

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

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PROTEUS LOST

by Tony Pi

February 18, 1588

Outside of Florence stood a Carthusian charterhouse on the crest of a forlorn hill, where a century ago I had hidden a hunted man and a stolen book.

Now, I had need of both. Philip the Second of Spain continued to plot against our beloved majesty, Queen Elizabeth, and to cloak his schemes his assassins had crippled my web of spies abroad, murdering many by poison or the blade. To protect England, I needed reports from other sources and thus had promised the spymaster of Venice, who called himself Antlion, that I would return his Proteus Codex to him in exchange for information. And so I had ridden south with my apprentice Luca to the *Certoza del Galluzzo*, arriving at dusk.

A lay brother muttered prayers to himself as he swept the front entrance. Ten years had passed since I last had seen him: Brother Giotto, my friend D'Affide's kitchen assistant.

Brother Giotto regarded us suspiciously as we dismounted, fear and worry clouding his face. I didn't blame him; he

wouldn't recognize me in my current guise. Last visit I had taken the shape of a swarthy, stolid farmer, but now I appeared before him as a paler, younger man with an acrobat's frame.

"Brother Giotto, I'm Filippo, and this is Luca. We've come to see the charterhouse cook Davide, also called the basil thief." I produced an amber with a fly trapped in its center: the price for seeing D'Affide, as we had decided long ago.

Relief flashed across Giotto's face. The amber, when presented alongside the code phrase *basil thief*, should identify me as someone D'Affide would trust implicitly. "My prayers have been answered!" He gripped my hand and lowered his voice. "Please, help him. He's turning into a monster, and I don't know how much longer I can hide him from the prior."

"What do you mean?"

"Your friend's become half-man, half-wolf!" Giotto crossed himself. "If he weren't the kind and forthright man I know him to be, I'd have fled and left him to starve.

"It happened two weeks ago, on the full moon. When he was struck by the change, he begged me to hide him in an empty cell. I've told the prior that he has been working outside the charterhouse, or that he's only just missed him, but he's growing more and more suspicious of my lies. When I bring Davide food on the sly, he bursts into bouts of anger and says little but words of prayer."

I clasped his shoulder. “We’ll do what we can. Take us to him.”

As a thankful Giotto led us through the halls of the charterhouse, Luca whispered in my ear. “Master Flea, can D’Afide truly become half-wolf? I thought your magic only allowed human shapes?”

“True, but the Proteus Codex hides the greatest shapeshifting tricks of the eldest and most cunning of my kind,” I said softly. “Think of the legend of Circe and how she changed men into animals. That power could be one of the secrets hidden in the book.”

I had stolen the Proteus Codex from Antlion when he was living in Florence as Leonardo da Vinci, painting the *Mona Lisa* and completing the Codex, his great book on shapeshifting. It was a dangerous volume full of forbidden transformations and traps; I had learned what I dared from it. The Codex taught me the variations of the living body, tricks that could save my life. For example, by growing my heart in a different place than where an assassin might drive his blade, I might survive such a blow and live another day. Such unusual skills had served me well whilst I carried out missions as Queen Elizabeth’s shapeshifting spy.

I had always intended to trade the Codex back to Antlion for a favor, and with a war against Spain looming, it seemed

wise to repair my diplomatic relationship with him promptly. Admiral Álvaro de Bazán had passed away in Lisbon days ago, and the Seventh Duke of Medina Sidonia had been newly appointed to the command of the Spanish fleet. I would need the intelligence gathered by Antlion's many spies on the Duke and the Spanish court to better advise Elizabeth.

We slipped into the cloisters unnoticed. This Carthusian charterhouse was grander than those of the other, more austere orders, with a large square where archways lined the edges of the green and a small section of the cloisters where a white stone angel watched over the graves of former priors. Above the arcade peeked the rooftops of the individual cloister habitats. Along the sides were two-dozen doors, each opening into the cloisters. Giotto ushered us hurriedly towards one near the middle. "Don't let the prior catch you."

"Thank you," Luca said.

Giotto hastened away.

I knocked on the door. "D'Afide? It's Flea. Open the door."

No answer.

I had told D'Afide not to pry inside the Proteus Codex. Why had he, after all these years? It had taken me months to decipher half its secrets. Within the book were diagrams, secret codes that described stages of transformations and successively deeper and darker metamorphoses that went beyond the limits

of what it meant to be human. But if you didn't know which was a dangerous page and which wasn't, you could easily misstep with the transformations and make a change to your own anatomy that could kill you.

I had first met D'Affide, then a rotund lad, in France in 1388 during my travels across Europe, when he was apprenticing under the cook to the court, Taillevent. I discovered his potential for shapeshifting and tutored him in the art, even as he mastered his skills as a chef. He took the name D'Affide—which meant Aphid—when he joined the Elect but made the mistake of shaming Niccolò Machiavelli, who in revenge framed D'Affide for poisoning Antlion's favorite apprentice. Given that Antlion never forgave lightly, D'Affide had turned to me for protection. I found him a safe haven in this charterhouse as a lay brother but in return had tasked him to keep the Proteus Codex safe.

D'Affide had had to temper his love of good food in his new role as the cook for the monks. He had always been the gourmand, the snobbish chef, cook to emperors and kings, but it was basic fare at best at the monastery, and he had to stoop to cook for those who had no use for high cuisine. In the years that D'Affide had hidden here, however, he seemed more humble, saying that he now recognized taste in its most virtuous form. To hide his immortality he had let himself go fat

before shedding his identity and taking a new one, faking the death of the old chef even as he crafted the guise of the new. He had taken the name Davide for this latest incarnation.

Luca played with the ‘turn’, the little food alcove that spun on an axis behind a tiny hatch. I put a piece of amber into the opening and turned it. We Elect could permanently change our shapes but only if we could tap into the Lightning trapped inside amber. The jewel would let D’Afile know that it was me, and perhaps he would let me in.

No response.

“Could it be that he’s become a wolf already?” Luca said.

Were we too late, and a hungry wolf waited inside that cloister to gorge on human flesh?

From what I remembered, each cloister was two floors and a basement, and immediately beyond this door was a pantry and a main room with a fireplace. A small bedroom was part of the space on this floor, while there was a study upstairs. No windows opened on this side facing the central courtyard, but there were some facing the outside, so that the monks could see the landscape. Each cell had a small garden where the monks could grow their own food. We could gain entrance into the apartment there. “We’ll climb into his cell.”

Luca gave me a boost onto the arcade roof, then I helped him up. His feet had just cleared the archway when another lay brother entered the courtyard. Had he seen us?

No time to worry. Luca and I dashed across the rooftop and onto the other side. Together we dropped down into the garden, carefully approached the doorway, and entered.

The room stank from excrement, sweat, and whatever else. And there, in the dim light we saw D'Affide—or rather, what he had become.

Half-bear? Half-wolf? He had grown hairier than anyone I had ever seen, and his frock was torn from his great size. But he didn't seem to see me; rather, he sniffed the air and turned towards us, but backed away like an animal sensing danger.

My friend was losing his humanity before my very eyes.

And there, on the table further in, was the Proteus Codex. I prayed that it was intact, or else I would lose my chance to placate Antlion and buy the intelligence I needed on the Spanish plot.

“D'Affide. It's Flea.”

He either didn't hear me or was ignoring me. I raised my voice and said his name again. He bared his teeth, his canines longer and sharper than I'd ever seen in a human being.

“I think he's deaf and blind,” Luca said.

I stepped closer. Indeed, D'Affide's opaque, milky eyes stared but saw nothing. "Oh, D'Affide, why did you look?"

"Like Orpheus, everyone always looks," said Luca. "But Master Flea, why doesn't he just restore his eyes with magic?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that, Luca," I said. "Some changes need to be incremental, slight changes from a similar shape. Change too fast through the wrong sequence and your heart could stop, for example."

The wolf-man growled and advanced on us. I pushed Luca behind me and reached into my pocket for a silk handkerchief. Like amber, silk contained Lightning as well, but its power was more ephemeral, and its shapes held quite frailty and could be unraveled.

Though D'Affide had never been a fighter and his crippled senses made it hard for him to see me clearly, his transformation had given him great feral instincts. I barely dodged his claws. I swept my leg under him and tripped him, then clasped his hand with the kerchief silk between our palms.

"Read me, D'Affide!" I was counting on him to *feel* me. The shapes of those who had touched the silk last became entangled therein. With both of us touching the silk, I wanted him to sense who I was, just as I could feel his inhuman shape.

D'Affide bit at me but I managed to hold him back. Luca drew a stiletto from his boot.

“Don’t hurt him, Luca!” I said. “D’Afiide, I will bring you back out of the maze of shapes, I promise.”

D’Afiide stopped fighting me, perhaps sensing my intent through the silk. Cautiously, I led him to the table where the Codex was. Fragments of a crushed piece of amber lay on the table. Luca lit a candle so that we could better see the book.

There was a test at the handle of the locked door, then knocking. That lay brother must have seen us earlier and was checking on us. “Don’t answer that,” I said to Luca.

“How will this work, Master Flea?” he asked.

“You know how obsessed Antlion is with his mazes.” Antlion had in fact been Daedalus far back in the past, the maker of the original Labyrinth. “You must do certain changes in the right order. Get it wrong, and you might be thrust into a series of them from which you cannot escape. Take D’Afiide’s blindness, for example. It has robbed him of a way to read the rest of the Codex.”

Now that I had a better look at him, D’Afiide seemed more human than I first thought. It was the coarse brown hair growing everywhere on his body, even his eyelids, that gave him the semblance of a beast.

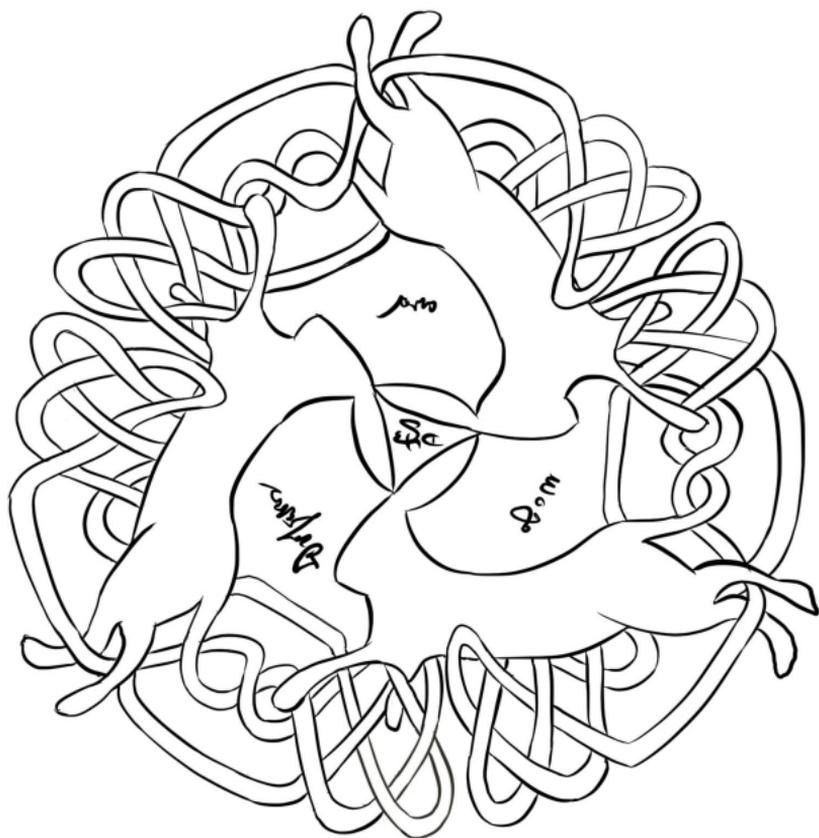
I thought back to my own brush with catastrophe when I experimented with the Codex all those centuries ago. I had accidentally stumbled into a transformation that made my

breathing depend on thought alone. If I had lost consciousness, I'd have stopped breathing and suffocated to death. Luckily I had reversed that, but the outcome could have been deadly. "You rescue someone from a maze by following him down to where he strayed, calling to him and leading him to the safe way out, and hoping not to fall into the same trap while you are there. If I can navigate the same paths that he's gone down, I should be able to help him back."

I moved the Proteus Codex into the light. It had a hidebound cover made from sealskin, protecting over a hundred pages within. Proteus of legend had been a herdsman among the sea-beasts, dwelling with a colony of seals. Burned into the cover were images of beasts and insects: pig, wolf, bear; seal, lion, leopard; antlion, cicada, bee. I flipped it open to a random page and saw the mirror-image cursive handwriting that was unmistakably Leonardo da Vinci's, interspersed with anatomical sketches, formulae, and the Three Hares symbol on every page. "A lot of what I learned from the book comes from understanding the diagrams and his mirror-writing notes." I showed Luca some of the anatomical drawings throughout the text.

Luca pointed to the Three Hares. "What are these?"

I flipped to the first page and showed him the largest of the Three Hares diagrams.



“The Three Hares is a symbol as ancient as shapeshifters themselves. Three rabbits with only three visible ears, chasing each other in a circle.”

“But it gives the illusion that each rabbit has two ears,” Luca noted.

I nodded. “The illusion makes you change your perspective, every time, and is the secret key to the higher shapeshifts. For the most complicated changes to body and

mind, it's impossible to learn exactly how to do them consciously. Instead, you must yield yourself to the complex involuntary shapeshifts that Antlion cunningly planted in the Codex." I traced the Celtic knotwork that enwreathed the hares. "See these? The tracery hides instructions for shapeshifting. By drawing in Lightning as you focus on the Three Hares, the knotwork will force you into a predetermined shape. There are more than just the circle-shaped Celtic knot like this one, on other pages. Triskeles, triple knots, nested loops, labyrinths, and other briar-like patterns that these rabbits nimble-foot through. I call them 'protean seals'."

"What of the words in the spaces between the rabbits?" Luca was referring to four words in the diagram: one in the center between all of the ears, and the other three seemed like dust before the gaze of each hare.

"Antlion's mirror-writing. He was Leonardo da Vinci when he wrote this book, and favored writing that way because he was left-handed. It made less of a smudge and also serves as a deterrent to others who cannot easily read the words in reverse. They are needed for navigating the many paths through the Codex. The first protean seal is like the entrance to the maze. Triggering it will change my perception. For some rare people, words on a page can glow with different colors

from the uncanny sight, depending on the letters, and that is the power of the first seal.”

Luca was a quick study. “So the three words along the side have different colors, which match the word in the middle of a later seal somewhere else in the book?”

“Right. I tried out one of the paths a century ago, and fell into a dangerous change that would have killed me.” I told him about the loss of autonomic breathing. “I had only ventured four seals deep, learned a few transformations that I had never thought of before nor been able to replicate since. You can trigger a protean seal to do or undo a change, but then a metamorphosis like the one or ones that D’Afide stumbled across might force you into a series of changes that prevent you from using the same seal to undo the cursed shape.”

“Then I could lose you to the same danger,” Luca said.

“Not if I’m careful. I just need to find the blind-deaf wolf sequence without straying so far that I begin to lose my sight. Once there, I can let him read my shape through the silk, and pull him back gently.”

Luca sighed. “We don’t need two wolves, Master Flea.”

“Nor do I wish it, Luca. But if things go wrong, I might not be able to stop myself from hurting you. Save yourself at any cost, even if you have to harm me. Understand?”

“Clear.” But I knew Luca would hesitate to kill me. A noble sentiment but likely fatal if he did; a monstrous change, especially that one that made me lose control, might make me snap his neck in a berserk rage.

I put a piece of amber in my fist and another on the table. I would need the power of the first to change my shape, and once I was ready to bring D’Afide back I’d have him tap the power of the spare. I had hoped D’Afide could guide me through the path of shapes himself, but it looked like I’d have to guess how he navigated them.

I concentrated on the first protean seal. Looking at the Three Hares, I let my mind drift, opening to its weaves and whirls. I didn’t change perceptibly, but something inside me did shift, giving me the uncanny sight that rendered written words in color.

The four words took on new hues. The shade of unripened green grape for the Italian word for *sea*, in the middle of the seal. Then, the three others in the second circle—*heart* was slate gray, *music* was the color of the harvest moon, and *snake* was the hue of blood from a fresh cut. One had to be very careful in judging the exact shade of the words. Close enough was not enough. The first time I had tried the seals, it had been the path of the word *heart* that I followed and found to be safe, as far as I was willing to go. *Snake* had been the false start, the

dreaded breathing problem that I had discovered and undone before it became deadly. Surely D'Affide had not followed *snake*. But had he followed the same transformations as I had down the pathway of *heart*, or had he taken the path of *music*?

That had been the reason I hadn't pushed my exploration of the protean seals. Without a key that guaranteed a safe passage into the deepest mysteries of transformation known to our kind, there was only so much that I dared explore. Four-deep had been my limit, but I feared that D'Affide strayed further than that, possibly in a direction that I hadn't tried.

Following the path of *heart*, as I remembered, led me to a page where the word at the center of the Three Hares was *fear*, shining the same color as the word *heart*. Without the word-color vision, it would have been impossible to find the next safe transformation. As I recalled, the change was one that allowed a shapeshifter to completely reverse the placement of his internal organs, as in a mirror. One could achieve the same effect by slowly changing the position of each organ, but what the protean seal allowed was a simultaneous, almost instantaneous change.

But had D'Affide followed that path? Possibly. I had to deduce which shape he had taken based on the changes I knew he had implemented. But could I confirm whether his organs had been reversed?

The heart was normally located more towards the left side of a person's body, though there was variation among people. I pressed my ear to his chest and listened first on the left, then the right. His heartbeat seemed stronger on the right. I would have to trust my intuition that he had taken the same step as I had, in this regard. But to be sure, I examined the wolf-man imprint he had left in the silk that we both still held and explored the pattern of his organs. Indeed, he was mirror-reversed on the inside.

“He followed the word *heart* to the second seal *fear*,” I said to Luca.

Luca turned the pages for me, until he found the word *fear* in the middle of another Three Hares seal. I began change number two, drawing more Lightning from the amber, and the protean seal forced my organs into their reversed configuration in a flash of pain as of a terrible fall from a height.

Luca was uneasy. “Usually I can tell how you've changed. Now I see nothing.”

“The risks are still very real.” I examined the three other words of this new seal. *Intention* was the shade of an eggplant's skin; *invention* was the blue of the midday Mediterranean sea; and lastly, *revolution* was the red of a dying ember.

Intention had been my choice, so long ago when I experimented with the Codex. It was a change I was familiar

with, where my skin became so finely attuned to touch that I could discern subtle textures and changes with my sensitive fingertips. I had explored the other two paths and had the fortune to reverse the transformations before I could slide into further trouble. *Invention* had given me extra fingers, while *revolution* led to total insensitivity to any kind of pain. One might believe it was a fortunate transformation rather than one that was harmful, but such a condition could make you not notice a bruise, wound, or burn. Not being able to react to pain meant that you might ignore signals that could prevent you from getting into a terrible accident. I supposed I could test if he could react to pain, but I thought better of that. I did not need this wolfman raging from injury, when my neck was so close to his teeth.

“*Intention* it is, then.”

Luca helped me find the next seal that corresponded: *prayer*. I took on the touch-sensitivity power, whose only indication of change to me was a whiteness in my field of vision that flashed then faded away like a cloak of snow. I was now three seals deep into the Codex.

The other words in the third seal were: *fire*, the color of old moss; *hail*, the color of black pearl; *banishment*, the shade of a golden coin.

“This was as far as I was willing to trust my judgment,” I told Luca. “I ventured four seals deep along this path, and by misfortune I tried the seal linked to the word *hail*. It was a disaster. Whatever it was, it caused my left hand to act of its own accord. I had no control over it, and it almost turned deadly as it tried to gouge out my left eye with two fingers. I reversed that process through the seal just in time, before it could blind me, but it was a close call.”

“Both his eyes are intact,” Luca said. “Not that path, then?”

“I can’t be sure. The phantom hand might have tried a different action with D’Afide.”

Luca watched D’Afide carefully. “Then he wouldn’t have let you take his hand. And, watching him as I have, I must say that he seems to have control of both his arms. He must have taken a different path.”

Luca had the right of it. “Then he has followed the path of *fire* or the path of *banishment*, but which? I never explored beyond that previous seal.” I would have to take my chances, it seemed. “*Fire*, then!”

Luca began at the beginning of the Codex, letting me examine the words in the midst of the protean seals until I found the right shade that matched with the color of the word *fire*.

We found it in the word *marrow* near the end of the book. I summoned my courage and tapped into the amber in my hand again.

I took a deep breath. “Get ready for whatever comes.”

Luca grabbed my shoulder. “Talk to me through it. Maybe I don’t understand the shapeshifting magic as well as you, but I might see something that you don’t. We’re a team.”

I nodded.

My eyes followed the hares in their endless chase around the circle, their paws woven into the triskelion briar painted painstakingly in vermilion behind them. I felt a new change overtake me, a vertigo that turned the world upside-down. I couldn’t even hold my head upright, and I fell headlong into D’Afile beside me. Luca uttered a cry and tried to help me, but I had already startled D’Afile, who pushed me away. I jolted into the table, and the candle fell and rolled towards the pages of the book. I tried to stop it, reaching out to grab it before the flames could touch the dry pages, but my field of vision spun and I hit my hand against the bottom of the table instead. Only Luca was able to swat the candle away in the nick of time.

He steadied me, while glancing towards the corner of the room where D’Afile had scrambled to and now huddled in. “What’s wrong, Flea?”

“My balance.” I was also sick to my stomach. “This is a bad path, but not the one he took. Quickly, the page, so I can reverse it.” I couldn’t even right myself to see it. Another trap, one that would have prevented a user who followed the rabbit down this particular hole from seeing the right page to stop it. Clever Antlion!

But Luca being here was a godsend. It proved once again that I could always use a helping hand, and not just to carry my bag of tricks for me. He brought the candle and page closer so that I could see the rabbits, and instead of following the forward path of the hares, I, seeing what they were chasing in front of them, followed the opposite direction. What the hares were being chased by, reversing change.

“I owe you my life once again,” I told Luca as the world steadied. “I guess he went down the road to *banishment*.” I looked over at D’Afile. “We’d better calm him again. Bring the book and light.”

“Wait,” Luca said. “There’s one thing that puzzles me. If there are safe pathways through the labyrinth in the book, shouldn’t there be a key to it? Otherwise, you’re just stumbling through, like you and D’Afile have been. We’re missing something.”

“Clues besides the color of the words, that hint at the proper path?”

Luca mulled the puzzle. “If I were Antlion, I’d have written this book to teach others the same skills in the event of my death, so there must be a key—or Ariadne’s thread, if you will—that leads to the ultimate truth.”

“Antlion could have hidden the key elsewhere,” I argued.

“That might be,” Luca admitted. “But so far there’s been a proper path. Think of normal mazes. There are always physical clues that you could use to help you, as you taught me. The tread of feet across the ground might have worn away the surface of the proper path. Or always taking a right-hand turn to navigate the labyrinth. The book’s different, but maybe Antlion’s hidden something else on in the maze of pages. A necessary transformation that lets the reader identify the dangerous paths?”

“Keep thinking, Luca, because you’re on a better path than I am. Bring the book.” I went to D’Afile in the corner and reassured him, wrapping the silk between us once more to re-establish my contact with him.

“What if the mirror-writing is part of the clue?” Luca flipped back to the first page. “Suppose the mirror-image words also hint that you should look at the image in the mirror as you change shapes?”

“Brilliant, Luca!” Antlion indeed had the cleverness to weave such a complex shape-shifting spell into the protean

seals. Luca's sharp mind would serve him well in the future. If we succeeded in returning the Codex to Antlion, perhaps I should intensify his training. Whatever Spain was scheming, I would need men like Luca to help me thwart their plot.

There was further knocking on the door and words spoken through the turn. It was muffled, but they were trying to get our attention.

Luca reached into the bag of tricks that he was carrying for me and pulled out a glass mirror. We had just come from Venice, city of glass, after all.

I held it up to the paper and candlelight and studied the image. The word *sea* in the middle of the Three Hares taunted me. The sea was a mirror for the sun, and water a natural mirror for us all. "Ready."

I did the same rabbit-chase transformation using the mirrored protean seal in the reflection.

At first, I didn't think there had been a change, or at least one that I noticed right away. But then I looked again at the mirror-writing words on the actual page, and my tongue flared with strange, sudden flavors.

The word *sea* tasted of salt as I stared at it. It was an extraordinary sensation, somewhat like the color auras that emanated from the words, but instead of a visual cue it was a lick of tastes. When my eyes saw the word *music*, the taste

changed to burnt onion. *Snake*, the taste of dried cherries. *Heart*, the taste of meat pie. I told Luca this. “Savory, perhaps? Turn to the next seal along the *heart* path.”

I checked the words *intention*, *invention*, and *revolution* in the next seal. *Intention* tasted of salted pork, *invention* of saffron, and *revolution* of kale. “That’s it! The path of salt.” The taste of blood.

We hurried back to the third seal in the series where we had the word *banishment*. It tasted of pickles. “Confirmed. The true path is the salt road.”

We looked for the word that corresponded to *banishment*, which was the shade of the polished golden coin. I found the next protean seal: *wolf* in the center and the three words *cost*, *keel*, and *church*. *Cost* was the color of coal and the taste of mead. *Keel* was the shade of ripe peach-skin and the flavor of raw herring. *Church* glowed with the green of a new leaf but reminded me of a salty chicken broth.

The next one should be *church*, but had D’Afile followed that? Or was this where he had strayed? I was working blind from here, but since he had gone down one of the wrong paths, I’d have to rule out the other two branches. But maybe I was close enough with this transformation to lure him back? But if I was too far away, and he tried to undo the transformation by

reading my body pattern from the silk, missing a vital step might kill him. I told Luca of my worries.

“If you follow the path of *cost* and find it’s the start of the wolf-shape, you could start going blind right away,” said Luca. “That probably happened to D’Afide, or else he’d have tried reversing the procedure. Do you want to risk it?”

I wondered. How had Antlion discovered these shapes himself? Had he pioneered every shape, even the more dangerous ones? My guess was, he used a pawn or theorized them, but I supposed he had attempted it himself. Wouldn’t he have had a safeguard in place? Especially if he risked losing his eyesight, he would want to be able to undo the change. But without sight, could he activate the Protean Seal in reverse? It had left D’Afide a freak, deaf, and blind. If I were Antlion, how would I build in a hidden escape from that?

Then, I realized I had the answer all along.

My sense of touch.

The second protean seal had given me extraordinary touch, so even if I couldn’t see, I might be able to feel the indentations on the page, perhaps trace the pattern. It would be a slow process, taking long to visualize what I felt under my fingertips and reconstruct the image in my mind, but at least it was an escape.

“I think I know how to reverse the wolf-shape even if I’m blind, Luca, so I might as well try.”

“You’re the greatest fool of all time, Master, and I say that with all due respect.”

“That’s no lie, my friend.” We found the word corresponding to *cost*: *witch*, tasting of field mushrooms. Not salty, which meant the seal was a dangerous one and could be the wolf-shape. With trepidation, I activated the change, feeling something click within me—just as the door to our cell opened.

The Prior had the key, of course. He stood in the doorway with a gaggle of monks behind him, wide-eyed and surprised as he saw us. I wondered what he thought of two strangers, a book, and a man-wolf creature in the corner of the cell.

But the change I had activated was already working its magic on me. My vision was dimming, though it hadn’t yet affected my hearing. I felt hair sprouting from all parts of my body, coarse and dense black. A pain also wracked my body as I began to grow from the Lightning infusing my flesh, and my newfound bulk ripped the clothes that I was wearing. There were cries of panic from the doorway, and Luca shouting to them to calm but with no success. I squeezed D’Afide’s hand through the silk, so he could sense that I too had taken the

wolf-curse upon me. I had made a mistake; I should have risked pulling him back in the state of my last transformation.

“What you see, Prior, isn’t sorcery!” Luca shouted. “Please, these are good men seeking penance here.” He was trying his best to stave off panic. If they fled and spread the rumor of this monstrosity, this terror, then we would be doomed as the local folk hunted us. Anything could happen to the Codex, to D’Afide, to Luca who was trying to shield us. He couldn’t stumble through the dark countryside with two deaf-and-blind wolfmen with us in tow.

“Leave us, Luca,” I shouted. “Save yourself and return the Codex to Antlion at any cost!”

“You need me, and the book,” Luca said. I heard him slam the door shut and drop jangling keys on the table. “I had to threaten the Prior with my stiletto to get my point across, as it were.”

“I don’t know how much time we have. D’Afide, you might not be able to hear me, but follow my changes. Luca, the amber for D’Afide.” I reached out to touch the page that Luca held out for me. Thankfully my fingertips hadn’t sprouted hair, so I began tracing the pattern backwards. As I started feeling the Lightning change me, I forced it through the silk so that D’Afide would feel it too.

I felt the extra hair shed away onto the floor, and my vision cleared. Before me, D'Afide also shed his hair, and his eyes became alert. He was becoming a normal man again.

“D'Afide, can you see me?” I asked.

“Flea?” D'Afide wept. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for keeping this book safe. But next time, don't read something I told you not to?” I tossed him a new frock.

D'Afide put it on. “I only allowed myself one page every five years to quell my curiosity. I thought it would be little enough to be safe.”

“We're not out of danger yet,” Luca said. He threw the Proteus Codex into his bag of tricks. “Mobs? Panicked monks?”

“They're looking for wolf-men, Luca.”

Luca frowned. “You're both shedding fiercely. I'd rather you not be caught.”

“Then we can climb out of here with D'Afide.”

“What about Antlion?” D'Afide asked. “Isn't he still after me?”

“I'll speak to him when I give him back the Proteus Codex. As for you, my friend—I think your time here has come to an end. I'm sending you to England, under my protection. The Queen may find your culinary skills quite delectable.”

“A full, royal kitchen?” His eyes glimmered with anticipation. “Aye, that'd be good for the gullet.”

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REQUIEM FOR THE UNCHAINED

by Cae Hawksmoor

Exactly one year and one day after my wife falls overboard and goes to the unchained, I receive a letter from the man who killed her.

Requiem is moored at mast in the Boneyard when the postgirl throws the envelope up onto his deck. She calls up: "Letter for you, ma'am!" and I stir in my chair on the fo'c's'le, swearing at the dawn light and knocking over last night's whisky. The bottle rasps back and forth on the unevenness of the deck, finding its space in the world again, and I bend down for the letter.

I recognize Émile's insignia right away, watermarked into the fine paper. When I open it, a new lantern mantle wisps from the envelope down onto the deck, as fine as fresh cobweb. I scan the words, but none of it really sinks in. The inarticulate twist at the bottom of my belly only gets worse. It isn't like I ever expected that cold-hearted bastard to send condolences, but this is inhuman even for him.

Of course Émile would wait until the precise moment that *Requiem* and I are almost grounded with the weight of unpaid

bills before sending me another job. I don't think he does this sort of thing on purpose. He doesn't have enough blood in him to care about anything other than the spiteful aristocratic face that stares back out of his gilded mirror every morning. No, the devil touched that one while he was still in the womb. Or touched his family going back seven generations. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that he will turn up precisely when you don't want him to, invite himself inside, and proceed to wreck whatever's left your life. That's what did it for Christie, and it is what'll kill me if I'm not careful.

He's written 'I hear that you may need this' at the bottom in his own sickeningly perfect handwriting. And the worst thing about it is that he's right. I *do* need his damned charity if I'm ever going to get *Requiem* off the ground again.

It takes me the whole rest of the morning to figure out that I have no other choice. The Boneyard is at its best in those first few hours of thin sunlight, before the ghostmurk starts blowing in off of the sea and they light the ugly green soulfire lanterns along the promenade to drive it back. It is dead quiet then. Early enough that most of the junk-pickers are at work, sifting through the latest wrecks dragged out here to die. The washed-up live-aboards who insist, a little too angrily, that you still call them 'captain' are all sleeping off their hangovers in the bellies of their punctured and grounded little airships, shifting

restively through half-remembered dreams of flying. Which is all just as well because I don't want their company. Not never and certainly not now.

I take some small grain of pleasure in crushing Émile's fine letter into a ball and pushing it into the very bottom of my pocket. Then I crack the casing on *Requiem's* soulfire lantern and begin the work of replacing the old mantle.

The whole assembly hasn't been used since the Sandcutter Run two months ago. Even then I only lit it so the rich owners standing on the airfield would think they were getting their money's worth, and I extinguished it the second we rose through the cloud and they dissolved into the nothingness below. And why wouldn't I? There hasn't been a geiststorm on the Sandcutter Run for twenty years now, and no one there pays you enough to keep the lantern burning for the full run anymore.

I haven't even so much as checked the components since then, and it stubbornly repays me now by refusing to light every time I strike the bones, even *with* the new mantle in place. I pretend I'm not doing this for Émile's sake. Pretend I'm not going to take his dead-woman job. But I spit curses at that blond bastard's name the whole time I'm working. Break up the hangover by imagining all the ways I'd ruin his life if I had all

his money and all he had was a sixty-year-old lantern ship long since past its prime.

When the marshals turn up, I hear them from halfway across the Boneyard—squabbling over *Requiem's* bones before he's even decommissioned. It doesn't even matter which of the unpaid bills on my desk they're coming for. If I had the money for any of them, I would have already paid. But when I look over the gunnel I see Émile's man coming as well, quiet and smiling, and I know what all of this comes down to.

I can take a job no better than the one that killed Christie, or I can abandon my ship. Let the marshals drag *Requiem* away and tell Émile's man what his master can do with his money. I can spend the next ten years of my life scraping by in the gutter of the capital, tugging at the coats of rich women as they come by and begging for their charity until the cold finally takes me, bitter and unfinished, out into the geiststorm to be with Christie and the rest of the unchained. Locked together in a miserable death that wouldn't be so different from our marriage, but now with no more minds of our own than rabid dogs. Throwing ourselves up against the edges of the world and burning ourselves on the soulfire that the living light against the geists, over and over again, until the Great Inventor finally puts his hands around everything that is, was, and ever will be, and rolls it all up like a carpet.

I climb down off of the fo'c's'le. The marshals are still coming, chattering like excited crows. Doubtless they'll take *Requiem* to auction to pay for all my sins. Sell him like meat to someone like Émile Laurence. Another antique for his personal museum. Something to show off when his rich friends come to call. *Oh, a charming example of the type. They were part of a more daring age, you know. When lantern ship captains flew by the seat of their breeches through Category Ten geiststorms. Just look at how close her soulfire lantern is to the envelope! It's a miracle she's survived this long without burning to a cinder. Maybe this one was even built before the Harrowing. Perhaps she even remembers the time before the unchained, before ships like her were needed at all.*

Émile's man is wearing a suit as silver-grey as factory smoke. He's the same bastard that always comes to do Emile's dirty work. Before he even has the chance to open up his mouth, I am holding out my hand.

"I want twenty-thousand," I tell him.

He doesn't even hesitate. "Done."

We shake on it, and the marshals behind him finally stop chattering like a parliament of crows. They look at *Requiem* like someone has just snatched away their favorite toy. I can't help but smile at that. Even if they do glance back over their shoulders as they go, like they are remembering the way.

* * *

The *Wayward Star* is already at mast in the vast green of the airfield by the time I get *Requiem's* nose to the wind and start to bring him down. And a grand old lady she is at that. Émile's pride and joy, and the flagship of his not-insubstantial fleet of luxury cloud liners. Even from a thousand feet in the air she looks like a leviathan—pink and purple sunset melting on her silver flanks, bright as a freshly minted coin.

Rumor has it that Émile's people are already at work building her replacement. One of those modern monstrosities—all chrome and ego and white paint. The ones the papers like to print big gaudy headlines about. They will never match the *Star's* patient and elegant beauty, no matter how well-worn her claret velvet or how tarnished her filigree. She might be almost as old as *Requiem*, but next to her he is a squat leather bag with a splintering wooden gondola slung underneath and an ugly lantern strapped to his prow—reminding everyone how the unchained are coming for us. How death is coming for us, should we ever drop our guard.

The handlers on the ground don't even stir themselves until we're almost down. Then they bundle *Requiem* to mast, bitching and complaining and sending petulant glances back over their shoulders. Most likely, they bully any woman who has the audacity to sail into their little kingdom here. I have

known men like them all my life. Spent years watching Christie cause a fuss—yelling at them and getting us into trouble. Damned fool never did understand that while it might be fashionable these days for fine city ladies to marry each other in their silks and their sequins, women like us would always have to live by different rules.

Since she went to the unchained, these landings have gotten easier. Instead of ending up in a scrap with a half a dozen grizzled handlers in the middle of the airfield, I reward them with spiteful disinterest until they get bored and slink back to their hangers. This time, I'm so busy congratulating myself that I don't notice Émile until his gaggle of rich drunkards start to call me over.

Émile doesn't lower himself to shouting, of course. He just stands there, a stone at the center of a motley of fools, and watches me with lance-like eyes. Waiting for me to bow to his will. It'd be worth twenty thousand sovereigns just to see the look on his face if I take his money and stuff it where he won't see it for a week.

I don't think two human beings have ever smiled at each other less genuinely than he and I do now. I've heard a lot of people say he's beautiful. Hair so blond it's almost white and so fine that the breeze swims through it. Dark blue dining suit buttoned up as far as it will go and eyes steely sober amongst

his den of drunkards. Personally, I've never been able to choke down enough of his ego to see it.

"Apologies about the wife," he says, the moment he judges I'm close enough to punch him in the face.

Another little game for him to demonstrate his power. I dig my nails into the palms of my hands. "I was sick of her, anyway."

Émile flinches. Perhaps on anyone else you could mistake it for embarrassment. On him it doesn't look like that. It just looks, for a second, like he's paying attention. Like he has found an animal that's almost as malicious and spiteful as he is and has confused himself into believing it is trying to communicate with him.

"Good," he says, his eyes already glazing back over. "I always took her for a shriek."

I stop my breath before it snags and hold it for a moment, pressing it deep against the muscles in my belly. I half-expect his drunk friends to say something, but they're all smiling and chatting as though nothing has happened. Old friends, then. People who have been around for long enough to know him. When I let the breath go, I do it slow and careful.

"But the work ain't any easier with only one pair of hands," I tell him. "I trust your lordship has reasons for sailing one of his most valuable ships down the Gullet at the start of leaffall?"

Émile raises his eyebrows a fraction of a degree, doubtless so he may better look down his nose at me, his voice knapped sharp as a glass knife. “You think that I would have asked you here if I did not?”

This time his friends do stop talking. But they aren't watching me, they're watching him. A lot of them doubtless have more money than Émile, better breeding, more ancient and illustrious family history. In fact, most of them probably do. But that doesn't stop them all looking at him like dogs watching their master's switch.

“And that he has taken the proper precautions,” I go on, ignoring their worried glances. “I only noticed one other lantern ship on the airfield when I came down. At this time of year, a ship like the *Wayward Star* is going to need at least two more.”

“*Eulogy* is on site for repairs,” he says, flashing a snake's smile. “And you shall not be needing your lantern, captain. The *Wayward Star* has been fitted with six of her own.”

This madman is going to get us all killed.

I turn my head and spit. “The Emmerainian ship they tried that on ignited her own gas bags at mast and killed half a dozen handlers.”

“This ship was fitted here,” he says. “By my own people. And will not.”

If anyone else had asked, I would have told them that fitting a liner with her own lanterns was suicide, but I have never known Émile to be certain about anything that won't go exactly how he wants it. Hell, I don't know. If anyone is finally going to put me out of business and send *Requiem* to the breakers, then of course it would be him.

"You know," I say. "I'd heard that Hiron Justicae's company has been working on something like that." I outflank him for a moment there. Enough to see the slight twinge between his eyebrows. To know that whatever the hell he is up to here, his old rivalry with Hiron is part of it. I push my hands into the bottoms of my pockets, fishing for a cigarette. "What if I refuse? If I walk straight back to *Requiem* and leave?"

"Please." Émile extends a hand. Dinner gloves only a fraction of a shade whiter than his skin. "Be my guest."

Never seen a day of hard work in all his life, those hands. And here he is talking about going down the Gullet in autumn like it doesn't mean a thing.

I finally find that cigarette and try to straighten it between my fingers. I say, "And the *Wayward Star* will sail right out of here without me."

Émile's smile gets worse. "And the man from the ministry will be satisfied that every attempt was made to cross with a lantern ship in tow, just in case. He will complain, but after an

hour and a little brandy, he will agree that we must make the test now, before the Category Tens close in.”

Something pulls at the corner of my mouth. “Not so confident in your new toy that you’ll risk the big ones, then?”

I know the arrow has hit the mark when he curls his dinner glove into a fist, slowly and silently, at his side. At least if I’m going to die, I’ll do it remembering the look on this inbred bastard’s face right now.

I strike a match and then another, but the cigarette won’t light. “None of this was in the letter you sent.” I dare to turn away from him. To start walking before he has the chance to think of some viciousness to put me back where I belong. Before I have to suffer the consequences of pissing off someone whose fingernails are of more importance than I am. “I won’t do it for less than fifty thousand,” I say back over my shoulder.

Behind me, one of his motley splutters. I imagine Émile’s face twisting with rage and disgust, but when he speaks his voice is still perfectly calm.

“You will get thirty-five,” he says. “Be ready to sail at first light.”

I close my eyes, my jaw, my fist around that cigarette. Close up every part of me and screw it tight. Wrap myself around the image of Christie falling slow into the clouds with

both her arms still reaching upwards. Like I could save her. Like I ever could.

“As you say, your lordship.”

I keep walking and strike the last match I have. When the wind smothers that as well, I tear the damned cigarette in half and toss the smoking ember down into wet grass.

* * *

That night it takes a whole bottle of whisky to put me to sleep. In the long and restless hours when I'm waiting for it to come, I stalk the airfield like a geist: stumbling around in a landscape populated by giants, the shadows of the four great airship hangers pressing great slabs of black on the moonlight.

Some time just after midnight, I find my way to where they are building Émile's latest creation—a white and chrome elephant a thousand feet long. Its skeleton is almost finished, and it looks so delicate from down here that the ship doesn't seem to have substance. Brittle as a spun sugar ghost.

Workers' tools are scattered everywhere, but the whole place is filled up with kind of deep silence that has not been disturbed in a while. Looking at that bastard's perfect suit and perfect skin on the airfield earlier, it seemed impossible that the rumors flying around about his company's financial difficulties were true. But standing here in the hanger with the

ghost of his crowning glory, my boots leave halos in the dust settled on the floor.

In reality, it doesn't much matter whether *Wayward Star* sails away from here tomorrow and into wealth and glory as the prototype for the future, or whether she burns to ash out over the headland and Hiron Justicae snatches victory back from the hands of his old rival. Standing in that hanger underneath the ghost of the future, it all seems inevitable. No matter what I do now, some day not so very far from now, Hiron or Émile or another man just as rich and pompous as them will finally succeed at the impossible. They'll build a big gas-lifted liner that flies with its own lanterns, and *Requiem* and I will be cut loose from our moorings and set adrift in history.

I take another swig from the bottle hanging like a pendulum in my hand and head back to *Requiem* and to my bunk. Whatever the future has in store for our kind, tomorrow we fly or we burn. And that's as true now as ever.

* * *

Somehow I still make it up before the dawn, cursing and rubbing my face as the first few sunbeams stab my eyes. Perhaps it should worry me, but the truth is that over the last few years I've gotten used to flying with a hangover. The whole world all strange and curling at the edges. But this isn't the Sandcutter Run and I can't afford to take chances. I light the

soulfire lantern as soon as I get up and just resign myself to what the sickly green light does to the pounding in my head.

When it's lit, the rest of the world seems darker. Towering black clouds spilling like smoke out of the west and a sharp wind blowing in off of the sea—catching a thousand different red and brown and yellow leaves and scuttering them inland across the airfield. I stoke up *Requiem's* brazier until his envelope glows like a glob of polished amber in the dark morning and wait for the off.

Émile doesn't keep us waiting long. Before the sun is even high enough to be lost behind the cloud, the *Wayward Star* is turned towards the wind and rising. She dives upwards like a whale, all smooth grace and silver beauty. I watch until she starts steering north towards the sea, then hurry to cast off our mooring ropes.

The air is so cold around the heat in *Requiem's* belly that he rises as fast as a soap-bubble, the wind buffeting us back and forth and making my hangover as miserable as it can be. I turn the furnace high, and we climb so quick that we pass the *Wayward Star*. Watch her fall away into the clouds below. Only when I find a more steady wind do I level off and bank us hard to starboard to get out of her way, leaning over the gunnel to watch her surface through the storm. The thick grey

nimbostratus blisters and then breaks open, sliding over the mirror polish of her body.

Great Inventor, but she is beautiful. But old now. Growing old. Not quite all of what she once was.

I suspect that's why Émile chose her for this little experiment of his. The skeleton of the ghost he's building in that hanger isn't designed to fit six soulfire lanterns inside her body. Worse than that: she's been so thoroughly over-engineered that modifying her to carry them will take a lot of time and money. A hell of a lot. Assuming it's even possible. There is a real chance that Hiron Justicae's ambition will make Émile's crowning glory obsolete before she even launches. Perhaps retrofitting the *Wayward Star* just before the autumn storms isn't an act of arrogance but an act of desperation. Maybe Émile's money is running out after all and the vultures are beginning to circle.

Great Inventor, let it be true! I hope with all my black and poisonous heart that his money and his friends all evaporate like spring mist and leave him with nothing. Shivering in the streets with calluses on his pretty little hands, begging for pennies from the fine ladies and gentlemen of the capital.

It takes me a long time to look away from the *Star*, to stop myself from reveling in daydreams of Émile's downfall. Only when I do can I see the scale of what we were facing. From up

here and this close to the ocean, the geiststorms are a roiling nightmare of charcoal-colored smoke spidered with green fire. A storm layered on a storm, squatting over the space where the horizon should be. And every single mote of dust in it is one of the unchained. Driven so mad by their own deaths that only the animal part of them is left—gibbering and screaming and thrashing stupidly against the soulfires we light to hold them back. Scraping at the windows of the world. I snatch at the rigging, at the side of *Requiem's* gunnel, at anything that will stop my world from being sucked towards that monstrosity like water through a plughole. Somehow, I manage to claw my way inside the cabin and get my hands onto the radio.

“*Wayward Star. Requiem.* Was that on the forecasts this morning?”

There is a long pause filled with nothing but the hiss of static and the low keening of the wind.

“*Requiem. Wayward Star.*” Not the captain. A woman’s voice. One of the officers? “Yes. As you would know, if you had been at the briefing.”

We’re sailing into a living nightmare of the dead, and she wants to bitch at me for not getting up in the middle of the night to look at a second-hand weather report for a job that I didn’t even want.

My fist clenches around the receiver. “That is at least a Category Eight.”

“Nine, actually. Waning to an Eight by ten bells.”

Her voice sounds clipped. Cold, and far away from itself. It’s difficult to tell if that’s the distortion on the radio, or if she simply doesn’t have two feelings left to rub together.

I look out of the window and watch the storm roll in until it’s all there is. Every time I see the geiststorms, it’s the same. The realization of those hundreds of millions of dead, stretching all the way back to the Harrowing. Into the war that birthed the Harrowing. Each of them dying in violence and pain. Each of them howling in the animal agony of that moment forever. I wonder if I will recognize any of them when they get close. Whether my mother and my sister are out there somewhere, screaming in the storm.

“*Requiem*,” says the receiver. “*Wayward Star*.”

It is not the first time she’s called. I squeeze my thumb onto the transmit button until my hand shakes.

Why can’t I stop staring?

“*Wayward Star*,” I say. “*Requiem*. Get me *Émile*.”

“Mister Laurence is not on-board,” she tells me. “He and a few of his guests were taken ill last night. The airfield physician grounded his whole party this morning.”

I spit out an angry laugh at that. “Does the devil get sick? Can a virus attack another virus?”

“*Requiem. Wayward Star*. Can you repeat?”

The storm is rolling in over the swirling sea. I let it wash everything inside me cold and clear and hard, until I no longer feel anything at all. Nothing but a faint weightlessness of anticipation, as though I’ve been cut adrift.

“You heard,” I say. If I turn now, we could make it back to the airfield before the storm hits. “How many do you have aboard?”

“One hundred and twelve,” she tells me. This woman with the clipped voice. This stupid fool who is about to risk everything on the say-so of Émile Laurence and can’t even be roused enough to care.

I place the receiver carefully back in its cradle and head out to check the rigging. I can hear it humming in the wind, low and soft as the strings of a plucked harp.

* * *

The geiststorms play tricks on you sometimes. For a while, it almost looks as though we’re going to miss the worst. The *Wayward Star* slides through the tops of the nimbostratus as though she’s skimming across an oiled sea. Silver-white in the sun and aimed towards the Gullet—a thin sliver of still air between the roiling ocean and the mountains.

In summer, the sailing is smooth and blissful in the hot still air, and thousands of people bask on the specially constructed sun decks or lean over the railings and thrill themselves with a distant glimpse of the storms—crackling with green fire in the night. Even then a good captain will always double her watch and bring a lantern ship along, just in case.

But in the autumn? In autumn the whole thing just goes to hell. The west wind blows in from the ocean and shoves the storms right up against the cliffs. If it's a good year, the bulwark of soulfire lanterns that runs for two hundred miles along the coast is only breached two dozen times over the course of those three months. In a bad year, those two dozen times coincide with captains still stupid or desperate enough to try and make the Gullet. Those unlucky autumns stretch out into a forever of red-gold leaves, grey skies, and dead bodies falling from the heavens all along the headland.

Soon it is past ten bells. We're within a dozen miles of the storm, and it looks as though it has started to recede. The *Wayward Star* tacks in close to the mountains and turns slightly into the wind—the safest course for a ship of her size—and I take *Requiem* out until we're about a half a mile off of her port side. If the geiststorm looked at us with its many compound eyes, *Requiem* would be nothing more than the

tinest firefly, glowing green and amber against the vastness of her flank.

I tap my fingers against the wheel and turn into the wind to match her course. The air is clear enough that I can just about make out the green headache glow of each of the lanterns on the headland as we pass. All the same, every so often one of the geists will make it far enough inland to slither around the edges of the sickly light pouring off the lantern on *Requiem's* prow. They turn putrid and plasmic as the light shreds their bodies into ether, and what little is left splashes like rainwater against the silver of the *Wayward Star's* envelope. Blasted into nothing by the wind.

Great Inventor, I swear that I *hear* it when the *Star* deploys her new lanterns for the first time. I feel it as a low vibration in all the mineral parts of my body and look out of the starboard window just in time to see the six cold iron cages slide out of her. They ignite one at a time, turning the faceless ether of the ghostmurk into a haze of green light. It's so bright that I have to turn my head. Raise my hand to shield my eyes. Can almost feel my own shadow burning into me. And then everything goes black. I try to open my eyes, convinced that she has blinded me. The darkness glimmers and swims. The first thing that makes any sense is the green glow of *Requiem's*

lantern. And the dark space where the *Wayward Star* should be.

Still is, I realize catching the faint reflection of our light on her hull.

But all six of her lanterns have gone out, and now the whole sky has darkened. I was right when I was standing on the airfield in front of Émile last night. We are all going to die out here for his folly.

Geists shred themselves around *Requiem's* light, and their keening howls melt into the single high note that the gale makes in the ropes. I step out of the cabin door and brace against the wind. Pull down my hood down against the spume of ether that's turning the deck to slippery silver. Like moonlight on snail's trails. I almost lose my footing twice before I make it to the lantern and twist the key to turn the flame as high as it will go.

Through the cloud, I can still just about make out the *Wayward Star* alongside. Every single one of her lanterns is dark, with only the faintest ripple of green fire every now and then to show that they were ever lit.

There's only one time when a lantern fizzes like that. The mantles have burned up on every single one of them. It should be impossible. There are laws demanding the strict testing of all the components of a soulfire lantern, *especially* the mantles.

That thought drops through me slowly. Like watching a stone sink down into black water. I feel the muscles of my jaw ratchet a little tighter.

How old is the *Wayward Star* now? Old enough that the payout from wrecking her might begin to look tempting. Especially if you are provided with the opportunity to put the whole country in a panic about the dangers of fitting passenger liners with their own lanterns. Then, not only do you have the means to scupper all of Hiron Justicae's grand plans, but you also have the sudden influx of capital to finish building your own white elephant.

Is that truth? In all likelihood, I'll never know. But that's the funny thing about when the other boot finally comes down: truth doesn't matter any more. The only truth you need is that your response now is the same. It's the only thing left that you can do. You do what you can to survive.

For a moment, I am back at mast in the Boneyard. Émile's fancy letter in my hand, and something as fine as fresh-spun cobwebs whispering down onto the deck. I have just enough time to realize that whatever is wrong with the *Wayward Star* is probably about to happen to us, then *Requiem* wallows hard to starboard and nearly throws me over the railing and into the black ocean of the sky. I barely manage to catch hold of the rigging, and I'm so blinded by the squall that I have to close my

eyes to drag myself back aboard—trusting that primordial sense in my body to know up from down when my eyes cannot. A geist scream slices within an inch of my ear as I come back up to my feet.

They're breaking through. The lantern... If we don't—

The rest of that thought is cut away. More of a feeling than a sound, like some part of me has crumpled in. I swipe the back of my hand across my forehead to clear some of the spume. Open my eyes just as the last of the *Wayward Star's* envelope folds and crinkles up with flame—not the sickly green of geiststorm and soulfire but the deep umber-red of burning gas. And then debris is everywhere around. Falling embers like standing under the first full meteor shower of the year.

I can't even really hear the storm. I can't hear anything at all. The *Wayward Star's* blackened skeleton folds in on itself as it falls, her bones already crawling with geists, swarming like grey insects. I scabble and slither on *Requiem's* leaning deck, reaching for the lantern on his prow as its light flares and then dissolves into green and crackling haze.

Then everything becomes a chaos of darkness and fire and falling debris. A geist screams somewhere overhead, loud enough that I feel as though I'll never hear anything ever again. Something hits me from behind like a wall, like a boom coming around too fast on a sail-boat. *Requiem's* scarred and slippery

deck pitches sharply upwards towards me, and everything is obliterated.

* * *

In the first few seconds of waking, I'm standing numb against the gunnel as Christie finally goes overboard. I'm hanging like a frozen breath in time, watching her plummet like a stone toward the clouds with both of her arms held out to me. I think I was wrong before. She realized in that moment what I'd known all along: that salvation was impossible, or at least well beyond the likes of us. When she reached out to me then, I don't think she was asking me to save her. I think that she was asking me to fall...

I am lying on the deck. Every joint and bone in my body are as weak as matchsticks. When I bring my hand to the back of my head, it comes back covered in blood. A spike of nausea lances outwards from my stomach and I bring myself up, retching, to sit against the gunnel. All I can see is a grey-white mist of ghostmurk, smothering everything apart from the faint creaking in the rigging. Like a comfortable old chair settling back into place.

It's difficult to make out most of the damage through the fog. Bad enough that I don't immediately recognize the wreck around me as my ship. The Great Inventor only knows how we

are still in the air and not tumbling towards the rocks like a tangled parachute.

Old metal groans towards the prow. Something remote in the hollow space of my brain recognizes that sound. The same as the morning that Émile's letter landed on the deck, when all the Boneyard was as quiet as the ghostmurk is right now. It is the sound a soulfire lantern makes when someone opens the casing. I stumble upwards. Feel my way along the gunnel one faltering step at a time. My footsteps sound too loud in the still fog. I almost flinch from them.

I can see the shadow on his prow. It's just in front of the lantern, reaching hesitantly into the last splutters of green light. Even as a shadow in the mist, there is no mistaking a geist for a living human being. Some part of your brain just won't do it—refuses to, even though all the pieces are in place.

And the lantern is almost out now. It has its hands deep in the workings...

“Hey!”

My voice is so loud that it rings. The geist pauses and for a moment nothing moves. Then she looks back at me, and something sticks hard in my lungs. My arm trembles on the gunnel, and *Requiem's* rigging groans in sympathy.

When she goes back to the lantern, I don't try to stop her. I don't do anything at all. I just hang there in the deep stillness

and watch her burn her hands on the fragments of green fire, turning up the wick as high as it will go...

“Wait!”

But the sound forces itself out of me too late. Even crippled and uncovered, the wick is long enough for the fire to flare into an agony of green light. It’s almost impossible to tell when my eyes manage to open again. Everything is swimming in a thick soup of stars and retina burn. Somewhere out in the ghostmurk, someone starts tolling a bell. The geist isn’t more than a shadow, standing in front of me and shredding into ether in the light, with both her hands held out to me.

I nod slowly, as though I understand, and reach out for her in turn. I can almost feel us both pitching over the rail. The dizziness of falling, until I realize that I’m not falling at all. That the geist has melted into nothing over me like hot wax and left me holding something as fragile as a breath in my hands. The whispery remains of a mantle.

Even in the swamp of fog I can tell that something’s wrong with it. That there was probably something wrong with it all along, just waiting for the fire to reveal it. I reach into my pocket with my free hand, fishing for something to contain the last charred fragments of proof, and laugh when I find the ball of Émile’s envelope wedged down at the bottom. I smooth it

out carefully with the edge of my hand and tip the remains of the mantle carefully inside.

“Thank you very much, your lordship.”

Almost before the words are out of me, the lantern on the prow splinters and then shatters open, spraying out a long gout of green fire into the mist and stammering into nothing. I walk to the prow like I’m moving through a dream and turn the fuel tap all the way closed. The bell that’s tolling in the ghostmurk is closer now. Drawn in by the gout of green light. I see the lanterns first. Clean golden light spilling out of the gondola of a rescue ship.

“Hey!”

My throat feels as though it’s full of cotton wool, but the other ship is already tacking back around towards me, the sound of raised voices echoing in the mist.

“We’ll bring you aboard!” one of the men calls across the chasm of fog.

“No!” I shout back. Letting the cold damp air spill full into my face. Tightening my hand on *Requiem’s* split and ruined mast.

“Throw a tow rope across,” I tell the faceless man in the ghostmurk. I slip the envelope down carefully into my pocket before he is close enough to see. Rest my palm against the

crumpled paper, as though I dare not let it go. “We’re not quite done here yet.”

Relics or not, there is still work to do.

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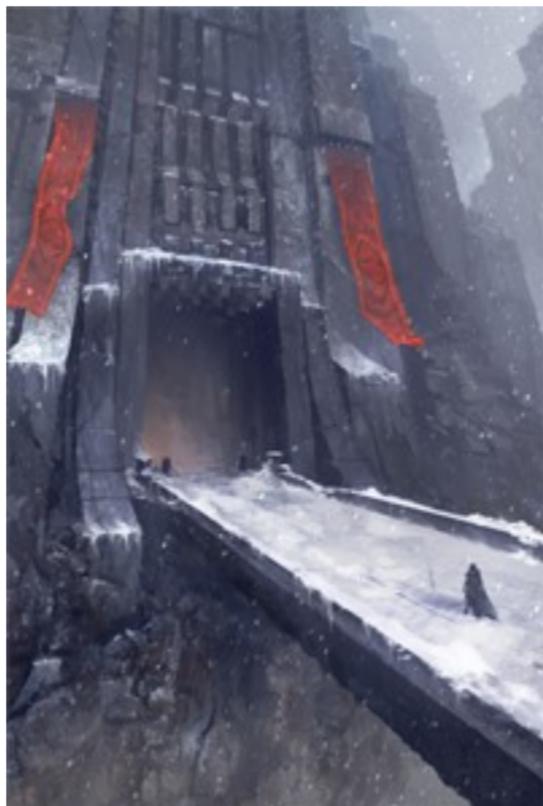
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“The Sacred Flames,” by Jinxu Du



Jinxu Du is a primarily self taught artist, now enrolled in school to pursue a career in concept art and design for entertainment media. See more work online at ishutani.deviantart.com.

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