaving Hawken to exit by himself, walking past the rabble of the Quaccists, knowing that he would have to sacrifice them to attain power for himself, for Quacc, and then to defeat Ducc. And hopefully, this lady would help him do it for real. No more of these small, pointless jobs. The real money would be in the running of the city. And then, hopefully, the running of many cities.

And then maybe, possibly, the island.

But that was all a pipe dream to him now, stuck in a dreary job, waiting on tables. Admittedly, the cultural change was a lovely difference to the routine of Dryden. He was free of all burdens and hard labour, and when his shift was over, he could get his pay and food stamps, he could go home to his home, which he owned. It wasn’t great, a dingy room which was being let out to him by some weird guy with a silly nickname, but it was furnished with all sorts of books, the likes of which he had never seen before.

In a way, Hawken was happy here. He was happy to sit down, relax, and watch as the evening sunlight streamed through the holes near the top of the wall. It was such a perfect wall, without blemishes or cracks, and such a vibrant but not eye-straining green. Pictures of various places over the world lined the small walls, some of which Hawken had decided he wanted to visit. Maybe if he saved up enough of his money, he could. But even if he didn't, there were plenty of things to be had here, all kinds of games, social events and market stalls all over the place. The hustle seemed to have a soothing quality to it, like white noise, like a sea of bodies, acting as cogs in a well oiled machine. But this machine was so human, so kind and creative, and it felt like home to him.

Waking up the next morning, he wanted his job to start as soon as possible. His optimism was not marred by the wearisome speech of a sixty-year old immigration office lady, or the way in which she had described her plans for world domination. Hawken didn't really want to take over the world anymore. The world was inside his room, in the books which contained stories, and facts about how things used to be, and people talking about how things could be. In the pages of the books he read, there were adventures, there were people who didn't care about the routines of the world, who walked alone, but content. He put on his work clothes and walked to the other side of the city to start working. On his way, he passed more new people than he had passed in the last ten years of his life, each of them presumably with their own real stories, their own books waiting to be written.

After finishing his shift, he remembered a conversation he had with one of the chefs in the place he worked at, who said that everything was fine at first for him, but then there's a looming sense of mediocrity, of routine, that eventually comes and swallows up the optimism of yesterday. When you get used to doing everything, seeing everyone, and such a vibrant and rich life compared to your old one, it's hard to go back.

He wasn't ever sad about his loneliness. A chef named Fred, the only other person he ever talked to, only paid attention to him when they were on break together. The various talks they had seemed to amaze Hawken, who was so small compared to even the smallest of small talk, due to his lack of interaction with new people back in Dryden. Every time someone asked him, "How are you?", he would respond in the most articulate way he could.

There was an outlet in these conversations, an outlet which needs to flow after being cooped up against the same thousand or so people for over thirty years. And he let it flow, talking to random people on top of the city wall until he passed out from tiredness, chatting to everyone who gave him eye contact on his commute, making sure not to be late.

And there was beauty in the routine of it all, too. The spontaneity of the people compared with the jobs and houses in which they lived in was so wonderful to him that he wondered if he could ever go and live in somewhere like Dryden ever again.

Walking to and from work was a cathartic experience for him, seeing all kinds of new foods, waiting to try each of them out, one by one, in the morning. He counted the stands, and counted each of the different foods they sold, and became sad because he probably would never be able to finish them all, never be able to have every possible combination of them, because there were far too many.

He tried all sorts of things which he would have probably dismissed before. Green sponge-like plants which were crunchy, yet soft. Cakes with textures and flavours he had no reference point for. Drinks that were sweeter than anything Boris could have made.

Fred warned him of falling into this routine, of becoming used to choice, of wanting more and more from a world which could not keep up with your demands. But Hawken thought he would never have to change what he wanted from the world. Being so used to pretty much nothing, he had an outright advantage when it came to 'tolerance of choice'. He hadn't been brought up in this world, and yet still thought it was more homely than his real home.

Hawken's real home had been turned into the second Ducc Education Centre, where Stockdale was implementing a trial version of a language he said the Ducc Scripts contained. Every new child to be born would be taught Duccish by Stockdale himself, and raised only speaking Duccish, so they could attain closer spiritual enlightenment by becoming one with the

resonance of his voice. Stockdale had also announced the first trip outside the circle since he came here, in order to visit Duccian controlled College Wren, and check up on how Hawken was subduing the locals and making them into Duccists.

Hawken didn't want that, though. He was content with practising Quacc at home, thanking him for giving him the opportunity to live, to work happily, rather than letting him rule over it all, and quite possibly break the wonderful nature of the city. Instead of subduing the locals, he liked interacting with them. He told stories of all the people and the events of Dryden, and began to tell the people about Stockdale and his evil doings, and how he had originally been sent out, following his orders. The locals listened intently, having never heard from a real Drydenite before, wondering how he was fooled to spend all of that time inside the circle.

In his own room, he thought about these questions they asked him more. Not the descriptive questions, like 'How was the food there?', but the deeper ones, the ones that he answered quickly and light-heartedly. How had he been made to spend all of that time inside the circle?

Stockdale had come to the town when he was around twenty-five, which was probably almost twenty years ago now, give or take a few years. He remembered a time before Ducc, a time which Stockdale had convinced them to let go of, a time which Stockdale said they were unclean. And now that he viewed Stockdale as the enemy, and Ducc as the tool which he used and uses now

to subdue the people of Dryden, he was forced to reconsider his whole life. Stockdale was a trustworthy man that had become corrupted by power, who had showed them the Duccian path to reaching the true salvation of Quacc and then left them to do their own thing.

Most of the other Quaccians had settled into their lives, feeling somewhat the same as Hawken. Every time he passed one of them in the street, they shared some conversation, usually about Stockdale or Quacc, or how their kingship was going. It didn't seem right for Stockdale to say the truth of their predicament, for it would take away what little faith they had in Quacc, taking away the walls of College and exposing them to the harsh truth that they had been fooled. But they could accept the fact they had been fooled and live their lives as they had been doing now, same job, same house, just not a king anymore. Well, not thinking that they were a king anymore.

It was sad to see them getting on with their lives under a false impression of kingship, but at the same time, they were so happy. They had organised to at least meet up once per week to discuss the ruling of the city (ie. how they were going to vote at each referendum) and more importantly, to catch up with one another, and share stories of what they had done, and recommend things to do to the others.

And each one, in their own little way, was content.

XIX - Balloons

Deeply disturbed by the loss of Curran, the five remaining people in the group decided to go over to Busby's, which sat, smouldering in the depths of the valley they had exited into. The city looked like it was in a bad state, especially compared to how much the Busbites had talked it up. None of them spoke a word while going down, after trying to open the door for almost an hour, working in silent co-operation, trying to fight for a life they almost certainly knew was no more. And they had given up, because if they all died trying to find a dead man, they knew Curran would be screaming at them not to do it, as it wasn't worth it to him. To them, especially to Farr, he would go down as a martyr. A legend, perhaps. A small one, but still one all the same. Farr, being the only one who had known Curran for more than a day, sat against the door after their attempt to open it had failed, crying softly, and picking off a flower from a few meters above the door opening.

As they walked down the valley's edge, they noticed a small group of Busby's Balloons, parked near the edge of the city, inflated, presumably either picking up or dropping off tourists.

"I knew they hadn't closed down the balloons!" shouted Farr. "They sent us in the tunnels for nothing, then! And I've lost two of my closest friends!" Farr began to shout more profane things about the king, Botton, and how he was, to put it nicely, not very nice himself. "I just want

Curran back! I just want him back with us! He's the only one who could take us to Botton. They're old rowing pals. And now he's gone!"

The group let Farr have her moment, which would presumably last for a lot longer than they would have liked. However, they did actually need to go and see the king, so Kalivas and Ullathorne could get their balloon, and Tarek and Joe could continue on their journey to find people to recruit. The city was closer to them now, and it was quite apparent that something was up, even to the untrained eyes of the Drydenites.

Farr was behind the group, obviously distraught by the loss of their friend, and still occasionally turned towards the door, just to see if anything had broken out, to see if there was any hope. The others, not really knowing which particular direction to go, vaguely wandered towards the city, in the general bearing of what looked to be a large palace in the centre.

"Farr, is that palace where the Busbite King lives?" asked Joe.

Farr looked back slowly, not wasting any more of her tearful breaths on a longer answer. "Yes."

As they entered the town, Farr piped up once more and said, "Oh, we'll need these pass things to get in. There should be guards..." she trailed off as she looked around and saw empty huts where guards used to be, and an

open gate in front of them. She faced the group, wiping her face. "I suppose we can just go now."

The town was empty, and Farr looked around as if she had never seen it like this before. It was the middle of the day, and yet the streets were barren, devoid of shopkeepers, residents, even birds seemed to know to not be around. Walking towards the centre of the town, there was a loud, booming sound, which was presumably coming from a large crowd of people.

The crowd was there, and standing under the foot of Botton, as he descended from the throne, passing his crown over to his heir, Bradshaw, and the crowd seemed to boo in response to this. Farr ran over to the side of the crowd, and looked up in awe at Bradshaw, next to his dog, which was nearly as tall as him, and looked like it wanted every moving object dead, judging by the way it turned its head and snapped at Botton on his way out. The three people employed to restrain it lurched forwards, one of them almost bumping into the dog.

The Busbites cheered as Botton waved one last time, barely visible at the back of the balcony on which they stood. Bradshaw waved too, assuming they were cheering him on. A solitary fruit came arcing through the air, thrown by some disgruntled individual with at least a tiny bit of income left to spend on throwable fruits, income that hadn't been seized by Bradshaw's guards in the days leading up to his ascension.

Almost assuredly, it missed. But it did prove a point to Bradshaw, but that point was lost on him as, walking away from the balcony, he immediately began to ponder how to ban fruits that could be thrown easily. Perhaps only allow watermelons and grapes. Perhaps, he thought, there were more pressing things to think about. He sat down on his indoor throne, a completely separate replica of the original one, made alongside the other dozen ones which almost littered his new home, the palace halls. Most of them were made of reclaimed jewellery, again, seized off the Busbites. He was honestly surprised, but a little disappointed, that they didn't put up more of a fight so he could have beat them down harder.

Farr led the group round to the palace front, where they were greeted in a most abrupt way by two guards, waiting outside, both secretly hoping their shift would end before the weather turned, as it did look rather grey. What was also grey was the look on Farr's face as she barely sputtered out who she wanted to see, and why, presumably due to Bradshaw's dog's head poking out of a flap in the door, which any human could easily have fit through. Why there was a flap, no one quite knew, but it had a definite psychological effect on the group outside, which was probably the intended effect.

"You want to see the king?" said the smaller of them.

"Well, you heard her. Let them in."

"You can't just let them in! What if they try and kill Bradshaw?"

The larger guard turned to the smaller one. "Trust me, they won't. Look at them. And then look at the dog." He turned back to Farr. "And why do you want to see him, I didn't quite catch that bit."

Joe stepped forward. "So we can... so we can recruit him for important matters. In Dryden. He'll want to help us, maybe to improve his image with the Busbites?"

The larger one opened the door without the dog's head sticking out of it. "Alright, I guess so. Well, come on in. Mind the puddles."

"Why would there be puddles inside?" said Joe, then turning to look at the dog, salivating gross, great waterfalls that were being frantically mopped up by the fourth and fifth handlers. He took his book out of Tarek's bag and began to write some notes down, and a sketch of the dog.

The group walked on in slight wonder, but also disgust, as the smell hit them. Joe wondered what they needed to feed a dog so big, and his mind wandered towards the inverse-cube law, and surface areas, and heat radiation, and he was currently wandering up the steps to Bradshaw's throne, with Bradshaw staring him down, about to explode with rage that someone dare approach him without bowing.

"Can you please go back down the stairs?" said Bradshaw, unusually muted.

Joe quickly complied, and walked back down, and Bradshaw signalled something to one of the guards, and he nodded and walked away. The rest of the group wondered what was going to happen to Joe, now that some secret code had been swapped.

“So what brings here you today?” said Bradshaw, simultaneously calling for Luna. In almost everyone’s opinion, Luna wasn’t really a fitting name, but in Bradshaw’s mind, everyone he had asked had said it was a great name, so that was decisively that. Luna came running up alongside him, sitting as tall as the throne he was on, being held still by three guards, and mopped by two more. Kalivas stepped forwards, as if having rehearsed a speech.

“We are here to tell you about an evil that is affecting Dryden, and College. Stockdale, a Wrenite tyrant, is using his power to manipulate the people of Dryden to fight against College, and take it over. His ambitions are far larger than this, though. So if you don’t want to have to deal with him later, when he might actually be a threat, why not deal with him now, when the resources you have outnumber his a hundred to one?”

“Wow, er... yeah. Sounds cool. I’ll check it out.” said Bradshaw.

“Sooner, rather than later, please?” said Kalivas.

Bradshaw posed sarcastically. “Maybe.”

“People are dying!” said Kalivas. “Seriously, they need your-”

“Yeah, yeah, my help, all that rubbish. Look, I’ll help your irrelevant kingdom once I’ve sorted my own one out.”

“Hey, you can’t just leave them behind!” said Kalivas, stepping several steps forward, waving his fist.

“Guards! Take their things! Take them outside!”

“Run!” said Tarek, not running himself, due to the amount of guards which had suddenly surrounded him. Joe took a Nioc out of the back part of Tarek’s bag, (which, to be fair, was more *his* bag, but Tarek had carried it for so long that...well, it didn’t matter who’s bag it was now.) All that mattered is that that Nioc was going towards Luna, and unlike the failed flight of the fruit from earlier, this coin hit Luna in-between the eyes, causing her to skitter uncontrollably, dragging her five handlers down the throne stairs with her, and crashing into all of the guards and some of the group. Kalivas and Ullathorne found themselves on top of Luna, who was at this point running straight towards the flap at full tilt. Tarek was also on Luna, being held on top of her by Kalivas holding on to Tarek’s bag.

The guards outside heard this noise and opened the doors to go inside, and the larger one was hit with the full force of Luna, sending him flying across the street,

where Luna was heading straight towards, due to Kalivas and Ullathorne obscuring her view. Tarek slipped out of his backpack when Luna bounded down the outside steps, and fell on the relatively soft ground, relatively unscathed, minus backpack. The people in the shop opposite were not expecting a two-meter tall dog, carrying over seven people to come crashing through their front window, but they had never expected to sell that incredibly rotten tomato to that enraged customer either, so it was a win-lose situation for them.

Joe and Farr heard the noise of crashing glass as they ran towards the exit, having been knocked to the ground by the guards being launched into them, and the ropes strapping the handlers to Luna. They were injured, but the heat of the moment kept them going on, while some of the Busbite protestors had leaked into the palace, wanting to know what was going on, and what had caused Luna to run with such force. Kalivas and Ullathorne were both flung to the far side of the shop, not being strapped to Luna in any way. They landed in crates of produce far too tough to give them a soft landing, and so struggled to get to their feet.

Farr ran out of the palace, shrieking, causing many of the Busbites to leave, covering their ears. Tarek and Joe immediately lost Farr in the crowd, and Luna reared her head once more, almost no time after she had charged through a shop front.

“Something has to be wrong with that dog.” said Tarek, looking around for any other person in the group.

“That’s not really what we should be-” said Joe, talking to Tarek, not realising he was still being carried by the current of the crowd, or that he was anywhere near Tarek.

“Luna!” screamed Bradshaw, hanging on to the door of the emptied palace. “Get them! Get those Drydenites!”

“That’s our cue!” shouted Tarek, not realising Joe wasn’t beside him. He shouted louder. “Joe!”

They drifted towards each other in the crowd, fighting against the people, who were mainly running away from the guards who were filing out of the palace, single file, through the dog flap, as the other door was broken and mangled.

“Great. Where to go now?”

“Hey, are you the Drydenites?”

“Yes.”

“Oh man, you’re going to want to come with me if you don’t want to die in one of many ways, and most probably by stampeding.” said the man, trying not to get stampeded himself. The end of the crowd was drawing near.

“Come on, you two.” he said, running into a gap between the shop Luna had crashed into, and a small tavern. “In here.”

He walked through the gap and kept travelling through all sorts of back passages and impossibly small alleyways, all with the greatest of ease. Joe and Tarek weren’t able to keep up too well, but with the threat of death by guards or Luna, or some combination of the two, kept them on their toes.

Meanwhile, Kalivas and Ullathorne had been dragged upstairs by the shop owners, and were being cared for by them. Farr had got swept up by the crowd, and was at the end of the main street, surrounded by only strangers, not too worried about the Drydenites whereabouts now that she was back in her hometown. She began to run towards the Busby’s Balloons Emporium, the only place she knew where to go in times of desperation. That, and the tavern opposite the palace, but right now wasn’t the best time to drown her sorrows. In fact, what would cure her sorrows was a balloon ride to her favourite part of town, where she would be able to relax in relative peace.

Joe and Tarek came to a stop with the man, in a small square in between some buildings, a haven of peace and quiet amongst the crowds and protestors of the city.

“This is the Peachmind Estate, and I’m Johnny. Good to meet you guys. Haven’t met any Drydenites before.”

“I’m Tarek.”

"I'm Joe, nice to meet you. And I'm not a Drydenite, only he is."

"Ah, then where are you from?"

"College."

"Oh cool. I've got a cool story from when I went to College and did a fencing course with this guy called Fred. Crazy guy, really good chef, too. He was kind of good with attacking manoeuvres, but bad at defence. Good chef, cooked loads of College food. You know whatever-bird? Really good in sandwiches. Looks gross, tastes good."

Johnny recounted tales of all kinds of places to the two adventurers, if you could call them adventurers. They weren't forging a new path anywhere. But to them, it might as well have been a new path, with the amount of effort it had taken and lack of help they had received to get this far. He lit up his pipe, stuffing it with tobacco, in a way much unlike his other mannerisms. Forceful motions, hunched over with a lighter, in contrast with his fluid, yet solid motions of his walking, and he carried the utmost power about him, but in a smooth way, one that never seemed to interfere with anything else he did.

And yet, in those moments between stories, he was jittery, unstable. Like a bicycle, if he stopped moving, he would lose balance and fall over. He hadn't yet actually fallen over, but as he jumped from story to story

violently, telling stories of Busby's, as if he hadn't had anyone to speak to in a long time. As the stories turned to somewhat overly personal recollections of his own life, Joe and Tarek began to notice shouting once more.

Further outside of the network of little streets that Johnny had made his way through, Luna had careened through many more protestors, eventually coming to a halt as the rope connecting the handlers to her had got snagged around a newly-placed (and newly-vandalised) statue of Bradshaw. The real Bradshaw was standing outside the palace entrance now, and was attempting to tell the guards to corral the protestors in order to find out who threw the fruit. However, Luna wasn't responding to any orders, choosing to follow a scent which she had picked up, one of a vague, singular, unmistakeable mustiness that emanated from Johnny. It wasn't a distinguishable smell to either Joe or Tarek, and for all intents and purposes, that was probably a good thing.

Luna managed to break the rope around her, knocking the torso off of the statue in the process. Bradshaw was even more annoyed at the five handlers, who lay scattered across the street, ankles almost broken from digging their steel-spiked boots into the ground in a feeble attempt to stop the now enraged Luna. He ordered Mabel, Luna's less intimidating cousin, to be released too, in a feeble attempt to calm Luna down.

Ullathorne and Kalivas were exiting by the back entrance to the upper floor of the shop, after being tended to by the shopkeepers. Kalivas readjusted the bag, and stopped

on his way out. "One last thing, before we go, do you know where we would get a balloon?"

"There's a shop just around the corner." replied the woman, cheerily.

"No, like a big one. Busby's Balloons?" said Kalivas.

"As I said, just around the corner."

"Which corner?" said Kalivas, looking back as Luna ran past them, through the courtyard which they stood over.

"Oh, that way, dear. The way that dog went. I'm sure you'll feel better when you get a balloon." said the woman, yet again cheery, but she might have just wanted to shut them out of her house so she could fix the store front.

Kalivas knocked on the door. "Are you sure?"

A man responded. "Go on, we didn't even ask you to buy anything and we helped you."

"We didn't ask to be helped!" said Ullathorne.

The man opened the door. "Look, just leave. We've had enough trouble for one day. I think that someone threw one of our tomatoes at Bradshaw and we might be investigated for it. So if you could just quietly leave like nothing ever happened, that would be great." he said, closing the door with more force.

Kalivas and Ullathorne stepped down the rickety wooden stairs and began to follow Luna's path, around many, many corners. They couldn't see anywhere that could be classified as a 'corner' as it was a winding, twisting path that narrowly separated two rows of buildings, the likes of which they had never seen. In silent admiration of them, they walked on and on until they reached the Peachmind Estate. 'A haven amongst havens' read the sign, but the destroyed benches and snarled fruit trees told a different story. Luna had come in here, in search of Johnny, wreaking havoc on the square. And just as luck would have it, in flew a balloon, carrying some people.

"What's gone on here?" said one of them. "Seriously, what's gone on here? This is horrible!"

Farr looked out from the side of the balloon. "Look what they've done to the estate! Bradshaw's guards will have to pay for this. I mean, look at the balloon shop. Trashed, not beyond repair-"

"But beyond what we can afford, given the circumstances. We're going out of business due to this whole Bradshaw lark. He sends a bad message overseas, and no one wants to come here now." said the other woman, jumping out of the balloon as it hovered above the ground, tying it to a mangled bench.

"Farr! We thought we'd lost you!" said Ullathorne, walking to greet her, only slightly impaired by the two-meter height difference between his head and hers.

Platitudes were exchanged, and Farr offered both of them a lift in the balloon.

“Wait, Farr, we have an idea. Can we buy this balloon off of you guys?”

“What do you have to offer?”

“This.” said Kalivas, removing Tarek’s bag from his back and producing the statue.

The woman and Farr looked at it strangely. “Are you sure this is worth, what, a whole balloon?” said the woman.

“They said it had a ‘special’ rock in it that could kill things when those things ate bits of the rock. Apparently they killed loads of rats in Grant’s with it.”

“Well, we didn’t do that, but judging by the way it glows,” said Kalivas, opening the statue, “It’s definitely... something.”

“Test it.”

“What?”

“Test it on something.” said the woman, when Mabel ran past, sensing Ullathorne and Kalivas somehow. She stopped, sizing up the duo, and then running up towards them, not bothering to charge too hard.

Kalivas saw the opportunity, and shook the statue around, broke off some small pieces of the rock, and then was promptly knocked to the floor, by Mabel, who hung her head over his on the ground, looking to attack him, or so it seemed to Kalivas. He slowly raised his arm up, rock in hand, ready to put it into Mabel's mouth and not have his hand bitten off in the process. However, it was entirely unexpected that Mabel licked the rock clean off of Kalivas's hand, and then stood vaguely still for a few seconds, and then slumped down upon Kalivas, who was just trying to get out.

Ullathorne and the woman lifted Mabel off of the helpless Kalivas, dropping her gently onto a bed of torn-up bushes. Farr looked on in amazement, and hatched a plan to herself. She would take the rock and use it to poison Bradshaw, and then take the rock and keep it, and then order another election in which Bradshaw would not be allowed to station his guards outside polling stations.

Kalivas got to his feet. "You want it now?"

The woman looked at him disapprovingly, but then Farr said, "Oh, no, we'll take it! But you have to come with us for a bit, first, before we let you go. Plus, you'll need some training so you don't, uh... crash."

"Well, that sounds like a pretty good deal to me." said Kalivas. Ullathorne stepped forward and said, "I think we'll be able to pilot it pretty well. We piloted the tunnelling machine, after all, Kalivas."

“I wouldn’t say that we piloted it. It took us most of the way.”

“Alright, whatever. Let’s go and get Bradshaw, and then head towards Dryden and save everyone.”

Meanwhile, Tarek, Joe and Johnny were still meandering along, having lost Luna somewhere in the ever-growing, but seemingly shrinking maze of winding paths. Eventually, he came across a stony pathway, leading behind a large hall. The path wasn’t that nice, filled with bins and the heavy air of smoke, some from the fires of the rubbish tip, slowly filling up with personal possessions that Bradshaw’s guards had deemed too ‘wasteful’ for the town, some from the tobacco smoke that seemed to wrap around the street, and made the gas lamps burn a slightly different colour than usual.

“Mem!” shouted Johnny. “What are you doing here at this time of day?”

“Oh, nothing much.” said Mem, walking up to Johnny and hugging him tightly, but not too tightly, since that would violate at least six terms of the unspoken ‘bro-code’ which they had developed over the years they had known each other. “I’m just waiting for Page to leave his meeting.”

“Oh, the A.B.C?”

“Yeah,” said Mem, stepping back. “They’ve finalised their Bradshaw removal plan, and hopefully, if they do what they say they’re going to do, we’ll instate Page as the leader, as Botton, according to some random law, has reached his limit as king. Only ten years, they said.”

“Here’s to ten years of Page, then.” said Johnny, enthusiastically. “By the way, here are these two stragglers I picked up. Joe and Tarek.”

“Hi Joe,” said Mem, shaking Tarek’s hand.

“Oh, no, I’m Joe.” said Joe.

Mem looked at Joe. “I’d say you looked more like a Tarek to me. And vice versa. But if that’s the way it is, then...” he said, trailing off as Page walked out of the building opposite, looking happy to see everyone, but it was clear that he wasn’t exactly happy inside.

“The Anti-Bradshaw Committee is officially underway with its one and only goal. We’re waiting for the state dinner tonight, and one of the lower goons is going to go in and poison his food with some kind of rock that we have.” said Page, placing his arms around Johnny and Mem’s shoulders. “We’re almost there, lads.”

Page, Mem and Johnny spoke to each other for quite a long time, Johnny telling his stories, Page one-upping him with a better story, and then Mem acting as a neutral third party to ‘judge’ the stories. Not that there was any formal ranking system, but if there was, Mem

would be writing every point he had down, trying to see who was better.

At some point, Joe's mind turned to his book, which he thought he had left in Tarek's bag, which was not on Tarek currently.

"Tarek." said Joe, softly. "Where is the bag?"

"It's... not here."

"Ah." said Joe. "Wait, no, it's in one of Johnny's coat pockets."

"Which one?" said Johnny.

"The one on the left."

"That, Joe, does not narrow it down."

At this point, Luna came round a corner, slowly, and then saw the five of them. She had been recaptured, and then sent to try and find the A.B.C headquarters, which Bradshaw had been attempting to find since day one of his 'campaign'. And now, Johnny, with his slight distinguishing scent, had led the smell-sensitive Luna right to them, and to the A.B.C as well.

Johnny began to run, alongside Mem and Page, and so did Tarek and Joe, out of fear that they would be left behind. Page ducked into the cellar door that led down into the A.B.C's cellar base, and didn't quite realise the

implications of this until he looked at the other members, huddled over intricate maps of the palace, lit by candlelight, and they saw him run in as if he was running away from something. As the other four filed in, they spread around the room, and just as Page was about to say something along the lines of 'Well, better get a move on then' (obviously a little less politely) Luna stuck her head through the door, barking and snapping, but not able to get any closer.

"You've led Bradshaw's guards right to the base? You idiot! You total f-" said a man, before he was crushed by the stampede towards the door at the other end of the room. Everyone filed out in very, very vague accordance with their contingency plans, not all exiting from the same part of the upstairs building, but all wanting to leave as soon as possible and avoid becoming dog food. They were orderly, but twitching to get in front of each other as soon as possible, running like hell as soon as they were roughly out of sight.

Tarek and Joe were now together with the other three, as Luna began to squeeze around the side of the building, clawing past some bins, wrecking the rubbish and making it seem even more messy than it already was. Somehow, they managed to all run in roughly the same direction, regrouping once they had got out of sight of the guards. As they stopped, Johnny relit his pipe, and then had to immediately begin running away again after Luna poked her head around the corner near them. He dropped his pipe, and went back to retrieve it, quite unfazed by the fact that Luna was careening

towards him, and then, stepping out of the way like a bull-fighter, he continued to try and light it, as Luna attempted to chase the other four around. He eventually got it to light, and then looked around for the other four, who were at least halfway up the street, dodging and weaving Luna.

He walked behind them slowly, much more slowly than they were running. A guard came up behind him and asked him to come with him back to the palace. Johnny didn't respond in a conventional sense, taking his pipe out of his mouth as if to speak, and then punching the guard in the face with the other hand. He then turned around once more and continued to walk towards the unfolding scene.

Page screamed, leading Tarek and Joe into a side path, which Luna was too large to follow them down, though that didn't stop her from trying. The splintering wood cut into her side as she blasted through the sides of the houses and shops, working her way to yet another one of those little havens inside the cramped city. However, a stone gate to the square proved too much for her to handle, and she stopped just before crashing into it, having lost at least two of the handlers at some point during the destruction.

Tarek and Joe managed to take a brief break, managing a few short intakes of breath before they heard another noise. This time, Johnny had caught up with them, walking around Luna, who had slumped down, much as Kalivas did. Kalivas was lucky he wasn't down here to

witness it. He might have seen it from above, though it's hard to tell if he actually looked over the edge of the balloon on his first flight, having never experienced being any more than about five meters above the ground. Kalivas did see a lot, when he plucked up the courage to glance over the edge. The world was below him, the perimeter of the city, nestled in-between two valleys, and the grand palace, a relatively bright, white square in the centre of the city. It seemed to flow and stream with people, protestors, guards, shopkeepers, market vendors, and most importantly to him, one Bradshaw. As soon as he was dealt with, he would be able to go and solve his own problems, along with Ullathorne.

Ullathorne was captivated with the view from the second he got up into the cabin. It had a beautiful feeling, ascending to the sky, feeling that he could finally look upon the world in a new light. He loved this new light so much, he didn't really want to have to come back down and find enjoyment in the basal things that the ants down on the surface seemed to enjoy. He had watched ant-hills as a child, when Dryden was different, before they had moved it. Before John, the man responsible for the founding of New Dryden, or so they had called it, long ago. How they had found a town in such good condition, he would never know. Ullathorne was older than Kalivas, he didn't remember Kalivas being around then. Only memories as hazy and as vague as the haze above the desert sands still lied in his head, but he clung on to the fuzziness, and thought about the ants, living their whole lives on the ground, never once really

questioning the nature of their reality. It was a sight, and a sight to behold.

And, while looking around the town, he saw Luna, still passed out. Johnny had clambered over her, watching the broken guards as they lay, strewn across the sides of the great dog.

“What’s up?” said Johnny, clearly not realising he didn’t really care about the answer, and knew what had happened anyway. Saying ‘what’s up’ was more of an involuntary reaction for him, one that attempted to fill the awkwardness at the start of a conversation, but instead just delayed it slightly.

No one else responded; Page looked shattered. Joe and Tarek were resting on an unbroken bench. Johnny was pretty much no more worse for wear than usual, not that there was anything usual about his demeanour. Johnny stopped in front of Joe and Tarek.

“So what are you guys even doing here?”

Joe piped up. “Well, he’s (pointing at Tarek) a Drydenite, as you know, and he’s here to ask the Busbite King for help. Only we didn’t realise that the king had, you know, changed. To whoever Bradshaw is. So, hopefully, having lost the other two, with no chance of meeting them again, we can get out of here, where we’re clearly not wanted, and make our way somewhere else.”

“Why did you want help?” asked Johnny.

Tarek leant forward. "There's this man called Stockdale, and he's trying to take over College, and brainwash the people of Dryden, and corrupt Ducc. And Ducc's kind of hard to explain. The only thing I can say is that he's definitely bad. He did help us with our town, but that was probably just to hide his real plans."

"And now that you haven't found who you're looking for, where are you going to go?" said Johnny, getting out his pipe again, tapping the ashes out.

"Oh, we'll go somewhere else to find help." said Joe. "I'd much rather College wasn't run by some Drydenite..." he continued, looking over at Tarek, wondering if he should finish his sentence. It was probably best not to, he thought.

"Do you know anywhere else?" asked Page, having walked over. "Also, let's get moving. Don't want to be around here when Luna wakes up."

"Not really, I have heard that some people in Liddell's would be willing to help." said Joe.

"Oh, they're a good crowd." said Johnny. "A tad quirky, though. So, when can we expect to go there?"

"You want to come with us? I thought you'd just show us the way out, and then go and do whatever it is you do." asked Joe.

“Oh, well, you’ll have to stick around for tonight, because of the...” said Page, lowering his voice. “Anti-Bradshaw Committee. Our plans for tonight.”

“Ah yes.” said Joe.

“Well, everyone in the A.B.C knows what to do and where to be later today, so we can just mull around for a few hours in Johnny’s place, and then go and monitor Kershen, our man, so he doesn’t mess the whole thing up.

“Ah, we can’t-” started Johnny, reconsidering mid-sentence. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Is there something wrong?” asked Page.

“Oh, no, it’s... you know, from last time.”

“Oh...” said Page.

“Anyway,” said Johnny, with a long stress on the ‘a’, as if to draw away attention from the strange exchange he had just had. “We must continue. Let us go forth to the abode!” he said, triumphantly, as he was accustomed to doing. His clothes seemed to complement the actuality of his person, great waves crashing over his chest, waves of extreme detail, that looked as if they moved due to their realism. In fact, there were so many threads making up the intricacies that it looked a heavy thing to wear, but he wore it and made it seem light as anything. His jacket was also strangely intricate, rustling rhythmically down

the long corridors, the strange echo of this ethereal noise making Tarek feel ever so slightly dissociated with himself. He felt like if he was to lose Johnny round a corner, he would not be able to make his way anywhere.

Joe wrote in his book, and having described Johnny, and his mannerisms, Page was the next to come under the soft, orange-glowing scrutiny of Joe's book. He wore a deep purple camouflage jacket, with beard and hair equally eccentric to match. Both of them seemed to share the same, relatively boring taste in trousers: sandy, tan coloured, smooth but seemingly well-crafted and surprisingly well-maintained. Busby's seemed to be full of people selling things like this, and so it was not much of a surprise they could just walk around like this.

Drydenites wouldn't have had the money or the will to buy such things, saying that rich material gain was against the laws of Ducc. Collegians generally had the money to afford such things, but instead chose to spend it on new experiences. The Busbites were more material, having spent their lives trading commodities, diamonds, precious metals, all the things their forefathers had found, and what they had to sell. And when things started going wrong, when they had run out of things to sell, Botton came in and made Busby's the place to be. He had the money. He had the power. And the only opposition left to even think of deposing him was Bradshaw, the vice-king. He was the only one who stood to gain from his ascension to the throne, and once Botton's ten year limit was up, the process had to begin. Botton had begged Bradshaw to follow in his footsteps,

and now, right now, as Bradshaw persecuted the Drydenites with Luna, and rounded up protestors in the streets, Botton could do nothing but look on in abject despair as the world he had worked so hard to enrich tore itself apart under his feet.

Botton floated through the air in his private balloon. Usually he would have someone fly it for him, but he was gone today. He had said he needed to go to a meeting, and that it was urgent. Something about philosophy. He was an odd man, that Page, thought Botton.

At the same height as Botton flew Farr and her two helpers, on their way to the palace to try and put one of the death rocks in one of Bradshaw's meals, and Farr began thinking about the loss of Curran, and having more time to reflect on it. She had known him since they got jobs at the Busby's Balloons Academy, almost ten years ago now, and that time had come to an abrupt end, at the hands of a bugbear. Of course, she wouldn't come to resent the bugbears, for they were allegedly the product of reckless Busbite mining and toxic materials, but she wondered if Curran would be looking across at her, from up in the heavens, or wherever.

As their balloons crossed paths, Botton waved to Farr, and Farr waved, and then saluted back, and leaned over the edge of the balloon and shouted.

“Thanks!” she said, before Botton drifted, silently, out of her vocal range, and back into the shrouded royal ether from which he seemed to come, ten years ago.

XX - Communication

Alongside the barely-spared Reverend Williams, Stockdale had given his speech, saying he would have to take a trip to an ‘occupied Wrenite city’, and he was also preparing to take a cohort of people with him, in order to populate this new town with plenty more Drydenites. What he forgot to account for, was the fact that College had a population an order of magnitude larger than Dryden, and so his troupe of women with their children wouldn’t do much good. He had also overestimated the level of ‘taken over’ that College actually was. Hawken had taken over College in his own way, choosing to fill and personalise his own room, absorbing the culture and the life of the city, and adding his own thing, however small, to the mix.

He never felt lost in a sea of this mixture, though. He floated on top of the broth, like Fred’s famous Floating Whatever-Bird soup, which tasted like everything, with the texture of nothing. The airiness of that also translated to a general sense of flavour around the city, far better than any other thing he had seen in Dryden.

He almost didn’t want to get up to face Stockdale, as it was much easier for him to just appear as a Collegian, a unit, part of something bigger, but something more than the sum of its parts.

College was his home, and he felt at home. He thought sometimes, “Enough of the self-motivational drivel. You

need to keep doing your job, and keep earning so you can travel in this world.” He had been improving his skills as a chef, and recently hosted a barbecue outside the apartment for his neighbours and friends, and had asked everyone to bring food and drink. He thought about saving up enough money to get his own market stand, and he also thought about applying for a job change at the office; partially to ‘spice things up’ a bit, and partially to speak to the office lady, who he still hadn’t asked for her name. To think they could rule College and not even know each others names! Not that he wanted to rule College, at that.

It was at that moment, he had an interesting thought. Because of his new-found social and financial stability, he didn’t want to take over College any more. Not even in the slightest. So, he’d go over to her and tell her her input was not going to lead to anything, he wasn’t in on the plan any more, and maybe after that, he’d ask for her name.

Hawken made his way across the city, and bumped into one of the Drydenites near the office.

“Oh, what have you been up to?” said Hawken, cheerily.

“Not much. Just seeing new people. It’s great here, isn’t it?” she said, gesturing around.

Hawken straightened himself up. “Look, you know we haven’t... done what we came here for, right?”

The girl looked puzzled.

“I mean, we... Since we came here, we haven’t been ruling over the College people. Like we intended to.”

“Oh, that?” she said, laughing. “Nah, I don’t care about that any more. Why would you? Look at all this stuff we’ve got now! It’s like... way more stuff than we had back in Dryden.” She smiled, and then, when Hawken didn’t return her smile, she feared the worst.

She spoke worriedly. “Have you told Stockdale? Are they going to kill us for being Quaccists? Or failing our-”

“No, no. I agree with you, this whole thing failed, but in a good way. I’m glad it failed. You should have seen me outside my block last night, I was hosting this kind of food party. I’d’ve never done that back in old Dryden town.”

“I suppose so. So you’re not just trying to take over College any more?”

“If you count taking over the market stands with my amazing cooking, then absolutely!” he said, trying to lighten the strange mood which had fallen upon them, as a result of ever so slight miscommunication.

The woman laughed. “Don’t worry, then.” she said, walking off. “See you later this week at the Markey of Granberry.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Hawken continued to walk towards the office, having thoroughly cemented the no-kingship idea in his head now. He walked into the immigration office, and tapped on the window between the lady and himself, pointing to the side room. She put her files down hurriedly, and shuffled over to the door, slightly limping. When the door was opened from the inside, Hawken stepped through.

“So, what’s going on? Realised what’s going on?” she said.

“Oh, no. I’ve come here to talk to you about the whole College take-over thing.”

“That’s what I meant.” she snapped. “Now, if you would please not ask me any more inane questions, I have a bad leg and a sore throat, so I don’t want to have to keep correcting you.”

“Well, sure.” Hawken said, reconsidering how nicely he was going to break the news to her. “I’m not doing it.”

“Doing what?”

“The College takeover.”

“Be more specific so I don’t have to correct you.” she said, walking over to a corner of the room, before

abruptly turning back. “You want to do what?!” she shouted.

“Honestly, I don’t want to do it. I’m fine where I am.”

“You’re fine now, but what about twenty, thirty years down the line?” she exclaimed. “You’re full of optimism now, just like me. And then, before you know it, you get good at what you do. And then, people don’t want to replace you, they don’t let you move because if you did, they’d have to find another person. And they don’t like work, Mann and Norm. Mann’s lazy, he barely works at all, and he gets his lackey, Norm, to do all the bookkeeping for him.”

“But I’ve met so many people that I could never meet if I was the king! Everyone is equal here, I can just speak to whoever I want, about whatever I want.”

“That may be nice, coming from a backwards hellhole like Dryden, but here, we get used to that fairly quickly. I’ve been here probably since before you were born. And before that, I lived in...” she trailed off. “Look, having a nine to five job is alright for some, but the inevitable mediocrity, the greyness, the vibrant food that mentally turns to mushy sludge, the same five or so people every day of the week, wondering if you even like them. And look at me!” she said, picking up a photo on the wall.

She continued, “Please don’t look too hard. It is me, almost forty years ago. Look. I’m smiling. And now look at me. My husband and son are both dead. My co-worker

is rejoicing that I'm gone for five minutes, talking to someone else. Or whatever I would call you. Doesn't matter. All that matters is that I'm sick of it, Hawken, sick of it. I want to get out and do things the only way I know how."

"To start a bloody revolution and become the queen of College?" said Hawken.

"No, that was never the point. There's no way we could have done this, just us. I just wanted someone who saw me a different way, someone other than that grey-eyed, whiny woman who takes your files, unconsciously laughing at where you're from."

She put the photo, down, being very careful, as the film it was on was degraded and cracking.

"I wanted someone to notice that I wasn't happy, and not brush it off. I'm not allowed time off work, as if I left, the whole town would have to slow down. The bureaucracy, the papers. They hurt me as much as you. But to an extent, they keep this place a great place for people to come and stay for a while. But never to live. Never to live." she said, tearing up. "I just wanted to speak to Mann, and I never got the chance. He sees me and goes away, saying something about kingly duties. Well, all of his paperwork and law-writing stuff goes to Norm and I instead. We just fill out the forms and tick the boxes. Settle building disputes, market scuffles, anything you can think of. Mann always liked Norm more, and he was allowed to go and work as a market trader for a few days

a week. Eccentric guy, you might have met him when he has his... his wizard outfit on. Pretty sure Mann had it made for him.”

Hawken tried to speak, but had nothing to say.

“I’ve always had a degree of authority over this place, seemingly some of the power too, but all of the responsibility.”

She paused.

“I’d like you to go and talk to Mann about this. Can you just get me a job somewhere else. I don’t care where else. Anywhere. Anywhere where I’m not the load-bearer. The essential cog. The quartz in a watch.” she said, lowering herself onto her chair and crying.

“But how will I change anything?” said Hawken.

“Mann avoids me, and so does pretty much everyone else. With you, I had to say something that would make you come back. And to an extent, taking over College is something I’ve wanted to do. To get Mann to do his job properly. To get some time outside of this prison. I even live downstairs, in this little bit.” she said, pointing to a door, behind the desk in the room.

“I never go there. Haven’t in ages. I just pass out on the floor in my office. The papers are lovely and comfortable compared to the floor, so that’s why I’ve always got some out.”

"I can't believe you live like this." said Hawken, opening the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To find Mann." replied Hawken. "Oh, and by the way, what's your name?"

"Hah! It's somewhere on one of the files here, from long ago. No one's asked me in so long, I can't even remember it. I just use my acronym now."

"What's that?"

"Lisa."

"Well, see you soon, Lisa."

"Good luck, Hawken!"

He strode off into the day, walking the streets of College, on his way to find and coerce Mann into giving Lisa better work, or at least some kind of break. Meanwhile, across the lands, another person was gearing up to visit College, to meet whoever this Stockdale man was, in his newly conquered kingdom.

"I wish I could leave this dinner early. It's really, uh, boring. Need to see that Stockdale guy. I'd like to meet with him, need to try and see what he's up to. Bet he's conquering Grants by now. He seems like that kind of

person. Hey, French. Can you go and get me some info on Dryden? The best we have.” French leaned over her chair and snapped her fingers. Roy, her assistant, rose from his seat, far behind, at the corner of the room, and walked over to her, where she asked Roy the same question as Bradshaw had asked her, just slightly more eloquently, and much more quietly.

Roy briskly walked into another room, and picked up the necessary folder. There, he was met with an unfamiliar sight, a man who was absolutely not supposed to be there. Kershen, a member of the A.B.C, stood in the corner, looking up through the skylight in the library, where Roy cautiously turned on the lights after opening the door.

Page looked down the skylight, having made his way on top of the palace by hitching a ride on a balloon with this nice woman and two more Drydenites in it. “How did you even get here this early?”

“I thought you said we started at six o’clock.”

“No, no, no! I said seven! I’m here now, at six thirty, thinking I was going to be super early. But apparently not. Has anyone seen you?”

“No, I don’t think so.” said Kershen, just then, lowering his gaze and seeing Roy at the other corner of the room. “Maybe one person.”

“How bad is it?” asked Page.

“He’s here now.”

Roy turned on the light and closed the door behind him. He walked towards Kershen, and picked out a book beside him.

“I know I’m not supposed to be-” started Kershen, before he was shushed by Page.

Roy turned his head. “Excuse me?” he said, too politely for what he thought was an intruder. “Oh, no. Don’t worry. Are you here to depose Bradshaw?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Kill Bradshaw.” said Roy, matter-of-factly. “Are you here to kill him?”

“Well...” said Kershen, being shushed by Page yet again.

“Oh, don’t worry. That’s why I’m here too. I’m sick of being mistreated by them.”

“Them?”

“Bradshaw’s regime. They demoted me to this silly ‘Slave of the Day’ position, but it seems to have lasted somewhat more than a day. They treat me as a court jester. Someone to get food for them. So this time, Mrs French has asked for a book. I’ve specially prepared a bomb in this book that will detonate in their faces, once

they get the lock open.” Roy pointed to the lock, proudly. “Adding to that, I’ve been feeling ill, and I’m pretty sure they’re trying to poison me too.”

“So you’re trying to kill Bradshaw?”

“Yes. Well, more than just Bradshaw, at least.”

“Page, can you pull me up then? Roy’s going to kill them.”

“No, no.” said Page. “You’ve got to stay here until it’s fine.”

Roy waved goodbye, and merrily opened the door, with a tiny skip in his step. He placed the book down in front of French, who said. “Roy, this is the wrong book. The Dryden’s book, please.”

Roy dutifully obliged, muttering something about ‘next time’. He put the book back, and walked out of the room. The door slammed shut, and then the other door in the room opened, and Farr walked out.

“I swear I’m innocent!” shouted Kershen.

“Oh, shush!” shouted Farr and Page, pretty much at the same time. Page continued. “Who’s down there?”

“This woman. Short. Short hair, light colour. Wearing black. Angry, walking towards me quickly. Very angry-” said Kershen, before he was slapped.

Farr shushed him once more.

“Oh, she’s the woman from the balloon.” he said, over the shushing.

“From the balloon? Hey, you! Are you a Bradshawite, or whatever we’re calling them.”

“No, I’m here to get rid of him. As, I assume by the bottle on your waist that says ‘poison’, are you.” said Farr.

“Yes.” said Kershen, quietly.

“Look, I’m going to go in there, in my attire, and stroll through, and look assertive, and then put this little rock in Bradshaw’s drink. Or his food, I haven’t quite planned that bit out yet.”

“Can I come with you?” asked Kershen.

“I’d recommend you stay here as backup, just in case I fail.”

“Well, you wouldn’t be the first to fail. This guy came in and tried to blow them up with a book bomb.”

“Well, if he didn’t make it, I will.” said Farr. “Good luck, but wait here for now.” she said, slipping out of the door into the main dining hall, not really being noticed. She strode along, looking very determined, she looked like she knew exactly where she was going, but had no idea

in reality. Following a couple of chef-looking individuals, she ended up in the kitchen, where someone was preparing tea in an extremely large teapot, which had a picture of Luna's face on it.

"Is this Bradshaw's?" She asked one of the cooks.

"Oh yeah, feel free to spit in it or something. Some people have put more interesting things in there," he said, looking over at his co-workers, who snickered.

"I've just got this." said Farr, getting out the rock.

"Looks funky. Put it in." said the chef. "Do you think we should give this broth a new name, now that it has life of its own?"

"And death of its own!" shouted another chef. "There is no way he's surviving this one."

"Well, that's because the previous dozen times, someone has been a klutz at some point, and we get some poor guy like Roy ill instead." said another.

"Poor guy. Pretty sure he's lost it. But anyway, add your rock." said the chef, pointing at the mixture. "Oh, anyone got a name?"

"Mildred!" shouted one.

"That's my grandmother's name." said another.

“That’s not a very good name, is it?” shouted another, in response to the second chef.

“Neither is that!” shouted a third, eliciting a laugh amongst them all.

“Come on, you lot. Back on track. We need a name.”

“Jethers.” said Farr.

“Jethers! I like it! Can’t quite pin down why, but I like it! Jethers it is. Alright then, let’s go carry Jethers out.” said the head chef.

Four chefs carried Jethers out, much like a king in a sedan, bearing the weight of it on their elbows. They poured a tiny bit of it into Bradshaw’s cup, barely able to lift it up again to keep it from overflowing. Luckily, no large ‘foreign objects’ clogged up the hole, and so Bradshaw’s tea was ready. Farr watched from the side of the table closest to the library door, and as Bradshaw raised the cup to his lips, there was a loud explosion.

In the other room, Kershen fell to the floor, and Page could only look on in horror and swear, and pray to whatever that he could get out of here alive. Farr ran back into the library, and was greeted with a mess of ash, dust, and flying shredded pages, and an unconscious Kershen. Page lowered the rope down for her, and she climbed up rapidly, almost pulling Page down. The chefs ran into the room, followed closely by some guards, who saw Page attempting to lasso Kershen and take him up,

unsuccessfully. Bradshaw also walked in, accompanied by Roy and French.

The guards grabbed the rope down, and marched out of the room, presumably trying to find their way around the maze of a palace, on to the roof. Tarek, Joe, Mem and Johnny waited outside the palace, on top of Page's house, and Ullathorne and Kalivas were waiting in Farr's balloon, expecting three to return.

"Where's your other guy?" asked Kalivas, as Farr and Page clambered into the cabin after untying the rope.

"I'm trying not to think about that." said Page. "He'll be waking up soon."

"Did it not go well, then?" asked Kalivas, almost sarcastically, watching as the guards piled out of the library skylight, and running across the roof, one of them jumping and grabbing onto the ballast, hanging over the side. Farr leant over the side and bashed his closed hands with the statue, and the guard fell off, but the statue also fell out of her hands. The balloon was drifting back towards the skylight now, and the heavy statue fell through the roof, and hit Bradshaw on the back of the head, knocking him out.

Farr laughed. "Bullseye!"

"What?" asked Ullathorne.

“Dropped the statue on to Bradshaw’s head by accident. He looked out cold!” said Farr.

Kalivas looked at her sternly. “You mean to say we no longer have the statue. And now Bradshaw has it.”

“What statue?” asked Page.

“Oh, just this little statue that contained a rock that could kill anything that it touched.” said Kalivas, sarcastically once more.

“Hey, it was either that, or have a guard board the balloon! At least he’s gone, Kalivas.” said Farr, matching the level of passive-aggressiveness that seemed to hang around them.

“Can we all just calm down? Farr just needs to drop me off at my place, and then you can go and do what you want.” said Page.

Farr crossed her arms. “I don’t think I want to do that. I genuinely don’t want to be with you guys. Why should I help you?”

“Because you promised you would.” said Ullathorne.

“This is the real world, not your little sand-bubble. Promises don’t mean that much. Out here, we do things legally. Paper and pen, you see.”

“But there’s a system of honour as well.” said Page.

“Hey, old man, be quiet and take us to your place, then I can finally leave you all in peace.” said Farr, attempting to defuse her conversational time-bomb.

Page looked indignant at Farr, and a long silence followed.

“I wonder how Roy is.” said Ullathorne.

“Oh, do be quiet.” said Farr.

They reached their destination, and saw the four younger ones on the rooftop. Johnny and Mem were sitting by themselves, while Joe wrote in his book, and Tarek paced up and down, wondering if this was Page returning, or just a funeral procession for him.

“We’re all back!” said Farr.

“Kalivas! Ullathorne! So we’ll take Page and catch up with you guys when we go back to Dryden! Print those pamphlets!” said Tarek, excitedly anticipating the next section of his adventure.

Farr stepped up. “Well, about that, we’ve... I’ve decided to...” she said, trailing off as the seven people around her all stared at her, wanting her to keep her promise of giving the balloon to Ullathorne and Kalivas, and to guide them to Dryden to try and save the day, before Tarek and his crew brought reinforcements to help reclaim it from Stockdale.

Farr barely continued, her words under weight. "I'm going to... Oh, I don't have it in me. Goodbye, Page. Come on, you two. Let's go to Rigaud's and get those things printed."

All of them cheered, even Johnny, who had been staring at Farr because he thought everyone was looking at some facial oddity she bore, and had been trying to figure out what it was for the last ten minutes. Page stepped out of the balloon, and it took back off over them, expertly flown by Farr. She was a bit patronised, but also excited to finally be the hero of some story, no matter how little she was affected by it.

The five people on the roof all went back inside, and began to play games, and talk about their disparate lives, and Johnny and Page laid in each others arms as they fell asleep together, with Mem at the foot of the only bed, and Tarek and Joe on the chairs in the surprisingly well-furnished front room.

Back on the ground, Bradshaw was having an intimate moment by himself, a self-cooked dinner, in the privacy of his own room. He began humming a tune to himself, perhaps a Rigaud's anthem, maybe a Busbite ballad. He enjoyed these moments of peace, and loved to cook for himself for two main reasons. One, he was very good at it, and two, he wasn't going to be poisoned as much. Sometimes, he would disguise himself and go out to the marketplaces, and haggle, and try and save money, even

though now he had all the money of the kingdom, well, at least a great deal of it.

He had arranged to leave with a trio of balloons the following morning, and make his way over to Dryden for his first political trip, and hopefully introduce himself to Stockdale, and perhaps share their ambitions, as like-minded individuals. Also, it would give him a break from the constant hectic life of the palace, which, as much as he revered and would never willingly give up, he wished it would disappear. He never really wanted the responsibility, just the riches. But, he thought, it was just an occupational hazard. The following morning, he took one bite out of the non-lethal side of a poisoned muffin, drank two sips of acidic tea, in which the poison was concentrated at the bottom, managed to dodge a tile on the palace forecourt, rigged to explode, and left in his balloon, calling upon every non-palace guard to make their way over to the land of Dryden by foot, expecting them to find shelter and food for themselves on the journey, even over the mountains.

The guards had been out all night, looking for the people that were dropped off by the balloon. Unfortunately, so many of them had died from drinking Jethers that their search capacity was greatly decreased, so they slept, having not achieved their goal for the evening, and some of them even wanted to simply give up and join the A.B.C.

XXI - Above & Below

“It’s awfully high now.” said Kalivas, looking over the balloon for the first time since falling asleep last night. Farr and Ullathorne had taken turns piloting, chatting about various things, looking down as they rose over the Busby’s mountains, and saw a small town below them. Farr had explained there was a strangely-themed ski resort, Chumba Kumi-na-tano. Farr had mentioned she had spent a few winters there, meeting new people and generally having fun. However, she said, the green strips on the ground weren’t due to melting snow. They were due to overzealous Busby’s miners digging up anything they could stick a shovel into, and snow was absolutely ‘diggable’ for lack of a better word. Allegedly, Busbites flocked to the town centres, where Botton had installed snow cannons, which blew snow into the squares, letting anyone experience snow for themselves. Which wasn’t that much of a problem, but the snow melted, obviously, and the ground became totally waterlogged. So, the Busby’s miners did what they did best, and dug it out. So much, in fact, that the city of Busby’s sank an extra ten meters, on average, into the bottom of the valley it was already in.

Ullathorne was fascinated by seemingly pointless stories like this. Knowing things that were told to him by people who weren’t Stockdale made it seem like there was an infinite amount of these stories, and these experiences that other people had had. His mind spanned at the dizzying reality of it all, of the hundreds of thousands of people

that were out there, of the forces that governed their lives, of their borders, of their rulers, and the dizzying height of the balloon.

“We’re going to go down to Rigaud’s now,” said Farr. “Wake Kalivas up properly. He doesn’t look ready.”

“Ready for what?” asked Ullathorne.

Farr looked over her shoulder, still with hands on the controls. “Trust me, it’s quite... raucous down there. Yeah. A bit feisty. Oh, that reminds, me, do you have any money on you?”

“Just a few, uh... coins. From Busby’s.” said Ullathorne, having bartered and traded his whole life, not really understanding what value simple pieces of metal could have. Apparently you could buy a house with just a few thousand of paper slips. He thought it quite strange.

“Alright, count it, keep it safe. They’re worth a lot more here than most other places.”

“Why?”

Farr turned back towards the front of the cabin. “I don’t really know either. But trust me on that one too.”

The balloon lowered, to the sounds of the street of Rigaud’s. Paint splattering throughout the rooms, a thousand typewriters clicking away in a disconnected unison, and people making things to their hearts content,

free from criticism, well, at least free from consequence-free criticism. The people of Rigaud's were at odds with one another, attempting to outdo each other's particular art, be it in terms of scale or violence, or their immersive potential, there was always competition. Even between the two-dozen 'home-crafted' brands of oat flakes, there was a fierce rivalry, and it drove everyone to try their hardest, for fear of quite literally starving to death.

Farr descended upon the town even faster, and landed just outside the one of the central 'blobs' it was comprised of. Even between these blobs, which all followed the same loose structure of government, there was competition. Sporting teams threw javelins across the plains, competing with each other representing their blob-sub-town, and getting dangerously close to the balloon. It landed, and then took off again, Farr not wanting to come back to a deflated mess. She got out of it, alongside Kalivas and Ullathorne, and pulled it along by hand, almost floating away a few times when the wind picked up a bit. It was slightly raining, too, and she didn't want the rain to damage the balloon, but deflating it wouldn't be an option. So her only real choice was to walk into the city with it attached to her, or risk it being stolen or punctured out here.

Kalivas said. "Are you sure this is okay?"

"Yes." said Farr, watching upwards as the balloon floated through one of the streets, lightly bouncing against third-storey balconies and windowsills. "Now, look, here's that printing company, I think. Well, it was here last time, and

they change their offices all the time. Some rent dodging tactic, apparently. Yep, that's the one. Pre-Emptive Printing."

Kalivas and Ullathorne walked inside, leaving Farr outside in the rain, even though she was mostly sheltered by the balloon. People walked past, often commenting on the 'cool art piece she was wearing'.

"Wow, when's your exhibition coming?" said one.

"I don't have one, I'm not even a Rigaudite."

"Oh. Well, you should at least have an exhibition."

"Where would I... make one?"

"I know someone who organises these things. But she's away right now, I think she's gone way over to Sutcliffe."

"Oh." said Farr, and just as she said that, the person ran off through the rain, as if nothing had happened. She heard the sounds of fire crackling, for what reason it was crackling she could not discern, nor did she want to. Inside the building, Kalivas and Ullathorne walked up to the front desk, and just before Ullathorne rang the bell for service, a man popped up from under the table.

"Hello, and welcome to Pre-Emptive Printing! How can I help you today?"

“We’re looking to have some flyers printed, we’ve got some text for you,” said Kalivas, presenting some scribbled notes which he had written over the course of the past few days. “Don’t worry if you need some time. We’ve got a day or so we can wait.”

“Oh, a Drydenite rebellion? Name of rebel leader, Stockdale, name of religion, Ducc, name of... oh, yes, we’ve got this one on file, I think.”

“On file?” asked Ullathorne.

“Yes, on file. It means we’ve got some just like it, pre-emptively printed for you.”

“But it can’t be the same. This has just happened over the last two weeks.” said Ullathorne.

“Two weeks? We had these printed... oh, let’s see... six years ago. Don’t know why we’ve held on to them. Lucky we threw out the ones which had your enemy’s name down as Stockton. fifty-fifty chance, I guess.”

Kalivas leaned on the desk. “Can you like, tell the future, or something? Is this how it works? You violate the laws of the universe to print some damn leaflets?”

“You don’t like how they look?” said the man. “We’ve got different ones on file, there’s a green one if you’d prefer.”

“No, orange is fine. But how did you know we’d need this?”

“We didn’t.”

“So why’d you print it?”

“To give our customers the greatest sense of satisfaction when their prints arrive as soon as they describe what happened.”

“Is there a printout for my biography then?”

“Maybe. Depends on how much we can extrapolate from all the data we get from our files.”

The two of them stood in stunned silence for a few seconds.

Ullathorne broke the silence. “So you don’t just guess every future, you predict the likely outcomes?”

“Oh yes, and usually when we get it wrong, it’s not our fault. Misreported data from College or something like that. We’re surprised we got as much information about Dryden as we got, considering we only have one informant.”

“Who’s he?” asked Kalivas.

“That’s a private matter. You can become an informant if you like, you can get paid-”

“Oh no, I think we’re fine.” said Ullathorne, with Kalivas nodding in agreement. But I would like to buy all the books you have on the future- well, history of Dryden.

“How much do you have?” asked the man.

“Quite a lot.” said Kalivas.

“Oh, you’ll need a lot more than quite a lot. Even for one, they’re quite expensive.”

“Fine. We’ll take the leaflets I wanted and one future book.” said Kalivas, looking at the man intently. He sighed.

“Fine, make it two books.”

Having passed over them as they waited for their leaflets, Bradshaw’s express balloon had made it all the way over to the far side, to near where College and Dryden were. He had refused to pilot the balloon himself, instead opting for one of the remaining guards to fly him across. The guard, who had never flown a balloon for, volunteered out of fear that he would be executed if he refused. Now, several hundred meters above the ground, he was wondering if death by execution would have been less painful than the inevitable death by balloon crash he was going to cause. ‘Nothing would happen too quickly’, he thought, standing right at the front of the balloon. ‘Nothing that I can’t ask Bradshaw to help with.’

All of a sudden, out from beneath the clouds, came a walled city, one that looked pretty much like the place he was told to land at. Of course, this far up, it wasn't obvious to him that the walls read 'College' but he just wanted to land in a safe-looking spot before anything too bad happened.

"Bradshaw." he said. "Bradshaw." he continued, with ever so slightly more volume, but not enough to make him think he was shouting, or even showing the slightest bit of anger.

He walked to the back of the balloon. This shifted the balance so much that the basket tilted, and one of the fixings of the balloon came loose. Nothing too bad had happened yet, according to the guard, as he hadn't seen or felt anything. Bradshaw was lying, face up on his mattress at the back of the balloon, under some covers, with an eye-mask to help him sleep.

"Bradshaw, we're here." he said, shaking Bradshaw very gently. At this point, a second rope broke, and the basket tilted much more, tipping the guard on top of Bradshaw, who woke up, pushing the guard off.

"Oh, were you trying to kiss me in my sleep?" said Bradshaw, indignant. "Well, I'm very flattered, but-" he said, noticing the ropes dangling above, and sensing the angle of the basket.

Bradshaw screamed, and leapt up from under the covers, and frantically began to put on his royal clothes.

“I can’t die like this!” he shouted. “How far up are we?”

“I have no idea.” the guard responded.

“Well, can you check?” said Bradshaw, searching in his luggage for his crown, not realising his screaming had been replaced with the screams of those below him, and rapidly approaching him.

As the guard looked over the side, the balloon came crashing down near the centre of the town, damaging a top-floor apartment, which Fred had bought a few days prior, after being convinced to do so by Hawken. The balloon scraped and bashed itself down the side of the building, maiming a few balconies along the way. Pretty much no-one was at home, so no one was hurt in the process, very much except the guard, who fell out of the basket, two stories before it crashed to the ground. Bradshaw was tangled up in his clothes and robes, and managed to stay inside the basket until it reached the ground.

Hawken, who was just on his way to work, waiting for Fred to meet him, saw the commotion and ran over to help, slightly scared, having never seen anything that big fly so high, and then fall so fast. The guard stood up, and then collapsed again, and was attended to by a few market traders who had wheeled their carts out of the way in anticipation of the crash.

Bradshaw also tried to get up, but lacking the ability to move, he wriggled out of his robes and grabbed his crown once more, and walked around, looking like he had just touched down gracefully.

He walked up to Hawken and asked him, “Where is Stockdale?”

Hawken took a moment to think. If this strange man, coming in via a very expensive (he assumed) synthetic flying machine, then he would presumably be someone powerful.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” asked Hawken, whose confidence had grown significantly since coming to College. He would never have been able to think of that so quickly if he had stayed in Dryden.

“Who am I? I’m Bradshaw, new king of Busby’s.”

“King, you say?” said Hawken, assuming that Bradshaw had been fooled into believing he was king of another one of these towns. “Well, yes, I am Stockdale.” he continued, wanting to have a bit of a laugh, pretending to be someone who he wasn’t. Fred had walked out of the apartment building, looking angry.

“Well, Stockdale, I’ve heard a lot of good things about you. Taking over College, and ruling over this place just fine. This is Dryden, right?”

“Well, yes, of course.” said Hawken, trying to get Fred to play along.

“Are you the guy who smashed my house in?” said Fred.

Bradshaw pointed to the unconscious guard, stretched out over a market table, being attended to. “No, no. He was piloting. I was just trying to... er... save myself. I really hit my head hard though, so I’m not feeling so good.”

“Save yourself? Not feeling so good? So much for my bloody house, mate.”

Hawken stepped forward and stopped Fred from initiating a fight, not that he would have lost, but he didn’t want the paperwork, and he didn’t want Lisa to have to fill out any forms either.

“Look, guys, we can figure this out later.”

“Oh yeah, what would you know about this guy, Hawken?”

“I thought you were called Stockdale.” said Bradshaw.

“I am. It’s his nickname for me. Used to have a pet hawk.” said Hawken, looking at Fred, pleading him to play along with this strange man, just to see what adventures they could have.

“Ah, I see,” said Bradshaw, failing to pick up on their not-so-secret signals. “So, I’ve come to offer my services to you in exchange for some trade, some goods, and perhaps one day, we can rule all the kingdoms together. What do you say to that?”

“Um, sure.” said Hawken, trying to contain his laughter.

Bradshaw turned around. “I’ll just go and get my robes from the other balloon...” he said, before realising the other balloons were nowhere to be seen. He turned around once more. “Never mind. So, what’s your grand scheme for this place, eh? Subvert, convert? All that stuff?”

“Oh, yeah.” said Hawken. “We’ve got this place under wraps. Total security. Everyone’s with us now, they’re all cheery with us.”

He waved over to a random passer-by in the street, and she waved back, eagerly. “I saw you at that party last week! I loved your singing!”

Hawken laughed, “You too!”, and then turned back to Bradshaw. They love me.

“But surely they should fear you?” asked Bradshaw.

“Oh, they do, on the inside.” said Hawken, suddenly surprising Fred by screaming at him, causing Fred to jump back.

“I see.” said Bradshaw. “Alright, so can you just show me around while I wait for the other two balloons to come.”

The three of them walked around the town, close to where the restaurant was. Outside of the town was Stockdale, having wandered in the correct direction towards College, and not following the Drydenite tradition of getting lost on their way out.

Hawken turned around at the main arch, and spoke to Bradshaw at length about the city, explaining how it worked, and every so often, reassuring him he had it under control.

Bradshaw asked once more, “Are you sure you’ve got this place to yourself? These people look awfully peaceful. They don’t appear as subservient as your enemies told me.”

“Well, fear not.” said Hawken. “We’ve got this place in the bag.” said Hawken, and also Stockdale, shouting to his group of followers outside the city. Hawken turned around, and shouted, “Stockdale?!”, then quickly covered his mouth in regret.

Bradshaw wondered how weird this custom of calling someone using your own name was, not before realising that maybe that was Stockdale, over there.

“Hawken?” shouted Stockdale, who began to walk faster, over to the arch. “Good to see you’re still alive! How’s the takeover going?”

Bradshaw said, "Alright, which one of you is Stockdale?"

Both of them said it was them, right at the same time.

"No, I'm Stockdale." said Stockdale.

"I'm Stockdale." said Hawken.

"And I'm Stockdale, too." said Fred, walking up to the three of them.

Bradshaw shouted, "Alright, this isn't fair for me. Who is actually Stockdale here, with at least one person who is not them to back it up. I bet none of you are actually Stockdale."

"No, I promise I am Stockdale." said Fred and Stockdale, virtually simultaneously.

"Alright, I know it can't be you, whoever you are, because I saw him (pointing at Hawken) say that he was Stockdale and you (now pointing with the other arm at Fred in a strangely dominant way) agreed with him." said Bradshaw.

At this moment, of which there had already been many today, Lisa saw Hawken, and ran over to greet him, using the name Hawken, and asking him how his job was going along. Hawken wasn't prepared to stare Lisa down in the same way as Fred to get her to play along, and so he just accepted his loss and moved on.

“So what? I’m not Stockdale!” said Hawken, with Bradshaw finally lowering his arms, still looking somewhat confused. “I shouldn’t have to explain any more than that. I thought you were some crazy man that had come here intending to rule over us all as a king!”

“You came here for the exact same reason.” said Lisa. Stockdale turned to Hawken and looked down at him slightly proudly, but it was heavily masked underneath his veil of disappointment in him. “Something about Quacc, right?”

Stockdale corrected Lisa. “Oh, no, it’s actually Ducc. With two c’s. It’s very different to-”

“Nope, definitely Quacc.” said Lisa, assertive and unflinching as she was behind the desk.

“Hawken? You formed a splinter group? A faction? You know that’s not allowed in the Ducc scripts. In fact, it is a terrible crime, one of the highest order. So I, unfortunately, will have the honour of executing you for crimes against the state of Dryden.” said Stockdale, signalling something to his group of guards, which stood around the mothers and children he had intended to also bring to the town. “Find any Quacc-believers you can and question them about this place and their horrid sect. Take them outside the city walls and bring them back to me, here. Then we can deal with them.”

One of the Drydenites piped up. "By deal with them, do you mean kill them, or talk to them?"

"I'll reveal that later." said Stockdale.

"But why not now?" said the Drydenite.

"Look, just go and round them up. That's an order." shouted Stockdale, watching the troops file into the city, chasing Hawken, Lisa and Fred, leaving the unarmed mothers behind.

"You here." said Stockdale, addressing them. "You have been selected as Dryden's best. You are young, and mostly fertile. Like the land that Dryden is on. And you will go into that town, once we have successfully invaded it. And this man, that man over there, Bradshaw, he will help us take it over, because while he may not be big on Ducc, he does share a lot of our values."

"I do?" asked Bradshaw.

"You do. Of course." said Stockdale. "Now, why don't you come back to our base camp, just over there, and talk over everything?"

"Of course." said Bradshaw. "But let me talk to my guard first... ah, he's not here. Don't worry then."

Hawken ran into his building, and closed the door behind him, showing the other two the way into his apartment.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be safe in here.” said Hawken, knowing how bad the Drydenites were at finding things.

Lisa smiled at Hawken. “I just wanted to come and say hi, I didn’t realise anything was going on with you guys.”

“Come on Hawken, we should be at work now.” said Fred.

“We aren’t usually being chased by Drydenite guards,” said Hawken, “So be grateful we’re not in a worse place than where we are now. Sorry, Lisa, where were you?”

“I just wanted to spend my day off with you.” said Lisa.

Hawken looked surprised. “Day off? I didn’t know you had a day off.”

“Oh no, Mann came down and said I had worked here for forty years exactly now, so I could have another day off.”

Lisa seemed to be smiling at that fact. Hawken, however, was infuriated. Fred felt indifferent, and admittedly quite hungry.

“Forty years? I thought you said thirty?” said Hawken.

“Well, it’s kind of the same, right? It’s a long time, that’s all.”

“That’s not all!” Hawken put his arms up. “Mann is using you. He’s been using you for his own ease of life. You’re the real king of this place. You control what we all see and do, our jobs, you file all our data, our logbooks, our clocking in and out, you see to it all, almost alone, due to the fact no one wants to work with you, or ever replace you. And it’s only this way because Mann doesn’t want anyone to replace you. Because you’re his engine. His fuel for his reign. What does he do again? Tell me all of his jobs.”

“He counts the votes.” said Lisa.

“He counts the votes.” said Hawken, slightly sarcastically. “But how do you think he counts them?”

“Not fairly.” said Lisa. “But why should I care? For all I know, the new guy could be worse. I mean, over the years I have seen too many candidates. All of them definitely too weird for me.”

“But you have to have change sometimes. You get that, don’t you? What’s happened to you? I thought you wanted to take over the world with me? I thought you had ambition?”

“When you said you were happy here, I felt like the best thing to do was just let you get on with your life, and maybe ask you for a small favour, like a day off from Mann. You would have been happy, like I was.”

“But why keep yourself down? Why continue to be a cog?”

“Because I never wanted to disturb anyone.”

Hawken sighed, and took a deep breath. “Alright, we’re going to see Mann.”

“But what about the guards?” said Lisa.

“Don’t mind the guards.” said Hawken. “We’ll be fine.”

The three of them walked out into the city, and walked down side alleys and streets to get to Mann’s hall. They didn’t speak at all, Hawken slowly stewing in anger, and Lisa slowly realising the situation she was in, and how she had wasted the last forty years of her life. She was almost sixty now. She had aged both mentally and physically, beyond her years, beyond any reasonable expectation. She had no mirror, no reference point to anchor her reality down to. There was just paper, and more paper. Eventually, reaching the peak of their collective frustration, they reached the hall and knocked on the door. Mann answered, sticking his head out of the door meekly, in front of marble busts and large paintings.

“What do you want?” said Mann. “And why are you here? I thought you’d want to spend your day off doing something you liked more.”

“Truth is, I don’t know what I like anymore, thanks to you.” said Lisa, putting her foot in the door, both physically and conversationally.

“What?” said Mann, who then tried to close the door. “Please, can you just go and do something else. I don’t have time for this.”

“I think you’ll find you do.” said Hawken. “Let us in.”

“Oh, look.” said Mann. “What do you even want?”

“I want to have a day off.” said Lisa, with Hawken angrily correcting her.

“No, she needs to stop work entirely. She’s been the only one down there in the office for years. No one had ever replaced her. She’s got her own dreams and desires.”

Hawken turned to Lisa. “Don’t settle for another day off. You can get much more out of life.”

“No, if she wants another day off she can have one.” said Mann. “Next week, to ease the load on her assistant. Come on, go now.”

“No.” said Hawken, wedging his foot into the door, too.

The woman that Hawken had talked to earlier came around, and asked Hawken what he was up to.

“Get the other Drydenites. Stay away from any of Stockdale’s troops. Come here. We’re going to get in here and make Mann give Lisa her freedom.”

She wished she hadn’t asked, and as Mann began to try and pull the door closed with all his weight, the door handle broke off. A voice came from inside.

“Is everything alright, sir?”

Hawken recognised the man; he was a Drydenite, and not a Stockdale-influenced one at that. He called out to him, asking him to come downstairs. Hawken opened the door fully, and looked over Mann, who was getting up.

“Don’t come in or I will set my guards on you.” said Mann.

“Which guards? The Drydenite ones who are here because they thought they’d be in a palace?” said Hawken. “Hey, you! Up there! Come down! Let us through.”

“Why’s that?”

“Mann lied to all of us. He lied to Lisa, kept her in almost slavery-”

“She was getting paid for her work! It’s not slavery!” shouted Mann, moving backwards. “Get them!” he screamed to the guards.

The guards, which had amassed at the top of the stairs in the foyer, did not move.

“He lied to us! He fakes the votes! He’s not a democratic leader, he’s a tyrant, living off our struggle!” said Hawken, as one of the Drydenites ran down the stairs, delicately carrying a drink on a tray.

“Your cocktail, sir.” he said, not realising what was going on, and then moving swiftly back to the kitchen, shuffling past the guards.

Hawken pointed at Mann. “See, look! I told you-”

Mann smashed his drink on the ground, and walked up the stairs, expecting the guards to part for him. Instead, they blocked him, and encircled him once he started retreating.

“Haven’t counted the votes, eh?” said a guard.

“And what’s all this about keeping that poor woman in her job for years?” said another. Mann, not wanting to give up yet, ran through two smaller guards and to the top of the stairs. The guards quickly followed, bogged down by ceremonial armour, and soon, Fred, Hawken and Lisa followed too.

Hawken quickly turned around. “Fred, can you organise the Drydenites. Make sure they’re okay. Make sure all of them are fine, and that the Stockdale ones don’t mess up

anything. Lisa and I will try and get Mann to let her retire, or do what she wants.”

Fred went back outside, and shut the door behind him, and saw his boss, on his way to the restaurant.

The boss walked up to him. “Why aren’t you at the restaurant?”

“I have something important to do; something with Mann. Just trust me, stick around here for a while. It’s going to be interesting, just you wait.”

“But the place opens in twenty minutes, and there’ll be people wanting breakfast soon.”

“Please, just trust me. I’ll have my morning off. Just the morning. Honestly, this is for Hawken and his friends.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I care. Don’t know about what in particular, but I feel now that this is my business. I’m glad I stuck by Hawken earlier, actually. He’s shown me that Mann is worthy of criticism, and maybe not as good as he seems.”

His boss sighed. “Well, I guess we have worked pretty well. Alright, I’ll close us for breakfast, but be back by lunchtime.”

“I promise.”

“Alright.” said the boss, walking off, looking at some people carrying the fabric of the balloon into the palace, to be repaired.

“Thank you!” said Hawken, not quite sure if the boss heard him. He didn’t care too much, though.

Upstairs, the guards had followed Mann out into the upstairs area, and he then made a rash decision to run out onto the balcony, essentially trapping him. Thankfully, he had locks installed on both the inside and the outside, to stop any attackers from, well, attacking him, perhaps while he was doing a speech. Thankfully, until now, there had been no use for those extra locks.

A spear broke one of the bottom windows, and a hand reached through to open the locks. Mann kicked the hand into the glassy, broken edges of the panel, and the head which was connected to the man screamed loudly, pulling the arm back, making the cut much worse.

Hawken stepped up to the window as Mann moved down the balcony. “Why are you hiding? Do you have something to hide?”

Mann didn’t respond, and in response to his lack of response, they kicked the door in, and found Mann, at the edge of the balcony, having attracted quite a crowd below. Fred was at the back of this crowd, calling the Drydenites to him, and to safety, away from Stockdale’s forces, and into the palace.

More and more people came to the town square, seeing what Mann's shouting was all about.

"Alright, what do you want? You can all have a holiday, we'll just close the town for a week or so. Anything. Seriously. Anything."

"We want you to show us the real votes." said Hawken.

Mann looked slightly less horrified. "Go on then, go get the files. They're in a cupboard in my office." He took a key out of his pocket and kicked it across the ground. Hawken picked it up, looking at Mann as he did.

"Alright, I'll be back in a second." he said, running to Mann's office, being led by some guards who knew the corridors better than he did. Outside the palace, the amount of Stockdale's soldiers seemed to grow and grow, trying to find Drydenites, and occasionally attacking the odd College resident. Fred had directed a few more of them inside, but he thought the others would likely be doing their jobs. He walked back inside the palace, having not seen anyone for a few minutes, and as he watched Mann on the balcony, alongside some of his guards, he wondered what was going on up there.

Hawken had found the files, and had run upstairs without bothering to open them. The two guards carried a large sack of tiny paper slips up, too, presumably votes. They strode on to the balcony once more, opening the register book, Hawken saw by each name a tick or cross,

marking their vote. He kept turning the pages, and began shouting to the crowd.

“Mann has falsified the votes! There’s no way he could have been in power for this long! And before me, I have the real votes, which we are going to count. Not all of them, that would take too long. But we’ll see who votes for who!”

Hawken flicked through the pages, and saw nothing but Mann votes, and so he threw it to the ground, and picked up some vote cards.

“Here’s a vote for Durno! And here’s another! Look! People do vote other things!” The crowd listened intently, wondering why this man was ranting on about the votes.

“He’s got a vote here, I’ll give you that.” said Hawken, pointing at Mann. He picked up another handful and ran through them. All Mann. A few others scattered here and there, but all Mann. All verified, all checked by Lisa, with her stamp and signature at the bottom. Hawken called Lisa forward to check if it was her signature. The crowd was silent as Mann stopped reading out the votes, realising the truth behind them.

“Are you sure these are all real?” asked Mann.

Lisa stood in front of him. “They’re all real.”

Hawken shouted. “Then why are... what?”

“People like him. They like where they are.” said Lisa.

Hawken looked at her blankly. He turned to the crowd and said, “Hands up if you voted for Mann.”

The crowd raised their arms in unison.

Hawken took the bag of votes, and sank his hand into it, reaching for the bottom. He pulled out a fistful of votes, and threw them into the crowd. He started emptying the bag out over the railing, and a guard stopped him as he was about to launch the vote book into the crowd, too.

“Look, we voted for him. There’s not much we can do about it now. Just wait until the next election.”

Hawken looked at the guard and shouted. “When’s the next election, then?”

“Three years.”

Hawken shouted in anger once more, the crowd now massive, and focused on every noise Mann and this strange man made.

“No! No! You see, this isn’t right! You shouldn’t be happy with just him! We need someone who works for the city, not rules over it. Lisa here,” he said, addressing the crowd, “has worked every year, every day since forty years ago, and she has worked for all of you. You may see her as that woman from the immigration office, and you may hate her. I sure did when I first saw her. She

had an awful temper. But have you ever thought that maybe, just maybe, something caused that? She's a lovely person. But Mann decided, long ago, he wanted her to be the load bearer. She would do every job under the sun. Every. Single. One. And she has got a day off today, her first in ten years. Mann cannot be allowed to keep on doing this."

The crowd did not cheer, nor did they boo. They stood in silence, not knowing how to react. No one had done this before. No one had bothered to replace Mann, as they liked it so much the way things were. They were too in their ways to realise that they could be better off if they did new things, not sticking with the job they were assigned long ago. The sweet covering which kept them from realising this was the system of housing and food Mann had given them. Of course, there was good to be found in this actions, but it was for a deeply selfish reason. Mann just wanted to relax.

"Well, I think that's enough." said Mann. "The crowd has spoken." he continued, laughing.

Hawken stepped forwards. "Get me his crown."

"What?" said Mann, and some of the guards.

"Go into his office again, and get his crown."

"It's not in his office." said a guard.

“Well, just get it.” shouted Hawken, edging forwards towards Mann.

The guards ran to Mann’s room, locked as usual, and retrieved their battering ram from the barracks downstairs in order to deal with the door.

Outside the city, Bradshaw and Stockdale had decided how they were going to carve up College, and how to rule over it, and they had discussed using the power of Ducc to control the people. Bradshaw had noticed a small dot on the horizon, followed by many more dots. Within minutes, the dots were at the edge of the town, and Bradshaw realised who they were.

“Busbites! Busbites! Hello! It’s me, Bradshaw! Follow me!”

Stockdale followed Bradshaw as the mass of soldiers stood outside the town, unnoticed by the College guard, who had all amassed in the town square, ready to arrest Hawken when he exited the palace. Fred stood on the inside of the palace door, with the small band of Drydenites, who were ready to protect the door, should anyone run out. The last thing they expected was the door to be opened from the outside, and in rushed the College guards, who fought them up the stairs, slowly. More and more of them filed into the room, and they gained ground, step by step, on the stairs.

The other guards were busy with Mann’s crown, having found it, slightly squashed, underneath the broken door.

They took it upstairs hurriedly, and walked out onto the balcony, handing it to Hawken.

“Now, Mann. Give this crown to Lisa. She should be the rightful king of College, since she does your job.” said Hawken.

“Give me the crown then.”

“How do I know you won’t just hold on to it?”

“I promise.” said Mann. “Seriously, I have no other option. I have to crown Lisa by giving her the crown from my own hand. We both have to be touching the crown for it to... um... transfer the power. It’s a ritual thing, I’m sure you’ll understand.”

Hawken thought about it, watching more people file into the town, all sorts of people, really. Eventually, the crowd watched and gasped as Mann took the crown from Hawken’s outstretched arm, and tossed it into the crowd below.

A voice from below said. “Oh, that’s nice, a crown.”

Hawken looked over in horror, and saw Stockdale, right in the centre of the square, surrounded by Busbite guards and Duccists, pushing the regular Collegians away. Bradshaw pointed to the roof of the building, and said something to Stockdale privately.

Stockdale said, "So, I'm king now? That's it? Well, that was easy. Come on, Bradshaw, give the order."

Bradshaw signalled to his troops, and they marched around the town square, blocking off all the exits, and rounding up people in buildings. No one could put up a fight except the College guard, who were too busy fighting Fred and the other Drydenites up the stairs. They had reached the room that led on to the balcony now, and saw Hawken outside, making a charge for him.

Hawken ran up to Mann and tried to tackle him, but as he leapt and Mann ducked, someone leapt through the balcony door, and slammed into him, covering them both in shards of broken glass. Hawken managed to get out from underneath the College guard, who then took Mann to safety. The others were inside, waiting for him. Fred, and all the Drydenites, both palace guard Drydenites and the ones he had found in the street, managed to miss the attacks of the College guard, who lost them up the stairs to the roof. On the roof, they were testing out the balloon that Bradshaw had brought, and some were mounted on tall ladders, inspecting the inflated balloon for leaks.

Hawken saw the balloon, and having seen all sorts of images of them adorning posters he had on his walls, knew it was for getting places. He had always wanted to travel, but never like this. The College guard had caught many escaping Drydenites, and so, Hawken and Lisa, unburdened by armour, managed to make it to the top of the building, wondering where Fred was. Fred was at the

bottom of the final flight of stairs, having got to the top with them already.

Pressing himself up against some doors, he shouted, "Go! Go! I can't hold them much longer!"

"But you can't leave us and the other Drydenites!"

"Don't worry! I have a plan." said Fred.

"No, no you don't." said Hawken. "We just got here."

"Look, do you want to get in the balloon, or not?" said Fred.

"It's just too selfish, with everyone else here that needs saving."

"I saw them all go down, Hawken." shouted Fred, barely able to keep the College guard at bay, at least the ones who weren't rounding up all the kinds of Drydenites (Stockdale's lot and Hawken's lot), or trying to quell the uprising on the streets. The streets of College were at breaking point, with citizens being told to leave their homes, so that the Busbites and Drydenites could pick their own houses. That was an idea of Stockdale's that Bradshaw had liked quite a lot, and with the might of the Busbite army, it seemed to be happening quite quickly.

Hawken and Lisa climbed into the balloon, and they cut the rope, and as they took off, they unintentionally brushed the ladders off of the balloon, causing someone

to fall and hit the town centre, from at least seven storeys up. They weren't alive, exactly, not that the Busbites cared, who scooped the mush up, dumping it outside the city walls with the rest of the evacuated populace. The College guards, who were leaking back on to the streets, immediately let go of their prisoners, instead choosing to fight against the Busbites, who were removing old people from their homes and making them walk to the city walls, in the evening light.

Hawken and Lisa took off very slowly, and Lisa began to pilot the balloon.

"Are you sure you know how to pilot this thing?"

"I've studied every diagram, and had to safety-assure all the latest models that the people here design. So yes, I do know how to fly it." said Lisa, followed by a sharp judder. The balloon was still tied to the roof. Lisa leaned over, and tried to untie the knot.

"It's no good, it's stuck." she said, just as Fred came running up the stairs, a band of College guards behind him. "Fred! Cut the rope and try and jump on, if you can!"

"I've only got this kitchen knife." said Fred, taking it out, and deftly cutting the rope, as if he had done it a hundred times. He began to climb the rope, and he shuffled up as if his life depended on it, and it probably did.

As Hawken lifted Fred into the basket, they watched College slowly fall, and watched the groups of people gathered outside, and as they lit fires, being sorted into groups, they knew Mann's time was over. Mann himself stood on the balcony still, unaffected, almost forgotten by the world. It felt nice to be here, and soon, he would use that balloon to get out of the city in time, and as he watched it drift off, not containing him, he looked rather puzzled, and then screamed.

"No! Come back!"

Hawken thought he heard the sounds of people being murdered. He just sank to the bottom of the basket and sat there, waiting to be far, far away from College, but still looking back on his time fondly.

Lisa was not looking back so fondly. Now nearly sixty, she would have to find work somewhere else, perhaps in one of the many kingdoms she had read about. At least it wouldn't be filing, she thought. She could be a florist, or an artist, or perhaps a tour guide. She had loved the books she had read on the other kingdoms and their histories, and wanted to travel, as did Fred, but Fred just wanted a holiday again, after his visit to Grant's last year ended up with him forgetting the entire ordeal due to copious amounts of beer. He even felt sick about it now, just remembering the endless deathly time, after the events had gone down.

And the sun set on Mann's world, too, as he was taken from his palace as Bradshaw and Stockdale walked in,

and ordered the crown to be cut in half, and formed into two matching bracelets. At first, Stockdale had been hesitant of this idea, but liked it, since he would finally had a proper crown, or at least something made of a proper crown. And, just like his proper crown, he would have a proper kingdom to rule. He would go back and tell the people of Dryden to move all they had here, but still keep watch over Dryden, just to make sure. He would appoint hundreds of the College people to rake the sand border, and then have them police themselves into staying within it. It would link up with Dryden's border, and have fires burning, that would mark out the edges at night, guiding the two towns together. He had big plans for the expansion of Dryden, too. But he thought it was too far away now to be thinking about, and so he tried on the crown bracelet for size.

It fit perfectly.

XXII - Tunnel, Part Two

After being left by Kalivas, Ullathorne and Farr, the others decided to spend another night in the city, upstairs in Page's room. The next day had been spent wandering around, surprisingly enough, given that they were being hunted viciously last night, and a bounty had probably been put on Page's head. The markets of Busby's were generally vibrant and bustling, but something about the people who ran the stands signified that this time was to come to an end soon. According to a few traders they had spoken to, Bradshaw had imposed a few taxes on them that would make their lives harder. In other parts of the town, there were musicians who had been forced to play the national anthem in squares, apparently to 'improve morale'. It seemed to be doing quite the opposite. Over in the corner of the market, a few guards which still remained rounded up a sword-wielding man who was cutting fruit, saying that his actions were 'a public nuisance, and dangerous'.

"No!" shouted Page. "The famous Joaquin of the Sword! He's been doing this routine for years. Some of his stuff is genuinely amazing, he does this whole juggling with watermelons thing, and-"

Johnny pointed to the other part of the market. "Look!" he shouted. "Over there! There's Luna!" Indeed, there was Luna, fully recovered from her earlier incident, and with a new set of handlers attached. She reared her head, and began to paw at the ground, and some of the

handlers looked up, not paying much attention to Johnny and the other fugitives, but instead tending to the pawing arm, trying to turn Luna's head away from whatever was bothering her. The last thing anyone needed was Luna destroying the market.

Around thirty seconds later, Luna had charged through a significant portion of the market, and was making her way towards an increasingly scared Johnny, alongside the four others with him. They ran, once more, ducking and weaving through small corridors and halls, but for every turn they took, Luna seemed to have a brute-force shortcut that was just as quick.

They were chased throughout Busby's, and eventually broke out onto the hills outside the city. They ran up a hill, trying to flee as far as possible, and perhaps hide outside for an hour or so, and then return to the city. They found a hatch, which Tarek pointed out had been wedged shut.

"We just came out of there, a few days ago." said Joe. "It got jammed, there's no use-"

Johnny interrupted Joe by banging on the door as hard as possible, thinking that that would change anything. It did, and now, as well as the barking from the foot of the hill, they could hear the screams of a bugbear from the inside of the tunnel, as well. Johnny, seemingly out of it, not caring about the noises, continued to bang, as Mem attempted to wrestle him off the door. The screaming became louder, and louder, as the bugbear ran towards

the door. Mem pulled Johnny away, and they landed on the grassy hillside. They heard a skitter and then a short scream as the bugbear hit the door after failing to grip on the bloodied floor, and the door burst open, and the bugbear rolled out, and everyone stood there, not quite knowing what to do.

“Everyone get in the tunnel.” said Page.

Joe looked willing, but concerned. “How would we get out again? We have no supplies.”

“I’ve got a map of the tunnels in my bag.” said Tarek.

“You lost your bag.” said Joe.

At this moment, Luna had stopped running up the hill, and was now sizing up the bugbear as it got to its feet. They both snarled, surprisingly similarly, and ran towards each other, the handlers frantically trying to unclip themselves and run back to Busby’s. Meanwhile, the five had climbed into the tunnel, and Joe had started up the main power for the light. The stench was horrible, as halfway up the corridor was a large pool of blood, presumably a mix of human and Bugbeast, and also a carcass, slowly festering in the dank air.

They walked round it, and decided the best course of action would not be to follow Tarek’s map which he could ‘clearly remember’, but instead to follow the ever-thinning trail of blood, which Joe insisted was human, despite the obvious paw-prints suggesting otherwise. The

path eventually led them to the tunnel base which Curran was still sitting in, bloodied, and almost starving, having carved out a bugbear to attempt to eat, combining the meagre flesh with whatever sauce he could salvage from Murphy's takings.

"Curran!" screamed Tarek. "You're actually alive!"

"I don't feel it." said Curran.

"Well, you're alive to us, and that's what matters." said Page.

"Page?" said Curran. "Is that you? I thought you got assassinated when Bradshaw started his campaign."

Page looked taken aback. "Assassinated? I didn't think I was important enough to be assassinated. Wow. Assassinated. I thought murdered would have been the case, but no."

"Well, you're alive." said Curran.

"And kicking. We tried to assassinate Bradshaw, but it sort of didn't work, and we're here to flee the Busbite guards. I don't think we were the only ones, though."

"Well, what are you going to do? Tarek's failed whatever he wanted to do, there's no helpful king anymore, and you've failed both your ideas, Page. No kingship and no murder? That's a double whammy." said Curran, clutching his shoulder in pain.

Page was mildly hurt by this, but willing to help Curran. "Are you alright? Looks like your shoulder is pretty gashed out."

"No, I'm fine."

Page laughed. "Ah, old stoic-man is coming out again. Glad to see you haven't changed since you were a rower."

"You've changed, though." said Curran. "You've gone and done things."

"Not successfully." said Page.

"Yeah, but at least you tried. I was just in balloon school or whatever until quite a few years ago, and then we got to fly some balloons for a bit, and I mean Farr and I did see the world, but it was never quite as fun as the stuff you did."

"I didn't do anything fun."

"Yes you did."

Looking down his shirt, Page said, "Alright, fine, maybe I did. Maybe that night up at Chumba-whatever was really worth it for the aching kidney pains I seem to have had..."

“Wasn’t just your kidneys.” said Curran, exhale-laughing.
“Well, whatever, that’s old history now.”

Page laughed, and his laugh faded slowly as he realised there were four other people in the room, who were all standing, silently, waiting for them to give instructions on where to go next.

“Oh, alright, the tunnels. Well, since I pretty much know the way to the tunnel we found Joe and Tarek at the end of, we can go that way. The only issue is, I can’t walk very well, and we smashed up the trolley in the door, so you’ll have to carry me in one of the baskets we had in here for repair. It should be in the cupboard to the left.

The cupboard was empty, and so the next best option, according to Curran, was to carry him on a table, each person with one table leg. This didn’t work, as Joe and Tarek failed to carry their allotted weight, and so Mem and Page had to be placed on opposite corner legs, with Tarek and Joe there as extra stability, in an attempt to keep Curran from sliding off. Page raided the boxes of supplies for medical equipment, but only ended up finding small pieces of fabric, which he attempted to wrap around Curran’s shoulder, which he refused, on the grounds that it had ‘scabbed up already’, which the blood seeping through his already blood-encrusted shirt begged to differ.

The five of them slowly, but surely made their way to the door, only to find that it had been removed from its hinges by the excessive wind of the storm, the rusty

joints giving way at some point. The only real issue was to climb down the mountainside now, and then, to Haklyut's, said Curran. There, he would be able to recruit someone to help them. Page argued against him, saying that taking a trip over to Liddell's would be the superior strategy. Plus, Phil still owed Page a favour after he didn't report him for being underweight for the yearly championships a few years back.

All three of them had been Grant's rowers at some point, and had all chosen to be Grant's rowers because, allegedly, they were the best. And if they weren't the best to start with, they were the best when they finally retired, one by one. Curran first, then Page, then Phil, only a few months ago now. Page was sure that Phil would be of assistance, rather than that Kingcombe guy, or whoever it was he was going on about.

The door led them out into the open world, in which they all excitedly climbed onto the now upturned table, expecting to be able to use it as a sled. They could, and they did.

They absolutely did, as long as the snow would permit, and even when it transitioned to wet, grassy ground, they still tried. Very wet, very cold, and very tired, the five of them arrived at Haklyut's, expecting a warm welcome.

XXIII - Travelling

Nirav felt a tiny bit neglected by his peers, after they had all flocked to Hartley, who told them exaggerated stories of Drydenite life, saying how backwards the place was, and his tales of farming while having to fend off wild beasts, cutting corn and heads off with the same wicked scythe. He just talked and talked, to no end, and he eventually took the cox's place, telling his stories with a sort of rhythm which helped the rowers keep their steady pace as they cruised back towards the delta. Hartley assured the cox that his directions would be fine, and they would find themselves at the correct side of the delta just fine. Just in case, the cox had brought a sailboat with him, which carried two smaller rowing boats, just in case the worst happened.

A few of the rowers sat, listening to Hartley's tales, while Nirav sat at the other end, lying, face up, in one of the rowing boats, trying to just zone out, and think about where Tarek and Joe were right now. Nirav had thought about Ducc a lot more, in the context of the wider world. He thought that if Ducc had been so great, then wouldn't the rest of the world have heard about it? He pondered these questions for a long time, and thought over and over about the origins of Ducc, and stopped to remember the world that Stockdale had created, and then subverted. The world of learning, and pipelines, and technology, and knowledge, and blissful worship of Ducc, and then the world of festivities, feasts, and slowing down, circling the black hole that would consume them

whole, with laziness in every aspect of their lives, except service to Stockdale, which was very clear to Nirav as not being part of the Ducc he had grown to love.

Perhaps he liked Ducc as a concept, a concept of an all-knowing, all-loving being. Someone to not give him guidance, but to remind him of his own actions, and give him time to think decisions over. He thought that the real Ducc was within him, created by what he thought Ducc should look like. As the boats pulled up to the Liddell's shoreline, there was a strange creature in the water next to the boat.

The cox told the duck to shoo, as he didn't want it to even think about touching any of their expensive rowing boats. Nirav asked him what it was.

"Oh, it's just a duck."

In all his years alive, Nirav had never seen a real duck, nor did he know that there was something the ducc he worshipped was based on. Forms of Ducc were crude, yellow, with stunted beaks, no legs to speak of, and continuous, smooth, moulded wings, which were static, and served no discernible purpose. The eyes were printed on, flat against the rubber skin, with a squeaker at the bottom.

But this, this was something much, much more than that. He took a look over the side of the boat, and saw the duck with his own eyes. A real life duck. Contoured feathers, seemingly blowing over the textured body, over wings that moved, shuffling in the indents they made in

the down, and with a neck which craned, so long, so slender, so seemingly perfectly formed. The eyes, black, beady, ball-like, suspended in a circle which was visible, detailed, right down to the tiny eyelashes, which Nirav could begin to see when he leaned further and further over the side of the boat. He got closer and closer to this tame thing, this infinitely tame being, and wanted to touch it, to feel how the feathers would be under his hand, to experience the sensation of touching what was to him, more than a deity, a symbol of everything that was good about the world.

And as he reached his arm out, he fell in the water, and as he lay underwater, having rolled out of the boat, he could see through the crystal clear water, the feet paddling away, and he rose from the depths, the movements of the webbed feet distorted by the waters above, but not darkened in any way. As he lifted his head above the water, another astonishing thing happened. It spread its wings and took off. He had always known Ducc could fly, but he never thought anything else could. The sky, as he had been taught, was Ducc's domain, and anything that was in it had to be a symbol of Ducc, but now, according to Nirav, this was anyone's domain.

As the duck flew up, joining the flock of others in the sky, forming a v-shape, and flying to better lands that Nirav now wanted to visit, the cox leaned over the side of the boat.

"What the hell did you just do?" he shouted.

“I just wanted to touch it, that’s all. I’m fine, we’re right by the lakeside anyway.” said Nirav, which prompted the cox to walk away, and begin to sail the boat inland a little more, for easier mooring. He then screamed once more.

“Hartley! This is Haykluts, not Liddell’s! Great, we’re going to have to cross the delta now.” said the cox, beginning to think of how he would sort this mess out. From the shoreline came a cry of excitement, and a small dot slid down from the top of a hill at an incredible speed. Page had mastered the art of grass-sledding, and was now attempting to get to Haykluts in one go, just so that he could quickly prove that Kingcombe was not worth visiting, and then go over the delta by... well... he hadn’t thought of that part yet, and it was probably better he hadn’t, because now, barrelling towards the rowers on the table, he thought he heard Tarek shout.

“Hartley! Is that you?” Tarek shouted, not quite being able to make out the familiar face in such an unfamiliar location.

“Tarek!” shouted Hartley in reply, and he got out of the boat, not realising there was water underneath. He sank in to the water to around knee depth, and then rose once more, soggy, but still no less enthusiastic to greet a fellow Drydenite. The sled slid to a halt on the unpleasantly rocky shoreline, and Tarek got up, trying to contain his laughter. The other four got up, and Page tended to Curran while Joe wrote in his book. Mem began skimming stones.

“Is that Nirav over there?” asked Tarek.

“Why, yes, it is. It’s great having-”

“Tell me everything that happened with Stockdale while I was gone.”

“But what about the-”

“Everything that happened after I left. I really need to know what’s going on.”

Mem skimmed a stone into Nirav’s head.

As Hartley waded out of the water and recounted the Code Of Ducc to Tarek, and the national anthem, and all of Stockdale’s various reforms on anything from their currency, to their border policy. Apparently, people were allowed to cross the border, but only with specific permission from him for the time being, while he expanded the border.

“Wow. I can’t believe how quick that all was. I bet he was planning it for years. Kalivas said something about it.” said Tarek.

“Yeah, I remember him saying something about Stockdale not being quite as he seemed. I thought it was something to do with a stomach bug at the time, no idea he meant anything more sinister.” said Hartley, beginning to get colder. “I hope he’s okay.”

“Oh, he’s okay. Well, last I saw him he was okay.” said Tarek, then realising Hartley had probably left after Kalivas. “He came to Busby’s by chance. Some found him and Ullathorne in the tunnels.”

“So Ullathorne’s escaped too? Then who’s still there, teaching?” asked Hartley, neither of them knowing the answer, which was that Stockdale had been doing most of the teaching, and had been prioritising Duccian scripts over the actual knowledge he gave them. Most people thought that the lessons he told them seemed to hold true in the real world, lessons on heat conductivity and metallic oxidation, but took his Ducc-related knowledge in the same way, with an air of unverifiable truth about it.

Nirav climbed out of the water. “Why’d you throw that rock at me, eh?”

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to.” said Mem, with Johnny walking up beside him.

Johnny shouted to the soggy Nirav, “Nah, he’s telling the truth. Never thrown a rock at me before. Really good guy.”

“Why’d he throw a rock at me then? Is it because I’m a Drydenite?”

Mem attempted to speak, but Johnny spoke over him, “Dude, neither of us knew you were a Drydenite until you just told us, right then.”

Nirav stopped for a second, and then asked the question once more.

“Look, I didn’t throw the rock at you on purpose.” retorted Mem. “Can we just settle it at that?”

“Oh, does this guy want to settle a fight?” said one of the rowers, laughing, leaning over the side of the boat. “We can take him to Liddell’s for the table tennis championships there, in a few days time. We’re visiting Phil there, and that Hartley guy seems to know that kid over there. I’m sure the cox would be happy to have you in his boat.”

The cox frowned, not wanting a load of ‘rabble-rousers’ (as he frequently called anyone outside of his immediate social sphere) to enter the boat. But, alas, the rowers got their way, and the boat pulled up closer to the shore, and Page used the table to allow everyone clamber in the boat without having to get too wet. Tarek said hello to Nirav, and talked to him at length about his experiences that he had had while rowing. It seemed to be just as tough as those men reported it to be, all the way back in Grants, but even after just over a week of training, Nirav already seemed a lot more mentally and physically fit, not to mention more confident and generally outgoing. However, Nirav said he was glad to see Tarek again, after all, it had been the longest time

the two were separated that either of them could remember. He also seemed to like the break that this delta crossing gave them.

The cox gave Hartley a stern lecture about how to steer a boat properly, and Hartley nodded along, unenthusiastically. He talked to the rowers, who had loaded their larger boat into the sailboat, and Page and Curran talked too, but more reminiscently, and wondered if they could be allowed to have a go again, once more. Page thought it was hypocritical of him to ask, as he denied his teacher use of the new equipment that they had spent their hard-earned prize funds on, just in case he broke it.

He wasn't young anymore, he had come to terms with that, a thousand times in his sleep, a thousand times during the waking hours, and every raging speech with a hoarse voice, every night out preceding a worse and worse subsequent feeling the next morning, the ever growing thought that he had reached the top of what he would do. He had skied to the peak of the Busby's mountains, on the highest feelings possible, and sunk down into the valley where the city was, the only thing stopping him from sinking lower was the shabby, uncleaned floor beneath him.

But when he saw Johnny and Mem getting along, he realised he need not be so desperate to relive ages gone past. They still had existential dread, they had all their lives ahead of them to figure out what they wanted to do, and fears of old age, or at the very least, their mid-thirties. Page laughed ever so quietly to himself, paused

in thought, sitting at the end of the shorter boat, then lying, then immersing himself in the boat, the sides seemingly enveloping him, trapping him in with his own thoughts.

These thoughts wandered around the plains of his mind, kicking up great dust clouds as the train of thought raced past old, unremembered memories, aged and flickering, the hardware to remember them slowly degrading. He remembered things he never really saw, recounting his experiences to himself, amazed at how much had been preserved in vivid colour and sound, wondering how the days had been so bright, and the nights still so bright, with the stars and lighthouses he had seen long ago still searing holes in his retinas, all amplified, not diminished, by time.

But, he thought, to dwell on these memories would be a waste of time; a waste of time spent creating new ones. Of course, there would always be time for revisiting, especially when he himself was only forty-five or so. He was not old, nor senile, and holding up incredibly well for someone his age. He could row (presumably, he hadn't tried in at least a year) and cycle very well, and played a mean game of table tennis, head swerving from side to side, batting the ball back and forth at immense speeds, standing a full meter back from the table at all times, ready like no one else was.

He continued doing the motions, readying himself for a couple of friendly matches when they arrived at Liddell's. Hopefully, some people would remember him from last

year, and put up a good, gentlemanly fight. Back, forth, back, forth. He swung his arm around inside the boat, and the cox got up to have a look.

“Sir, are you okay.” said the cox in a deeply rhetorical tone, disturbing Page’s moment of practice.

Before Page had come to his senses, unreeling the spooled tape of his memories and packaging them up, ready to shoot some new ones, and half-sputtered out the word ‘yes’, the cox had already gone back to the other side of the boat, happy that Page had stopped his hand waving, for whatever reason. Not that he was any less of a disturbance than that loud man, Hartley.

Page looked down again, at his feet, under one of the seats in the boat, and began to move them, in time, shuffling aimlessly, remembering some song he had heard a few years ago.

“Uemidan by name, Uemidan by nature, we’re the worst and you’re gonna hate us, trash the place and we’ll see you later.” he sang, quietly, playing some kind of air-instrument alongside the words, not sure how the two were connected. The cox saw his hands moving, and sighed once more, as he was accustomed to doing. But this time, he would just let it go.

Over, in the middle of the lands, flew Hawken, Fred and Lisa, wondering where they should land, hopefully deciding on a place before their fuel ran out. They had been freezing, each of them standing up and huddling

over the heat, occasionally spurting off the burner. The icy cold froze through all of them as they flew off into the night, barely keeping control of the balloon at first, Lisa attempting to figure out the controls haphazardly, despite her prior knowledge of the manuals. Lisa looked back at College, and attempted to remember the last time she left there.

Not since she was a child, and perhaps, never before then, she had left College. She had no memories. None, except entirely vivid memories of pages and pages of filing, all the noise of the words on the pages, all the cacophony which they seemed to convey, the people losing forms, applying for new forms, applying for new application forms - an endless, seemingly circular cycle of loss and retrieval. She would have to go down into her cellars to find some files, sometimes. The system was immense, organised and bureaucratised beyond belief. It was a relief, however, when she stepped down into those dusty, musky cellars. They were dry, and consistent. And without light, dark as a mole's pocket. The candlelight kept her alive down there, so to speak, box of matches in hand, ready to relight if anything moved and blew out the candle. Not that there was any wind or rain to do so.

Once, she was down there, finding some old fencing licences for years ago, for people who had claimed them before she was born, and now had to be renewed. She wondered whether the old man waiting up above even needed a fencing licence. He didn't seem to need one, let alone have the physical strength to carry a sword of any kind. She had been down there for what seemed like

hours, but she was still looking for the files, still lost in her workflow, checking categorically, alphabetically, numerically, even. As she finally found the relevant files, the candle went out due to a her slamming the drawer shut in relief. But this time, there were no more matches. She tried to blunder her way through the halls, wondering if she'd ever find her way back. Not wanting to cry for help for fear of breaking the unspoken rule of silence which seemed to impose itself on anyone who went down there, she still stumbled once more, but eventually became more confident, using her rich memory of the doorways and entries to find her way back to the stairs.

And she did. Lisa, of her own will, found her way back to those stairs, which concerned her. At the time, she had worked there for around twenty-five years, and she had never really stopped yet to contemplate the nature of the routine she had accidentally sunk into. She had no time to be angry between finding files for everyone, as the whole town seemed to revolve around her doings. But, she had thought down there, she never got any recognition for what she did.

As she handed the files over to the old man, he thanked her, and walked away. He said to his son, Gilbert, that this was his old 'sword licence' and that one day, he could get one too if he was a good boy. The old man took Gilbert by the hand, walking slowly, but carefully, gracefully, out into the open world.

She wanted that kind of innocent happiness, but didn't know where to find it, and instead of asking, of speaking, she chose to stay quiet over the years, getting more and more resentful of those who had more than her, and more and more infatuated with the idea she wanted to take over the world. Some man, long ago, had come to her, proposing they take over College. But he wasn't really leader material, he was relatively wiry, and lacked any sort of conviction about him, and he tended to just pass by unnoticed to most people. He worked in a factory, somewhere at the edge of the city. Some plastic manufacturing place which blew up a few years ago now. Maybe five, maybe fifteen. She couldn't remember.

The moon sank now, and the sun began to rise, and the burner began to sputter, causing the three pilots to startle awake, and pay attention to what was going on. They seemed to be descending at a manageable rate, right over Rigaud's. Lisa recognised the city at once, from maps she had seen depicting the street layouts. Another balloon was below them, right at the edge of the city, moored on top of some building. Down there, Farr, Kalivas and Ullathorne had stayed in the balloon, and Farr was currently undertaking an exhibition, where painters would paint her with the large maroon balloon.

"Nice. Just move a bit to the left so I can frame it better." said one of them, holding his brush up, attempting to look even artsier than he already was.

Kalivas and Ullathorne were sitting on one of the ballast bags which had been untied from the balloon earlier,

watching the painters in awe. Some of them were producing breathtakingly realistic portraits of the scene, whereas others were deconstructing it to the forms which made it up. Maroon balloon. Orange basket. Farr, pretty much a black triangle with her dress, shaking in the light winds of the desert's edge. Some were painting the sunrise in as it moved, others chose to keep the scene as it had been before it rose.

The filing and chipping of the marble statue of the balloon distracted Kalivas occasionally, and he wandered over to check out the precision of the carving. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, nothing like any of the statues of Ducc that Stockdale had made in the village, or, right before he left, the crude effigy of Stockdale that was made by the townspeople. It had been made of wood. He thought about burning it if their mission was successful, but perhaps keeping it as a sort of trophy would be more appropriate.

Above, Lisa and Hawken debated what the various levers on the burner did, before coming to a fairly sudden halt on the ground, just outside the wall. Fred took the initiative and stepped outside, anchoring it to the ground with himself. Once he had done this, the other two got out, with Lisa explaining the workings of Rigaud's to them, and began to walk towards the city.

Farr, noticing another Busby's Balloon with the logo stamped on it, decided she would go and investigate. Rather than take the stairs, clumsily, encumbered with a whole hot air balloon, she jumped up to test how fast she

would fall, and then ran up and jumped off of the edge of the building, and she sailed gently down towards the other balloon, while everyone else looked on in shock. Some of the painters still continued, others packed up their things, but before anyone else had even stood up, Kalivas and Ullathorne ran down the stairs, and attempted to catch up with Farr, hopefully before she hit the ground, so they could make sure nothing went too wrong.

“She probably knows what she’s doing.” said Ullathorne, panting as he reached the ground floor.

Farr did know what she was doing, but she’d only ever dreamed of doing this before. Roped onto the balloon, she floated through the air. One of the artists quickly scribbled down a sketch of this new and much more exciting scene, before also hurrying downstairs too. Farr reached the other balloon quickly, and began making her way over to greet the three people on the ground. Perhaps they were balloon operators, and she would know them from the academy.

“Hello!” said Farr. “Are you all Busbites?”

“None of us are.” said Fred, attempting to tie the rope around his waist, unsuccessfully.

“So why do you have the balloon?” asked Farr. “Have you stolen it?”

“No,” said Lisa, sternly, “Him and I are from College which is currently under Bradshaw’s control. The new king, I’m sure you know him. And the Drydenite over there, he escaped to College, and fled with us earlier. So that’s why we have this balloon.”

“Well, what are you doing here?” asked Farr, as Ullathorne and Kalivas joined her. Before Lisa or Fred could get a chance to respond, Ullathorne shouted “Hawken! Why are you here?” and began to run up to him.

“Well, I was sent to take over College, as you know.”

“Yeah, I mean, how could we forget that? Stockdale’s speech and all.” said Ullathorne.

“I never thought we could do it.” said Kalivas. “Way beyond our scope. But it looks like, well, from what she’s said, you actually did it. Can’t believe it.” Kalivas looked at Hawken disapprovingly.

“No, when I got there, they gave me a job and a house, and it was so great I just stayed there, and realised that taking over College for Ducc wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Kalivas looked intrigued. “So you still do the whole Ducc thing?”

“Oh, no.” Hawken said, shuffling his foot in the sand. “We’ve got a new thing. Quacc. Since Ducc abandoned us in the desert.”

“Ah, okay. Just wanted to know. Well, I think the whole Ducc thing was invented by Stockdale, and you clearly disobeyed Stockdale, so why do you even do Quacc now? As it’s based on Ducc?”

“It’s different. It’s not like the whole Ducc thing. No power hungriness, no script alterations, in fact, no scripts at all. It’s like a self-help thing. It’s good. But don’t take me up on it.”

“Sounds cool.” said Ullathorne. “Well, we were going to go to Dryden to drop off some leaflets, but now clearly doesn’t seem like the best time to go.”

“Leaflets?” asked Hawken, interjecting. “Why do you want leaflets?”

“To drop on the people of Dryden to convince them how bad Stockdale is.” said Kalivas.

Lisa added, “Well, since Stockdale and his army are presumably out of Dryden, then now would be the perfect time to go. They’d be undefended.”

“Good point.” said Farr. “But the wind forecast is very bad for us.”

“And we haven’t got the leaflets yet.” said Ullathorne.

“Well, we can just wait a day or two, it’s not like they’re going to leave soon. They’re going to want to really

ingrain themselves before they can let the Busbites rule without question.” said Lisa.

“Did they tell you how long you would have to wait for your leaflets?” Farr asked.

“Oh, probably quite a while. But that was two days ago, so probably quite soon now.”

“Well, that’s good.” said Farr. “Anyway, do you want to join our balloon club on the top of this building? People pay to paint us. It’s odd, but it’s got us by so far.”

“Why not?” said Lisa. “We’re only waiting this one out.”

XXIV - Subduing

“And by the order of the newly formed Busby-Dryden Empire, we declare College under control of the Busby-Dryden Empire, and all of its territories and subdivisions shall hereby become part of the Busby-Dryden Empire, adding to it’s populace, and serving the Busby-Dryden Empire as such.” said Stockdale, out of the balcony, into the town square, as a man behind him swept the floor of glass shards.

“I think you’ll want to give it a more concise name,” said Bradshaw, quietly. “It’s not very catchy.”

“It doesn’t need to be catchy. It will be imprinted precisely because of its un-catchiness.”

“I don’t think that’s a word, but that’s a... good idea.” said Bradshaw, opening the balcony door and treading over the glass. “I get what you mean.”

Stockdale resumed his speech. “And here, here is your other king! Bradshaw! And I’m Stockdale. I know we look similar, but there are two of us. Don’t confuse us or...” he shouted, trailing off.

“What’s a suitable punishment for that?” whispered Stockdale. Bradshaw just shrugged. “Make something up.” he said.

“Death!” said Stockdale, causing both the crowd and Bradshaw to recoil slightly.

“Alright, maybe not death. But you shouldn’t back down on it now, you’ve set a bar for punishment.”

“But how can I set it any higher? Death is pretty permanent.” said Stockdale, walking back inside, beginning to pace up and down.

“There are worse things than death.” said Bradshaw.

Stockdale stopped. “Oh, really?”

“I haven’t used any of them yet, but you’ll love this. Shipped in last night before the sunrise, fresh from Busby’s, we have this torture device which apparently subjects the prisoner to the maximum psychological and physical pain.”

“Can I see it?” said Stockdale, after along pause, only the sound of their shoes against the marble floors to keep silence at bay.

“Well, no. But you can see the door, and the guy who we’ve employed to use it. Hopefully he’ll show us how it’s done. And you can tell people about it, our next speech is going to be about this box.”

“Hopefully we’ll never have to use it.”

“I sure hope.” said Bradshaw. “Then again, I hope we never have to punish anyone for rebelling in any way, shape or form. But that’s not going to happen, is it?”

“No.” said Stockdale, who then laughed slowly. “I sure hope not, at least.”

They both laughed as they walked into the metal corridor which contained the box, neither of them knowing what to expect. They peered in through the hatch in the door, seeing nothing.

“Light’s off.” said a man inside. “Just finishing it up.”

“Can we come in?” said Stockdale.

“No!” said the man inside and Bradshaw, in unison, fairly dramatically.

“It would ruin the surprise.” said Bradshaw. “I only want to know what’s in it when the time comes.”

“Oh, really?” said Stockdale.

“I’m sure. Plus, we have many more interesting things to see, things shipped from Busby’s. Ever heard of a whatever-bird?”

“No.”

“Great, then come this way.”

As Stockdale and Bradshaw toured the cargo which had been hauled across the desert, or flown over in great balloons, the new underworld of College was forming. Under a new label, too. The name of Busby-Dryden Empire wasn't catchy, and it didn't give any rebels any clever rhymes to chant at the protests they would inevitably be at.

Sword was sitting at the bottom of a dingy stairwell, waiting to be assigned his job. Another person walked down the stairwell, and he vaguely recognised the silhouette, blocking out the light of the uncomfortably warm rising sun, which seemed to amplify the smells which emanated from the bottom. The silhouette moved closer, and as the light reflecting off the walls became ever so slightly brighter, Sword stood up, looking towards the figure.

"Mann?" said Sword. "Is that you?"

Mann stopped walking down the stairs, and began to turn around.

"No, if it is you, don't go." said Sword.

"I just don't want to be known any more. Especially not as the man who lost College."

"Well, you aren't just the man who lost College. You did find College, the things you did for the city were excellent, and pretty much everyone here was happy until-"

“Until I lost the city to a bunch of barbaric Drydenites and Busbites? Until that?”

“Well, if you put it like that, it sounds worse.”

“But if you put any of my achievements into context, they are worse. I used Lisa, it’s true. I feel terrible for her. And she did get what she deserved, being able to flee this place.”

“I hope they knew how to fly that thing.” said Sword, while Mann turned back round, sitting on the stairs, as the stairwell brightened more as the sun reached the right angle.

“Oh, I bet she did. Razor sharp, that one. I just wish I hadn’t dulled her by using her skills for the most tedious of tasks.”

“Look, it’s not that bad now.”

“That bad? I’ve had a series of rotting fruit and mouldy produce thrown at me over the past day, merely for existing. Whoever you are, just treat me as if I’m just another human. I’m in this with you now.”

“Well, I’m Sword. And I do get what you mean. There’s not really enough time for squabbling while we’re all under occupancy.”

“Thanks, Sword.” said Mann, reaching out a hand, and then retracting it. “Hey, do you know of any barbers around here? I think if I want to be disguised, I need some kind of haircut.”

“I’ve got this razor that I could use.” said Sword, reaching into his satchel and rustled around.

“Oh no, I’ll be fine.”

“Right then.” said Sword, putting the rusty blade back into his bag, waiting to be used in impossibly unlikely scenarios once more. “Where next?”

“To get a haircut.”

“No, after that.”

“I don’t know. Do you have a hat or something?”

“Yes, I have this helmet my friend left behind a while ago, though it is in my house. It’ll hide your face pretty well, if we can get it.”

“So we’d have to go up to where all the guards are currently making their own homes?”

“Well, chances are that no one’s going to pick my house, it’s a basement apartment which I’ve rented out to a few people.”

“So where’s your actual house that you live in?”

“Oh, on most days I used to fall asleep during the day, out on patrol. Just stayed up during the night.”

“You do realise I paid you for doing that job, and you weren’t doing it.” said Mann, looking down at Sword.

“Well, yes.” said Sword, timidly. “Ah, but you lost College.”

“You said you wouldn’t bring that up.”

“So don’t mention my slacking off either.”

“Fine.”

Both of them walked up the stairs, back out into the crowd. Someone shouted, “Look! It’s the man who lost College!” and threw a shoe at him, which Sword caught and threw back.

“Are you trying to protect him? What’s he ever done for you?” shouted one of the many voices of the angry crowd.

“No, I just don’t think it’s a good idea to be divided in a time where we are under control from-” said Sword, before he was hit in the head with the same shoe, to much applause from the crowd. Then, a rock came arcing through the air, hitting his side.

“Stop that! That’s a rock! You just threw a rock at me! Ow!” he said, more rocks being pelted at him and Mann by the second. They ran back down into the stairwell, and walked along for a while.

“Sword, why are we walking so far?”

“I have a plan. Oh, by the way, do you want your hair cut now?” he said, brandishing the razor yet again, alongside an equally rusty pair of scissors, which didn’t even seem to glimmer under the light.

“Alright, but only when we get where you’re heading.”

“Fine.” said Sword, imitating Mann’s earlier one.

They walked along a little further, and then heard a rumbling noise, followed by shouts of, ‘They’re over there, and torchlight illuminating the tunnels much more.’

“Quick, we’re almost here. Just climb up this ladder, well, it’s more of a small spiral staircase since I spent last month upgrading it, but-”

“Come on! Just go!” said Mann, in a hushed but stressed tone, and they both climbed up the ladder, and flipped open a flap which opened into the room, which was situated next to Hawken’s old room.

“Ah, it’s good to be here.” said Sword, locking the flap underneath him.

“Won’t they see the ladder?” said Mann.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Well, it looks like they’ll find us one way or another.”

“Who’ll find us?” said a voice from outside the door, which was wide open. A Busbite guard stood outside, not really able to do much about the people inside once Sword had jammed the door shut, locking it with a series of mechanisms which he had developed over the past years.

“Why’s this room so secure?”

“Oh, so nobody takes my statue.” said Sword. “I haven’t checked on it for a while, but it takes so long to open the locker I can’t usually be bothered. Well, everything should be fine for a while, so I’ll just get it out. It might be able to help us.”

“How can a statue help us?”

“Trust me, you’ll see.” said Sword, turning the handle, expecting to have to solve the complex puzzle of rotation he had designed, but instead finding it was open. Inside was a note from Joe that read: ‘Stop being annoying. I’ll give this back when you stop being annoying. You’ve spent so long talking about its ‘magical powers’ which that wizard guy told you about. And what’s with the ladder? Too far, Gilbert. Too far.’

Sword stood at the safe, looking at the note for a good few seconds before Mann asked him if everything was okay.

“Everything is definitely not ok, Mann.” said Sword. “I’ve lost the statue.”

“Who do you think has it?”

“I know Joe has it.” he replied, “But I have absolutely no idea where he is right now. He could be in Dryden, for all I know, going off and helping those other Drydenites.”

Mann looked contemplative for a few moments. “Why do you think he decided to leave?”

“No idea.” Sword said, dismissing the question. “Well, he did say something about nothing interesting ever happening to him in College.”

“Where did he work?”

“He was a border guard with me.’

Mann wanted to give a snide remark, something along the lines of ‘that explains it, then’, but he felt that Sword’s hospitality was too great a gift to potentially waste on a joke. That being said, it was pretty funny, according to him. Perhaps that wasn’t the best metric to decide how funny jokes were.

Either way, Sword had now meticulously closed the safe again, setting all the locks back, and he stood back, admiring his creation as the safe door swung open of its own accord.

“Not again!” said Sword, loud at first, but quieter as he heard the rumbling below the floor, the rumbling of disenfranchised Collegians wanting to have a shot at Mann.

Sword faced Mann, getting his razor back out, after having changed his clothes.

“Okay, want a shave?”

Mann reluctantly accepted, even though he thought that Sword hadn’t even shaved himself once. The procedure was over before it began, somehow, and he looked into a musty mirror in the corner, part obscured by a poster advertising guided travel to Busby’s, seeing his face, clean shaven, without any cuts.

“Wow, that was pretty good.”

“They don’t call me sword for nothing.”

Mann didn’t really know how to respond to this properly, so he just chuckled a bit. A banging on the floor panel came shortly after.

“Hey! Get down here, we’re trying to find Mann.”

Sword tossed some clothes over to Mann, and he put them on hurriedly, along with a hat to hide his unchanged hair. They opened the flap, and Sword poked his head through it.

“Mann? You mean the man who lost College?”

A few of the crowd members laughed, and they moved along as Sword and Mann walked down. Mann laughed heartily, in a way he didn't usually, which was enough to fool the crowd into thinking he was someone else. The group ran and shuffled down the corridors, splitting and reforming their groups as they went along, looking for fugitives which were actively helping them, and when Mann and Sword walked out into the streets of College, there was an interesting sight, waiting for them. There was now a fire pile in the town square, with Bradshaw and Stockdale standing on the balcony, giving orders, saying the law, which was going to be laid down in the name of Ducc.

Bradshaw readied himself for the final part of the speech, which he had practised many times before.

“Oh, former Collegians, we thank you for letting us have your kingdom without much hassle. We thank you for evacuating so fast, as to let our guards take your houses, and we thank you for not complaining when you were forced to sleep on the street, or underground. We thank you. And we want to repay you. We will accept your services, your labour, and your lands, but we will also accept a sacrifice.”

He handed over to Stockdale, who was eager to continue.

“We have this box. A box which is in the bottom of the palace, deep beneath the marble halls. It’s a metal box. No light, no sound. Nothing there. Except everything that will make you feel everything. Every torturous second, getting worse and worse, until there’s nothing left of you. But then, it gets worse. When you die, which you’ll never quite do, you’ll feel every new cut, every new nerve ending exposed to the cold air and the boiling tar, the icy cold steel of a razor with a searing one to follow. And we will choose one person a week, that is, unless you submit someone.”

The crowd was in disbelief. The ones who had just come up from the tunnels, tired of looking for Mann, were now faced with an even bigger problem. Most of the people in the crowd thought of Mann, and how he would be the immediate choice for a sacrifice. One dismayed individual began screaming, and attacked a guard, panicked. The guard quickly summoned others, and soon, the man was thrown into the fire, like a piece of wood. He was too far in to escape, nothing audible but the faint-sounding screams over crackling wood.

Bradshaw laughed. “He’s the lucky one. Good luck, everybody.”

On the ground, Mann thought of all the thoughts that were thinking about him, and how he would be the prime choice for the first sacrifice.

XXV - Training

After an amount of time that the cox would have deemed 'far too long', the boat reached the other side of the delta, and landed on the shore of Liddell's. There was a small pier set up for them, and there were a few people milling around on it.

"Hey, mate. You were supposed to be here last night? Why are you so late?"

Before the cox had time to even say anything about Hartley, the man spoke up again.

He laughed. "Only joking, it's fine, don't worry. I'm Phil, by the way. Nice to meet you." Phil stuck out his hand, shaking the cox's, while also leading him out of the boat, and tying it to the pier all at the same time. The others disembarked, the boat slightly rocking with each step.

Page was asleep in the smaller rowing boat, and was woken up by Phil, gently rocking the boat, jokingly singing a nursery rhyme to him.

"What? Who are-" stammered Page, focusing his eyes on Phil. They both smiled.

"Haven't seen you in years." said Page. "How's the rowing going?"

“Oh, no, I quit last year. Table tennis is more my thing now. Coaching all the new recruits. It’s really rewarding, being able to help out at events like this.”

“Yeah, I got into table tennis, too. Got really good at it.” said Page, standing up, waking out of the boat. “While I’m here, I’d love to play you.”

“And I would too. Why don’t we catch up now, leave the others to do their thing.” said Phil, jogging to catch up with the rest of the group, to whom he explained they would meet back here at eight o’clock tonight, ready for a feast, prepared by some Grantites that were going to be ferried over, specially for them. Each went their certain ways, Johnny and Mem heading towards the city centre in search of bars and pubs, Curran having a talk with Hartley, alongside the rowers making a scene wherever they went, but Nirav elected to go with Joe and Tarek, and they talked more of their varying experiences throughout the world, and discussed how they thought things were going in Dryden.

Phil returned to Page, and began talking to him about the various ways in which they’d spent their years. Every story that Page told, Phil somehow outdid. If he had skied to the bottom of the Busby’s sloped in ten minutes, Phil had done it in nine. This one-upmanship seemed to be a farce to him, and telling falsified stories to one of his oldest friends seemed to be something that he didn’t think Phil was capable of doing. But, as he had mentioned many times now, he had an advertising deal

in Liddell's, and was a household name amongst the people here.

"Hopefully, one day, we'll take it to Hakylut's. Maybe, maybe not." said Phil, timidly, but with an air of boastfulness. "I think there's definitely some kind of foreign market which will like it, anyway."

Page replied very briefly, almost saddened by Phil's lack of humility. "Good." he said. "Good for you."

Without much regard for this response, he continued. "And we've got this new product coming out soon, which should hopefully premiere in a few weeks time."

There wasn't much to be said about Phil's life that hadn't already been said in some way, a seemingly endless cycle of product, premiere, production, profit. There were aspects of it which caught Page's attention, but most of it seemed boring, and quite a lot of effort. After a conversational eon, he was handed the controls to the topic at hand, and had a go at telling Phil about his life. Of course, there was a lot to be said, he had run for political office twice in the years after he left the Grantite Rowers, and he had done quite a lot of other things as well, but those weren't really worth mentioning. In fact, his political career had been rather short, too, and so that was able to be disregarded on top of that. His whittling down of his own life eventually left him with very little. He had bought a house, but who knows what was going on with that now. He had met Johnny a while back, but that wasn't worth mentioning either. They had

fun together, but kept their distance, arms length in a cramped apartment.

He decided it was probably best to talk about Bradshaw, but judging by Phil's disregard for all life outside of Liddell's (except the rowers), he quickly regained control of the conversation once more, steering it towards the table tennis championships which were taking place in a few days time, and whether Page would be interested in training someone up for the event.

"But can't I do the event myself?" said Page.

"There's an... there is some kind of regulations on who can do it. No professionals."

"I'm not a professional. I'm not sponsored, either."

"Well, sure, only if you feel up to it. I'm sure they'll let you compete, but..." said Phil, leaving the sentence open in such a way that the only possible answer from Page would be deciding not to compete.

"I think I'll compete." said Page, disregarding the implication, and taking back control of not only the conversation, but his life. He needed to do more, and this was going to be a good start. He'd start work on-

Phil interrupted, even before Page had time to finish contemplating his own statement. "Well, good luck. And it's a tag team event now, so you'll need a second player

if you want to fare well. Oh, and farewell anyway! I've got to get to a meeting. New product."

"See you round, then."

"Yeah, have fun."

He was now alone again, after what had seemed like hours of listening. He asked a passerby for the time. They didn't know, but they said there was a clock around the corner. And yes, there was. It had almost been half an hour since they had left the boat.

Elsewhere in the city, far away from the disillusioned Page (who was now searching for a free table tennis table), Johnny and Mem were chatting away, when they heard a group of people walking along, trying to talk to Phil, who was being escorted round the city by a group of guards. The people quickly dispersed as Phil walked through the door, peeling off the guards, and the guards and people waited for the door to close, and then just stood there for a few seconds. They started talking to each other, some taking off their suits and jackets, complaining of how warm it was. It didn't seem right. However, the two of them walked by, looking for a free table tennis table so they could practise, and maybe meet some people they could go drinking with later. Eventually, they came across a table, just round a corner, and as Johnny whipped out two paddles, Page cried out in pain.

"No! The one free table!"

“Don’t worry, Page, it’s just us.”

“Oh! Johnny! Mem! Good to see you again. Well, let’s get to practising. I mean, there’s only two days to go before I have to play at the championships.”

Mem looked incredulous. “You signed up for the championships?”

“Well, no, but I told Phil I’d go.”

“Oh, that’s cool. He’ll probably sign you up.”

“Yeah.”

Johnny held a paddle in each hand, waving them slowly. “Want to play, then? King of the court?”

“I’ll serve.” said Mem, barely putting the ball above the net, not intentionally. Page tapped the shot back over the net, and it bounced once, as close as it could possibly be, and Mem tapped it up once more, letting Page slam the ball in such a way that he would win, but they wouldn’t lose it to the sea of other players around them.

“You’re pretty good.” said Mem, tossing the paddle onto the table, leaving Johnny to lean over the table to pick it up.

He served, and the shot went right to the far left corner of the table, and Page arced his hand, hitting the ball

with such a magnitude of backspin that the Magnus effect took complete control over the arc, causing it to hit Johnny's side of the table, before zipping back over to the other side, and just for style, he hit it again, right into Johnny's other hand, which reflexively grasped the ball.

Johnny was not aware he had caught the ball for at least a few seconds, and his vision darted around as if there was something to track, waiting for a shot to deflect, even though he had just seen Page hit the ball twice in a row. Eventually, he realised, and stood, open mouthed, speechless.

Mem clapped. "I mean, the man's still got talent in him. Look, why don't you go and sign up now, while you still can, and Johnny and I'll hold this table for you."

He left, not entirely sure of where to go, and passed Phil on his way out of the door, rejoining his oddly social troupe of guards and followers, walking with severe intent in the general direction of the table tennis courts. They parted ways without even making eye contact, and Page stumbled on, trying to find any sign that would take him to where he needed to go.

Back at the table tennis table, Mem and Johnny were accosted by Phil's guards, who then took the paddles, and formed a ring around the table, and Phil played against a tall man, who was recognisable to almost no one, except of course the crowd of followers which were swarming them with chants of 'Teddy' and 'Phil', and

some of them got a little too into it at times, and were pushed back by the guards, arms outstretched, asserting dominance somewhat.

Johnny and Mem, not wanting too much confrontation (for that would be saved for later), decided to go back to the harbour and see if there was anyone else there. As a futile last ditch effort to get the table back, Johnny pinged a ball at Teddy's head to try and get a reaction. He barely flinched, but missed a return. The guards looked around in fear as Teddy dropped his racket and pushed some of them aside.

"You what mate?" said Teddy, pausing, maybe for dramatic effect, or maybe he just needed time to think. "Did you just throw that ball at my head?"

"No." said Johnny.

"He didn't." said Mem, not exactly subtly.

Teddy stepped forward. "Well, who else could have? That's right. No-one. Now, I'm not an unreasonable guy, so I'll challenge you to a game of table tennis right now. If you win, you can leave, and nothing more happens. If you lose, well, you'll lose a lot more than just the game, eh?" he said, laughing towards the end. The crowd around him laughed too, as well as some of the guards.

"So what is it? Going to fight for your life?"

"I think I'll pass on this one." said Johnny.

“You can’t just ‘pass on this one’, mate. You’re here now.”

The guards formed an even larger circle around the table, and more and more people gathered around to watch, which created an inescapable barrier that was far more affective than the guards.

“Alright, you serve.” said Teddy. “Generosity and all that.”

Johnny served, attempting to replicate Page’s initial serve, but ever so slightly worse. Teddy returned the shot with ease, his arm span being far larger than the width of the table. The ball went back and forth for a good minute, solidly clacking against both paddle and table, and the crowd of onlookers growing rapidly. Some stopped to form crowds to admire the sheer scale of the crowd, creating mini-clusters, centred far away from the action. Page noticed one of these clusters forming as passageways became blocked with people, waiting to see what was going on. Some groups were looking up, prompted by others to look up, and others were chatting amongst themselves, like isolated pockets, fractured worlds of small talk about the upcoming competition. Page wrestled his way through the thick crowd, until his head finally poked out in-between two people, and he saw as Phil and Teddy stared at Johnny, waiting for him to falter. Eventually, Phil picked up another paddle and joined in, trying to make Johnny run some more. Page squeezed through the gaps in the guards, and joined Johnny, pushing them further back from the table with each super-powered shot.

“Alright, this isn’t fair.” said Phil. “We’re on a slope. The wind’s all wonky. This is why I don’t play outdoors.”

“Phil, you can’t...” started Teddy, distracted by the volley of shots Page was putting out. “You can’t go. I can’t lose, not before the championships.”

“No, you have to come and train in the indoors area.”

“After this game.”

“This game has gone on for far too long already, Teddy. Pack it in.” said Phil, kicking the table away from underneath them. Page retreated as Phil began to fold it up, and now, Johnny and Teddy were fighting it out, mid air, never letting a shot touch the ground. They took the ball over to another court, both wanting to win on fair grounds as much as possible. Once Phil had folded the first table up, he walked over to the new one, shuffling the epicentre of the crowd as he walked. Page followed, too, moving the table away from Phil’s angry gaze.

“Just let them finish. It’ll be over soon.”

“Ted’s got to study hard and train hard, otherwise he won’t keep his title for next year.” said Phil, attempting to unclip the table. Instead, Page began to roll the table along the ground, and along the streets. The crowd mounted more and more like a snowball, following them as they slowly made their way through the city, backing away from Phil.

“You can’t go like this forever.” said Phil.

They did try, though, and they battled back and forth, no fatal mistakes on either side, though a good few were very close to ending the game. Teddy tripped on a broken cobblestone, and Johnny was afflicted by a fly, but both continued on, and on, and both were almost ready for it to be over, but only if it was a victory for them. At this point, it wouldn’t be worth settling for a draw. Page began to back up faster and faster as Phil got more and more angry, and then, the table smoothed out, and the wheels stopped bumping and clattering around.

The crowd began to disappear from one side of them, and Page did not realise this until his foot was submerged underwater, in sand. Johnny and Teddy were still battling it out, waist deep in the waters of the delta, flinging cold splashes of water over the table, affecting the ball in all sorts of ways.

“Page, get them out of there. He’ll get a cold or something.” said Phil, not wanting to ruin his nice new sports kit.

“When they’re done.”

The match continued on for a while longer, and as the tide went out, Page slowly pulled the table further and further along the bank, until Teddy, unaware of his surroundings, bumped into a rowing boat that the cox was lowering out of the larger boat. He looked behind

him, and smacked his face on the bow, and he recoiled in pain, hitting a shot, but hitting it clean into the water, where it washed up at Phil's feet.

"Come on, Ted. Now we go."

Teddy didn't seem to respond well to that, though.

"Who was that? Who-" he shouted, before turning around and seeing the boat which had distracted him earlier.

"Oh, you. You are in big trouble." he said to the boat, and set upon destroying it. He picked it up out of the water, and threw it at the metal pier, breaking it clean in half, before shaking Johnny's hand and walking off, soaking wet, and rather angry.

Before disappearing out of sight, he shouted, "Thanks, Phil. Thanks, boat. Thanks, random ball thrower."

The sentiment behind these phrases was mixed. Johnny could not tell whether they were supposed to be sarcastic, as they were brought out by such mixed emotions. He walked off, and tried to find Teddy. The cox sat at the edge of the boat, and also walked to try and find Teddy, before Phil walked up to him and said;

"There's no point trying to talk to him about it right now. I've never seen him lose before. I have no idea how you'll look if you go over there. I mean, look at him. Look at you. I'm not saying anything directly but I think we both

know what will happen if you try and confront that man.”

The cox angrily, wordlessly agreed, and walked back over to the boat, attempting to tend to it. The crowd dissipated, no longer bothered to watch as the drama behind the table tennis ran its course.

“Don’t worry.” Phil said. “I know how to fix those things, I had to do it a lot. Kept crashing them, you see.”

“I know. I was there.”

He felt bad for not remembering the cox. “So, what do you say I do you a favour? We’ll use my status, and fix your boat while thousands watch, and make you famous, right?”

“No.” said the cox. “Just fix the boat. Yourself. Now.”

“I... I mean-”

“Now.”

Phil knelt down in the wet sand beside the boat, not quite knowing how to tackle this broken balsa wood mess. “Am I allowed any tools?” He said, right as a red metal box created a crater in the sand as it angrily thumped down next to him.

“Thanks, I guess. I mean you could...”

Phil fizzled out, mid-sentence, seeing the seething look the cox gave him. Phil unpacked the tools, and began to move the two broken halves together, wishing he could just glue them together in one easy motion.

“Can’t Teddy fix it?”

“Who’s Teddy?”

“The big guy who actually broke the boat.”

“Well, by the way you shouted at him, I feel you’re responsible for his anger.”

Phil had no real response that wouldn’t invoke a painful line of questions, so he just stayed quiet, fixing the boat slowly, almost waiting for Teddy to come back, wanting to deflect his mildly unjust punishment. But Teddy was in the centre of the town, walking into his private gym, which Johnny was pushed to the outside of by the guards. He stood at the closing door, watching Teddy go in, expecting some kind of retribution. A few people followed behind him, also expecting some kind of confrontation that would be fun to watch.

Teddy stopped, just before the door slammed shut on Johnny, and walked back, opening it, and whispering something to one of the guards. They parted the sea of people to let Johnny in.

Teddy looked embarrassed, contrasting his physique. “Look, mate. I’m really sorry about that.”

“Nah, don’t worry. It’s fine.”

“I feel bad smashing up your boat.”

“It’s not mine.”

“Well, that doesn’t change anything. I still broke the boat. I still owe you one.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Teddy.”

“I think I owe your friends something.” He laughed, sitting down on a set of weights.

“Thanks, but I can’t accept anything on behalf of them.”

“Oh, but what about the boat? Oh, the boat! I don’t even-” Teddy sighed and hung his head down lower. “I didn’t even say sorry. I’m going to head back there now.”

“You don’t have to. Phil is fixing it.”

“It’s my fault though.”

Johnny didn’t react much to this, not really knowing any proper tactful response.

Teddy started walking back towards the door. “Thanks, for following me, I guess. What’s your name?”

“Johnny.”

“Well, thank you Johnny.”

They walked out of the gym, pushing back past the guards, the crowd now having dissipated into the air, and walked back, wordlessly, to the harbour, where everyone was sitting around Phil, repairing the boat, talking.

“That’s really bad.” said Hartley, not adding much to the conversation. “That’s properly broken, that is.”

Phil had been working for a few minutes now, and had made almost no progress, aimlessly matching the tools to the non-existent, borderline unsolvable problem. Teddy arrived, and sat down next to Phil.

“What are you doing, Teddy? Go and train for tomorrow.”

“I want to help.” said Teddy in a way that Phil had to oblige, and so he did. Teddy and Phil worked for hours on the boat, fixing the wooden fibres together, attempting to solve so many conflicting fractures, and sitting there in silence as everyone else talked. Johnny and Mem eventually got cold when the wind rolled in off the water, and decided to head to a bar. Page did, too, who was still wading around in the water, playing table tennis with enamoured Liddellites. The others all sat around in the boat, and asked the cox to bring them drinks. He wearily complied, not wanting to bend to the will of the rowers too much, for that would set a

precedent that they could do what they wanted, and perhaps even steer without his guidance. Of course, he'd still be on the boat, but if he wasn't guiding them, they might as well have had a sack of grain, the exact same weight as the limit.

Teddy didn't really know how to fix the boat very well, but he held it at various angles throughout the night, and they worked until Phil fell asleep, much after everyone else. But Teddy stayed up, feeling he had some kind of debt to pay off, some kind of unjust doing he had to repay. He would thank Johnny in the morning, and then go to train.

"Morning, Teddy."

"Morning." said Teddy, still working on the boat, having got no sleep whatsoever, which was evident by the grey circles under his eyes. "I don't feel great, but the boat is almost done."

Phil looked at him. "Teddy. How much sleep did you get?"

"N-none." said Teddy, afraid to tell Phil the truth, perhaps for some deep, underlying psychological reason. Or maybe he just didn't want to admit it. Or he just felt like he couldn't lie.

"Teddy." said Phil, calmly. The championships are today." he continued, decidedly not calmly. "You cannot, and I

repeat, cannot go and do things like this. Why did you stay up all night?"

"I wanted to fix what I had broke."

"Not good enough!" Phil shouted, waking most of the others. "That is not a good enough reason to lose your first championship since you started!"

"I... I honestly don't care any more." said Teddy, standing up, hammer in hand, not using it as a threat, but still clutching it tight. Phil stood up too, but not nearly at Teddy's eye level.

Phil looked at Teddy. "You don't care? What about that time like three years ago when you threw a hissy fit about the referee on your semi-final game, and he only gave you the win because you threatened to beat him up?"

"Well, uh... I'm different now."

"Different? Here's the only thing that's different about you." said Phil, "The only thing that's changed about you is the number of championships you've won."

"I lost last night, which you may or may not have seen, Phil, and I lost to someone who didn't laud it over me."

Johnny waved over the side of the boat, cheerily injecting himself into the angry conversation.

Teddy continued, "And I felt okay, after he talked to me. I'm okay with losing. I'm okay with not going to this championship, too. I'm going to take some time off of this whole thing."

"You'll miss out. Your competitors will get ahead of you."

"I'll miss out on sleep. And as for my competitors, I don't care about my competitors. I really don't. They can go. It's their turn, anyway. I have won."

"Eight years in a row, yes, I know. First newcomer to win a championship. And you're going to just throw that away?"

"I'm not throwing anything away. I'm not doing anything of the sort. I just want to go somewhere else, do something else, other than be stuck in this city. There's a lot of things to do, I agree, but all I do is just table tennis, table tennis, table tennis."

Phil paused.

"You're not so different as you think. But, as your coach, I'm obliged to give you time off. And I've been your coach for eight years now, I refuse to let you go. Last year, I quit my rowing place - in the Granite Rowers top eight, no less - to help you keep going. I took time off my rowing training to help you train."

"Hey, wait, no you didn't, you quit so you could go into advertising for that stupid product of yours."

“No, I didn’t...” said Phil, having another realisation.
“Wait, we could use that to fix the boat.”

“Phil, stop. No. No more of that stuff, no more tape or whatever it is you actually sell.”

“It’s-”

“I don’t care. I think I’m going to go with these people.”
Teddy pointed to Johnny in particular, who was sitting on the edge of the boat. He looked surprised.

“Wait, you want to come with us?” said Johnny. “We’ve just got here, and we’re leaving after the championships are over.”

“Why can’t we just go back over?”

Johnny leaned further. “I mean, you’ll have to ask the cox.”

The cox looked over. “If you can fix the boat, it’s yours. We couldn’t have used it anyway. And if you could maybe pay us a little bit of money, that would be nice.”

Teddy laughed. “Well, I’d love to.” he said, turning to Phil. “Please can I cash out my last title winnings now?”

“They’ll be worth more in the future.” said Phil. “But if you insist, I’ll go and ask for the money now.”

The cox spoke up. "Don't worry, I don't want that much."

Phil turned around.

"Oh, you're going to get a lot." said Phil. "I'll make sure of it."

Teddy shook his head at Phil, before asking the cox if he could sleep in the boat.

"It's yours. Do whatever you want with it. But it's not comfortable enough. Teddy, come here." he said, leading him onto the boat.

The cox sat Teddy down and spoke. "Look, I used to have a horrible trainer, just like him. Expecting nothing but results. I mean, it is tough being a Grantite rower, but I can do it because I want to do it. And I'm sure you'd like to do another competition, but the rest of you thinks-wait, knows you need a break. So, give yourself one. You can take your boat over the delta. Nirav'll row, he's pretty good. I'm sure he'll be up for it."

"Just so long as I don't take it too hard." said Nirav. "We're off season now. Need to relax."

"And I've got to stop being so hard to you guys." said the cox, in a rather cliché manner. "I do not want to be like Phil. I can't believe he's changed so much in that year."

"No, he's always been like this." said Teddy. "You just never saw it because he wasn't your coach."

“I never thought about that.” said the cox. “Regardless of that, when Phil returns with the money, you can go whenever you like, maybe after the championships if anyone would like to see it?”

“I’d be down for that.” said Johnny.

Everyone agreed on a time to meet once more, and Teddy set upon the boat once more, trying to fix it. It took him most of the day, but he did it, spurred on at first by Johnny, and then when he left, Curran, who’s arm had gotten more painful, so he sat and watched the repairing of the boat instead.

XXVI - Spreading

Mann and Sword were sitting in a dingy room, connected to the underground corridors of the city. They were waiting for Norm, who said he was going to arrive here separately from them, to avoid arousing any suspicion. They had met Norm when they had been arranged by their birthdays by the Busbites, and coincidentally, they were on the same day.

Sword felt uncomfortable existing here, as if he was some kind of third wheel, trying to prise Mann out of certain death-by-vote. He didn't want to be a conversational crowbar, either, and he didn't want Norm to try and use him in any way. Plus, it was curfew.

Norm opened the door, and then jammed it some more with his foot, as the hinges had rusted through a decade of disuse.

"You know, I never thought we'd need these tunnels," said Norm. "But we built them anyway."

Sword looked at Mann. "So why did you have them built? Presumably you ordered it?"

"Oh, no, they were going to be part of the sewer system."

Norm slammed the door shut. "But what about the policy to eliminate unemployment?"

“Yes, well, even though that may have had ties to the program, the overall aim was to... was to...” sputtered Mann, not able to think of a reason why.

“You made these tunnels so people had something to do so your numbers could look impressive.” said Norm.

Mann threw his hands up. “But I had to! Before me, and us, we were at best the ninth-ranked kingdom in any metric we could find! I looked silly in front of the other leaders at the Magiston Peak summit.”

“They weren’t looking at you. They were definitely looking at Kingcombe.” said Norm. “Hakyluts has really fallen recently. I mean, really really. He’s definitely-”

“Alright, alright,” said Mann, wanting to get to the point of the whole meeting. “We’ve got to figure out how to not get any of us killed by vote.”

“You mean, ‘how can we help you not get voted out immediately?’” said Sword, overly cynically.

“Look, Sword, if that is your real name. You need to help me. I gave you the opportunity for food and housing for a multitude of years. Your parents, too.” said Mann.

Norm whispered what Sword’s real name was to him.

Mann looked surprised. “Gilbert? Well, Gilbert, I would like to ask you to help me. In return, I will try and

recover some of my things and give them to you for when you try to escape.”

“That’s bold.” said Sword. “Very forward looking. And also, please don’t call me Gilbert.”

“But it’s your name.”

“But I want to be called Sword. And I’m helping you, so it’s not like you’re at liberty to criticise anything I do.”

“I’m just saying that no one will take you seriously with that name.”

“Well, so be it.”

Norm wished he didn’t have the same birthday as Mann now. He edged towards the door.

“Norm, you can’t leave until we’ve figured something out.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to help you.”

Mann realised the situation he was in was getting quite dire, and nothing he had said had helped in any way. He found it hard to not do this, because for the first time in his life, his actions seemed to have consequences. He looked around the room and saw the blocked off rusty walls, and both of the others staring at him, unhappy with his actions. He didn’t feel safe around the two people he could trust not to turn him in at the earliest

available opportunity. Norm walked out and slammed the door again, but this time it stuck shut, producing a strange squeak. Sword also walked out, shortly after, wordlessly, finding his way back to his own house alone, and wanting to just go back to before this whole thing happened.

Mann sat alone with his thoughts for a long time, the rusty metal chair providing a sharp pain to his back all the time, head looking up at a gas lamp, which leaked slowly, filling the room with a haze, and as the haze sank, he began to feel tired, and he wondered if he sat here long enough, he would just die painlessly, avoiding his almost inevitable demise.

His thoughts wandered to the times when he first got into power, and people voted for him in droves. There was all sorts of issues with the city, but by keeping people in line, and making them less Rigaudian, he kept the city in line, and everything was on the up. Of course, the means in which he had achieved these results were superficial, but every time he made his way over to Magiston Peak to sit amongst the other leaders, they would note how the kingdom had improved greatly. He would be gently applauded as they recited lists of figures, most of which were prepared by Lisa, who could never be present as her work was too important to the kingdom for her to ever be away, not even for a day.

In retrospect, it seemed unfair to give her the burden. But she had never complained about it. She had always thought it was her duty to do what she did, and so she

did it, as if her life depended on it. And, in the end, she realised it didn't, floating away from the place she had spent her whole life on a balloon which she had read so much about. But she hadn't read fanciful stories of where these balloons went, they were diagrams and schematics of how they worked, the components that made them, and their various mechanisms which made them work. She had often collected random pieces of metal which were tossed outside the factory, alongside the city wall, and she was enamoured with these parts, wanting to try and fashion her own balloon.

Mann walked out of the room, and tried to remember where the immigration office exit would be. From there, he could see if there were any files he could retrieve that would help him. The corridors eventually converged on the room, and Mann looked at the locked door. There were two locks on each of these doors, a personal lock and a master lock, to which he had the key. Surprisingly enough, it wasn't confiscated by the Busbites, not even under the pretence that it could be used as a weapon.

The lock was stiff, but it opened, and thankfully, the personal lock was open. The key was in the door, and judging by the rust that fused them together, it had been there a long time. And then, the room appeared. A lack of light seemed to emanate from the room, and it appeared darker than dark could be. There was no gas lamp inside, and so Mann would have to keep the door open to look properly. Stumbling his way through the darkness, he fumbled a set of steps, and climbed up them, reaching an outward-opening door, which was

blocked by something on the other side. He pushed harder, and eventually the blockage shifted. It turned out to be a table, and a heavy-looking stack of paperwork had fallen on to the floor, alongside pictures and mementoes that someone had collected. The new room had some light in it, and soon, he found some matches and a lantern, which was melted all over the handle, and plenty of burnt ends sitting in the saucer, some enveloped by long-hardened wax.

He struck a match, and it worked surprisingly well. The scene was now illuminated properly, and he wandered back downstairs, glancing back at the picture of Lisa. He had always had a fondness for Lisa, but had never really wanted to love her, for if he did, she would probably never love him back if she ever realised the lengths he had gone to to keep her from realising what he was doing to keep her down.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a giant metallic lump, like the burner for a balloon. In fact, it was the burner for a balloon, and lining the walls were diagrams on how to create them, lists of parts and explanations of the physics behind them, and then, to top it all off, a series of drawings Lisa had made of the worlds which had been described to her in strange detail.

She could know anything she wanted about any of the people or businesses in these worlds, their finances and their details all seared into her mind through repeated exposure, but she had never seen an image of the worlds which she helped to run.

Mann then turned his attention to the final part of the chaotic display, a drawing of herself in this balloon, sailing away in the sky. The machine in the middle had been given context now. Its shiny surfaces were very clearly taken care of, scrubbed like nothing else in the room. The lack of light was another factor, and the self-barricading nature of the table in front of the door showed that she was desperate to hide this from everyone. She never wanted to show any kind of desire to leave to anyone, lest they thought she was a traitor, or even just insane.

The machine was beautiful. It was just as the diagrams described it, and more. The only thing about it which warranted any criticism was a small leak at the bottom, but that was probably due to the fact she hadn't been present to tend to it.

Mann imagined what she could have done if she was shown the real world, the real thing. He didn't have to imagine for her, though. He pulled a chair out from underneath the grimy table, and sat down on it. Looking down, he saw the floor was covered in files of all kinds, everything from birth certificates to sword licences, and he looked closer and closer, nearer and nearer the corner. There was a description of a woman in her mid-twenties there, and as he read the description, he found himself drawn back to Lisa, and the way in which everything she did was just like this paper described.

Long ago, Mann had written this letter to Lisa, describing her as if she was describing someone who wanted to sign up for citizenship. There was a long series of descriptors, some of which were retrospectively sickening, but others still resonated with Mann, as if he was there, putting pen to paper for the first time.

“And to you, go my dearest wishes. Sincerely, Alfred Mann.”

He began to cry, and sunk his head a little further. He never knew her name. She was just the L.I.S.A to him.

“Lisa.” he muttered.

He had done it on purpose, the acronym. What a silly acronym it was. Services administration? It was a near-tautological phrase. But, even though it made little sense, he remembered why he did all this, he remembered the love which he had had for her, and the ways in which he had to prioritise the running of the kingdom over his own personal wishes. It felt selfish to even consider the alternative, admitting his love, but bringing the bureaucracy of the entire city to a grinding halt. But it also felt selfish to keep using her as he did.

Maybe what had happened had been the best scenario, overall. She had gone without his intervention. He sunk his head lower, a tear falling onto the paper, shortly followed by the lantern, slipping out of his hand. He picked it up again, and blew out the fiery wax which burned the ground. But the fuel which had leaked out of

the machine burnt very quickly, and rapidly spread the fire to the nearby stacks of papers. Flames were soon moving to the walls, hugging them, out of Mann's control.

"No! No!" screamed Mann, unsure of what to do, trying to preserve even a fragment of her, perhaps to give back to her, if she was ever to return. Or maybe it was selfish once more, and he was keeping it for the sake of personal recollection.

But the fire did not care, and he was forced out the door, crying at the lost works of a woman who had lived her whole life in these rooms. The machine began to leak more, almost crying tears of fire onto the ground. It had a face to it, in a way, a face that conveyed his disappointment with himself in a way that self-reflection could not achieve.

"Who's there?" shouted a guard, Mann still crying to himself, banging on the closing door until it became too hot to touch. The outer key had melted into the lock too, sagging, glowing warm.

"It's curfew time. Go back home, screaming man." shouted the guard, showing his face, with a few others behind him.

"What do you want from me?" said Mann, barely audible over the creaking and snapping going on from inside the room.

The guard walked forwards, cautiously. “Did you set fire to that room? Alright, mate, you’ve had too much to drink or something. You’re coming with us.”

The guards picked up the screaming Mann, carrying him right to the palace underground, walking through a tunnel of guards, ready to eliminate any intruders. They walked upstairs, carrying him on their shoulders, now completely silent and red-eyed.

Bradshaw looked at Mann as he was thrown onto the floor.

“Oh, wow. Look who turned up. Stockdale will love this. Can one of you send for him?”

One of the guards ran off, armour clattering in the hallways. The rest of them stood around Mann, who had got to his feet, and was now in shackles, courtesy of Bradshaw.

“I’ve always wanted to do that. Quite personal. Anyway, how have you been? I’ve heard a lot about you from Botton, when I used to speak to him.”

Mann did not speak, instead choosing to bow to Bradshaw.

“Look, I’m flattered, but what are you trying to do? Offer your services to me?”

Mann nodded.

“Why? Don’t you want to rebel or anything?”

Mann ached his voice back in to working. “I owe it to Lisa.” he said, barely managing the last syllables without breaking down.

“Oh, look, don’t cry. Don’t... do that. Stop looking at the floor. Good. Alright, I was thinking you could offer your services to me in a very important way. We would put you in the prison I talked about in that speech about a week ago, and then send you off to Magiston Peak, where you would explain how everything was alright, and nothing needed checking up on. Right?”

“Right.”

“Okay. I’m going to get you guys to take Mann there tomorrow, and I’ll follow you there by boat. We’ll go to the coast near Dryden, and from there, sail to Haklyuts, where we can make our way to Magiston. All good?”

The guards and Mann nodded in unison.

“Great. Now, for tonight, keep him in some cell downstairs. Not the voting one, though. Oh, and make sure not to lose him or kill him on the trip, since he’ll be the first sacrifice, probably.”

Mann screamed, saying that no one would take him away so easily, and he screamed loud enough for Bradshaw to cover his ears. Stockdale came running out

into the room, asking what had gone on, and Bradshaw took him out of the room, explaining Magiston Peak to him, as he had never been. The screams echoed through the halls, powerfully reflecting off the shiny, featureless surfaces, melting and distorting it into almost white noise. But however hard he screamed behind the door of his cell, no one could hear him.

An equally loud, but less harrowing scream came from the crowd, watching from the stands as the ball rocketed back and forth between Adam and Max, the two other title contenders. Teddy sat with Johnny and some others, fairly close to the front. A man behind them leaned over.

“Aren’t you Teddy?”

“Yes.”

“Well, shouldn’t you be up there?”

“Shouldn’t you be at work, too?” said Teddy, laughing. “Don’t worry, I’m just taking a little break. I’ll be back next year.”

The game was over, almost before it began. Teddy was occasionally critiquing the players based on what he thought they were doing wrong, and that if he had been in this one, he would have won without much contest. He said he slightly regretted not participating, and that he was unfairly angry at Phil, but he would work hard to make sure he could balance his work and social lives. They filed out of the stands quickly, too, Teddy only

being stopped for a few signatures on the way back, and a few puzzled looks from people who were all too used to see him where Max stood now, clutching the trophy.

The boat had been fixed now, through repeated application of a sticky paste, which didn't look as if it was the most safe fix, but the extra horizontal planks of wood holding the two halves together seemed to give it an air of structural integrity.

Tarek and Joe signed up for Teddy's adventure because he thought that Teddy would be a powerful ally in their eventual return to Dryden, and the ensuing battle that would take place. Johnny also wanted something to do, and so wanted to go somewhere with Teddy, and he'd probably drag Mem and Page along with him, too. Curran thought it was probably better for him to stay this one out, and said he wanted to wait in Liddell's until his arm was better. Everyone got into the boat, waiting for him. Teddy clambered on last, straining to hold the gold coins which he had received from Phil.

"Oh no, I insist." said Curran, refusing to board the ever so slightly off-putting boat. "You go yourselves, I'm sure there's no room for me. Plus, if I come, then you'll need to check up on my arm, and you don't want that responsibility."

Johnny frowned, but also smiled. "Alright. We'll be about two weeks, though. Apparently Ted wants to go to Milne's?"

“Yep.” said Teddy.

“Ah, okay then.” said Johnny. “Maybe a month. No idea, really.”

“It’ll be around three weeks.” said Teddy.

“Well then, I was right. On average.”

Curran walked towards the boat. “See ya. Have fun.”

He turned to the cox, who nodded, and he then pushed the boat out, gently letting it float away. He almost longed to jump to the boat, it wasn’t very far away, and it was only getting a tiny bit further away each second, as Nirav readied his oars, starting his stroke.

He fell into the water after missing the jump, and splashed around for a while, Nirav reversing over him, and then dragging him onboard, before telling him to go and dry off, then he could leave with them, for if he left wet, he would catch a cold, or just be cold.

They waited for what seemed like too long, aching to leave, but Nirav always held the oars away from Teddy. Curran eventually returned, not looking much drier, but they pulled away, all of them successfully on board, and all eight pairs of eyes looking to the horizon.

XXVII - Leaving

Farr, Ullathorne, Kalivas, Fred, Lisa and Hawken sat in a circle, next to their two balloons, picking through the leaflets which they had received earlier that morning, and checking to see if they were all the same.

“Can’t believe they just had these things available.” said Ullathorne. “They just print everything that could happen. Honestly, insane.”

The rest continued working in silence, as this had not been the first time anyone had said that, not even in the last hour. The pile in the centre of the circle was growing, and next to it sat Kalivas’s biographies, which he had flicked through earlier, trying to note down anything important. So far, there had been pretty much nothing, and they were quite thin. The man had said that was the case because he was a Drydenite, and they didn’t tend to have a lot of info on them, not since - (he struggled to remember this part), not since their representative failed to attend Magiston Peak meetings, whatever that meant. He felt tempted to spend some more money on a book that explained all the kingdoms and the way they worked, but he felt that would be too much money, and he only had a little left after his purchase.

“You know what, guys, these biographies I bought kind of suck. They don’t have any information about what I was, either. Just some job description, which is sort of

wrong to begin with, and some personal stories which are wrong, too.”

“What did they put your job down as?” asked Ullathorne.

“Oh, they put me down as a teacher of the Ducc faith.”

“Well, that’s not exactly wrong, is it?”

“I was just a teacher. No Ducc involved.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. We’ve had this conversation before, anyway. I refused to teach anything Ducc-related in my lessons. They were for maths and science only. Not that I wasn’t a Duccist at all, but it just lingered with me.”

“Sorry.” said Ullathorne, throwing in his last leaflet. “Right, we better get these loaded on to the baskets and get going now, shouldn’t we?”

Farr stood up, chucking the bundles into her balloon.

“I don’t think they’ll all fit in our one. Can we use yours?” asked Farr.

Fred stepped forwards. “What makes you think we’re going back over there?”

“Well, you came here to escape, but I bet you didn’t come here to run away from your problems forever,

right? You sort of expected you'd come back and do something? I assume you took that balloon out of College, and if you did, then you should return there, and save the people from whatever horrors you fled from, leaving them behind."

Lisa and Hawken looked angry now. "It wasn't just us that escaped! There were others, too! And we couldn't have fitted everyone on this balloon, right? So it's not our fault this happened! It's not our fault we were the only ones who found this thing." said Hawken.

"You shouldn't have to guilt us into doing this." said Lisa.

Farr threw a bundle at Lisa. "Well then, load up, we're going in five minutes. You've got a city to save."

"And you!" said Lisa.

"I'm just here to help these two."

"To help these two? Well, that's helping, right?"

"Well... yes."

"Great. Then you won't mind helping me load your leaflets on to our balloon, then?"

"Yes." Farr said, somehow changed and enthusiastic about making some kind of change. She didn't even know if this whole thing was real, but she had always wanted to visit Dryden, and having a tour guide would

probably be the best way to do it. They loaded all the leaflets in, and set off to Dryden on a slow wind. They tied the two balloons together so they wouldn't be separated, and tried to make casual conversation over the twenty metre gap.

Down below, the clatter of a lock falling to the floor echoed throughout the palace as Mann was let out his cell after a single night. He was thrown to the floor, and ordered to carry the heavy lock back upstairs, where it would be repaired and de-rusted. Mann had never used these cells to imprison anyone, and so they were in disrepair, and he almost paid the price for it. The rotting wooden floor of the cell and rusty metal walls did not offer pleasant conditions to sleep in. The guards accompanied him to the top of the stairs, and he placed the lock down, and after, he was swiftly dragged to the edge of the palace, the guards seemingly not caring as his head clattered along the ground, holding him by his shackles.

"You're going to be put in this bag." said one of them, before placing the bag over his head, rather abruptly. Mann could see the outside world relatively clearly, and saw Bradshaw walking towards him, despite still being upside down.

"Ah, good. You got him in. Much trouble?"

"No, sir."

“Great. Well, Mann, I think you know where you’re off to now. I’ll be on my way shortly, too. Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine.” Bradshaw said, stepping closer, menacingly. “I’m going by balloon.”

Mann piped up. “I thought you lost your one.”

“There were a few more that turned up later.”

He hung there in silence, and then at the order of Bradshaw, he was dropped to the floor, and the bag carried out to the edge of the town, where Mann was thrown into the back of a wagon, which was pulled along by several bugbears, writhing and scratching at the sand. On the journey to the water’s edge, one of the bugbears collapsed in the heat, and the man responsible for them untied it from the wagon, leaving it in the middle of the desert. Eventually, they reached the water’s edge, where there was a hut, seemingly waiting for them. A boat arrived shortly after, and Mann was loaded into the boat, without touching the ground.

He was strangely relaxed. He knew that he wasn’t going to die, or Bradshaw would be in bigger trouble than he could ever hope to cause by staying alive. The air inside the bag was warm, but not stale, and it was sufficiently thick enough that the wooden floor of the boat wasn’t too uncomfortable, either. The boat rocked side to side abruptly as things were loaded into it, presumably a few food rations, and maybe even some weapons. His mind wandered to Magiston Peak, remembering the various ways in which he had been there over the years. Most

times, he had stopped off at Busby's, just to see how everything was going. It had always been a point to strive towards, some kind of guide on how he should make College, and it always outranked everyone in every metric. He wondered what Bradshaw would have to say about the city now, if there was anything left to comment on. Judging by the amount of Busbite Guards that were over in College, he wondered how chaotic it must be. In reality, law was being kept roughly how Botton had it.

Mann remembered Botton, and how he was a friendly person, a genuine leader, and not afraid to take a few risks here and there. One of the times he was there, Botton had just sunk quite a lot of money into these strange tunnels in the mountains. He never quite knew why they had been put there, but he built his own tunnels too, and the work that had to be put into them made his labour output comparable to Busby's, which was at least twice the size of College. Those tunnels had largely caved in, more than a decade since they were last checked. But the ones which he needed had always been maintained, roughly. The corridor leading to the basement of the palace had been kept up, in case someone like Bradshaw tried to conquer them. Of course, he would have had to have failed, but it was a worthwhile safety net. He had a horrible thought, but brushed it off before his conscious mind had enough time to process it.

He had spent the previous night in that safety net, acutely aware of the fact he had designed it and ordered it to be built. The curve that brought the wall into the

floor was designed so that no one could injure themselves while in there, and the handle was made so it lay almost flat against the door, with no opportunity to open it from the inside without some serious force, not manageable by a human. Everything in that room had been designed to keep the occupant inside.

The horrible thought came back to him, curving its way around the subconscious like a boomerang, ready to hit its unsuspecting owner in the back of the head. The room in which he had placed Lisa in all those years ago also had all those hallmarks. It was designed to keep her in for as long as possible in order to maximise productivity. He had placed a hard to move desk in front of the door to that room, all those years ago, in order to make it hard for her to go home. The room in which she was supposed to sleep was cold and dark, with no natural light whatsoever. The vault, containing most of the files, also had no natural light in them, and were designed to be as hostile as possible, jagged tile floors with jutting edges, and as little floor space as possible. The room upstairs was lit harshly by the sun every evening, not letting the light go out until at least sunset, which, at certain times of the year, was well beyond what any normal person would have to gone to sleep at.

Consciously or unconsciously, he had designed the room to be this way when he moved her from that other, dingy room. It was a basement room, and he thought she should have a nicer room, one on the ground floor, for her benefit, and also ease of access for the customers. He had moved her there 'for her own good'. Knowing that

the design of the room would inspire her to change her routine as little as possible and question as few things as possible, he moved her there. The inside of the bag felt very warm now, as the sun rose overhead.

Over the sea, Nirav slowly rowed the boat out, not pushing himself hard at all, for this was a simple leisure trip. He tried to teach Tarek how to row properly, with all the timings of the various parts of the stroke. Joe seemed much more adept at the timing, but Tarek was better with the power. In the end, he gave up and decided to just drop the oars in the boat, and float around for a while. Johnny had claimed he had brought fishing equipment, which was dubious until he whipped out a box from underneath his seat, slamming it down with such force that Teddy thought the boat might break in half again.

“Here ya go.” said Johnny. “Doubles as a barbecue. I’ve got a light and some coal in here, too.”

Everyone cheered, and Nirav asked Johnny where he got the box from.

“I’ve had this box the whole time.”

“No you haven’t.” said Nirav, rather incredulous. “You can’t have had it since before you got to Liddell’s.”

“I don’t remember you ever having it.” said Tarek.

“So do you want to fish and cook or not?” said Johnny, in an unusually angry tone.

Everyone sat in silence for a second or two, before Nirav chimed in with a quiet yes.

“Well then!” Johnny said, enthusiastically (without a hint of sarcasm) “Let’s get to it, then.” He handed to two fishing rods, and they eventually found their way to the two other experienced fishers, Mem and Page.

“Thanks for bringing us this, Johnny.” said Page. “However you found it.”

“Yeah, for real, where did you get that from?” asked Mem, rod in hand, gently shaking.

“Last night, when I was going for a walk right before I went to sleep, I saw a massive whale, stuck on the shore. I tried to help it, but it was no use. Didn’t want to wake up the whole town, either, so I tried what I had to do.”

“What did you do?”

“I climbed into its mouth, and it was choking on this box.” he said, slapping the top. “I took it as a sign and walked off with it.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t somebody’s box?”

“Well, whoever it was wasn’t likely to get it back any time soon.”

Mem laughed with a few others. “So what about the whale? How comes we didn’t see it when we left the port?”

“No idea.” said Johnny. “Must have gone away itself. That, or someone else helped it.”

“There were some strange noises on the beach last night.” said Mem.

“Oh no,” said Nirav, “That was Page, staggering up and down after he’d had a little bit too much to drink.”

Everyone laughed, turning to Page to hear a retort. “Well at least I can handle my drink. You tapped out after... well... much less than me, at the least.”

“That’s because his liver isn’t made of pure lead.” said Johnny. “I’m sure if he regularly abused it for the better part of thirty years, he’d be able to handle it much better than you can.” he continued, walking the fine line between laughable comeback and genuine insult. The fishing continued as normal, with Tarek intently looking over the side of the boat, watching the hook sink below them, into the strangely clear water. As he looked up, he saw a duck, much the same as Nirav had.

“What’s that?” asked Tarek.

“That’s a duck.” said Joe, gently laughing. “It’s like a real version of Ducc!”

“Doesn’t it look great, Tarek?” said Nirav, moving over to the side of the boat, unbalancing it quite a bit.

“Can we not lean any further to one side?” asked Teddy. “I don’t really want to have to get wet.” Nirav moved back over to the other side, letting Tarek gaze at the duck all he wanted.

“Now this is something that deserves worship.” said Tarek. “Look at it! The colours on the fluffy things! And the way they all streak down the side of it. It’s just wonderful. I want to touch it.”

Nirav leaned over again. “I wouldn’t try.”

“Why?”

“It’ll fly away. Same thing with Ducc really. If you get too close, he hides himself from you. That’s why you can’t read the scripts.”

Tarek looked at Nirav, almost angrily. “Seriously? Don’t you think that Stockdale just said that so no one would question his tampering?”

Nirav looked at Tarek, and was just on the verge of saying something when Johnny said something much more important (at least to him).

“I’ve got a big one!”

“No need to brag, Johnny.” said Page, quietly.

“No, really, come and look at it.” he said, before the fish in question took off at an alarming rate, dragging the boat faster and faster.

“Johnny, let go of the fish.” said Teddy, as stern as the cox.

“Can’t.”

“Why?”

“Won’t unhook.”

“Then let go of the rod.”

“No.”

Teddy walked to the front of the boat carefully, trying not to make it nosedive, which was harder now that they were travelling at speed.

“Let go of it.”

“No, it’s mine.”

“According to you, you found it in a whale. You didn’t pay for it.”

“Sentimental value.”

“You’ve had it for less than a day.”

“Come on! This one could feed us for a week if we land it.”

“And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“Wait until it tires out. It’ll be less than twenty minutes, I promise. And I’ll do all the filleting and de-boning. Promise.”

Teddy sighed. The sun reached its peak, and then began to fall once more. By the time it was at the horizon, the fish had not begun to slow one bit. Teddy sighed once more, walking back to the front of the boat where Johnny now sat, alone for most of the time, with the rod attached to an oar holder.

“Still no luck catching that fish, then?”

“Nope.”

“Why don’t you just try and...”

“Try and what?”

“There’s another boat over there.” Teddy began to stand up and signal to them.

“Why are you trying to get their attention?”

“So they steer clear of us.”

“That won’t be an issue.”

“Yes, it will.” said Teddy, the issue in question rapidly approaching them. On that boat sat some incredibly bored Busbite guards, no longer satisfied with watching the birds fly overhead. Despite having been in the same group since Bradshaw came to power, the best they could do with conversation was small talk, as they were forced to hide most of their faces, and advised not to give out any personal details. For some reason, they thought the last rule also applied to other Busbite guards. Perhaps it was because there might be spies in the system. Either way, the lack of things to observe on the water had taken its toll on them, so they were almost glad to finally have something to discuss.

“Look over there.” said one of them, ever so slightly monotonously, as to not give away his voice.

“Want to go and talk to them?”

“We’ve got loads of time. Plus, we can see if they have anything we might want to buy.”

“Or steal!” said the first one, less monotonously.

“Yes, that too. Try steering towards them.”

“Steering’s terrible.”

“Well, just try anyway.”

The sailboat turned slowly, right into the path of the rowing boat.

“They aren’t rowing, but they’re going very fast.” said the first one, looking over the edge of the boat. “Very fast indeed. And straight towards us.”

The second one shouted, “Turn away!”

“We can’t!” shouted Johnny.

The two boats collided with a crunch, and surprisingly enough, Teddy’s boat had held fast. Mann still held, curled up in his bag, wondering if he would sink and drown. Johnny clambered on to the guards boat, leaving the line alone for a second, before returning, picking it out of the holder, and getting back on to their boat.

“Why didn’t you turn?” said a guard, almost in harmony with Johnny.

“Look, we had no steering, and we were signalling to you well before you crashed.”

“Well, our steering isn’t very good either.”

Teddy rushed onto the other boat. “Our boat is beginning to sink. Yours is pushing ours underwater.”

“Well, do something about it.” said one of the guards.

“No, you.” said Johnny.

Teddy started to work on dislodging the two boats, although that didn’t seem to be working. He began to load their supplies onto the other boat, telling everybody to move.

“You can’t be on our boat. Busby’s property.”

Teddy threw the fishing box onto the deck, and it cracked the floor panels.

“See what you’ve done?”

“What I’ve done?” shouted Teddy. “What you’ve done is much, much worse.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.” said Teddy. “And presumably everyone else on my boat.”

“But there are like, seven of you, it’s not fair to decide who’s right by simply counting up.”

“Fine then. I assume you all think you’re in the right, right?” said Teddy, addressing the three guards, and unknowingly, Mann.

The three guards affirmed in unison, in their separate

ways, but Mann was clearly audible, chiming in with a passionate 'no'.

Teddy looked scared, for once. "What was that?"

"Nothing." said the guard, stretching, trying to subtly block his view of the bag. Teddy reached over and tried to touch the person inside it, and before he did, Mann cried out.

"It's me, Mann! Of College!" Joe's ears perked up, and he walked on to the Busbite boat.

"What? Mann? Why are you here?"

"It's hard to-" he started, before being grabbed by one of the guards and bashed against the deck.

Joe and Teddy looked at each other. Johnny pushed one of the guards overboard (of his own will), and he began to sink underwater due to his armour. Splashing around, barely below water, he had managed to take most of it off before the fish that Johnny was catching began to bite at him, and it managed to take off a decently-sized chunk of forearm before he reached the surface again. On the boat, Teddy, Joe, Johnny and the two guards were locked in a push-of-war, and Joe lost his individual battle, being pushed off the boat too. As did the other two guards, but one of them took Mann with him as he fell, still linked to the bag somehow. Joe tried to climb aboard Teddy's boat, which had begun to split in half properly, due to the fish underneath it, swinging and

battering the guards around. Mann continued to sink, attached to a set of armour that a guard had removed. Page, who had jumped in already to try and help Joe, swam downwards, seeing the writhing mass of fish and man, fighting under the boat, and the bag, sinking, also writhing of its own accord. He tried to drag the bag upwards, and as he surfaced, hardly able to keep himself above water, he noticed as the boat lowered. It wasn't broken, or filling up, like he had expected, but the fish was dragging it down, chasing after the drowned guard who was leaving a trail of muddy looking blood in the water.

"Johnny!" shouted Page. "Johnny! Someone! Unhook the fishing rod!" No one could really hear him over the sound of the Mem and the guard angrily screaming as they fought, so he swam round, and then realised that the bag had been underwater all this time, with Mann now unconscious and unmoving. He attempted to push Mann back on to the boat, only to realise it was now level with his head, and sinking slowly. Mem, having barely managed to throw the guard off the boat, hauled the bag over the edge of the ship, causing it to sink further, and just as the water slipped over the lip of the boat, the oar holder broke, and the boat rose up, hitting Page in the chin, and he recoiled in pain, but also because of the sheer force of the boat knocking him back. Mem hauled Mann back in the boat, bumping his head on the corner of the boat in the process. Joe was stuck on the edge of the boat, and was dragged on by Tarek, who had sat most of the fight out, trying to avoid the water wherever possible. The guards were now all

sinking, down with the fish which Johnny lamented losing.

“We could have eaten well for a whole week, for free.”

Teddy looked at him angrily. “But we could have died, too. And it’s your fault we kept holding on to this fish, saying ‘Oh, no, don’t worry, it’ll tire out at some point.’, all day, while we couldn’t catch anything else due to the speed.”

“But we could have sold it.”

“Fine, even if we had caught it, which we wouldn’t have, where would we sell it?”

“Busby’s.”

“Why would you go back there? And, judging by the time that it took us to get across the delta, the fish would be rotten by the time we got there.”

“Why do you care so much?” said Johnny, actually unaware of the situation around him. “It’s not like we died.”

“Well, no. It is like we almost died. Because we did. Because we almost died, Johnny. This was supposed to be a stress-free adventure for me, and Nirav, Johnny.”

“But the fish took us along and Nirav didn’t even have to paddle.”

Nirav laughed. "Fair point, but I think I would have chosen rowing over whatever happened here."

The conversation ended abruptly when Mann began to cough and splutter as Mem ripped the bag open, despite the fact it had become untied while Mann was underwater.

"Are you okay?" asked Mem, loud enough that a coma patient would have awoken just to tell him to quiet down.

"Oh, yes, wow. You don't have to be so..." Mann coughed for at least five seconds, sputtering water over his already-soaked clothes. "Loud."

"Alright, as much as we're glad you're okay, we need to move all the stuff to the other boat, as this one looks like it's going to snap in half." said Mem, alternating glances between Teddy and the still-coughing Mann. Tarek, Joe and Nirav walked over, their attempts to clamber over the broken wood were only slightly marred by the equipment they carried.

"I can't row this boat." said Nirav. "It's too big."

"You don't need to," said Joe, hauling up a sack of potatoes. "It's got a sail, look." The boat did, indeed, have a sail, but it was furled due to the complete lack of wind, using the gentle outwards current to manoeuvre. The rest of the group made their way on to the new boat,

Johnny with his fishing box, Page and Mem carrying Mann, and Hartley merely existing this whole time.

“I recognise you.” said Johnny, as Mann was lifted over the gap in-between the two boats, and the old rowing boat began to fill with water slowly, eventually shifting out of view and sinking simultaneously. “You’re that College guy, right? What’s happened over there, then?”

Mann didn’t respond.

“So how do you work a sail?” said Nirav. Mem pushed Joe aside, unclipping the sail, and then clipping it to the boom, which swerved round as the wind picked up for a second, knocking Mem over and hitting Mann on the head once more, making him cry out, yet again.

“Not like that, then.” said Page, laughing a little, not so much as to make it seem like he found Mann’s predicament funny.

Joe fixed the sail properly, and set up the boat so that the smashed panels at the side hampered progress as little as possible. “So, where to, Mann?”

“Back.”

“Back where?”

“Back to College. We need to get rid of Stockdale and Bradshaw.”

“Finally, someone who gets it!” shouted Tarek, with Nirav nodding in relative approval, with Page celebrating having another potential member of the A.B.C. Mem and Johnny cheered too, but that was mainly because they enjoyed cheering. Joe struggled to unstick the rudder at first, but eventually, well after Johnny had lit the barbecue, they were back on their way to College, slowly moving downwind, not letting the sail out too far for fear of capsizing. Above them, the two balloons sailed along on the same winds as they were.

Tarek spoke up as they watched the sun set, later on.

“Why don’t we go to Dryden first? Mann said that Stockdale and Bradshaw will be at this meeting, so why don’t we go there to take back the town?”

Mann nodded, and no one else had any better ideas, so they changed course, sailing towards the coast near Dryden. Eventually, they saw the balloons overhead, and Johnny identified them as Busby’s Balloons, which were going to pick the two leaders up and take them to Magiston Peak.

XXVIII - Coalesce

It hadn't been a particularly nice day for Bradshaw, first he had had to witness Mann being dragged across his clean floors, and then his balloon trip to Magiston had been delayed by a sudden change in the wind. He'd had a few hours until the wind picked up again, and in those hours he walked the streets of College, surveying his land. There were many people going about their daily business as if not much had changed, only a few seemed to be actively concerned about the new regime. Some were lining up to cast their votes for the first sacrifice, and he stopped by the chalkboard where they were tallying up the scores. The tallies were beginning to run off the board, and the Drydenites in charge of the operation had resorted to representing groups of one hundred votes by placing apples in a box. It was chaotic, almost like a betting shop in nature, and he thought he saw people placing odds on the most likely people to be killed. One of the vote counters saw him walking along and scribbled over his name, emptying out the corresponding box of apples.

He then saw a Busbite shout at a new voter for voting for him. "Dont you see? Off limits! Next!"

"Don't I get another vote?" asked the woman.

"No! Next!"

Bradshaw walked over and said to the woman that she could have another vote, so she walked up to the guard once more.

“I said go away!”

“Someone said I can have another vote.”

Bradshaw waved as the woman pointed to him.

“Oh, that’s... but you just voted for him?”

“What?”

“The guy who said you can vote again, you wanted to vote for him to die the first time around.”

“Did I?”

“Don’t you know who he is?”

“I was just voting him because it looked like he had a lot of votes. More safe if we all vote for one person.”

“He doesn’t have any votes now.” said the Busbite guard, “And I don’t think you can vote for him. You can’t vote for him. So who else do you want to vote for?”

“Who has the most votes?”

“It’s almost a tie between Kelley Abbott and Tarek Abu, they seem to be-”

“Either one. I don’t mind.”

“Why?”

“Just whichever one has the most votes.”

Bradshaw walked over to the centre of the room, behind the row of vote counters. “Does anyone here actually know who either of those people are? Abbott, Kelley, and Abu, Tarek. Anyone? No?”

The crowd was completely silent, the scratching of chalk on the boards behind grew fainter until everyone was looking at him.

“You have to know what these people are like before you vote for them!” said Bradshaw. “I mean, I can understand why you’d vote for me, I... you know, subverted you and all, but these two people are innocent.” He turned to the vote counters.

“Do any of you know why anyone voted for Kelley Abbott?”

One of the counties turned to him, shyly. “I think someone said whoever’s name was first on the list. They just wanted to not have to vote for anyone in particular.”

“And I’m assuming Tarek suffered the same fate, no?”

“Yes, she’s first in the register, and Abu has no relatives registered, and-”

“All of you! Vote for people you actually hate! Not just because your friends and family are voting for them. Think of the people there who have done things to you, who have affected you. I will ask one thing, though. Stockdale and I are off limits. But aside from that, go wild. Think about who you have to vote for. We’ll scratch all these votes off and start again. Think about who’s betrayed you personally. Anyone you like.” He paused for a second. “Maybe even your leader. He’s done a lot of good for you, eh?”

The crowd sighed, not wanting to queue for hours once more, and the vote counters drearily dumped apples out of the boxes, rubbing out the series of tallies under Abu and Abbot.

He heard a single exchange before dropping out of earshot. “One vote for Mann.” shouted a vote counter.

He walked out from the back of the building, taking an underground passage to the palace, accompanied by a guard.

“Who’d you vote for?” he asked, trying to make conversation.

“Kelley Abbot.” he said, unaware of his earlier speech.

“Why?”

“Uh... she’s a bad person.”

“Yes, go on.”

“Can’t really. Don’t want to give anything away.”

“Yes. Vote security and all that.”

They arrived at the palace entrance, and another attendant called for Bradshaw and Stockdale, as their balloons were ready. Each with more attendants following them, they heaped their cases into the cabins, and watched eagerly as yet more people lit the burners, testing the fuel one last time before takeoff.

“Have you ever been in one of there before?” asked Bradshaw. Stockdale gave a hesitant shake of his head, almost embarrassed.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed.” said Bradshaw. “I had never been in one until coming to power. And I suppose this is the same for you.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, don’t just wait there, we have a meeting to go to and a Mann to manipulate.” said Bradshaw, with a small skip in his step, the crack of his heel hitting the floor rolling and ringing through the halls one last time, at least for the time being. The balloons took off, unaware they were heading past the path of more balloons which

sought to destroy them. Bradshaw vaguely recognised the Busby's Balloons patterning on the side, but couldn't recognise the people inside, as they shifted minutely inside their suspended world.

In this aforementioned world, Farr and Ullathorne read back through Kalivas's biography, attempting to see if any of the future predictions had come true. So far, they had got to the point where the writings had caught up with reality. In the book, they were supposed to leave for Busby's, which immediately contradicted their real-life actions. The other book said they would head towards Dryden, and that they would encounter an unconquerable enemy. Farr also revealed in reading a few previous anecdotes from Kalivas's early life, with Kalivas himself rebutting most of the stories as false, and Ullathorne occasionally chipping in to falsify his falsifications. In the other balloon, still roped together, the other three were sleeping, not having gotten any rest on the night of the balloon escape. They didn't notice when the other balloon cried out that they could see the edge of the desert, and were heading inland towards College now, or when Kalivas got angry at Ullathorne for insisting that he was the only person to fail the entry exam to be a rake bearer.

The balloons parted ways again, without much course correction, and soon enough, the two balloons found themselves above Dryden, the low morning sun casting long shadows over the town as the dunes seemed to shield it from reality. Ullathorne could make out his house in the vague pattern of the streets, but Kalivas's

was nowhere to be seen, a hole in the system where it once stood. Confused, he lowered the burner's flame and brought them down, gently tugging on the rope to signal the descent. As they got closer, Kalivas thought there had been a festival on, and everyone was recovering, still fast asleep several hours into the day. However, the detail resolved itself more, revealing partially wrecked houses, with their materials pilfered by some external force. There was no one left, and as Fred readied his arm with leaflets, Kalivas went even further down, and landed relatively softly compared to last time. There were no people. The houses were shells of themselves, all glass, all the metals, everything, gone. No people, no remnants of anyone's existence could be found, all personally identifying objects carried to College on a wave of frenzied individuals, looking for new life somewhere other than this desolate dominion.

The hall was still up, but frail looking, and missing something without the stained glass windows that portrayed Ducc in all its glory, telling the story of the Ancient Ones, and the Oasis, and the Cave, all until they had ran out of dye to stain the glass with. That didn't seem to matter now, as they climbed out, and Farr saw roughly what she expected, she never assumed Drydenites to be capable of such feats like metalworking.

"This is all wrong! What's happened here?" said Ullathorne, not really expecting a conclusive answer, merely venting.

“So this isn’t how it’s like all the time, then?” asked Farr, surprised that they weren’t living in mud huts with straw roofs.

Ullathorne and Kalivas walked around some more, with the others reluctant to step outside, for fear of an ambush. Eventually, they were coaxed out when Ullathorne started screaming to prove that no one was listening. They walked to his old house, and shared in the pain he felt when all of his things had been taken, all of his books in an ashy pile in the corner, and the drawings on the walls seemingly charred, as if someone had tried, but failed to light a fire. The fire in the centre of the town was smouldering, not out, but glowing softly, barely putting out as much heat as the sun that crept up their backs. Holes had been dug in the ground to get rid of the pipes, and in a few of them, there were skeletons of animals, and in one case, a human that hadn’t decomposed fully. Kalivas recognised the hair as Boris’s, and he gagged at the sight of it, despite only flashing a look at the body.

Fred, Lisa and Hawken were still vaguely anxious, seeing a kingdom so empty like this was a massive shock to them. They still thought that there were people hiding, who were in on Ullathorne’s plan to kill them. Perhaps this was all a trap, but when Ullathorne himself tentatively opened the door to Stockdale’s old house, the amount of fear in his eyes almost relieved them. Inside, they walked upstairs on a set of unstable stairs, finding a small book in a low drawer, under an equally unstable table. It was seemingly the only object in the whole town

that hadn't been taken. Kalivas read through it as they walked around the rest of the town, silently taking in revelation after revelation. Stockdale's entire plan had been left in here, almost as if he had wanted someone to find it. Hawken's house had been removed, too, though the roof was still lying on the floor, giving the impression that it was still there from the balloon earlier. Nothing was left there either, all personal items missing.

Step one, gather resources and knowledge, and go to Dryden. Get a few books from Trogglen library, and give them to whoever is in charge.

Kalivas had been given books for teaching some years ago. He had used them right up until he had left, the edges frayed, but the material inside still very much intact. Until they were burnt, of course.

Step two, find something to give to them. The red herring. Something to distract them. Maybe a red herring?

This was followed by a series of scribbles where ideas for idols had been crossed off. The anger of not being able to find a simple object to give them that would captivate them was annoying to him, and it showed as the pencil marks became deeper and darker, sometimes tearing into the next page. Eventually, somewhere buried deep beneath the messy lines, there was an answer.

A small, yellow, plastic duck. Load of them blew out of the factory at College. Got a bag full of them. Going to Dryden

tomorrow for the last time, going to be there permanently. Goodbye.

Kalivas was reminded of the cover, and turned the book to its front to see a tag on the front that gave Stockdale's old College address, and his full name. However, opening it back up, that was decisively not where it ended. The strokes were now in pen and ink, and more fluid, less scratchy.

I've come back here because the Drydenites are being lazy again. They need something to keep them busy. Some of them have rock gardens, so I had an idea. Raking a whole border around the town. Make it so it's something to do with Ducc. IMPORTANT REMINDER - DO NOT LET THEM SEE THE ACTUAL SCRIPTS. TO FIND COPY, ENTER IN LEFT, IN NORTH GRAVE.

Kalivas ushered everyone to look around for this north grave, not knowing where it could be, or how to orient himself. He thought of Boris's 'grave', if it could be called that, and walked over there, checking for markings in the ground. Covering the parts of his vision that made it clear he was looking at Boris, he walked around until coming to the realisation that the hall had been oriented with its door to the north, a fact he had had to put into consideration when building it. Boris's grave was directly west of the hall, and therefore could not be the location in question, and so the hunt went on for a while longer.

He also brought the group back round to Stockdale's house to find any more documents that would have led

to more clues, but they found nothing. Lisa had just lightened up, no longer fearing the ghost town, when a plank came loose in the ceiling, almost hitting her on the head.

At the same time, Tarek clambered out of the boat last, having managed to pick most of the remaining bits of fish off the bones that Johnny had given him.

Johnny looked at him with mild disgust. "It wasn't even cooked, Tarek."

"Don't care. Still tasty."

"Whatever floats your boat." said Johnny, struggling to lift the barbecue box alongside his sack of fish cuttings they hadn't finished. Walking up and down the dunes, they each tired, carrying some kind of equipment, ready to fend off any Drydenites if they came near them. The sun hit its peak, and started to shine in their eyes as they crossed over yet another dune. This dune revealed the town, silent as ever, and Tarek assumed there had been a curfew of a kind, or maybe everyone was crowded in the hall for a speech. His suspicions were heightened by the lack of any real flame in the centre of the town, and he thought back to how he had stood here several times before, looking down at the flickering candlelights of the world he had spent his whole life in. In a way, he had started a new life by escaping the town. He could have lied about his name and his origins to whoever would listen, and there would be no one to correct him, and no consequences for doing so.

His mind then wandered to his name, Tarek Abu, which apparently meant something like 'father'. Was he happy with it? Now probably wasn't the time to think about that, the others now catching up, most of them not able to understand why nothing was going on, why there were no signs of life. Working as a unit, they silently made their way down the slope, only because they couldn't see anything moving. At the slightest hint of anyone existing in the town, they would leave. Kalivas and the other five were already inside Stockdale's house, crowding round him as he read more segments of Stockdale's largely destroyed diary. He seemed to have a lot of ideas, most of which he crossed out. A good editor, thought Farr.

They're pretty good people, overall. With the new festivals, everyone's talking to each other, and some of them are attributing this growth to me. That's not fair, I think. I feel that they make the effort to go to all of these things, I just do a bit of the organising. I mean, the festivals. We have enough food to do them now. That's a good thing. The pipelines. I just hope that they're okay when I leave them.

Kalivas, Ullathorne and Hawken looked on in shock. Could Stockdale have been acting in their best interests the whole time? Even the festivals, which had been made to make them lazy, were achieving the exact opposite? They stood there in wordless revelry, not wanting to try and explain anything quite yet, all itching to turn the page. Farr held the book, measuring out the time to count the pages in her head, not flicking through like a

flip-book. It was a captivating read, even to Fred and Farr, who knew almost nothing of the story of Dryden.

Kalivas - pretty sure he knows about the script changes.

Rev. Hall - knows but shouldn't, Williams must have told him at some point, the bastard.

Ullathorne -

No one would have told their students or I would have heard about it by now. Also, if Hall complains again, then it's pretty clear that Drydenites don't know what they're getting.

Later on, the sweeping comments became more incisive, more scythe-like, with a wish to mow everything down.

Why aren't they happy? Why? They have food, water, and they're safe here. They don't have Wren as a leader. They should be happy. Most of them don't have to do any work. And all they do is complain occasionally. Say that they're getting fat. Well, then eat less, go and exercise or something. I sometimes wish I could take this place over properly.

The next series of entries had all been crossed out, but they were certain they described ways of taking power within the town, some seemed more violent than others. Eventually, disparate strands of thought coagulated into the plan which lied at the very last pages of the book, smaller writing, cramping every last idea he had onto ever-diminishing space.

Use Ducc. The thing that made them happy, safe and well-fed. We have to move. We must go forth and take more in the name of Ducc. We must implement something different. Kingship, that's the one.

TO-DO LIST:

*Declare that the person who rakes the border is king
(use scripts to help you, remember, north grave)*

Send Hawken and the battalion to College

If they succeed, take everyone there

If they don't move anyway and say we won

Fix that leaky pipe at the centre of the town

Do something about the oil fire

There was a collective pause for thought after the back cover collapsed shut, sealing off the most important document in the town, ready for closer inspection at a later date. Stockdale had felt bad about leaving his diary behind, he had forgotten it at the foot of his desk, and was angry at himself for doing so. Looking over the edge of the balloon, now well on its way to Magiston Peak, he thought he could see Dryden, in all of its diffused being. It wasn't, merely a figment of the sweeping shadows which moved over the land as the sun lowered more. Back down on the ground, Tarek and the others were nearing the edge of the town where Stockdale's house was, and they crept closer and closer to it, and he felt an urge to hide under the window, as he had done with Kalivas once before, when he uncovered the first layer of secrets behind Stockdale's existence.

Nirav poked his head in through the door, and he saw Fred, leaning up against the nearest wall, slab of ceiling panel in hand, ready to bat anyone who came in. Nirav wasn't able to back his head out fast enough to get a scream in before he was hit on the head. No one followed their mental plan, with Tarek's lot moving in to fight whoever hit Nirav, and vice versa for Kalivas's crew. Within a few seconds of frenzied fighting between unacquainted couples, Kalivas saw Tarek and shouted for everyone to stop, which most of them did. Nirav took a punch at Fred, though, calling it an 'idiot tax'.

All fourteen of them now stood in (or awkwardly hanging out of) Stockdale's house, with reuniting people clumping together in social lumps. Joe made a little diagram of the people, just to keep track of how they knew each other. He recognised Kalivas and Ullathorne, as well as Farr, but he was confused as to why the office lady from College was there.

"Why are you here?" asked Joe, almost harshly.

Lisa walked over to him, squeezing past Tarek and Nirav, who were looking on in wonder at Stockdale's diary, mouths not quite open, but feeling as if they were unhinged, aghast at the actions he had meticulously planned out, and the occasional heartfelt comment he put forward to a good person. Hawken was mentioned in there a few times, put down as 'not too much of a threat' in a table of trust that he had tabulated.

She looked confused. "You're from College, right?"

“Yes.”

“Well, I left with Fred and Hawken after it was taken over by Stockdale.”

“Taken over by Stockdale? How?”

“Bradshaw helped him.”

“Oh, of course. That explains quite a lot.”

Soon, pretty much everyone was caught up on the escapades of Stockdale, even though only half of them had any reason to care at all. Kalivas had told them about life in Dryden, about most of the festivities there, and about the rulers over the years. There seemed to be a blank in his mind whenever he tried to cast his storytelling back to before Stockdale. All of his childhood memories were still there, vivid as ever, but he couldn't recall who used to run the place properly before Stockdale. There was a good deal of mixing between the incredibly different social groups they had formed (mainly out of physical proximity, there wasn't much space to be antisocial in a balloon), and they shared stories as the sun finally set, wanting to spend the night here, and perhaps uncover the mystery of Stockdale's north grave.

Looking for somewhere to sleep was easy, there were still a few benches left in the hall, and the floor there hadn't been completely removed, so it was an obvious choice.

The temperature was the same, both indoors and out, and due to the lack of temperature fluctuation, most people just laid on the ground and slept easy. Kalivas didn't sleep so easy, though, his mind racing with ideas on how to find this grave. Stockdale slept restlessly too, tossing and turning to attempt to balance his balloon, the burner attendant wishing he would just calm down and stop making the rocking worse than it already was. A kind of shared dream occurred, both of them wondering about the horrors that could have been uncovered by his notebook. Stockdale dreamed of someone finding the original copy of the scrolls, and it had been so long since he had seen them he had forgotten what was on them. He maybe thought he had written some insulting message to the Drydenites in a fit of anger after he came back to the town after his extended period of leave.

He remembered leaving the town to go back to College to be able to afford having his records scrubbed there, as he wanted to start a new life in Dryden. One where, instead of being subdued by Wren or Mann, he could do what he wanted. He would no longer have to slave away in a factory or do some menial washing at a market stand, or whatever other job he held in the eons he thought he had stayed there. When he went back to College with Bradshaw, there was a sweeping wave of nostalgia for the things he had left behind. His old room was likely buried somewhere deep in a writhing mass of displaced families now, shared by five disgruntled occupants, each wishing things could just go back to how they were, with subconscious minds likely occupied with

finding out who Kelley Abbott was, but also not wanting to face up to her.

But also buried deep beneath this nostalgia was a certain need to be told what to do. To be moved around inside that factory, to have to idle his arms away doing something he never really wanted to do, shouted at by someone who just wanted both of them to keep their jobs, who was bossed around by someone higher up than him, and this chain rose higher and higher until you ended up at Mann. Unfortunately, he never seemed to do much, no speeches, nothing. A very passive person, he thought. This was very much unlike Wren, who was leader of Trogglen, a kingdom run under a strict rule, at least according to Stockdale. Wren himself despised Stockdale, citing him as ‘banish-worthy’, and ‘meek, will never accomplish much’ in a speech he gave. He had always felt this was slightly unfair, as there was never anything he had really done to deserve this. Either way, he was invited out of Trogglen, but his mind had never fully left it, always wanting to see Wren once more, just to give him a piece of his mind. When he was forming the plans to create Ducc and rule over Dryden, the perfect scapegoat was sitting right there, and all he had to do was tell them that he was the enemy, and he could walk a whole town of people right up to his front door, and bang right on that big iron knocker, and watch as he ran away, terrified. Then, he thought, he would take the throne of Trogglen for himself. He would never listen to anyone who referred to it as Trogglen, though. It was always Wren in his head. There was a parliament, but it was probably a sham, and they were more likely to be

throwing bins off the balconies in their central hall than actually debating their laws.

But, it was true that Wren's ways had rubbed off on him. He disliked Mann in the exact same way as Wren would have, meek, unaccomplished, lazy, letting other people do things that he should do. The nagging ghost of Wren on his shoulder had been his guide and his enemy, both at once. Of course, this duality of Wren was hard to reconcile in his head, and due to all the thinking and planning he usually had to do, it had never been loaded to the front of his conscious mind. But tonight, tossing on the top of the sky, he had all the time he wanted (or more accurately, didn't want) to think about these things.

Wren had always been an influence in his life, and the more he looked back, the more he could see his behaviour being moulded by the angry words of a grizzled ruler. He stopped racing through his past occasionally, taking breaks to remember what he had read about the brain choosing to see patterns where there aren't in a desperate attempt to make more sense of things. There had been many studies that he had read about which talked about this sort of thing. He was falling into a trap that was too easy to fall into, he thought, putting down the mental red string and push-pins, choosing to leave it stored in the back of his mind, alongside all the other good and bad things he had done. This was going to be a new him.

Nearly XXIX - Interlude V

As Stockdale finally rested his head, his mind was no longer able to keep worrying and thinking about all his pasts and his futures. The overcrowded and underused storeroom of his unconscious memories was about to be entered, the dream-state Stockdale wandering into the heart of this warehouse of wants and desires, wishes and hopes. Dizzying shelves towered up, containing every experience he had ever felt. Right from his birth, and his short stint at a good school in Trogglen before being tossed into the military, and then working his way out of the ground forces towards the relative safety of the commanding officers. Of course, he never quite reached that point, dismissed by Wren. He saw Wren as a disfigured man, blobs and rolls of saggy skin rolling onto the floor as he spoke, spitting great globs of saliva at him as he demonised him. Surrounding him in this great memory hall were the government officials, sneeringly sentencing him to banishment, perhaps, thinking he would come back on his hands and knees. But he didn't. Somehow, he stuck to his word as the flames chased him out of the great doors of Trogglen, slamming shut with a deafening ringing.

There was silence. The interim period between his stay in Trogglen and his stay in College. He wanted to prove Wren wrong, and the best way he thought to do it was to go to College and teach people that Wren was evil. Of course, when he arrived at College, no one was willing to listen to him. Except, perhaps, that lady at the office. She

was cheery with a defeated tone, and still caricature-less in his dream, still remembering her actual face. It seemed to pick up whenever he mentioned Wren and his evil doings. But nothing had ever happened, she had never had the time to do anything, restless from work. He had never had the time, either, wasting away his days in the factory, learning, writing, reading in his spare time. Wondering about any other places there were. He had found out about Dryden in a travel guide, where it was mentioned as a footnote, somewhere amongst the description of the desert tours which they offered.

A nomadic group of travellers seemed like the prime target for revenge. He could use his books (stolen from Trogglen library) and his knowledge about the world to make them into Wren-hating machines. Maybe he'd have a comfortable life. But in reality, he felt more comfortable as a subject than a ruler. There was something nice about benevolent rule, like Mann. Something that he never wanted to appreciate. It always seemed that Mann was something he felt mixed about. Something that he wanted to be, but disliked that. He felt he wanted to be like someone who he disliked, Wren. A strong leader. A strong leader. The words echoed round his dream, still in the desert between lands, looking for these nomads, toting a bag of books and wondering what could happen.

He remembered finding them for the first time, somehow nestled under a rocky outcrop in the deep desert, miles and miles away from anything else. The first few times he visited, the conditions were so bad he could not stay

long, but everyone he talked to took his books on farming, and they helped themselves to his stolen knowledge. Every time he had returned, the situation was better, but they were becoming less and less happy to see him, they felt he was an outsider with each subsequent book.

So, to keep them under control, he brought Ducc to them. The ultimate tool to rein them in, while letting them believe what they did. Shortly after the first introduction, they moved further into the desert, away from the rock. They distanced themselves from the rest of the world, fearing Wren would find them if they attached themselves to such a noticeable desert feature. He felt somewhat bad for forcing them into hiding, but the fear grew greater and greater until it dissipated, becoming a great unconscious worry, no longer discussed openly. On the surface, it was as any trace of concern had disappeared. Deep below, deeper than the pipelines, or the graves of the elderly, there was fear. And this fear had come back when he had given the speech that they would be moving to College, as it had been conquered. The citizens were happy to finally have something new, but at the same time, they feared it greatly, whether they showed it or not. They had been led by people who had just been following his orders, people like Reverend Williams, who he had ordered to ‘mysteriously go missing’, courtesy of a young Drydenite, who he had then sent out into the desert to find Wren, knowing fully he would die on the trip. Carrying the body of Williams over the top of the dune was an image that had been burned into his retinas, and one that he never wished to

have to see again, or anything like it. He had given speeches on change, and how they would have to all move their houses and personal items, and the great trains of cargo he envisioned flowing into a better home. But whenever he thought of all the good he did, the images of Boris hanging and the lifeless body of the reverend rushed to fill his mind. He wondered if he had done any good at all.

But he wished for them to like their new home, and to flourish there, and to create their own culture, having enough time and resources to paint, to sing, to make things, to find things out, to do something more than learning inapplicable snippets of trivia.

There was no turning back once they had ripped out the boards in their houses, and their possessions carried in great droves across the desert, in trains of people, burdened with a lifetime's worth of absent-minded accumulation. There was no turning back. That was the line that he stuck to. Looking forward. Looking forward.

XXIX - The Peak

The balloon had landed at Magiston without him knowing, the soft touch down hadn't woken him at all. His sleep had been short, but restful. Somehow unburdened by memory now, he rose from the balloon and walked out with a new air of confidence, a confidence in his integrity and his new-found appreciation for his past. However, he would have to forgo both of those attributes for today, fudging data on the running of their respective kingdoms, and having to explain why he hadn't been at Magiston Peak for the last few years or so. He did have a real excuse; he didn't know it was on, but that seemed a little weak.

"One day of lying, and then I can do what I've always wanted to do. Take the Drydenites to Trogglen." he thought. Walking up the mountainside path, followed by his two other luggage-bearing attendants, he saw the world stretched out below him, a great slope curving down into a flat plain, with forests and trees covering one part of the land, and grass and sand, and in the distance, an ocean, or what he thought may as well have been one. It was a sight to behold, and much nicer to behold now that he wasn't thousands of meters above the ground, one drop away from death. His feet were on solid ground, and he relished in this fact, walking more, and taking in the cold, fresh-seeming mountain air, which had a hint of meat scent on it. He thought it was the leader's feast which Bradshaw had told him about.

“All eleven of us.” he had said, meaning ten from his previous experience, “We have the meeting first, where our people come in and read out statistics and land ownership and border disputes and all that, but then the real fun begins when they leave. Just us. Just all the leaders. Of course, Mann will be here, too. We’ll have to excuse him from the dinner side of the meeting, or just keep him quiet. Silence is golden, after all.”

He walked into the building, which was done up in such a way that no one would know that it went largely unused for the rest of the year. His room where he would spend the night was lavish, and his name had been placed on it (finally) after it was confirmed he was coming to this year’s event. The room was sparsely decorated, using only images of mud huts and paintings done by Rigaudites who had presumably never been to Dryden. At the side of his bed, in a small dish, were what looked like small sweets, but upon further inspection were actually insects. Stockdale was disgusted by this, and asked one of the porters to take it away, bemused as to why anyone would eat these sorts of things. He headed over to Bradshaw’s room, a much larger room, adorned with an overhead view of the city, painted directly on to the wall, the white palace gleaming in the centre.

“Did eat your... bedside snack?” asked Stockdale, expecting a slightly disgusted look back from Bradshaw. Instead, Bradshaw told him that he had gotten some traditional Busbite snack, a small calzone-type thing with

a variety of sweet and savoury fillings. He had a spare one, and asked Stockdale if he would like to try one.

He refused, still wondering why they had given him insects. Bradshaw had jokingly said that it was the national dish of Dryden's, and politely laughed until Stockdale's face turned, realising that was probably the truth.

Bradshaw wiped his mouth after having eaten the second calzone. "You should really use this meeting to clear things up. Show them that Dryden's isn't as bad as it seems."

"Of course I could. It's going to be my mission for tonight. That, and not letting Mann spill any secrets."

"Well, that's going to be hard for him to do, seeing he hasn't arrived yet!" The two shared a more hearty, but hollow laugh, and decided to go and see the rooms where they would be having their meeting in around an hour. The halls were lined with various artefacts from histories of the other kingdoms, but a distinct lack of items appeared in the Drydenite cabinet, the most spectacular thing in it being a bone from the predecessor of the whatever-bird. It wasn't even a full skeleton. Along the corridor, Bradshaw saw another figure, walking towards them without seeing them, eyes fixed on the cabinet displays. The duo walked up towards him, and a horrible feeling of *deja vu* boiled in Stockdale's stomach.

“Hello, Bradshaw.” said an all too familiar voice, which then proceeded to lose its sense of authority. “Hello, Stockdale.” strained Wren, trying not to acknowledge the fact he was at Magiston Peak.

“How are you doing, Wren?” asked Bradshaw. “This is my friend, and leader of Dryden, Stockdale.” he added, unaware of their previous encounters, as Stockdale had never felt the need to tell anyone.

Stockdale stood, mute, as Wren looked at him, sizing him up now that he wore good clothes, and seemed to be confident in himself. He wasn’t slouching, and was a fair bit taller than him now. Straightening himself up, clinging on to any sense of seniority he had left, Wren uttered, “How are you, Stockdale?”

Stockdale, scratching his head, crown-bracelet jangling alongside, muttered a singular ‘good’, shaking his head up and down, face entirely avoiding Wren’s glare.

The two parties walked apart once more, and never even so much as glanced back. Bradshaw had noticed this tension, and asked Stockdale if he was okay. “Don’t worry.” he said, “I was like this the first time I was at Magiston. It’s odd, being around all these leaders.”

Stockdale was silent, and headed to the conference room, alone, as Bradshaw went off to find where Mann had gotten to, growing ever so slightly more worried with each passing minute. When Stockdale arrived at the

room, he was not the first one there. Sitting before him, directly opposite to his spot in the table, was Wren.

“Have a seat.” he said. “You’ve got your reports underneath your desk. You’ll find all the necessary information you need there.”

“So what do I do with this?” asked Stockdale, after fiddling around with the file clip for what seemed like an hour.

Wren leaned back in his chair. “You are to prepare a small speech, summing up the changes in your kingdom over the past year. Of course, for you, you’ll have to bring us up to speed on the last... well... twenty years or so of your kingdom.”

“I haven’t been in control of it for that long.” he eventually replied.

“Oh, no? Well, just do what you can.”

“Okay. I’ll take this back to my room, then.”

“No, no. Stay here. Besides, you can’t take them out of the room. Confidential.”

“Of course.”

Wren watched Stockdale study his reports duly, every time he looked up, his eyes would meet Wren’s, and that would spur him on to work harder. He felt like he had to

meet some expectation specifically for Wren, when in reality the only person he was doing this for was him. He was going to represent the kingdom that he had helped shape. Around half an hour later, Bradshaw had stuck his head through the door, and called Stockdale through. They sped through the corridors, and met up with the Busbite guards who were relaxing in the staff quarters. They walked outside, onto the path, and watched two more houses arrive, discussing the whereabouts of Mann's balloon.

"We can't have lost him. I had some of the best guards there. Big, burly guys. They wouldn't have been people to mess with. The only thing that could have held him back was the wind." said Bradshaw, nervously.

One of the guards spoke up. "But the wind carried us here on the balloons just fine."

"Maybe there's a different current in the higher parts." said another. Bradshaw pointed exasperatedly to a moving dot, slowly making its way towards the foot of the mountain. "Maybe that's them! He might not make it for the meeting, but he'll be here for the feast." said Bradshaw. "We can work with that. All of you, stay here and make sure it's him. Find a telescope or something." He sighed. "Ironical, isn't it. That's exactly the kind of thing that Mann would bring. Always stargazing up here. No clouds, you see."

The guards vaguely approved this statement, seeing how it could be the case, but not really caring. They did care,

however, that they had been ordered to stay outside in the cold weather, which was only getting worse. Instead of asking to be let inside, they would stay out here until Bradshaw was gone, and then go inside, citing Mann to be on his way up the mountain.

They found their way back to the meeting room, and it was full, leaders standing round, reacquainting themselves with their peers, wondering if there was anyone new to be seen. In fact, the leaders were so used to only having ten people present that they thought that Mann had been replaced with this strange new person. Most of them already knew about the ascension of Bradshaw to the leader of Busby's, but hadn't put a face to the name yet. They settled down, sitting in their respective places, glasses topped up with water (or, in a good few cases, clear spirits) and readying their speeches. A few more people filed in as the waiters filed out, the remaining canapés carried on painted wooden trays, the colour of each house. Each name tag had a colour to it, except Stockdale's, as Dryden's had not been assigned one yet.

"First order of business!" said a white haired, relatively young looking man. "We must introduce the two new leaders for this year."

Bradshaw stood up, and Stockdale followed him, bashing his thigh on the table as he stood up, knocking his drink over. He stayed upright, as one of the attendants mopped it up for him. Almost everyone contained a laugh and a frown simultaneously, burying both deep beneath a layer

of authority, which was sure to come off later, once the meal was served.

“Hello everybody, I’m Bradshaw, new leader of Busby’s.” he said, calmly leading Stockdale on, but still screaming inside due to the fact Mann still hadn’t arrived.

“And I’m Stockdale, new leader of Dryden.”

“You mean to say you had a leader before?” asked a rather stout man standing at the other end of the table, at an angle awkward for him to respond to.

“Well, yes. But they never knew about this place. No one told me until I met Bradshaw anyway.”

The other man looked angrily confused, but chose to not respond, instead silently wishing them to sit down. After a long period of time, Bradshaw did. After another agonisingly long second, Stockdale did too.

“So, Stockdale, I think it would only be fair for you to bring us up to speed on the running of your, er... kingdom.” said Wren, with too much emphasis on the ‘king’ part of ‘kingdom’.

“Well, I’ve been given a lot of data about the town, and I’ve compiled some myself over the years, however, I don’t have that with me right now. So Dryden is essentially a desert town, situated right...” he trailed off. “Can someone get a map?” As soon as he finished speaking, a map rolled out of the table, curving around

the edges. It was a fabric map, with all the borders and city-states set in lines, with geography and population notes, and natural resources. He took a moment to get his bearings, attempting to stop looking at it. It reminded him of Wren's map that he hung in his office, something which he had spent a good amount of time looking at, avoiding his glare.

Eventually, his mind caught up with him again, and he pointed out the approximate location of Dryden (or what was now an abandoned town) somewhere in the desert near College. He stated their population, their foods, and their rich history of festivals and celebrations. He neglected to mention Ducc for quite a while, as he thought it would prompt more questioning, and a good deal more restrained laughter.

"We have pipelines providing water for the citizens, and the crops provide enough food for everyone, despite the lack of meat products," he continued, trying to make Dryden sound as independent as possible. "Good standard of teaching and education for the resources we have. There's quite an emphasis on learning."

"Do they produce any of their own research?" asked the representative for Rigaud's, before receiving a heap of questions that the people of Rigaud's had wanted him to ask. He wasn't a special leader, just the one chosen to speak. Stockdale frowned.

“No, not really. We don’t export anything or import anything, but we have no need to. It’s a good life in Dryden. People are happy there.”

“Do you have a happiness index report?” asked another.

“No. But next year, we will, we’ll have all of these metrics and measures.”

“Good. You see, due to the lack of data we have on your kingdom, we can’t really rank you anything other than last this year, I’m afraid.” said Wren.

“Ah. Alright then.” said Stockdale. “Oh, one last thing. We don’t eat bugs.” he continued, expecting a small laugh (for this was intentionally funny, at least to him).

A long pause followed, one that even Tarek wouldn’t have been able to create. He eventually sat down again, prompting Bradshaw to give his speech. It was well-rehearsed, and where it lacked in factual correctness, it made up for that in charisma. There wasn’t much left to the imagination about the way he was going to be running Busby’s from now on. The drastic shift he detailed to everyone lifted a few eyebrows, mostly out of interest. Botton had kept them anchored before, as Busby’s was likely the strongest kingdom, and willing to intervene in any inter-kingdom conflict. Now that Botton was gone, the simmering ambition of the last then years had finally been let loose in all the leaders. Wren eyed the map, looking for some corridor, or some plan of action. College might be the likely first target, and with

Mann not strong enough to even attend, victory seemed likely. But not now, he thought, not yet.

The other leaders rattled through their territories quickly, having done this before, wanting to rush through it to get to the feast, where the real politics could begin, unbridled by the papers on their desks, which would be laden with food and drink. There were stains on the fabric map (which did double as a tablecloth) and stains of thrown wine and beer, flung food and melted candle-wax. There were all sorts of polite arguments, well-reasoned and carefully thought out, debating whether or not certain trade agreements should be allowed to pass. The representative for Purcell's made an appearance in every debate, seemingly detached from taking sides due to the remote nature of his kingdom, acting as an entirely arbitrary arbitrator of peace within the room. Eventually, the last person to speak was The Grand High Milnite (a self-declared title), speaking of the storms and rain that had ruined a small village on the top of Mount Milne recently, and the devastation that another storm had caused at the port.

The meeting faded out as Wren signalled everything was over, and the attendants left the room, along with the map-markers, water-pourers and file-givers. They returned moments later, carrying heaps of food from all over the lands, each waiting to tuck into their own food, but also sample others, and dismiss yet more as weak, compared to their own. The feast began when the last plate was put down in front of Stockdale, a hastily-prepared meal made from all the crops that Stockdale

had mentioned in his speech. He wasn't too pleased, but he would eat it as if it was the best thing he had ever eaten with an empty stomach, not-so-subliminally wanting to prove that his kingdom was the best.

No one said anything to begin the meal. When the door slammed shut, that was the starting gun. A race for policy-making, of debt-settling, of treating kingdoms as men, selling and buying parts, trading, arguing, and even fighting. Tensions between kingdoms were now collapsing into inter-personal conflict, hasty, jerky passings of sauces and drinks around the table signified something worse than anger. Wren shuffled his chair around the table, moving further away from Mann's empty seat, still not filled, but most of them were glad it was that way. Another hindrance gone. Perhaps he was just ill for a day or two, and coincidentally not present. Either way, a sign of weakness.

Stockdale cowered in fear as Wren walked over to him, saying, "Come outside for a second." He hesitated for a second, trying to use his new found power as an excuse to stay put. But he could find no reason to disobey him now that he was an equal. The door clicked open, and slammed shut by itself. No one was waiting outside. No one was in the corridors.

"Stockdale." started Wren, serious as ever. "I can't believe you're here!"

"Neither can I." said Stockdale, relieved, trying to conceal he had something to be relieved about.

“I knew you would make it out there.”

“Did you? What? Hold on, you sent me out there because you thought I would do something?”

Wren hesitated for a moment, changing his expression to one of incredulity. “Of course. From the start. I never wanted you to want anything less.”

“But in that case, why didn’t you tell me you thought I was good?”

“Because... because I never wanted you to get comfortable in your abilities. I didn’t want you to become complacent and lazy in Wren, as so many of my officials are. You aren’t just another Choraria.”

Stockdale laughed, vaguely remembering the name.

“Really. I want to apologise for what I did, and what I seem to be like. I’m not like that normally. You’re different, Stockdale.”

He stood there, waiting for a response, which he didn’t get. They nodded, smiled, and walked back into the room, with Stockdale moving over to the empty chair, Wren shuffling back up next to him. They talked about Wren’s in a positive light now, bad memories newly contextualised into formative moments. All night, they shared food and drank more and more, and Bradshaw sat vaguely alone, like a third wheel.

XXX - Confusion

Kalivas had slept poorly, like Stockdale's previous night, and woke up outside the hall, having found refuge on a tattered sheet of fabric, stretched over some wood -presumably a remnant of some house. He stood up again, and wandered around as the sun rose around him. Others started filing out of the hall slowly, wondering if there would be any food anywhere. Johnny's fish wasn't enough to feed all of them, so they wondered where they would be able to find more food. Kalivas, as much as he wanted to stay, couldn't go another day without food without it being uncomfortable. Most of the others were also relatively hungry, and Teddy felt sick of fish after devouring most of it during the night on the boat. So, following Joe with his pocket map, after some of them washed in the dubiously clean water that leaked from a broken well at the edge of the town, they began walking out of the town.

"But we have the balloons! Why don't we take them?" said Fred, for once, the voice of thinking things through.

The question of whether or not they should have taken the balloons was an easy one to answer. Who to fit in the balloons, less so. It seemed that there would have to be one pilot and four other people per balloon, and the remaining four would travel by foot. Farr and Lisa were the two best pilots, and so got to have a balloon each. Nirav, Hartley, Kalivas and Ullathorne were loaded into Farr's balloon, a reasonable social dynamic. Eventually,

the remaining eight decided which half would get to walk, and which would get to fly. Joe didn't want to go in the balloon, and preferred walking anyway. Johnny volunteered to walk as he had been in balloons before, and felt like taking it slow. Hawken wanted to go via the ground, too, and finally, Fred volunteered as well, leaving Mann, Mem, Page and Teddy to go with Lisa, also a reasonable social group. However, Mann had purposely avoided Lisa up until this point, hiding his face from her to such a degree that she didn't know who he was. Farr had talked to her at length, distracting her for the night. But as Mann clambered onto the balloon, wishing he had chosen to walk, he had no choice but to look at her. As they rose into the sky, the other three talked about table tennis and various tactics (to Teddy's mild despair, as he had followed them to get away from table tennis), but Mann and Lisa just looked at each other. Mann began to cry inside, and wanted to apologise, but he had a self-imposed silence. Lisa took a large, slow inhale of breath, and continued to stare.

"I'm sorry." said Mann.

"Why? I took your escape route. It's amazing you're still alive."

"I kept you in that city for decades. It was only fair I should let you out. And I thought you'd be gone. I never thought I'd see you again to say sorry, and now I'm here, I might as well... get it over with. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do to get back all those years I took from you."

Lisa thought back to what Hawken had said, and then looked down at the ground, seeing the four walkers travel over the bordering dunes, and off into the lonely desert. The other balloon looked appealing right about now, a chance to get away from the sopping mess that was Mann. ‘But was it all bad?’, she thought.

“I know you’re sorry. You feel bad because you lost College.”

“I feel bad because I lost you.”

“What?”

“Lisa...” he said, not so subtly, drawing the attention of the other three, who tried their hardest to listen but not appear as if they were doing so. He paused.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What?” she said, more inquiring.

“Nothing.”

She sighed, drawing back one of the flaps on the burner, moving some component around inside. Over in the other balloon, she could hear raucous laughter, and as the other three resumed their talking, she wished nothing more than to be over there, not stuck here with

a belligerent captor who had made her waste her best years, and then some, working for some menial purpose. There was some glimmer of something within him, though, a genuine apology hadn't been given yet, but there was space for one in time. The noise from the other balloon grew louder. She rested, moving to the other end of the cabin and joining in with Page and Mem's arm wrestling championship, gleefully laughing whenever the balloon rocked when a match was won, laughing at everyone's shocked reactions. It was nice to be up here, to pilot her own burner, after so long. She wondered if her burner had been found by anyone. If anything, it would be useless by the time she got back, the way she had left it. Some loose valve, she thought. Even though this burner was nowhere near the quality of the one she had made, all the imperfections in the design ironed out, all the bits of metal subliminally ordered in notes she slipped to couriers over the counter, it was much better to have the balloon with it. At some point, she would have put the basket and the balloon together, and tried to fly away herself. Of course, that was a dream. No material she could order would be good enough.

And this was as good as a dream.

The balloons eventually made their way over College, faster than the walkers, carried by slightly stronger winds than usual. Kalivas readied his arm, then slung the first batch of leaflets over the edge, which was met with a cry of bemusement from Ullathorne.

"Why'd you throw them over? Ducc isn't popular here."

“You never know.” said Kalivas. “Besides, what else are we going to do with them?”

The clump of leaflets did not separate well, and met the streets of College with a loud snap as they slid along, carried by the same wind they were using. Collegians all over the city watched these balloons, some of them in a queues, waiting to vote for Mann, wanting to find out what was dropping from the baskets above.

“We could save them for when we actually go and talk to the Drydenites.” said Ullathorne.

Nirav laughed. “Bold of you to assume they’re actually here, not just lost in the desert somewhere.”

They continued floating above, attempting to use the layers of wind currents to move round the city, surprised at the lack of commotion they seemed to be causing below. Mann was puzzling over his choice of words, and whether or not it was actually worth it to talk to Lisa. Would she even listen to him? It didn’t matter so much to him as he took his time, throwing individual leaflets over the edge, absent minded, focused on only one thing.

Another long time passed, the occasional wind gust carrying them off course, but it was always corrected. Below, some Busbite guards had climbed on the roof of the tallest building they could find and had prepared a makeshift harpoon out of some rope and scraps of metal. As Mann readied himself, acutely aware of Lisa’s current

mood, the guards below took the first shot. It missed the bottom of the balloon, which was now almost still, as the wind had died down. After retrieving the end (which had gotten lodged in someone's apartment wall) they tried again, missing once more. He prepared his phrase, over and over and over again in his head, as she looked out over the city, presumably wondering if they were going to be able to land safely. Eventually, as the scrap of metal was dislodged from yet another wall, and the rope securely fastened once more, he tapped her shoulder. 'Stick to the line.' he thought. This time, as she turned around, the balloon jolted, the metal now lodged in the basket fabric. The other end of the rope was tied to a large metal container, which the guards were now in the process of pushing off the roof.

"What was that?" asked Lisa.

"I love you."

She barely had time to register the awkward response before the balloon shot downwards, and as Mann briefly jolted out of the basket (and almost into the balloon itself), the five of them started to scream loudly, with the burner catching on the fabric sides, and lighting them up, even as they fell. Hitting the ground from at least seven floors up wouldn't be easy to take, not even for Mem, let alone Page (who had already complained of feeling ill). The free-fall was quite exhilarating, although that particular response was buried deep beneath the prevailing screaming and crying, and wondering what had led up to this. The basket hit the ground a good

quarter of a second before anything else, with Mann coming down at the centre, landing at an awkward angle. Of course, that didn't matter, as the burner crushing him would do significantly more damage. Teddy landed back-first, somehow alright after the crash, but Page didn't fare so well. The other balloon spiralled overhead as well, wondering if the leaflets had finally caused the commotion they were expecting. Getting too close to the roof to see what was going on, the guards physically grabbed the basket, attempting to pull it down. Farr let the burner on full power, but it was to no avail. Moments later, they were faced with arrest for entering College without a permit from Bradshaw. The ones down on the ground weren't conscious enough to hear that they were going to be locked up, but they didn't resist as they were flung over the shoulders of some guards, and that was good enough for the Busbites.

Shocked onlookers were puzzled. Moments ago these people were so high above them, a beacon of tyranny, as they were emblazoned with Busby's iconography. They were confused when they had dropped leaflets telling them about this duck, or something like that. Something about Stockdale, a man they barely knew. But these people were heroes to some of them. They had tried (to do what, they didn't exactly know) but it was obvious that there were people out there who wanted to help them. Seeds were planted in many minds in those few moments, ones of doubt about the nature of the new world they were living in (or realistically, under), and the friendly looking icon, stamped on the front of these leaflets, could maybe become a symbol of their

revolution. It wasn't going to be like this for long. Someone else would come to replace these fallen balloon-people. As one of them looked over at the mangled body beneath the burner, they could see the vague look of defeat and horror on a bloodied face, wincing as it had realised the gravity of the situation.

A child walked spoke quietly. "Is that Mann, mum?"

The mother saw it was. She had voted for him in the death-poll earlier that same day, but seeing him like this, vulnerable, human, powerless, it wasn't the same. Killed in an accident too, or what seemed like something not intended to kill; as the guards had attempted to speak to him. Before another round of guards came around to roll the broken metal lumps off of him, the crowd stood round, all knowing this is what they had voted for, what they wanted, but were too afraid to have, and now that they had it, they wished they never had done. Despite the fact the voting and the crushing were entirely unrelated, they wished they had never voted for Mann. Kelley Abbott was also in this crowd, unknowingly being saved from this fate by Bradshaw's policies.

Four men raised the burner off of Mann, and when they did, the crowd turned away in sympathy. Usually people would be drawn to gore, in awe of the scene. But today, the crowd had felt like they had personally caused this. Those dissatisfied with their lives under Mann, those content with their lives under Mann, all united in empathy for someone who looked rather worse for wear. He didn't respond to the guards at all. He was carried

off, to never be seen again. To be hidden away, or perhaps finished off in some back room, or kept barely alive, or perhaps he was already dead. Lisa couldn't remember anything due to a concussion slowly causing retrograde amnesia, but did remember feeling something. Maybe it was the floor giving way beneath her, or perhaps an emotional response to something. She would never quite know, without the grainy greyness of faded memory, shrouding that moment forever.

The crowd went home, some trying to remove their votes, choosing to just abstain instead of picking someone else. They didn't want this to happen to Kelley Abbott as well.

XXXI - Returning

Stockdale woke up in his room, after dreaming for ages about talking to Wren in a cheery way, and Wren being nice to him in return. Getting up and seeing the view out of his window, he saw his balloon floating around outside, the guards bored out of their minds using it for a quick joyride. He felt like being angry, or at least annoyed, but today was different. The dream had put him in a surprisingly good mood, somehow. He spent a few minutes packing his things for the return journey, and then washing, trying to figure out what the various food stains on his clothes were. The bedside snacks had been replaced, and were now nondescript lumps of admittedly tasty bread, still on a silver dish. A slight headache ringed around his head, but opening the windows and taking in a few lungfuls of fresh and bitterly cold air helped. As he finished packing, the case closed, and the door was knocked on.

“Come in.” said Stockdale. Wren entered the room, and smiled.

“Thanks for the support, Stockdale. I knew you would come round eventually.”

“To what?”

“To the unification of Dryden and Wren’s. It’ll help you greatly.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that.” he said, rethinking what was a dream and what wasn’t. In fact, he didn’t feel like he had dreamt at all. “But now that you say...”

“Oh, no, I definitely remember saying that. Bradshaw probably does, too. But I’m asking again just in case, actually, you were quite drunk.”

“How drunk?”

“Very. It’s like you’d never done it before.”

“Well, yeah.” said Stockdale. “No, we do have alcohol in Dryden, it’s just very poor quality.”

“I see.” said Wren, reserved. “Alright then, why don’t we start planning, as we never quite got around to it last night.”

“I think I need to go back to Dryden to get some things anyway.”

“So you don’t want me to come with you?” said Wren, sensing that Stockdale was trying to hide something, unaware that he had abandoned the entire town.

“Not yet. We’d need to go to great lengths to prepare ourselves for a visit from another leader.”

They both laughed, and Bradshaw arrived at the closed door, knocking after the laughter had ended. “Come in.”

Bradshaw entered, and saw the others. Dreading a repeat of last night, he wanted to show himself out, but was called in by Wren, who apologised for leaving him out of the discussion last night.

“I’d like to set up some free trade deals, Bradshaw. Stockdale has already approved of these, but I never got around to asking you.”

“Sure. I can get my guys to work on it.”

“And mine too!” said Wren, all three of them laughing, despite the fact that Stockdale didn’t really have ‘guys’ to do anything for him. He was kind of annoyed at the other two now, they weren’t self-made in their authority. He had had to go out of his way to find a place which had people who were ripe for manipulating, and they had just fitted in where they came from. presumably coming from families which already had some stake in a power system. He was the son of a factory worker and a post-carrier, and he was now technically a registered kingdom leader. They stopped laughing as Stockdale’s train of thought came to an end.

“So, what do we think? Next meeting of our union?”

“As soon as we decide on a name.” said Bradshaw.

All three of them laughed calmly once more, and then walked out of the room. Stockdale asked, “Have you packed your things?”

“I have, and I’ll be heading back with you to Dryden’s to start with, and then finally return to Busby’s.”

Bradshaw led the conversation over to Wren, who refused the offer of transport to Dryden, under the pretence of Stockdale’s earlier refusal.

“Great. I’ll just have to ask the guards to come back with my balloon, and then we’re good to go, Bradshaw.”

“You let your guards take your balloon out?”

“No, it’s fine. I didn’t even let them, but as long as nothing happens to it, I’m fine.”

“Well, you do you.” said Bradshaw, thinking. “So what about that deal last night? How serious are we talking?”

“Very serious.” said Stockdale, with an air of authority about him that covered up the fact he wanted to hide any trace of doubt or fear he had about anything involving Wren.

They walked together to the end of the hall, towards the exit, passing some other leaders, waving and saying their goodbyes, and a few ‘see you next year’s. Wren parted at the guards quarters, collecting his lot and getting a few porters to begin carrying his things onto the mountain carts.

Stockdale carried his own things this time, contrasting with Bradshaw’s liberal use of porters, all exhausted

from having to serve drinks all evening, and clean up all night. The balloon returned, and as the guards stepped out of it, Stockdale thanked them for returning it.

“Why’d you thank them?” said Bradshaw, after the guards were back inside. “They don’t require thanking. They just did something wrong, you see. You’re encouraging them to do whatever they want.”

“I’m not trying to be like that. I’m no Wren. I only use my power when it’s appropriate.”

“But when you use it, do you go all out?”

“Oh yes. First thing I did as king was to have someone hanged.”

“That’s a bit extreme, but I get where you’re coming from.” said Bradshaw, stepping into the loaded balloon. Stockdale got in to his own balloon, carefully putting down the luggage, not that there was anything much of value in there to break. He saw Wren come back through the front door, and told his burner attendant not to take off yet. The air was bitterly cold now, and as he put on another jacket and some gloves, Wren approached, holding out an object in his hand.

“You’ll want this.” said Wren. “It’s an old trinket of mine. Had it on my desk for years. Took it here, and saw you. It’s very silly.” He stuck out his hand, as Stockdale tried to say something along the lines of “You don’t have to.”

“You spent a lot of time in that room, so why don’t you have this as a gift from me? An apology?” he opened his ungloved hand, carefully balancing the wooden duck on top of Stockdale’s mittened, shivering hand.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t worry!” said Wren, walking off, getting progressively louder. “It’s just a favour from me. Nothing, really, after all I put you through.”

“Well, see you later, Wren!”

“See you later, Stockdale! And you too, Bradshaw.”

Bradshaw had already taken off now, and Stockdale followed quickly, their balloons racing along (for balloon standards, at least) and hearts wanting nothing more than to get back to College to find out what happened to Mann. Perhaps he would have found his way back himself, and turned himself in. It was more likely they now had an informant about their activities lurking somewhere like Rigaud’s, plotting their downfall, turning everyone against them. However, this was far from the case. Below, there was a great deal of suffering going on. The vote counters were packing up, votes tallied and counted. The day went on, with people moving around, spreading word of the state of Mann, and a collective sense of guilt washed over the city. It tied in with the subjugation that the guards subjected them to, every newly-imported Drydenite wanting a new home, moving ripped-out remnants of their whole lives, somehow

having to adjust to this new life. Many of them felt uneasy being here. Their experience was not going to be the same as Hawken's, they would not get to experience the fullest of the fruits of the land, they would not get to wonder what it was like to work. All these opportunities which most people would turn down if they had the chance had never been offered to them. Now, there weren't a set number of career paths, and a way to apply the broken, half-remembered knowledge they had gleaned from skim-reading old textbooks that were simply handed to them.

There were the odd few who went out of their way to get jobs, but the difference in class which the Busbites had imposed meant that they were largely menial and useless. Any Drydenite who wanted to work would have to solve puzzles, made for them for the sole purpose of them solving it, not anything else. Not brain training, not scientific research, just to keep them occupied. Adding numbers up for fake businesses. Micromanaging ethereal cleaners. All made up so that the 'ruling' class could have a taste of what they were missing out on. They had been given shirts based on their kingdom of origin. All people in the city at the time of the invasion were labelled Collegians, regardless of whether they were actually from College. They walked the streets in grey, contrasting with the maroon of the Busbites and the dark orange of the Drydenites. The material for these shirts had been prized out of every fabric shop and off of every curtain rail, with ill-fitting garments sticking out like a sea of sore thumbs. There was a certain unwarranted hatred in the city. The greys wanted to be like the

oranges, who hid the fact they wanted to be like greys. The Drydenites thought they would be all-powerful in this new life, able to tell people to move out of their way and command authority like they could have never done back home. But every time they had to say 'excuse me' to shuffle round a group of greys at a market stand, this secret feeling of power waned. The real leaders of the place were the Busbites, regal and royal, dignified in their striking, home-produced suits and robes, with purple stitching, finely crafted a hundred miles away, with more resources than the Drydenites would have known what to do with.

After a day of leaning hazardously over the side of their respective balloons and chatting at a volume that most people would not define as chatting, the two reached College, and hoped they would be able to announce the results of the death poll as soon as they landed. The city came into view, and already, some questions formed inside Bradshaw's head. Why was there no bonfire? Why was there a great maroon canopy, seemingly half-draped over the roof of a building? But they dissolved and drained away, pushed to the back of his mind as the final descent happened, a near miss by the catchers below, but otherwise fine. They unloaded their bags and a balloon took off, delivering two guards and a bag full of messages back to the motherland, Busby's. The soldiers posted here knew that as comfortable as it was, it wasn't quite Busby's, and the ones situated in the palace almost sneered when there were rooms with wooden, unheated floors.

Bradshaw walked out onto the balcony, having called some guards to corral the newly deemed 'greys' into the square, forming a circle around where the bonfire should have been. Stockdale followed, handing Bradshaw the official tallies of the poll.

"Hello everyone! It's me, Bradshaw, again. Did you miss me?" The crowd was silent. "Well, don't all say it!" he laughed along with Stockdale, and the crowd was yet again silent, only broken by the few souls who thought it better to play along with the regime. Any air of humour quickly subsided.

"So, here I have the poll to decide who will be our first candidate for death! And I'm just as excited as you are!" He threw his hands in the air, expecting no cheering, getting no cheering, but still feeling disappointed. He took his time opening the envelope, it had been over-sealed by some poor bureaucrat, who had been forced to work blindfolded by the guards, as they didn't want him to see the contents of the letter. He drew breath and continued.

"Well, first of all, I would like to say thank you for all of you that took my advice and didn't vote for Kelley Abbott. Those nine hundred and twenty four who did, though, you better have a good reason to have voted. So, next..." he trailed off. "Oh, this is going to be so boring if we just read out everyone's name. Who wants to hear who won?"

Silence.

“Alright then. With eleven thousand, one hundred and fifty six votes, Mann is to be killed on our first week! Wow! You guys really turned!” he shouted. “Alright, guards, go and get him.”

They stood there, silent as the crowd.

“Go and get him then.”

“Can’t, sir.”

“Why not?” shouted Bradshaw, still loud enough for the crowd to be able to hear him, dreading the next moment.

“We can’t, sir. He’s...”

“What? Missing? Did you cretins lose him?” he took his balcony chair and threatened to swing it at the guard’s head, when the guard stepped back.

“No! No, it’s not like that. He’s here.”

“Bring him out then.”

“We can’t.” said the guard, now silently exasperated.

The members of the crowd who could hear this exchange felt the cogs in Bradshaw’s head begin to turn, to fit together the pieces of the puzzle. A few seconds went by, and nothing happened.

“Bring him out anyway.”

“Sir!” said another guard, not hiding his frustration as much, thoughts whistling through his ears like steam, boiling to a shout, not tempered in any way by the likely response Bradshaw would direct at him.

“Mann is dead.”

The click was audible to everyone. The sound of a man who had lost all hope of staying in power for more than a year or so, the crack of someone at the end of their tether mentally splintering and stressing and screaming and shouting inside, complaining about the stupidity, the impotence, the laziness, the carelessness of every single last guard and their mothers, fathers, any children or pets they may have had, their cousins, anyone who had formed an emotional attachment to them, anyone who had maintained eye contact with them, everyone who had breathed the same air as them, all merged into a single thought, which for purposes of brevity, was just a single syllable.

Even the single syllable couldn't describe how he felt. Lost in a communicative hole, thinking for far too long, waiting longer and longer until his time to speak had gone, longer still and no one would have cared about the response he gave. He tossed the letter off of the balcony, and it floated into the middle of the empty circle, a guard promptly grabbing it, not to give away any secret information, not that there was anything to be added. He walked inside, the crowd defused, there was a tension in

the world held tight like a rubber band, or a lighted match next to a canister of fuel, on the edge of snapping and bursting, but not relaxed or safe.

Mann was downstairs, in the room of his own creation once more, in a state that no person should ever be in. Stockdale turned his head away in disgust and shame, but Bradshaw kept staring. His lifeline. His alibi. Gone. The others were locked up in the more general-purpose prison, and they all stood there, waiting for someone to tell them they could leave.

The expression on Stockdale's face as he looked at Tarek and Nirav was one of second-hand embarrassment. He felt bad that they were there, but it had to be done to keep himself from ending up where they were. In fact, they were all probable informants about the causes of Mann's death, and the various events that went on in Dryden over the years, and all the information he needed to keep things running smoothly.

He had gotten a new book while in Magiston Peak, and began to write in it now. The names of everyone locked up, and their physical attributes, the few items they carried, and for the ones he knew, how they responded to seeing him again. Fear. Fear of a man well-resourced and backed up. Fear of concrete walls that no tunnelling machine could dig out of. Fear of death, or lack thereof. He would likely keep them here for a long time, using their information as needed. Maybe, one day, they could become greys. Too much of a security risk.

XXXII - Aeon

The four walkers had made it to the edge of College, after stopping overnight to eat and sleep, under the same rock Tarek had found himself under, some time ago. They had enjoyed talking about their various experiences in life, and seemed to get along very well as a quartet. Johnny had suggested they come up with a theme song, to much negativity, but he had come up with one anyway, humming the tune as they walked along. It was quirks like these that kept the four of them together as they saw a Busby's balloon take off, heading in the complete wrong direction. They chased it for some time, shouting at it to come back, but it was no use.

The only thing they achieved was getting themselves into a bit of trouble. They kept walking along, Joe and Johnny talking about music theory and humming harmonies, and Fred and Hawken talking about College life and the restaurant, and their various ideas of what they thought it would be turned into. Hawken thought it would be a Busby's only dining hall, whereas Fred saw it suitable for flattening and turning into a shrine of whoever the leaders were.

In the distance, a dot, too large to be human, seemed to jump up and down, perhaps galloping towards them. Hawken has thought that someone's pet had gotten loose, he had seen large dogs around College and assumed this was one of them. In reality, the bugbear that had been let loose earlier had attempted to find its

way back to College, and had just located its next meal in the form of four slow-moving dots. From another direction came two other dots, and they moved towards each other, away from the bugbear.

The desert guards ran up to them, and they began to run away as well, and Johnny caught up to the guards.

“What’s all the shouting about, eh?” said one.

“And the... and the running. Why?” said the other.

“Bugbear!” said Johnny, calling for Hawken to come with them.

“What is up with you people? What’s a bugbear?” said the second one.

Johnny, out of breath as always, wheezed through a sentence, punctuated by tarry phlegm, “Just run, mate.”

The guards, who were equally nervous at this point, began to make small talk, as they jogged along, watching the bugbear tier itself out in the backdrop. “So are you lot from Busby’s?”

“No. But I’m a College person. I’ve got this sword licence to prove it.” said Joe, not quite realising that wasn’t exactly a good thing now, pulling his half closed hand back out of his pocket. The guards, acting as if it was, began to lead him back to College. The others stood and waited, not moving, but then the guards drew their

swords, and corralled them into the city. They dared not speak, distraught that they were being taken inside. Once they were in, there would be a relatively easy exit, thought Joe, again, not realising the maroon banners, and the might of Busby's looming over the city.

Lisa had been replaced with a team of frantic-looking Collegians, who were attempting to process all of Busby's and Dryden's filing, as well as their own. There were all sorts of pieces of things being thrown, filed and folded into various shapes by various people, all collectively struggling to do the same job Lisa could handle almost by herself. Bradshaw had made a mental note to find whoever it was who did the filing before, and reinstate them, oblivious to the fact she was right under his nose.

Joe signed himself back up to the system, already listed somewhere in the various back-catalogue of names they had accumulated over the many years. Voluntarily walking into College, finally wishing to be home again, at least where home physically used to be. He didn't want to have to write in his book anymore. He was just glad to be back, and glad to have time to reflect on his experiences, glad to finally be home. As the other three signed up to the system at knifepoint, each being given a grey shirt to put on, he found his way back to his old room, which was now locked. He waited around in the lobby for a while, left to pick up the other three, and narrowly avoided being arrested for loitering. After over an hour of walking around the same few streets, Joe finally glimpsed Sword, back from work, looking melancholy, wearing a grey shirt just like his. "Sword!"

“Joe!” he said, keeping his voice low. “Good to see you. How long have you been waiting?”

“About a quarter of an hour.”

“Huh. Okay. I’ll bring you up to speed.”

“Do you mind if these people come in? I know them, met them while on my trip.”

“Uh, okay. It’ll be cramped, though.”

“It’s not like they’re staying.” said Joe, not knowing any real alternative for them other than staying right there.

They sat and talked for a while, and Sword explained the death poll, and Mann’s death, two unrelated events, all as Bradshaw walked around the underground tunnels, surrounded by guards, puzzling over what he was going to do. He would have never killed Mann, just killed a stand-in, and then kept him somewhere, perhaps the prison cell he claimed to have designed. It had his name scratched in the wall, though he didn’t know whether he had done that during the building of the cell or the night he spent inside it.

Joe, pleading with Sword, managed to get the other three a place in the room, with two hammocks made of scraps of fabric that the Busbites had deemed ‘not orange enough’ and dumped back in the lobby, and he had taken it all for himself, hoping to one day be able to make a

balloon out of it. However, as Joe informed him, it was not a suitable material. But it was reasonably strong, and so comfortable that Sword slept in one of them, with Joe taking the other, Hawken taking the bed, and Johnny and Fred using the floor, with Johnny's head directly over the floor panel that led to the tunnels. The echoing clacking of the pacing Bradshaw and his guards kept him up until late, funnelled directly into his ear, no matter how much he tried to dampen the sound with grossly-coloured rags or move around the floor. The same happened for the prisoners, the echoes carried far down the tunnels which led to their cells.

Monitored by day and night (though down here, they were indistinguishable), all nine of them wondered if they were going to be able to make it long enough to escape. Above them somewhat, but still nowhere near the top, physically or socially, the five greys slept together, in relative peace, but each with their own worries for the future, hopes of escape, of freeing their friends, of freeing everyone in this place.

Wren also slept on a bed, attached by springs to his cart, pulling him across the lands, with all bumps ironed out by the gentle rocking of the springs, and all noise silenced by the fabric of the hood that covered him, also wondering if Stockdale had been taken in. Once he accepted that trade deal, it would all come to fruition. First of all it would be a union of economy, then of society, then the stronger society would win out, and the Wrenite spirit would prevail throughout the lands,

collecting territory in all the disparate corners, islands, and oceans.

Stockdale sometimes wondered how Ducc was faring now. The guards weren't having any of it, so they celebrated in private, filling all the newly-liberated time they had with festivities rather than self-improvement, the teachers joining in too, becoming even more complacent than they ever had before. Phil, Curran and the rowers were still relaxing in Liddell's, unaware of the injustice that was being done to so many, on so many levels, but almost blissfully so. Norm was still roughly himself, no longer supported by Mann, but still selling his wares to anyone who still had money to buy them.

Tarek waited in his cell half asleep on the cold ground, breathing heavy, but restrained to not keep his Nirav awake. Hours seemed to last days, and a long while later, some Busbite guards walked around, chatting as normal, but this time with another guest. He opened his eyes to see who it was, but dared not move to get a better angle. Despite the darkness, he could see a red shirted man, who turned to look at him, and he made a brief second of eye contact, even through his half-covered eyes.

Reverend Williams saw him, despite not being seen in return, the moonlight only illuminating inside the cell, casting him as a dark silhouette to Tarek. He wanted to say something, but the Busbites grew anxious around him the longer he waited. No longer a Duccian priest, he had just come here for a job experience, to stave off the boredom of their new way of life. Now, he wanted

nothing more than to let this child go, despite the fact he had advocated for his exile. His thoughts came running back to him and hit him, why had he been so willing to listen to Stockdale? He was responsible for this shrivelled figure before him. Now he could see the damage Stockdale was causing, it was his problem. He was no longer a Drydenite, but a guardian. And as he stepped back up the stairs out of the prison, he didn't look back once, for fear of the Busbites, but his mind span in circles, wondering how and why, not in a specific way, merely in general. No question seemed to give him the answer he was looking for.

Stockdale paced up and down the tunnels all night, and early in the morning, his footsteps eventually stopped ringing, early in the morning, but by then, the world no longer cared.

There were bigger problems to worry about.