

Chapter 2

Two years ago, Draugma Skeu – a small nation consisting of two significant cities, a handful of towns and endless semiarid plains scattered with villages no one had bothered to count – had been just another minor dictatorship.

It's the same old story: a self assured ecumenical civilisation, seduced by the myth of its own perfection, realises too late that hollowing out its own foundations was perhaps not the most prudent move and begins to unravel. Tyrants, inheriting the same ambition without the window dressing, make their move. Dictatorships spring up. Like fungal nail infections, they are revolting but common.

So Draugma Skeu, with its casual brutality, its show trials and unexplained disappearances, had been entirely unremarkable.

There had been a revolution. More rhetoric. More violence.

So far, so ordinary.

But what emerged was something new: A nation, if that was the word, that abjured the dictatorship so entirely that it had no leaders at all. In its fumbling, partial way, as bewildered by its own success as anyone else, it tried to rebuild itself along the lines envisioned by outdated Fyrmist philosophers of kindness and nonviolence. It didn't entirely succeed. It kept trying.

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Tesni Hiraeth went to a Fyrmist temple every morning before work. The entrance was just another stone catenary arch with an iron gate, squeezed between adjacent buildings. You could pass it a hundred times and not notice.

She left her shoes in the tiny vestibule and padded through the inner door. Rows of stone pillars lined the walls, carved and painted to mimic the texture of leaves and tree bark, of animals hides and shells, of sand dunes and weathered stone, all running together: a gestalt that showed the world in its appearance rather than its essence.

Suplicants knelt in alcoves between the pillars. Their whispered prayers ran together, a breathy background noise that defined the temple against the city. Most of them were changelings like Tesni, but there were some humans and spectres too.

Tesni found a free space and knelt on a fraying cushion. At the back of the alcove, a glass column filled with water reached up to the ceiling. Spheres floated inside it, all brilliant, artificial colours, like boiled sweets – the sort of colours that demanded fancy names: azures, cerises, aquamarines, and heliotropes.

She lit a gas stove under the tube. Convection caught the spheres. They floated up. They tumbled down. They became a religious cosmology in miniature.

She whispered her prayer. “Thus spoke the forest and the valley and the endless sky: ‘We rise and fall together. My destiny is in yours and yours is in mine. So lay down your fears for me.’”

That was the line that always caught her.

Everything she loved about the new, free Draugma Skeu seemed as delicate as a butterfly fresh

from its chrysalis; stiff, unfurling, in the shadow of a human fist that could fall at any moment. She dreamt sometimes the dictatorship had never left.

“And the forest and the valley and the endless sky took the fears, and the fears dissolved in the forest and the valley and the endless sky and were as nothing.”

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The Pneumatic Engineers Guild had received more reports of pressure loss. The trains on Afternoon Street were accelerating slowly, and every time they passed the mail slots in nearby buildings stopped working.

In the morning meeting, where all the pneumatic engineers sat in a circle, the facilitator asked for volunteers. Tesni and her co-worker, Glyn, stepped forward, and they went to investigate.

The transport tube stood above Afternoon Street on rows of arches, like vast, endless centipedes. Sunlight skimmed off their lustrous black cast iron skin and the oval windows running down their flanks.

Tesni climbed an access ladder on one of the arches. At the top, she braced herself against a creaking safety railing and plugged her pressure gauge into a socket on the tube. She checked the connection was secure, then opened the socket. A silver needle leapt across the gauge's dial.

Definitely underpowered. She recorded the pressure in her notebook and waited.

The tube thrummed. A train was approaching. Visible only as a shadow against the windows, it passed with a clatter. The silver needle on the dial swung from negative to positive. That was underpowered too.

Tesni recorded that it, then detached her pressure gauge. Still leaning on the safety railing, she did a quick calculation. That matched what the reports said about poor acceleration.

She climbed back down to street level, then went to meet Glyn, who had been recording pressure on an adjacent tube.

Like Tesni, Glyn was a changeling. Unlike Tesni, he was missing the top of his head.

He had been shot by a witless gendarme during the civil war, but his head didn't have any vital organs in it. He had almost bled to death, retreating blind through the streets, until a fellow revolutionary had found him. His mouth was intact, but above that there was nothing but a sunken cave of scales, from which a triplet of newly-grown reptilian eyes looked at Tesni.

“It all fits,” he said. “But where's it coming from?”

They compared their notebooks: Pressure readings across six tubes in the area. Tesni did a few calculations and then checked her pneumatic atlas.

“There's a power tube on Afternoon Street,” she said while Glyn was still thinking. “It feeds into everywhere we've seen a loss.”

Tesni had only started learning to read in the weeks before the revolution. Even now she struggled with the arbitrary links between graphemes and sounds. But the pneumatics – the pneumatics made sense. Everything was linked by pressure, logical and calculable. Just run the numbers, follow the topology, and you had your answer.

The power tube was under an iron grate in the pavement. They removed it, and Tesni tapped the tube with her ratchet. Instead of ringing out, it gave off a congested thud.

The next train wouldn't come for a few minutes. There was enough time to look inside. They took one side each, Tesni by the pavement, and Glyn above her. They sealed off the section of tube

and loosened the bolts around the access hatch. Moist air, stinking of decay, hissed out.

Tesni recoiled. "Forest and the Valley."

They took the hatch off. The inner surface was covered with stringy black slime, a broken urchin spine, rotting leaves, a bottlecap, an old shoelace, sodden bits of paper.

Tesni scooped up a bit of the mass with her spanner. It remained connected to the rest by stringy, pearlescent filaments. "Is that ... hagfish slime? How far is the nearest canal?"

Glyn looked through at atlas. "Just over a mile. Mile and a half, following the tubes."

The canalers farmed hagfish for the silk. But how would the slime find its way through a mile and a half of pneumatic tubes? A leak by the canals might have sucked up some of the water – but it couldn't have carried the slime this far. A mail capsule full of slime might have broken in transit – but there was more here than a capsule could hold.

Tesni cleared out as much of the blockage as she could while Glyn went to borrow a jar from a market nearby. They filled the jar with slimy detritus and took it to the archives, then went to file a report.

None of the other engineers could explain the blockage, so Tesni decided to ask at the Free Changelings meeting after work.

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Every week the Free Changelings in Draugh gathered in the chocolaterias of Eyetooth Lane. There, sitting on frayed, upholstered chairs or on faded cushions, amid the mingled smells of chocolate, smoke and spices, they shared stories, fruit and advice, read to one another or struggled through books alone, argued and flirted.

Tesni, Glyn, and their changeling co-workers arrived together and went to the counter.

"Are you going to join the festival?" Glyn asked.

"I hope so," Tesni said. "I want to be a tentacle bearer."

She exchanged a rationing token for a glass of chocolate flavoured with saffron and orange, then went to sit down.

Warm evening sunlight streamed though the rippled glass shopfront. In front of it, the young were playing: Little bundles of scaled tentacles, weaving and unweaving, bloating in places and withering in others. Colours and textures rolled across their scales. A tentacle resolved into a human hand absent thumb, grabbed awkwardly at the back of a chair, and lifted a sprawling mass into something almost bipedal.

Young changelings imitated every animate creature they could see, experimenting with forms and colours and ways of moving. They liquified and solidified their bones. They unhooked and reconnected tendons. But over the course of adolescence, their mutability left them. They spent more and more time in a particular form and eventually, becoming adults, lost the ability to change entirely.

Some of the adult changelings present were barely distinguishable from humans or spectres. Some bore scars, where imitation flesh had reverted to scales. And some were specialists, trained by the old masters of Draugma Skeu to take on specific forms: Factory workers with one arm swollen and ending with a chitin pincer, and security guards with hooked claws and fangs.

Announcements came at the beginning of the meeting. Tesni thought about standing up, but

couldn't quite summon the courage. "Would you?" she asked Glyn.

"Of course," he said.

Glyn stood to signal he had an announcement, and when it was his turn said, "Today, we found hagfish slime in the tubes. Does anyone here know anything about that? Something to do with the canalers, perhaps?"

The changelings had nothing to offer except apologetic looks.

"Well, please tell me if you hear anything," Glyn asked.

He sat down, and the next speaker began.

Tesni gave Glyn a brief smile of gratitude. If you wanted information, the Free Changelings meetings were always the first stop, out of principle if nothing else.

The triplet of reptile eyes in the cave of Glyn's head looked at her. "What now?"

"Now," said Tesni. "We figure it out ourselves."