

Cecil Monroe arrived at the Stonewing Airbus Terminal early in the afternoon, a thick overcoat pulled around his body. The winds in Stonewing were ferocious, always whipping and howling, and after the ascent, it was brutally cold and often stormy. He'd never experienced a storm like this; no rain, no cloudfronts, just a vicious and unrelenting galeforce wind that threatened to blow the lightest visitors clear off the island and down into the lake.

True to that little gravent's word, Cecil was granted company with the only dramask willing to take on an inappropriate project for the chance at some secrets. "The old codger" is what Ronald called him, and whatever Ronald had told the old codger was enough to get Cecil out on an airbus immediately, with an opportunity to stay in a nice hotel on the old codger's dime. Generous, but also the first message in a complex conversational game.

Dramasks didn't often get involved in the squabbles of the other species. Their immense wisdom and total freedom from the dangers of the land made them one of the longest living peoples on all of Eeridi, before even humans and gravents themselves. The stories about them ranged from mystical to nearly godlike adoration of the level of craftsmanship a dramask was capable of.

They had been responsible for the building of Uto's disc—though its original purpose has long since been buried—and the installation of the launchpad within Choice, though no one knew if the schematics for either project ever made it out the vaults. Supposedly, they had also been the ones to first reverse engineer a peculiar technology from the war, but Cecil knew when it was his business to sniff around, and there was little of interest there. Unless Aloycius Brassjaw had his sights set on Dramaski technology in the future.

All of those were just based on oral retellings, which could have been revised over time. Quite interesting to Cecil, but not what he was here for. He had to speak with the old codger, of course, but he was also here for another purpose. Alloy had made it clear that expeditions down into the core were going to be a requirement to acquire the income streams to cover the costs of his new business move.

Expeditions were something of a gold rush, but they were dangerous, mostly unregulated, and had a high failure rate if even one aspect of the project wasn't in perfect order. The Stonewing Division of the CIB was particularly interested in keeping diver's licenses out of the hands of potential looters.

It was up to Cecil to figure out the avenue for the UBF. Pressing, but not more important than the talk with the old codger. He made his way to the office for the Diving Certifications and spent a long time asking questions, gathering paperwork, and requesting contact information for commercial licenses. There were a handful of concerning risks at play, but it wasn't his place to correct government oversight. He would simply inform Alloy and Imreign of the costs for labor and certification, and suggest a few development projects if they could be squeezed in.

The docks were impressive from what he could see. The docks swung over the edge of the furthest ring, and he could see them from the office building. The stone rings that housed all the new development looked sturdy from afar, with a handful of ships already descending down into the depths of the core.

Though he couldn't see the core from here, he knew that there were a few ravines about a hundred miles away from the shores of Meteor Lake, and the flight paths to the core were special airspaces exclusive for core diving expeditions. But, he knew what killed him and let that ember of curiosity snuff out in a gust of wind.

Once he was done with the Diving Office, Cecil made his way to his hotel. The old codger invited him to stay somewhere specific, but he politely declined, ensuring that their communications would be above board only. At least until he could get a read on the dramask for himself. He would have a much better handle on the negotiations if he was face to face.

He arrived at his hotel without incident in the early evening, and took a few hours to shower and get comfortable before sending out a few emails and getting some shut eye. Truth be told, he didn't need the sleep, but if he sat up all night contemplating the future, he'd box himself into a line of thinking that could be disadvantageous. He only survived Banishment because he was adaptable.

He rested after confirming with Ronald that he would be at the old codger's workshop first thing in the morning, and he dreamed of juxtaposed fabrics and brilliant constellations suspended in clear syrup.

The morning was hectic. He rose before the sun did, and threw his curtains open to a dark sky with little peeks of light filtering from below, the rays glancing off structures much further away from the main island. His mind buzzed with the uncertainty of difficult negotiations.

Aloycius Brassjaw wanted an elevator and had the paperwork and permits to develop one, but dramasks didn't care for wealth and influence. The old codger wanted secrets, and secrets were difficult to appraise. They were equally difficult to control the spread of, maybe even more so, though it depended on what the secret actually was.

Cecil ran his thumb across the lines of his face before affixing his glasses in place. He donned a polished looking suit with ample room to make it look more casual if the old codger wasn't the prim and proper type. He combed his hair, brushed his teeth, applied his disguising jewelry, and set a watch on his wrist. He never looked more like a middle manager in his life.

Ronald met him at the lobby, a car already waiting.

The little red gravent bowed and said, "Good morning, Cecil."

"Good morning, Ronald," Cecil replied.

"We'll be heading off now, and I'm to escort you," Ronald explained. "He's in an amicable mood for now, but who knows how long he'll stay that way. The birds back at the post work ballyhoo seemed really excited about something, so you might be in luck."

"It'll be much appreciated if that's the case," Cecil said.

"I'm pretty sure he has already formulated something in his mind," Ronald continued, allowing Cecil to get into the car first. He hopped in afterwards. "I did my best to grease the wheels a bit, but he's come into a sizable pile of rare resources recently. Don't know where he got 'em from, but when he has a lot of goodies, he gets greedy."

"Greed can be used."

"Dramaski greed is not the same as Human greed," Ronald said. "They have long memories and even longer lives. Whatever he's getting

greedy for won't be known to you until your children's children have children."

Cecil could live with that. The two of them rode in silence as the car wound through the crowded streets of Stonewing's open plazas. Ever since the fracture, the city has seen a huge uptick in refugees becoming permanent denizens. Their houses were all destroyed elsewhere, and many people incorrectly assumed they were safer in the air. This made driving a nightmare, but driving was faster than walking, and Cecil refused to step into any kind of portal.

It may have been a drag, but he couldn't be sure what was on the other side of a portal in any instance, and he didn't have the knowledge or experience to handle them himself. After that catastrophic mailing incident, he didn't trust them one bit. Maybe one day he could spare the time and money.

The old codger's workshop was right at the edge of Inner Stonewing, disappointing considering not many people were allowed to waltz in, even if they were a Songbird. The entrance to Inner Stonewing was a gigantic gaping mouth with geode teeth, and the budding morning light refracted in those crystal teeth, spilling a beautiful prismatic pattern across the ceiling until the light could no longer reach.

Cecil stepped out of the car and took a deep breath. The air was oppressively warm and had a metallic smell to it. Though he couldn't quite see into the other workshops, the hazy red glow of belching forges splintered across the craggy floor, and he trailed after Ronald into the old codger's workshop.

The first thing Cecil noticed was the lack of a gravent flock. There were a handful of gravents wearing blacksmith's aprons, and all of them were busy counting inventory and preparing tools for the day. None of them did much more than glance at the two of them, until a tiny blue gravent flitted in from what appeared to be a side office room.

"This must be the guy," they said, and Ronald nodded.

Without another word, the tiny blue gravent beckoned for Cecil to follow them, and Ronald whistled as he returned to the car. He wasn't going to be a part of this; he'd kept his end of the bargain, and there was an exceptionally rare box of chocolate bars with his name on it.

Cecil fixed his glasses again, and made his way through a dense menagerie of intricate machine parts. Some had clear uses; working valves had tags with their pressure capacities written in delicate handwriting on them, dozens of bolts and screws of every shape and size sat in organized boxes, and piles of slick looking molding metal took up a bulk of the real estate. Cecil had to pay close attention to not knock anything over, and he removed his cufflinks and dropped them in his pocket.

This was a professional environment most certainly, but it was not the kind of professionalism that required excessive and performative pride. He dropped his watch in his pocket as well.

The storage rooms opened up into an enormous circular chamber. The walls were completely smooth, and tapered up into an eggshape, with a hole in the center of the ceiling for the smoke to trail out. The forge took up most of the space. It was several stories tall, a deep black in color with glittering silver spots in places where gravenets had to brace themselves. Cecil and the tiny blue gravenet walked out onto a platform jutting out over a series of deep grooves in the floor.

“He’ll be out in a moment,” and they were off.

Cecil stood, his shoulders squared, and his hands at his side until the air moved around him. Wispy blue and white lines curled around him and wandered towards the forge, the beginning of powerful air magic building in the space as its only other occupant revealed himself.

“You must be my visitor.”

The old codger’s voice was raspy, aged from centuries of breathing in the fumes of industrialization. His mask covered all of his head and neck, obscuring his face, though gentle silver chains dangled down from the mask and clinked against each other as the dramask hauled himself into a sitting position.

He was so large, that even when standing on a platform far above the floor, Cecil had to crane his neck to see where the eyeholes were. Bright eyes peered back at him, giving little to work with. It was like staring into a living painting, and the mask hummed with ancient magic.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my name is Cecil Monroe.”

The old codger blinked, and he studied Cecil. "Yes, from the gallery of humans. Surprised that your self appointed leader has not deemed it necessary to speak to me himself. A fellow reject."

"Mr. Brassjaw sends his regards," Cecil replied. "It is dangerous for him to travel."

The old codger hummed. "Understood. Now, let us not waste any more time. The forge is cold. Please, have a seat."