

# The Gearheart

A Novel by A.R. White

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## 1. Powers

Under the warm spotlights, the gleaming brass waited. Somewhere in the room, someone sniffed, his congestive breath illuminating the cavernous area in its echo. Everyone in the space held each other, their anxious feet teetering on the precipice of rhythm. As the house lights erupted onto the opulent splendor of the ballroom, the jazz band roared to life.

Flashing silk and velvet sliced the air into thin ribbons of black tuxedo as the dancers circled one another. Overhead, the lights of the chandeliers shattered across the floor. It was a sea of green and blue dresses against the monochrome of the male attire, but one gown swam alone- a brilliant orange number, the color of goldfish scales with a sheen to match, embroidered with white gold filigree against a background of pearls.

Her face was smooth and young, no older than twenty-five, with thin lips and a perfectly upturned nose. Her eyes were a dark brown to match her hair, which was pulled back with a single curl left out to frame her rosy cheeks. She glided about, laughing, enrapt in the ceremony as sparks showered onto the aquamarine atrium ceiling.

High overhead, in the swirling clouds, zeppelin captains ordered their crews to fire thousands of thundering rockets across the horizon. The tiny stars swept over the mountains, striping the skies in alternating hues of green and cyan flares. On deck, the crews shouted and sang and tossed harmless fireworks onto the ballroom roof below.

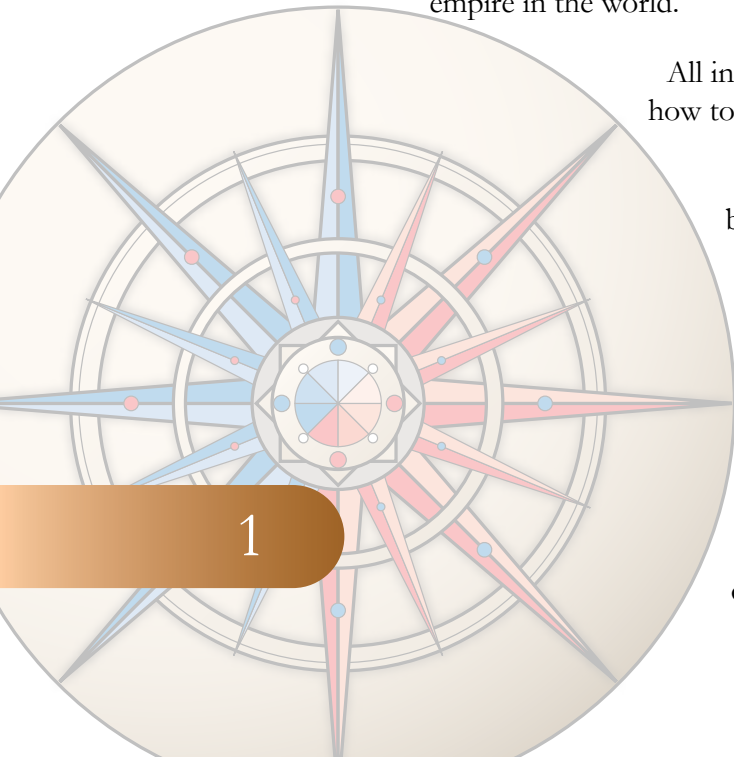
Back on the dance floor, the young girl's feet tapped a staccato code for exuberance on the inlaid marble as her partner spun away. She bathed in the beauty of the room- its sumptuous hardwoods, the artistry of the statues adorning every corner. The crown jewel was the atrium ceiling- a backlit stained glass pattern of blue and green scales that formed the shield of Gelseht. Behind it lay the military might of the second most powerful empire in the world.

All in all, Isabelle Carriker felt that the fine folks at Circeville knew how to throw a party.

“Fine music!” her partner shouted, clapping wildly as the band stopped at the end of the song.

“It's pretty good, Upton.” Isabelle laughed. The music was good enough that she had to dab her forehead with a handkerchief after she stopped panting. In a rather unladylike fashion, she bent and placed her hands on her knees for a moment to cool off.

“It's wonderful to know that you can be this unprofessional, Agent Carriker.” Upton closed the gap as soon as she caught her breath and snaked his hand around her waist. The



band changed pace to a slower song, as though catching Upton's cue. His neck smelled of sandalwood with the faintest hint of diesel.

"Call me Isabelle when we're in public, Lieutenant." Isabelle's lower jaw extended a bit, baring her teeth.

Upton gave her a wry grin, accentuating his eagle eyes and hooked nose. There was something in his face that spoke of physical prowess and it echoed through his hold on her body. "Ah, informality with beautiful women: one of the joys of being a military liaison."

"It can't be that wonderful."

"I would have you believe that it is, if only to make you jealous."

"But in actuality, most of your contacts are old codgers and most of your day is filing reports, right?" Isabelle would not be disarmed.

"Your tongue is a poniard, my dear."

The sparks showered upon the roof in earnest now, and the room echoed with thousands of whistling chirps from the rockets above. To Isabelle, it seemed as though she was underwater, staring up at the sun. The rays of light fluttered across her face and she crinkled her nose up in a playful smile. Upton was sturdy against her. She could lean on him, if she wanted.

But that wasn't what she wanted. Isabelle needed to take a step back. "Lieutenant Houseman, how exactly does one go about getting a ridiculous name like yours?"

"My father was a butler, as was my grandfather," Upton's awful smirk made another appearance. "My grandfather didn't speak a word of Gull when he arrived here in Circeville, and so naturalization asked him what he did for a living. He simply answered 'house man.'"

"But your first name is Upton. It's an awkward pairing," Isabelle began.

"Yes, well- my father wanted me to have a name with some refinement, hoping that it would rub off on me." Upton cocked his head to the side and his eyebrows shot up. "I think you'll find that it didn't work."

A quick dip and a turn later, Isabelle was pressed even closer to Upton than before. Damn it all was he charming. She found his warmth comforting, and so she wriggled away even more. Her heel caught his foot, and a moment of grinding forced her partner back to a civilized distance. She never should have bent to catch her breath. He must have taken it as weakness.

"Clumsy me," she laughed airily. "So how does one become a military liaison to my little club?"

Upton's smile faded noticeably and he grew a thousand-yard stare. He leaned forward and it seemed as though he was going to kiss her, but he merely whispered in her ear.

"Seek ye the mind of the sage and the secrets of the arcanist, for in them shall enlightenment come to pass," he said.

“Upton, so help me, if you don’t immediately explain to me why you know that locution, I will have the Queensmen arrest you right here.”

“Calm yourself, my darling.”

Upton’s eyes darted to the two lean men in tuxedos by the door. The gentlemen were laughing and drinking like all of the other guests, though their mannerisms were slightly more rigid. The fact that Upton knew who the Queensmen in the crowd were was unnerving, but it was no matter. A single Queensman could bring down even the most dangerous criminal, let alone a single spy. If Upton showed even the slightest sign of fear, she would have them snatch him from the party right then.

“Are you trying to start a war within the branches?” Isabelle whispered.

“I would never,” he soothed. “Perhaps you’d like proof?”

“Now, Lieutenant.”

And with a single deft movement, Upton’s hand jammed into his pocket and it reappeared with a ring.

It was a simple crest of a lion and a snake in front of a shield. Where the serpent’s tail coiled, there was a tiny diamond flanked by smaller rubies. A light-blue iridescence flowed over the gems, pulsating slightly outward, but only Isabelle and Upton could see it- and the two Queensmen, of course. The glow meant that the ring wasn’t a fake. Upton was in Isabelle’s order, and he far outranked her.

“I am terribly sorry, Lord Officiate,” Isabelle blustered.

“‘Lieutenant’ will be fine when we’re in public, Isabelle.” Upton exchanged nods with the men by the door, and met Isabelle’s eyes again.

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t be so formal, Miss Carriker. This is enough of a disappointment already.”

“What? Why?” Isabelle hoped that she wasn’t in for a lecture on the decorum of an agent.

“I was hoping to invite you home for drinks, but now that you know my rank, I don’t believe I can trust you to keep business and pleasure separate.”

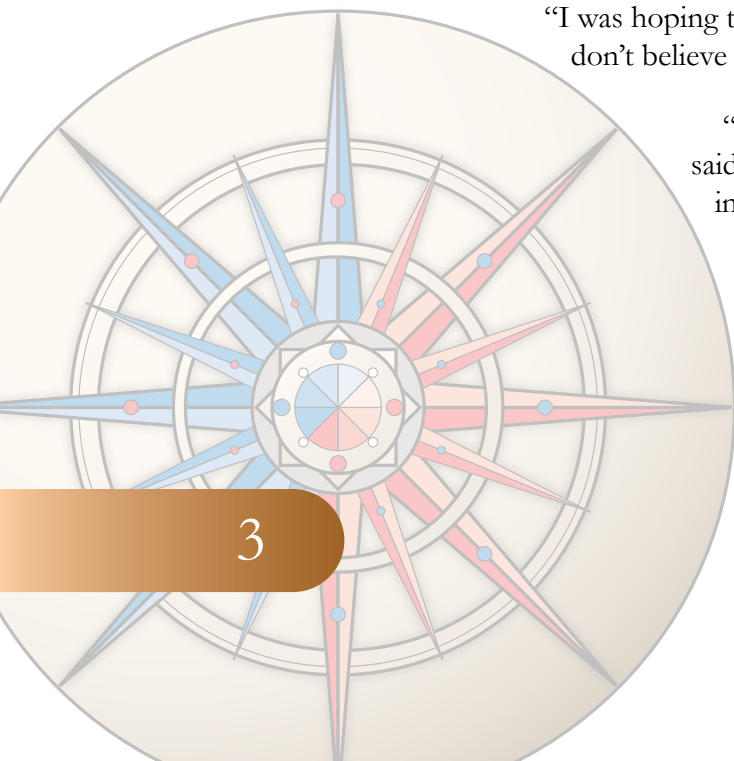
“If it’s any consolation, I was planning on saying no, sir,” Isabelle said. It was vexing to hear someone like Upton openly admit his inappropriate intentions.

“Well at least I’ll have that to keep me warm tonight.”

“Might I make a suggestion, Lieutenant Houseman?”

“As long as it doesn’t involve me going to more negative places in the afterlife.”

Isabelle decided that she had his number now. Upton would obviously have a record of insubordination and harass-



ment within the Seekers, and her pristine reputation would keep her safe from any disciplinary actions that he proposed. She took a deep breath.

“Since you’ve inoculated me against your pathetic sexual advances, perhaps we should leave here and get to the business at hand,” Isabelle stated flatly.

“Delightful idea, darling. It seems so unbearably cold in here, anyway.”

The air outside wasn’t cold, but breezy would’ve been an understatement. The local wind tore off Eckels Harbor and up through the streets and alleys of Circeville. It met the tower of fireworks over the National Academy of Historical Pursuit and blasted the sparks over the Palace District. Isabelle and Upton emerged from the ballroom into the sculpture garden on the eastern side, upwind of the wild display.

“And I’m saying that you’re a repugnant scoundrel with absolutely no redeeming qualities except your boyish face!” Isabelle spat.

“Oh, that’s rich! You know that you only commented on that because you find me attractive!”

“Officiate Houseman, I said you have a ‘boyish face.’ It might sadden you to discover that I like men!”

“Agent Carriker!” Upton began, but seemed unable to formulate a retort. He stopped and leaned against a granite statue of a wolf with sad eyes. “You will... refrain from... commenting on the perceived age of my face.”

“Very well, Houseman. Your face is fine,” Isabelle huffed, plopping down on a bench.

“Thank you, Isabelle,” Upton replied with forced politeness.

“In fact, it’s a wonderful face,” she continued with a kind smile.

“Well, it’s good to see that you’re softening up. You know, you’re not bad either, my dear.” Upton cordially sat down beside her, his legs close enough to feel the heat from hers. He seemed awfully close, and was probably calculating the logistics of a kiss.

“Yes, Houseman,” Isabelle began, reaching out and touching his cheek. “If only that visage wasn’t the mask hiding a nine-year-old mind,” she sighed mournfully.

Upton recoiled as though struck. “All right- that’s enough!”

“Are you sure? I was just getting started.”

“Yes! You have no idea the risks I’m taking to be here!”

Isabelle looked around. Behind her was the party of the century, christening the largest educational institution in the Empire of Gelseht. To her left and right were brilliant statuary sculpted by some of the most notable artisans of modern times. In front of her was the most incredible view of Eckels Harbor, the civilian sailboats floating across the moonlit surface like flocks of doves.

“Do tell, Upton. This all seems terribly dangerous.”

“You know, Isabelle, if you take up any more of my time with pointless sarcasm, someone might make a believer out of you,” Upton shot back, but this time, it wasn’t a joke. A bursting firework had highlighted his face, which was covered in a thin veil of cold perspiration. She considered it a prank at first, but his irises were completely contracted- the eyes of a terrified man.

“Then why are you here?”

Upton’s eyes flickered to the ground. “Because allegiance to the Seekers is everything. I’ve been charged with protecting one of my own and that’s exactly what I intend to do.”

“I’m not in your Chapter,” she said.

“No, but everyone beneath my rank falls under my protection when circumstances warrant.”

“So I’m coming into custody, then?”

“I don’t know. The Seeress didn’t augur that specifically,” Upton sighed. “You know how she can be.”

“Actually, I don’t. I’ve never had the clearance to see her,” Isabelle stated with a fake smile.

“When you need to see her, she clears you to see her. Pray that the occasion never arises.”

Isabelle suddenly felt on edge at hearing the news that a prophecy involved her. “So what did she tell you?”

“Simply that I should be here, tonight, if you want to have a fighting chance at life, and that no one else would do.”

Something thumped the statue beside Isabelle, and warm liquid sprayed across her face. She couldn’t quite make out what she was seeing in the evening illumination, but when she wiped her hand across her cheek, it came away with the sickly stickiness of blood. She looked up just as a flare dropped from the zeppelin above.

There, in the firelight, was the body of a Queensman, wrapped around the statue of an angel like a twisted toy. He just hung in suspended animation- his face the portrait of surprise, his fingers twisted and broken. Isabelle didn’t scream, but she wasn’t brave- Isabelle didn’t scream because she wasn’t ready to acknowledge what was happening.

“Take off, darling!”

But Houseman’s words passed through Isabelle’s ears without a trace of registry.

Houseman’s front foot plowed into the gravel garden path and his powerful legs launched him forward. A drop of blood

sank into Isabelle's eye and everything distorted and metamorphosed. The school was a sun, blaring daylight from the windows, and everything else was sackcloth. Isabelle's head swam and she couldn't tell which way to run.

The cacophony of fireworks muffled the explosions that followed, but the thumps of bass belied the discharge of arcane energy. There was a thick, warbling sound like thousands of rocks flying about and the clang of steel against them. Isabelle wiped furiously at her eyes and the lace of her gloves rubbed them raw, but she didn't care. She could hear herself calling Upton's name, but she wasn't even sure where he was.

The windows of the nearby ballroom erupted from their sockets, vomiting glass inward as a vicious explosion burst in the distance. Screams filled the air, but no one poured into the sculpture garden. Perhaps they were all too afraid to move. Isabelle could hear the crackle of several statues moving and the harsh footfalls as they climbed down off their pedestals. But there was also something else in the darkness. Something like a chain writhing through the air. More noise and the sounds of rock crumbling rang out.

Then all sound stopped, and a set of soft, wonderful fingers wrapped about Isabelle's face like a silken scarf. A luminous, blurry visage greeted hers, and Isabelle could see its kind eyes even through the blood.

"It's all right, dear," came a smooth, unfamiliar male voice.

"No, it's not," said Isabelle. Her voice wavered horribly, though she tried to sound stronger. "Where's Upton?"

"You need to be happy. Because he was here, I'm not really hungry anymore."

"What are you saying?" Isabelle shouted, tearing at her eyes with her gloved hands.

"Stop that, my dear. You haven't the experience to see when you've been cursed," the voice hushed, and a warm, wet kiss fell upon her forehead. When his lips touched her skin, her vision cleared like a fog burning away.

The face before her was sympathetic, eyebrows knit in concern. His pupils were wide and sad, wreathed with dark pink irises. His lips curled into a strong smile on one side, the dimple leading into his subtle nose. His face seemed so familiar to Isabelle, though she couldn't be certain where she had seen it before.

The shadows around him clawed at his face and shoulders, forming an unbroken, undulating cloak of pitch. From his back sprouted a glinting, silver chain dancing in the colors of the fireworks. There was the vaguest silhouette of a man dangling from the end like a macabre puppet.

In the bursting spectrum of luminance overhead, Isabelle could see that it was Upton, his neck turned to an awkward angle, his eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry, love. He isn't dead yet. I've only subdued him," the gentleman soothed.

The chain around Upton's neck caught the light of the fireworks and held it, growing brighter with every burst. As it rotated through a prismatic cycle, the hues of Upton's body began to lose saturation. First, Isabelle saw it in his eyes- his beautiful irises simply turned gray. Soon, the tips of his fingers

faded as the lack of color chased away the life in his veins. When Upton's form was but a shade of itself, a gust of wind blasted it into the evening like so much dust.

Somewhere deep in Isabelle's mind, she remembered the darkened woods- and watching as a young boy was murdered. It was happening again-. Icy panic roiled across her arteries, but she couldn't pass out. She had to keep going. Somehow, Upton had given her a chance.

"Upton!"

"Delicious, wasn't he?" the man quipped, brushing the chain under Isabelle's neck. She refused to shiver.

"You have no idea what you've done, monster."

The gentleman coughed up a hoarse laugh, as though his voice was made for nothing but intimate whispers. "And what's that?"

"You killed a Seeker. They'll chase you to the ends of the earth."

"I'm counting on it, Love. How else would I locate so many magi for my dinner?" he said. The gentleman seemed taken aback that Isabelle hadn't considered that possibility.

"That's not a very good plan."

"No?"

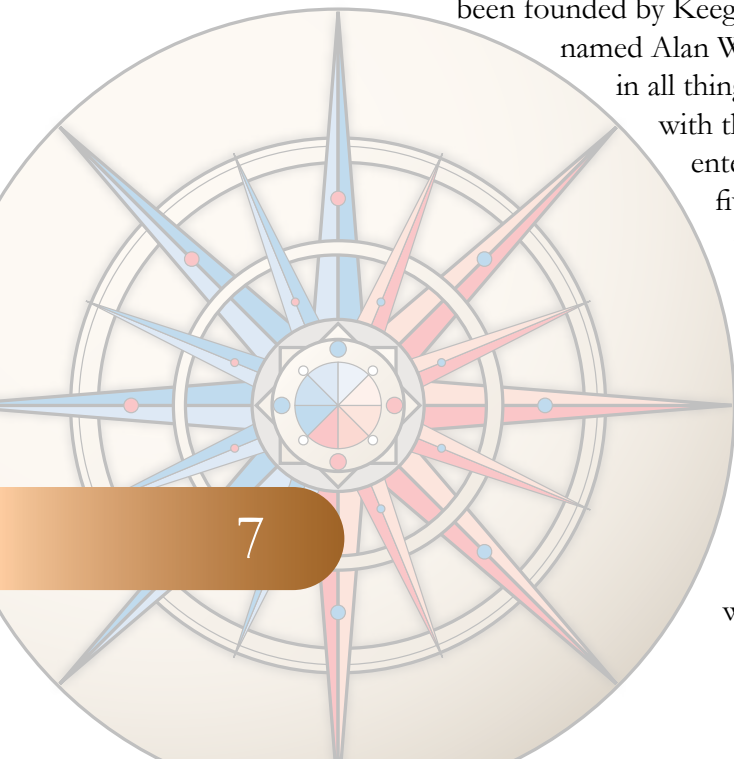
Isabelle steeled herself as she spoke. "Upton wasn't the only magus here."

And then she unleashed the powers of hellfire upon the man before her.

Orange, sharpened rays of sun echoed across the leaded crystal glass in Doctor Keegan Wilkinson's hand. It bore the etching of Wilkinson University- the preeminent law school of the Northlands. The institution had been founded by Keegan's great-great-great grandfather- a lawyer and congressman named Alan Wilkinson the Third. Alan was a staunch proponent of equality in all things, and believed that he could bring about a fair justice system with the help of the rest of his family. Every Wilkinson son since had entered law school at age eighteen and civil service at age twenty-five. Every Wilkinson son since had graced the halls in some way as a professor in the law department.

Every son except for Keegan, who wished so dearly to be a professor of Northlander Women's Literature.

He was an aberration, a disgrace. They had to make him Head of the Linguistics Department just to avoid embarrassment. His younger brothers jibed that at least they would never have to compete with him for presidency. It seemed to all that Keegan would simply rot in his classroom while the world moved on around him.



Then one day, a man approached him, stating that Keegan had fantastic powers beyond all imagination. The man said that Keegan could provide a great service to the world and help all of mankind reach a utopian state together if Keegan would come with him. The young teacher became a Seeker of the Arcane Unknown at the behest of fate and began to wend his way through the corridors of legend.

On the same day that Keegan had been chosen as Headmaster of the Fumoston chapter of Seekers, Wilkinson University presented him with a rather handsome set of leaded crystal brandy snifters, lauding him for his ten years of commitment and lack of further mischief-making. By then, however, the Wilkinsons of Fumoston barely existed as a construction in Keegan's mind. They seemed so petty, so unimportant to a brilliant tactician with lofty ideas. Every piece of Seeker dogma, every paradigm was just so much more real to the teacher than any petty concern about the Northland Empire's judicial system.

How could one tiny family matter when the entire world was on the cusp of a rebirth? Everything was worth losing when everything was on the line, right? Keegan had swallowed everything that his order fed him.

The deep, red wine rolled around the glass, leaving rich legs of fluid clinging to the sides. The snifter wasn't really appropriate for the drink, but the professor liked thinking about whom he could have been these days. It was just so hard to believe in the man he had become when that man had lost a team member in a fight that could have been avoided. It was even harder because that team member was a fifteen-year-old prodigy who wasn't ready to die.

The sunlight cut dark shadows across the doctor's hard-edged face- his noble eyebrows, his stern mouth. His cotton shirt was sweat-stained, but he wasn't going to change. Keegan was going to sit on the front porch of his humble house all day if he could and stare at the hustle and bustle of Fumoston below.

Keegan brought the glass to his lips for another sip. The morning rays glinted off his Headmaster's ring- a generous gift from the magisters in Circeville. Gingerly, he slipped it off his finger and inspected the details.

It was a breathtaking trinket, bearing the lion and snake of the Seekers with a gavel set into the background. In the center, there was a ruby with an emerald on either side. When Keegan concentrated hard upon the ring, he could see a smoky pattern of energy swirl about it. He set his glass on the porch floorboard beside him and put the ring to the right of it.

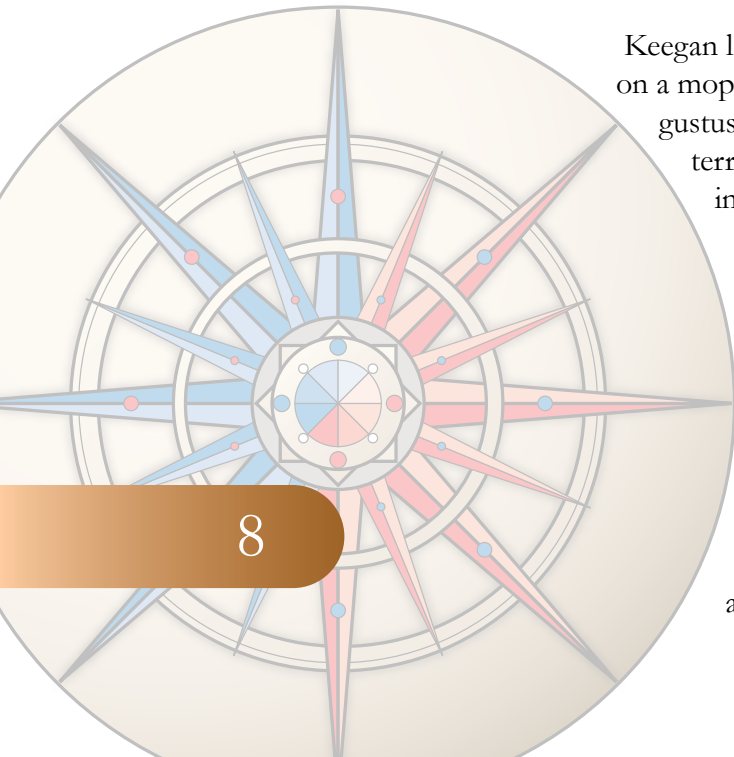
"Doctor Wilkinson," a voice called to him from the road.

Keegan looked up to see Augustus Elsworth stop in front of his house on a moped and stiffly dismount. The teacher didn't need to see Augustus's face to know something was wrong. There was something terribly urgent about the young man's body posture for six o' clock in the morning. The twenty-something man removed his goggles and leather cap, revealing his always-shocking, short, white hair. He rushed through the front gate and up the steps. His right hand clutched a wrinkled yellow paper.

"Good morning," Keegan sighed. "What's the trouble?"

"I just got this from Circeville, sir," Augustus replied, thrusting the paper forward.

It was a simple message scrawled on telegraph paper with an operator's signature. It read simply:



THERE WAS ONE MAN AT THE WEDDING. GIFTS OPENED.  
RETURNING SEPTEMBER 9. FENWICK HARBOR. DOCK 72.  
TEN THIRTY-SEVEN POST-MERIDEM.

At the bottom was the sender information. “Isabelle Carriker at Circeville Station Two,” it read. Isabelle had come under attack by a single man and casualties had been taken. Keegan’s stomach seemed to burst inside of him.

“This can’t be right, Augustus.”

“9972-1037. That’s Isabelle’s code,” Augustus reassured.

“Why would she have been attacked? She hasn’t been on assignment in three months.”

“No offense, sir, but that isn’t really my purview.”

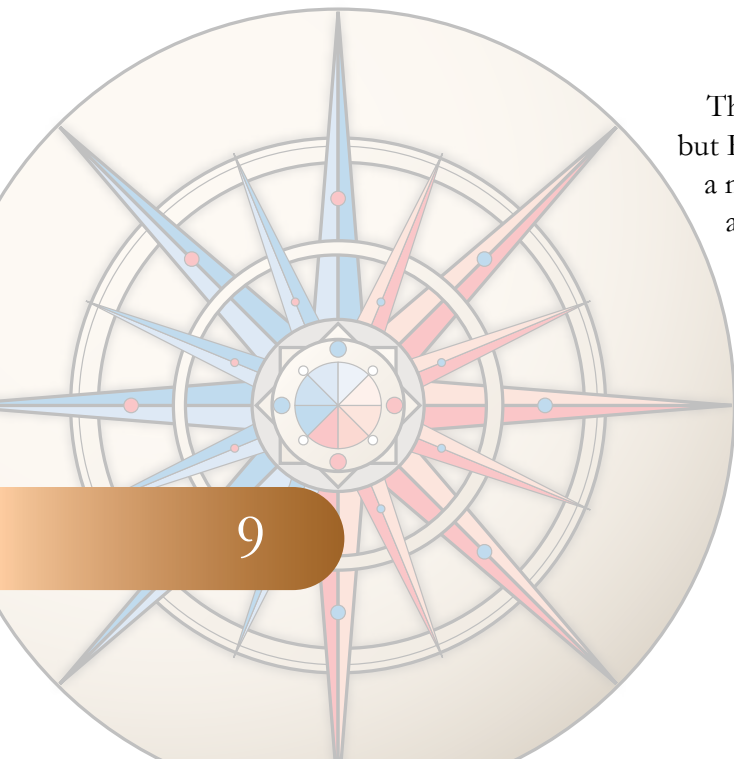
“All right, Augustus. Establish threat protocol with the others. Early return was slated for today at dock five. Be there and pick her up.”

“Understood.” Augustus turned to leave, but then stopped short. “Were you celebrating something, Dr. Wilkinson?” he asked, but the look on his face lead Keegan to believe that it was a rhetorical question.

“The discovery of my priorities, Agent Elsworth,” Keegan quipped.

As Augustus sped off down the dirt road toward the university, Keegan traced a glowing white sigil in the air with his fingertips. The Headmaster’s ring rose off the ground and into the professor’s waiting hand, where he placed it on his fingertips. The glass of wine levitated several feet into the air to hover before Keegan’s face. He briefly admired the well-placed lines, the perfect acid etching and the way that it held liquids as though they were gems to behold.

Then, by the Headmaster’s will, the glass moved away from him and shattered into hundreds of perfect, crystalline pieces.



The thick smell of tall grass was suffocating out in the fields, but Elena Antonello found solace beneath the western oak. It was a nice, wide shade that stifled the growth of plants and allowed a healthy breeze to tickle its leaves. She could see Antonello Manor from here as the servants went to and fro, dealing with their daily gardening and laundry chores. Thin skeins of smoke trickled up from the kitchen as the Knights of Slade ran through their sword exercises out behind the building. The oak’s shadowy imprint on the ground danced about like fireflies and before long, her head began to nod.

“Dost thou remember,” Wylan’s voice came softly from behind the tree, “whence first we kissed?”

Elena's lips curled into a smile, though her eyes did not open.

"When thy ruby lips met mine and I knew you under a summer sky?"

"You know me well enough to be more proper than this, my Lord," she whispered, and was rewarded with a gloved hand caressing her cheek. His gloves smelled sweetly of horses and lamp oil, but it was a wonderful scent that marked him perfectly.

"I'm afraid that's not the case anymore, Elena. There have been changes," said Wylan. His voice was shaking hard.

Elena's eyes flew open as Wylan's gloved hand seized her neck. She could feel her face filling with blood, her skin straining and prickling. Her betrayed eyes met Wylan's and spoke eloquently of fear. Tears rolled down Wylan's face and his teeth chattered fiercely as he shook his head. She wanted to scream. She wanted to talk, as though somehow that would stop him. She dug her fingernails into his forearm with one hand and clawed at his face with the other.

"Don't ever forgive me for this, my love," Wylan breathed as he drew a hideous green glyph with his left hand.

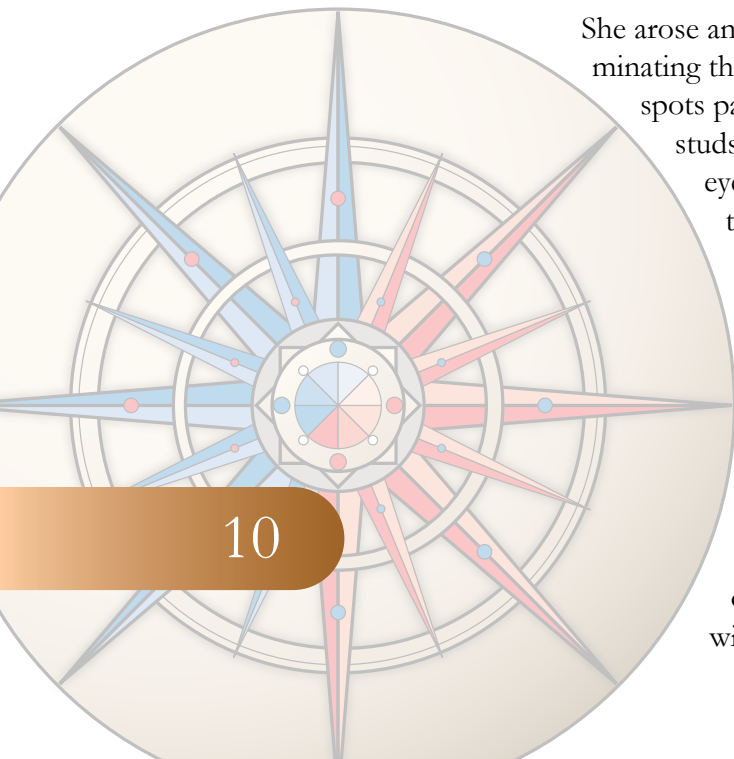
Then everything inside Elena began to tear itself apart.

Cog's eyes fluttered open, revealing pink irises. Her glass eyes flickered around, surveying the room for any potential threats. Nothing. Her body was ice cold, but that was always the case. She only ever really noticed when she had dreams of the days when she was called "Elena." Very rarely, she would hear a faint ticking after she awoke, but no one ever echoed these observations so she let it pass.

She still couldn't get used to where she was- to the fact that she was no longer a soldier. The Seekers invariably made use of her abilities, but now she lived in a townhouse in a modern-day city. It was more than a little disorienting after so many years of fighting to awaken in such lavish settings with the sounds of the city outside.

She arose and the moonlight reflected off her perfect, milky-white skin, illuminating the room. The only markings upon her body were the two blush spots painted upon her cheeks and the arcane sigils inset into metal studs in her knuckles. Her long, vermillion bangs fell in front of her eyes, but she brushed them aside. Cog had often considered cutting them for efficiency's sake, but shied away when confronted with the thought that she could never grow more. She had already trimmed the back, and missed her ladylike appearance. It was very important to her to at least feel human.

And yet, she bore the weight of her inhumanity around her neck every single day. Adorning her breast by way of a thick, leather choker was a faintly-glowing red stone set into a gleaming brass fixture the diameter of her palm. The leather was oily and unnaturally resilient, though Cog found herself quite thankful of this quality. To remove the stone from contact with her body was to remove her very heart.



She turned around and looked back on the bed. It had a massive indentation where her heavy body had lain, and she was slowly destroying the boxed springs below the mattress. She knew that, while she was muscular and slender in appearance, her weight would break most normal furniture after enough time. For a split second, Cog missed the sarcophagi of her father's laboratory, but then thought better of it. Perhaps she could speak to Augustus about sleeping arrangements.

Deep in the next room, Cog could hear Jonathan Andrews's shallow breath as he slept peacefully. Cog donned a housecoat that had been furnished to her by the Andrews and poked her head into the hallway, seeing no one. Carefully creeping along the strongest boards in the hall, she made her way to Jonathan's door. Spying that it was partially open, she looked inside.

Inside, she saw the sleeping frame of the young man who had saved her life the year before. He wasn't much to look at, with sandy brown hair and soft facial features, and he had almost no talent for combat when Cog met him. He did, however, seem to be an incredibly lucky boy. Of course, after being around hard-edged warrior-types for so long, she was truly thankful for Jonathan's gentle hazel eyes. Unconsciously, Jonathan kicked his legs in his sleep, and Cog wondered what he was dreaming about.

She was about to close the door when Jonathan kicked again, this time in a more coherent motion- running. Cog didn't want to pry, and she certainly didn't want to go and wake him up. Though her touch would be the texture of flesh, her cold, heavy hands would hardly be comforting to a frightened man. There would also be the question of what she was doing in Jonathan's room. Perhaps he'll calm down soon, she thought.

But he didn't. The fearful motions intensified, and soon a cold sweat coated his head and neck. Jonathan repeatedly cried out in his sleep, and Cog found herself rushing in to wake him. She hoped that one touch would be enough to rouse Jonathan from his nightmares.

But it wasn't. Jonathan began to thrash and tear at the air around him and Cog moved to forcibly subdue the young man.

"Jonathan! Wake up!"

Her pleas were answered with an accidental slap to the face. With one hand, she restrained both of his wrists as easily as a child's, and she forced down his chest with the other hand.

"Wake up, now!" she cried.

Jonathan's eyes flew open, but they didn't meet hers. His hazel irises were focused so far past her that Cog felt as though she were staring into an abyss.

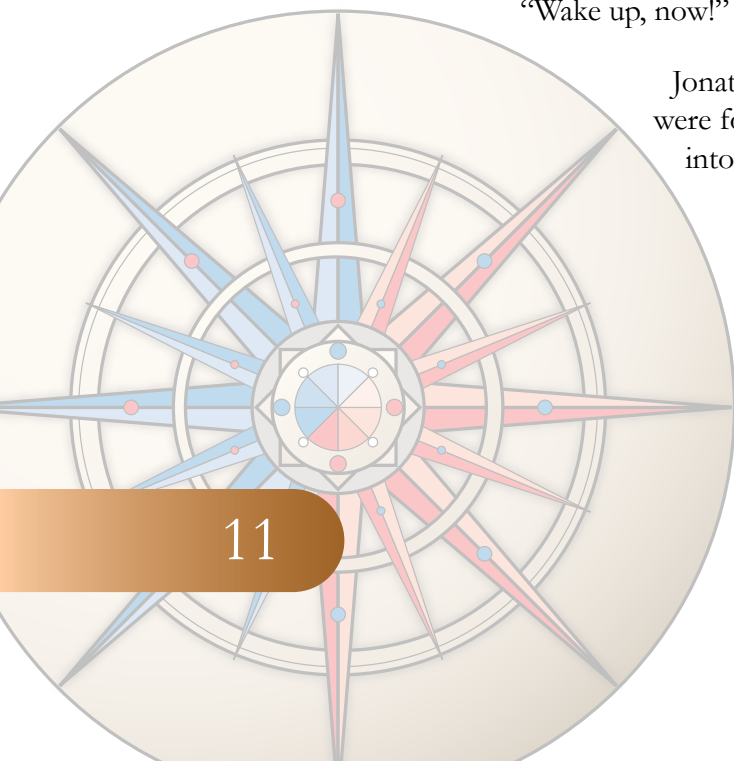
"Jonathan?" she began.

"He comes on untiring wings," Jonathan replied, his voice like breaking reeds. There was no way that those noises should have come from his throat. "A destroyer from the west, from the past."

"Who?"

"The curtain is coming down."

"Jonathan, please wake up."



“In spite of the way he gluts himself, there really is only one thing he wants, Elena.”

“Why are you calling me that?”

Jonathan’s eyes drifted downward to the stone around Cog’s neck, and she suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable.

“If you die, the world dies, Elena.”

“Please wake up, Jonathan.”

Jonathan’s eyes drifted up to meet hers. A brief blink later, his face seemed normal.

“Cog?” Jonathan said, in a normal voice, then a sudden look of pain crossed his face.

“What is it?”

“You’re hurting my wrists,” he grunted.

She withdrew her hands as quickly as possible as Jonathan sat up. For a moment, he rubbed his wrists and scratched his head. Repeatedly, he tried to shake the sleep out of his eyes.

“It’s not that I mind seeing you, but what are you doing in here?”

“You cried out. You were doing it again,” Cog said.

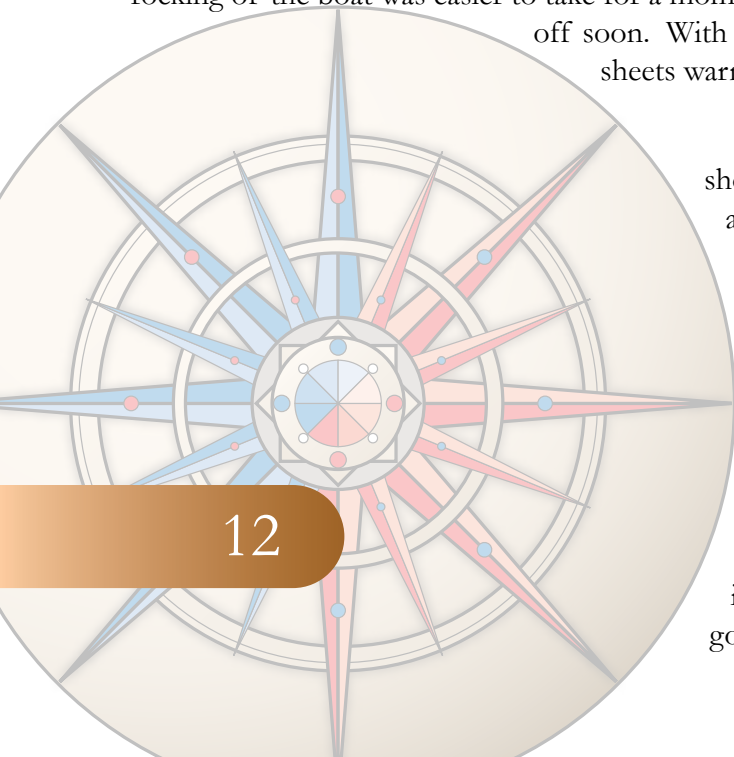
“Doing what?”

“Seeing the future.”

Darren Freeman fell back upon his bed and let the cool air trapped in the sheets wash over him. The harsh rocking of the boat was easier to take for a moment, but he knew the salubrious effects of the bed would wear off soon. With a sigh, Darren curled up and tried to get some sleep before the sheets warmed and nausea set in.

But it was impossible to keep his mind off of things. He’d cut short his visit to Zoe and the others at Redfield Colony as soon as he got the news that Isabelle was attacked, but the telegram didn’t make a lot of sense. A priority request from Circeville to the Seekers at Fumoston was indicated by the wording of the missive, but wasn’t the Queen’s chapter handling it? It happened on their soil, so why wasn’t it their problem?

He scratched his oily, black beard, trying to ignore the movement of the seas. Next to his bunk, an old steel bucket rattled to the ever-present vibrations of the diesel engine. The boat was maddening- a mercenary vessel bearing a storm-reinforced hull with a low, camouflaged profile. He could only go above decks in optimal conditions. The bridge was the only



structure on the whole blasted thing with any decent windows, and he wasn't allowed up there during "detection risk periods," which was basically any point during the daytime. So his choices were: stay below decks in the disjointed blackness, or go above decks in the windy disjointed blackness.

If he could just sleep, he could skip eight hours of the journey...

But it didn't make any sense at all. Why wasn't Isabelle sequestered for questioning? Who were the casualties in the telegram? Every scenario that played out in Darren's mind ended with dozens of Queensmen leaping out and destroying the attacker almost instantaneously. Why didn't that happen? Did the attacker stand his or her ground? Surely not. In his best years, Darren couldn't see anyone standing toe-to-toe with a Queensman.

The continued rattling of the bucket handle with his bottled-up thoughts afforded him no respite. Darren cursed himself for uselessly thinking on the predicament and batted the old container across the room. Instead of hearing the regular clatter that he expected, Darren was rewarded with a tone-rich mechanical hiss and an iridescent flash. Something had just materialized in the room with him.

Darren opened his nearby duffel and removed a nine-millimeter pistol and a clip. Gently, he slid the clip into the checkered handle and carefully pulled the slide until a round chambered and the hammer locked back. He wasn't the type to call out when ambush was on the line.

"I heard that, old boy," came a voice from the darkness. It was cautious yet jovial, with a weathered creak in it and a tinny sound like a phonograph. Darren knew the voice from somewhere.

"Then before you try anything, you should know that I've been shooting for a long time."

The voice chuckled briefly, its sharp laughter scraping against the corroded steel walls. "I'd say so, if you took my advice back at Laughing Rook."

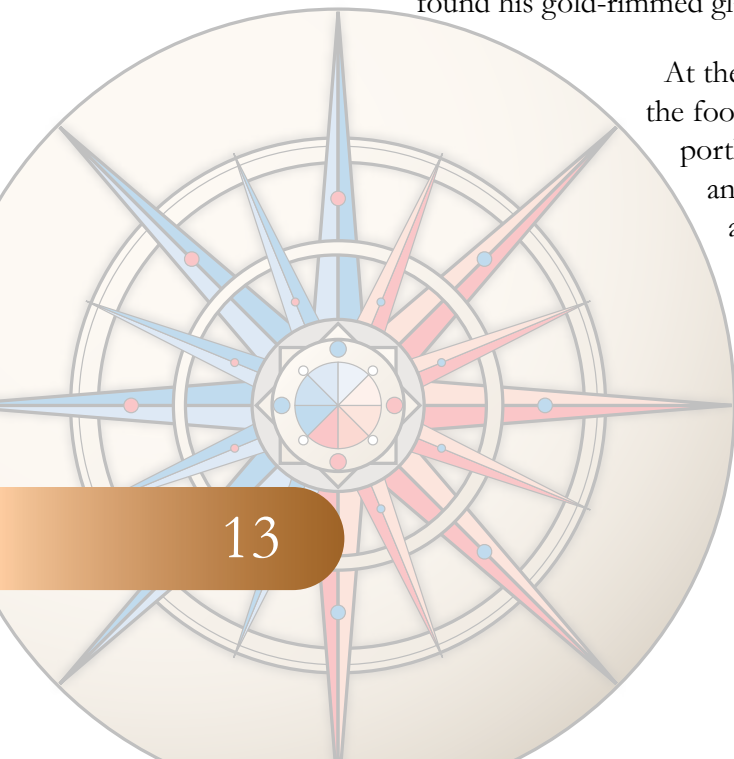
"Laughing Rook Lockup?" Darren asked. He searched his mind for anyone who could possibly know about that subject. "Freidrich?"

The thought of his old friend brought warmth to Darren's eyes and he reached for his lighter and lamp. He briefly wondered what business brought Freidrich to him, but it didn't matter. He would have plenty of time to ask on his accursed voyage. Darren ignited his lamp and a globe of warm firelight engulfed the room. Darren found his gold-rimmed glasses and slid the hooks around his ears.

At the edge of his bed, he spied a shining brass object clamped onto the footboard. It was a figure, no more than two feet high, with a portly body and spindly limbs. It had two tiny clamps for hands and enormous, thick, quartz eyes which gobbled up the lamplight and spat it back out as a sea-green. Adorning its belly were terrific engravings of eagles and ivy and three slots that housed a single speaker.

It clambered over the rail and up onto the worn cotton blanket. Its toddling gait faltered from the swaying motion of the boat, but it managed to struggle to Darren, who had swung his legs over the side of the bed. It was only when it approached closer that Darren could make out the obnoxious clicks of shutters and gears.

Darren's heart sank and the smile fell from his face.



“The one and only, lad! I told you that all of that firearm nonsense would work out for you.”

“I see,” Darren sighed, but it wasn’t a response to Freidrich’s observation. “You’ve passed away after all.”

The automaton made a sweeping gesture that nearly knocked it off its feet. “Afraid so, old boy. Not to worry, though. They made a copy of me!”

Darren’s jaw trembled a bit, but he retained his composure. “I’m never sure why they do that. It’s a worthless practice.”

Two flat pieces of metal on the creature’s forehead rose over its eyes. Darren could only assume that they were supposed to be eyebrows. “Not true. They need us for missives just like this one.”

“A note would have been just fine.”

“They told me you would find it comforting,” said Freidrich.

“I love finding out that people died without a shoulder to cry on.”

“Oh, come now, lad. You’ve seen plenty of friends die in your time.” Freidrich bowed with a flourish, and then struggled to retain his balance as the boat rose sharply beneath him. “They say that we copies are quite convincing.”

“Convincing, but a complete lie,” Darren snorted. “You’re incapable of learning any new attitudes, so you merely default to the most prevalent demeanor on a subject.”

The automaton cocked its head slightly in a rather animalistic gesture. “What are you on about?”

“I’m saying that you always liked me in life, so you’ll like me now that you’re a pathetic, worthless vestige of what you once were,” Darren calmly explained.

“I don’t understand, but I’m sure you’re quite right, my boy!” Freidrich said with a hearty laugh.

“My point exactly.”

“Surely you’re being too harsh.”

“Another example, then. King Benjamin.”

“God rest him,” sighed Freidrich.

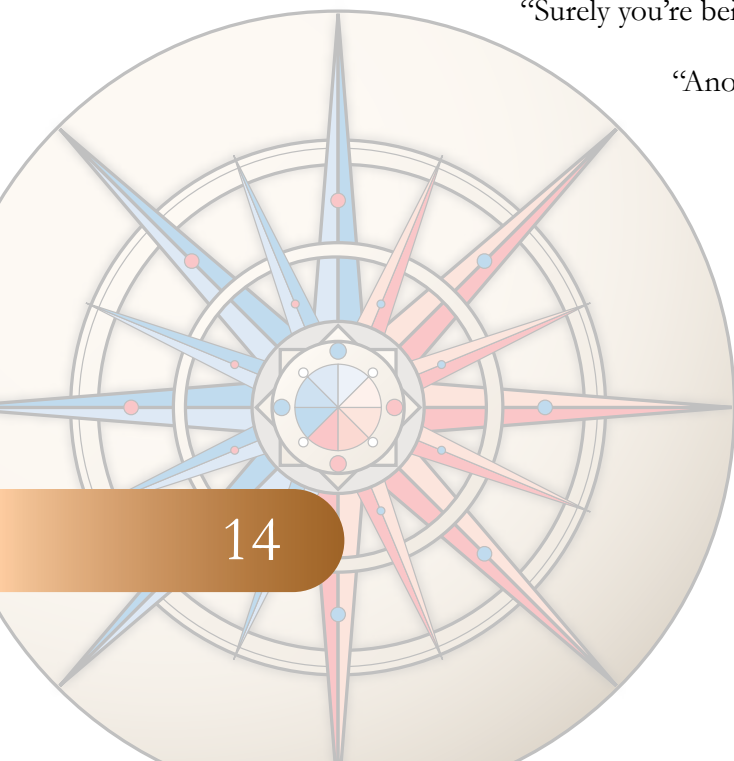
“Queen Anne.”

“God save her,” replied Freidrich.

“Taxes and paperwork.”

“Scalawags and skullduggery!”

“Which is why interacting with you is like seeing that someone has stuffed your old friend and mounted him on a wall like a trophy. You’re an abomination, and I find everything



about you painful and morbid,” said Darren, his voice bereft of emotion. Behind his spectacles, his eyes watered a bit, but he was good at keeping a hold on these things.

“Ha! Well spoken, old boy!”

Darren’s nostrils flared, but his expression remained fairly unchanged. “So who sent you?”

“The Main House in Circeville.”

“What do they want?”

“It’s the Department of Oracular Studies, actually.”

Darren’s heart sank even further. In his time with the Seekers, he had known of ten people contacted by the Seeress and nine of them had died gruesome deaths. She tended to stop babbling only to get people killed, though it generally resulted in a net profit for the organization as a whole.

“And that’s why they picked you to tell me then, Freidrich? I heard that your last mission ended up in the guillotine after a missive from the Seeress.”

“The intent was to inspire you, old boy! To let you know that you could be immortalized in service to the Seekers!” The robot’s eyes seemed to burn with an internal fire. “Not one in a million has this chance, lad- and here we are! I died serving her, and you must know that I had no regrets.”

“Yes. You did grin like an idiot right up until you left your cell.”

“That was the remorseless smile of a patriot, friend, and you cannot pay gold bars for peace of mind like that,” said Freidrich, strutting like he had somehow grown shinier.

“I see. And now look at you,” said Darren, sweeping his arm over the little automaton’s head. “The top of the world- the echo of a human soul, running errands when a telegram would have sufficed. With achievements like this, it’s hard to imagine what heights you’ll rise to next.”

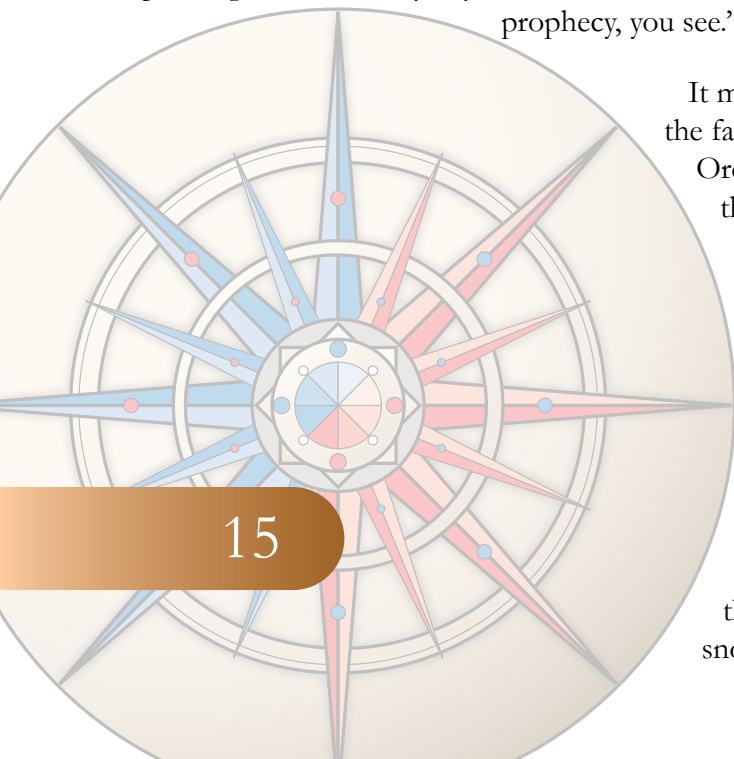
The infantile robot stiffened and stood at attention. “Actually, friend, this is a one-way mission. I’ll be spending the rest of my days at the bottom of the sea floor. I can’t afford to be captured whilst carrying a prophecy, you see.”

It made sense. He had been magically transported out here from the facilities at Circeville. It isn’t like he could hop back by himself. Ordering Freidrich to bury himself at the bottom of the ocean was the only sensible way to handle the information.

“Do tell. Let’s have it, then.”

The automaton popped all of its joints with an off-key, chiming sound and stood even more stiffly than before. Its eyes cycled orange, then red, then to a light cyan.

Another voice came out of the speaker now. It was a weak, female voice, but its shallow breath cut right through the air. Somehow, over the creak of the ship and the whine of the engine, Darren could hear her as clearly as if they were in a snow-covered forest together.



“Darren...” Her voice was like threadbare silk.

Darren couldn't believe he was about to listen to her. Pressure crept into his eyes and his ears began to burn. He could feel his own pulse in his neck, in his hands, in his feet. He could stop her now, if he wanted. By allowing her to speak, he allowed her will to be put in play.

“Listen carefully to my message. Take what you will from this and use it if you wish. If you fail to hear my words, how will you know whether or not you will wish to heed them?”

Apparently, she was familiar with her own reputation. Darren wondered whether or not that boilerplate was on every prophecy, or if he was just more apprehensive than the average man.

The robot lumbered forward and placed an appendage on Darren's hand, stroking it in a calming motion. It seemed to calculate his fingertips before its gaze met Darren's.

“You will be unmasked in the days ahead. You will pay for what you've done. It falls to you to choose the moment of revelation.”

The boat took a particularly fierce wave across the stern and bucked hard. Darren's lamp toppled from the nightstand and plummeted towards the steel floor, but he caught the base just in time. The swift motion of his hand extinguished the flame and the wind guard shattered against the ground. Suddenly, he was alone with the cold, blue eyes of the robot.

“Allow the moment of confession to be chosen for you, and you and all of your friends will die.”

Moments passed, and the diminutive messenger fell silent.

“Swell,” Darren replied with a wide-eyed frown.

The original sea-foam color returned to the construct's lenses. “Did you turn off the lights for effect, old boy?”

“I, uh... No. I didn't.”

“Was someone else here?” Then, with urgency, “Have we been compromised?”

“No, Freidrich. I just dropped the lamp.”

“Ah.”

“Indeed.”

“Why aren't we on fire?”

“Caught it,” Darren said.

“Ah,” then a brief pause. “Well, that's as good a spot as any to go up and throw myself overboard.” And with that, Freidrich turned and clanked away toward the door. He pushed it open, and some of the light from the hallway stole inside.

“Freidrich, I didn't get a chance to tell you before now.”

“Tell me what, lad?”

Darren couldn't believe how stupid he felt. He was going to say it anyway. “Goodbye.”

Freidrich stopped and turned to Darren. “God speed, lad. Maybe we'll meet in the next world.”

Darren snorted. “Maybe so.”

But before Freidrich left, he added, “Then again, knowing you, maybe not.”

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