

Chapter 1

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest against its own functions as its driver paused his run, here in a small square of the merchant's quarter. Most of the shopkeepers here had just arrived at their respective businesses, and wouldn't be open for another hour at least. He peered through the passenger window. Most of the shops here were two floors at most, save for that one wizard's tower- a looming, lopsided structure that seemed to be implanted with steam pipes and some sort of observatory telescope. He thought it looked like a mechanically reanimated corpse, the kind you'd read about in one of those scientific fiction stories.

"Alright, Dr. Wurtzmann's tower! Time for you lot to head off."

He slapped the side of his car, and the three individuals he'd paid to escort him climbed off. The second tallest, but also the broadest- he remembered her name was Duke, because he'd inquired what her actual name was- came around to his side.

The name had seemed odd on the paperwork, but after seeing her, it became more fitting. She seemed to be an ex-military type: ruggedly dressed but neat; stocky form, never went anywhere without some kind of armor, even if it was just a leather cuirass to a fancy dinner.

"Thanks for giving us a ride down the main street. Our man was very insistent about getting here on time. You've got our payment?"

"Yup, fifteen crowns each."

As he pretended to search his glovebox, she cleared her throat.

"*Twenty* crowns, old man. You made an agreement in exchange for protection."

He paused.

"Well, I've got losses to make up for. That extra-long route cost me a good bit more fuel, and-"

"And if you hadn't taken it, you'd be getting shat out of a half dozen barrow-ghouls. But luckily you have people who are much tougher than you in the back of your car. People who can split someone's head before he can empty out the extra fifteen crowns we're owed from his purse."

He held still for a moment, as if the purse he was holding had suddenly transformed into a venomous spider, and the wrong move would cause it to bite his palm. Without a word, he withdrew his hand from inside it, tied it shut, and dropped it in her outstretched palm.

"Fine. Sixty crowns. Enjoy your wizard doctor and his crazy contraptions."

"Thanks for the business. Safe travels."

He shook his head, shoved his car back into gear, and it took off with a shuddering start. Duke rolled her eyes, and turned back to face the other two from her group. Three was a small party, but everything she couldn't do, these two could: Missy was a brilliantly educated mage, a half-elven aristocrat from the Wizard Archipelago, and Jack was their talented and light-fingered locksmith, a halfling burglar who'd broken out of every prison he'd ever been sent to. At the moment, Missy was swishing her wand over her dress to clean it of dirt she couldn't see, and Jack had his eyes on the payment.

"Did he short us?"

"Tried to," Duke answered.

"Cheap old bastard."

"Leave it be, we got the full amount. This definitely is the place, isn't it?"

Duke looked to Missy, who had finally started paying attention. She spun around for a moment, her head swiveling like a bird before locking on the only structure standing twice as high as its surroundings.

"Oh, that's definitely it! The tower of Dr. Barnaby Wurtzmann, esteemed inventor. You know, he's made a number of machines that we rely on every day. He even--"

"Yes, we know, Missy!" Jack cut her off with a groan. "You told us on the way here."

"Well, I just think that this is a very exciting occasion! How often do you get to thank someone for the existence of the washing machine, or the alchemy engine?"

"Maybe you can get an autograph, after we've done whatever his experiment is." Duke pulled out the letter to reread.

"To the esteemed company known as 'Prophet's Rabble.' Your aid is required in completion of a scientific experiment, of which you will be subjects. This experiment is in no way a threat to your health or safety, but it is the start of groundbreaking research. For this reason, you will be paid a sum of 250,000 golden crowns upon completion. Please come to the tower of Dr. Barnaby Wurtzmann, in Larchmont's merchant quarter. You must be here no later than 7:40 AM. It is critical that you arrive on time and ready for testing."

"So, he's some kind of machine wizard?" Jack pondered aloud as he looked up the tower.

"I think that's only the building," Missy answered. "To my knowledge, Dr. Wurtzmann doesn't have any magical accomplishments, only inventions."

"Well, I suppose if he had done any magic, you'd've talked my ear off about that too..."

Missy glared, and prodded Jack's side with a finger, delivering a small electric shock that caused him to yelp in pain.

"Ow! Damn, alright, sorry! I always appreciate your insights and the way in which you seem physically incapable of shutting up for ten minutes. Is that better?"

"Quit it, you two." Duke stepped between them, all three now facing the tower. "Work to be done, and apparently the doc doesn't much like to be kept waiting."

She marched forward, which got the other two following close behind.

"Maybe this experiment of his has to be done before the sun is too high? Perhaps there's some sort of atmospheric element that could interfere with it." Missy sounded practically giddy.

"Maybe he doesn't want any witnesses up and about when he does it," Jack remarked.

Duke tugged on the handle, to no avail. She gave it one more try, seeing if it might just be stuck- the double wooden doors didn't even rattle. She might as well have been pulling on a handle bolted to a wall. She clucked her teeth.

"Well, whatever the reason, he's not as punctual as he wanted us to be."

"Locked?" Jack leaned in.

"Yeap. Time for you to get to work."

"Wait, really? Out here? There's..." Missy looked around behind herself. The shops were still closed, and most of the fronts weren't even being tended to, or their curtains lifted. "...definitely someone who could be watching," she finished.

"It's fine," Duke asserted. "We'll just tell them the good doctor could be in trouble and we're here to help. For 250,000 coins, I don't much care for anything making us late, even if it's our client."

Jack had already started working, his brow furrowed. He had moved from the standard picks to more specialty tools, delicately probing the interior of the lock. He gave it an odd look as he did.

"We might not have a choice," he muttered. "This design seems to be custom. There's some kind of security pins in place..."

"Can you crack it?"

"Maybe... Missy, want to check if there's a spell on the door?"

"Excuse me!"

The three of them turned to the wayward voice, with Jack standing up and swiftly tucking his tools into a back pocket. He hated standing shoulder to shoulder between the other two- it made him look like a child. The voice had belonged to a merchant, sweatily rushing his way up to the party.

"Oh- you must be the adventurers Dr. Wurtzmann hired! He told me that you might show today."

"Who are you?" Duke gave him a suspicious look. He bowed.

“Edwin Chatsbury Goosedown, Esquire, owner and proprietor of the Drinking Bird. I’m an alchemist! And Dr. Wurtzmann’s good friend.” He flourished a hand backwards towards the sign of his shop, which featured a drinking-bird toy bowing its head into a potion phial.

“Huh. Did he give you a spare key, then?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, he told us to be here five minutes ago,” Duke said, glancing at her watch. “And his front door’s locked.”

“Ah! He must have simply slept in. The burden of brilliance, as I’m sure your magess knows.” He bowed again, this time to Missy, almost low enough to scrape his head on the flagstones. She just gave Duke a bewildered look.

“Magess?”

“He stays up many hours into the night to work on his brilliant machines. It’s a tragedy, really- you know, he almost fell destitute after his slanderous business partner stole all his patents. He’s made many quite wondrous things you and I use every day.”

The shopkeeper was quite animated as he spoke, with lots of gesticulation and pointing, as if giving a lecture. Duke rolled her eyes and cut him off.

“Spare key. We need to get into his tower.”

“Yes, well- perhaps I’ll give him a ring!”

He smiled, and withdrew a device from his breast pocket. It seemed to resemble a radio microphone, but cut out of the rest of the machine. He pressed the button, and spoke into the side.

“Ah- Dr. Wurtzmann? Barnaby? Your guests have arrived at the time you requested. I do hope you have not forgotten your appointment! Stop.”

He smiled, and held out the device, which didn’t so much as crackle. The three of them stared at it, then up at him.

“You sure that thing even works?” Duke asked.

“Certainly! The Doctor and I have many a late-night chat about whatever’s bothering his mind. He’s quite the intellectual, you know. This device-”

“Oh!” Missy interrupted, her eyes lighting up. “That’s a Lodestone!”

“Yes! Ah, another brilliant mind. The doc-”

“It’s a transmission device,” she explained to Duke. “When he activates it, an electrical charge activates the particles within it, causing it to align to another device. He can encode sound, radio, pretty much anything that an electrical component can transmit! Usually they’re attuned together magically, but some of them can be encoded to reach more than one device.”

“Maybe try him again?” Duke asked. She was starting to get impatient, and all this tech talk wasn’t getting the door open any faster.

“Right-ho,” Edwin burbled. He held up the Lodestone and spoke into it again.

The three of them waited. There was no response. Duke gave Missy a questioning look. The sun was starting to put light on the square. Jack patted her leg to get her attention.

“What is it?”

“I think I hear something. Give it another ring.”

“What do you mean, young man?”

Jack glared up at Edwin. “I’m a halfling, not a child. Just start talking into the damn device.”

“Oh, my apologies, good sir. I meant no offense when I-”

“Just talk into it!”

Edwin retreated quickly, and did as instructed, chattering into the device. Jack wandered down the alley between the Drinking Bird and the doctor’s tower, keeping one ear raised. His eyes widened when he realized what he was hearing- about twenty feet up, through an open window, Edwin’s voice was coming out of a second location.

“Up here!” He shouted. The other three rushed over to him.

“What is it?”

“I think his whatchathingy is up there. Say something into yours.”

Edwin cleared his throat, and held the device up to his mouth. “Test.”

After a moment, a crackly version of his voice came back from the window: “Test.”

“Well, that isn’t right at all! Dr. Wurtzmann would most certainly have noticed me speaking by now. Something must have gone wrong, we must check in on him!” Duke spat out a curse. “Damn it. Alright, let’s get that door open. Missy, check it for spellwork first, and then-”

“Oh, no need- I’ve got a key.” Edwin produced a key from the same pocket.

“Why didn’t you tell us that when we first asked?”

“Well, I-”

“Door!” She shouted.

“Right!!”

He rushed around the corner back to the front door, pushing the key into the lock and giving a decisive twist. The doors swung open on their own, rotating by some kind of mechanism. Jack peered at the side of one door they both opened, noting that while the outside looked like oak, that seemed to be a facade laid over solid metal. They were secured by several squarish bolts, currently retracted.

Duke led the group inside, examining the room within. Gas lamps immediately lit up, revealing what looked like the sitting area at a bank. There was a water cooler, two

couches, and even a door labeled 'restroom.' The decorations were drab and ugly; the furniture was a dull yellow-green, with a harsh wool carpet. Along one side, a set of stairs led to the upstairs door. Despite the tower's rounded shape, the interior was square, its corners extending past where the architecture would normally allow.

"Wizard towers," she huffed. "Check up those stairs, we-"

"Welcome to the laboratory of Dr. Barnaby Wurtzmann," came an unseen voice. As three of them searched for its source, Missy pointed to a loudspeaker in one corner.

"Dr. Wurtzmann will be with you in a moment. In the meantime, please be seated and wait patiently."

"Uh, can you tell the Doctor we're here? We tried to call him on his-" Duke looked back to Missy.

"Lodestone."

"-Lodestone, and it sounds like he misplaced it. We were told to be here early."

They waited for a response. Jack had already made himself comfortable, tossing himself lengthwise onto a couch. There was only silence.

"I think that response was a recording," Missy explained. "If Dr. Wurtzmann made that communication device, he likely has a similar transmitter sending an automated response when someone arrives."

"So nobody's up there. Any ideas?"

"I say we wait," Jack replied. "Maybe we can charge him extra for being late."

"Hilarious. Can you check the upstairs door?"

Jack lifted his head. "Do you think something's the matter, Duke?"

"Just a bad feeling. If the front door was locked, that one probably is too."

"Ah- I'm afraid my spare only opens the front, I must confess." The trader guiltily interjected.

"Well, if it is locked, we'll be waiting an hour or so anyways."

"Why?"

"Did you see those doors?" Jack pointed to the two doors, which had automatically swung back shut. "They're mechanically latched. Whatever he's got the lock attached to, it's got some very complex elements. I'm going to need a good bit of time with my specialty kit, and I don't much like the idea of him walking down after his late morning breakfast to find me trying to pick open his living room. Or whatever the hell is up there."

"Fine. Uh- thank you, mister Goosefeather."

"Goosedown, my lady. Edwin Goosedown."

"Thanks for getting us inside, you can go back to your business."

"Of course! By all means. And please, if you require my assistance, just give me a knock. The good doctor-"

"Yes, go on, we've got business."

He bowed several times to them before he actually left. By then, Jack had settled with a magazine, and Missy was anxiously pacing.

"Are you certain he's alright, Jack?"

"Sure. Who'd go after an inventor?"

"Competitors," Duke answered.

"That's ridiculous. Can't be that much money in it."

"250,000 crowns."

"Huh. Well, I've never heard of the guy, not even for contract work. So if someone was after him, they didn't hire anyone to do it."

"Does that happen much?" Missy finally took a seat across from him, beside Duke.

"Only with types who haven't been in the business long. They try to do it themselves first, then come to you after the mark's been tipped off. Novice shit."

"So they wouldn't have succeeded, then." She sighed.

"Oh, I didn't say that. Maybe they did. If he's a scientist, then it's probably some chemist or inventor who slipped toxic gas into his air vents. Maybe it'll get us too!"

"That isn't funny, Jack! He could be in danger!"

Duke stood back up.

"Alright, that's enough waiting. We can apologize to him for having to break in after he showed up late. Jack, get the door open."

With a grumble, the halfling kicked his way off the couch and walked up the stairs. Duke watched him for a moment before scanning the room. Even if this wasn't a burglary, something about this felt like they were in danger. She watched the room, slowly moving around until her back was against the bannister.

Click. "Oh, shit."

"Jack?"

"Tripped a pin. It--"

"Attention. Please do not attempt to access Dr. Wurtzmann's library via unauthorized means. Any further attempts at entry will result in security countermeasures."

Duke's skin prickled. Missy stood up from her seat, already clutching her wand.

"Uhh, Duke?"

"Just be quick, Jack. We've been in worse situations than this."

From the center of the ceiling, a panel slid open, and a device extended outwards. Duke recognized the shape of a submachinegun instantly, and drew her revolver. The weapon trained itself on Jack.

"Duke??"

"Focus on the lock!"

With swift action, she slung her revolver upwards and flipped back the hammer, firing a shot into the lever that held up the machinegun. It jostled, but didn't seem to break, and quickly trained itself on her. She fired two more shots, and it responded with a burst of gunfire. Her first bullet had grazed the housing, and the second had gouged out the side of the weapon, jamming it for good. Every single one of its shots, however, had pierced through her chest. She slowly slid down the wall, leaving behind a smear of blood.

"DUKE!!"

Missy screamed and ran to her side.

"Oh my god, just hang on! I've got a revival spell ready, I--"

"Gun turret disabled. Activating secondary measures."

"What the hell was that?!" Jack leaned over the bannister, and gasped at the sight of Duke's lifeless body.

"Jack, help me!"

"We need to get out!"

He sprinted down the stairs, leaving behind his tools to try and shove open the front doors. They remained as resolutely still as when they'd first tried to enter. He looked up at one of the gas lamps in horror, hearing that telltale hiss.

"Missy--"

The room was consumed in fire.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest, causing Duke to wake up with a start. She shouted in panic, immediately grabbing for her revolver.

"Duke- just relax. Breathe, slowly. It didn't happen."

Duke did as Jack instructed, slowing from panicked, wheezing breaths to a firm and steady pace. Missy threw her arms around her shoulders, gripping her tight.

"What the hell just happened?"

"I... that burning took so long to stop. I-I could feel..."

"Missy?"

"I don't know what it was," Jack said, his gaze locked into the middle distance. "But we both remember it too."

"The tower? The gun? That voice?"

"After you-" he shook his head. Missy squeezed tighter. "It opened the gas valves for the lamps. Lit the whole room up."

"How the hell did we survive that?"

Missy sat up, and wiped her eyes. "It must have been a vision. Wizards have them often, I've heard of it happening to nonmagical persons on occasion. Perhaps..."

"Perhaps what?"

"I don't know- it must be because we've traveled together, maybe my magic has bled into the two of you, maybe it was just a powerful dream, I- I-"

"Misavel. It's okay." Duke put an arm around the mage's shoulder, and gave it a firm rub. It was rare for her to use her full name, and only ever when she was being serious. Missy took in a shivering breath, and nodded.

A clap to the side of the car startled all of them.

"Oi! I've got places to be. Here's your coin for the travel."

It was the merchant they'd traveled with. Duncan something. Duke opened the trailer and stepped off, helping down Missy as Jack jumped down beside them. He handed her the pouch, which she took without a word. As soon as it was in hand, he shuffled past them to get back in his car and take it down the road.

"So... just a vision."

"An omen, technically."

"Huh?"

"If a prophetic vision shows doom, it's an omen," she clarified.

"Right," Duke said with a chuckle. "Jack, you alright?"

"Yeah, I- ah, fuck!"

"What?"

"The driver shorted us!"

Duke looked at the disappearing car of the trader, who indeed had gotten away with the lightened payment. She snorted, then broke into laughter. Jack chuckled, looking at her like she was mad, before he started to giggle as well. Missy, her eyes still red, couldn't help joining them. Duke took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Alright, let's go talk to that fellow at the potion shop."

Chapter 2

The merchant angrily swung open his front door. It had taken a full minute of insistent knocking before he answered. Whatever verbose tirade he had prepared died in his throat with Duke glaring down at him.

"Er- listen, I'll have the money ready in a week, alright? I know it's a bit late, but-"

"We're here to meet with Dr. Wurtzmann."

"Oh!" Edwin straightened up immediately. "Yes, of course. Please, do come in- my name is Edwin Goosedown, Esquire, pro-"

"It's a bit urgent," she said, cutting him off. "He told us you'd have a spare key if the door was locked."

Behind her, Missy and Jack were waiting at the entrance to the tower. They'd already checked to make sure it was locked, but after what they'd witnessed, Jack was loathe to try and open it again.

"Ah, wonderful, then he's already told you of me, I'm sure."

She paused. She wasn't sure whether it was more plausible that the doctor would have spoken about Edwin, or that he wouldn't have given him a second thought. It seemed like he only needed him as a doorman.

"Well, we need in. He's late for an early morning appointment with us, and he isn't answering his Lodestone."

"Oh, this is troubling indeed! Yes, alright, I'll bring you in right away."

Edwin surged past her towards the door and produced a key. She breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that she'd remembered those details. As the doors swung themselves open, the four of them looked inside, inspecting the room cautiously.

"I know, it's quite marvelous, isn't it? Dr. Wurtzmann purchased this tower from an old wizard, so the rooms can be transfigured to be larger on their interior than the exterior. It's quite an ingenious bit of magic, something I wish I could do to my own shop. I-"

"We'll take it from here, thank you." Duke patted him on the shoulder.

"Right, yes. Well- give him my warmest regards, I must see to my shop. Fare the well!"

As soon as the merchant was gone, Jack looked up to Duke, wariness in his eyes. He was the least fond of walking into danger, the expectation was almost always that she'd be the first. She shook her head, and stepped inside. For a brief moment, she expected to be set on fire, or shot at again- but all that happened was that same automated recording.

"Welcome to the laboratory of Dr. Barnaby Wurtzmann. Dr. Wurtzman nwill be with you in a moment. In the meantime, please be seated and wait patiently."

"What do we do?" Missy crossed her arms, eyeing the fixtures of the room with concern.

"We be seated and wait patiently," Duke sighed.

“Fine by me.”

Jack pushed past her and threw himself back onto the same couch. Missy followed, hesitant to sit down again. Duke walked in slowly, examining where she'd seen that machinegun turret appear. There was a thin square groove where the panel was in place, barely noticeable to anyone who wasn't looking for it. Jack wiggled into place on the cushions.

“Funny, even the couch feels the same.”

“Do you know how he got that gun to work?” Duke looked to Missy, who shook her head. “I'm not much familiar with engineering. I would assume there's some sort of animation magic, something to make it... aim at people.”

“Huh.” She slowly sat down, eyes trained on that panel.

The minutes went by in silence. Eventually, Missy took a cup of water from the cooler, took a sip, and sat down.

“It's Kiwano,” she said aloud.

“That a spell?” Jack lifted the magazine, which he'd dropped onto his face.

“It's a fruit,” she corrected. “In the water. Tastes a bit like citrus and cucumber. People also call it ‘horned melon.’ It comes from the west tropics, it usually grows on dense vines.”

“The spider coast? I've been wanting to go there. How is it?”

She took another sip of the water.

“It's quite good, actually. Rather refreshing, especially since the water is kept cool.”

Jack shrugged, and picked the magazine back up to keep reading.

Duke wandered into the lavatory. Another gas lamp clicked on as soon as she opened the door. It was rather nice, and seemed to have just been cleaned. Given the officious look of the waiting room, she wasn't surprised. She took a moment to wash her face and comb her hair, examining herself for blemishes or dirt.

Jack hopped off of the couch and tested the front door, giving it a gentle push. It automatically swung open with a steady pace. As soon as it halted, he reached over to tug the handle, and it swung back closed. He tested this several more times.

Missy had gotten halfway through her book on the road here, and several chapters deep in the waiting room. She finally clapped it shut and stood up.

“Alright, we've been waiting long enough.”

“What do you suggest?” Duke looked up at her. She'd sat back down beside Jack, legs crossed, peeling an apple with her knife. Jack had gotten them breakfast as soon as the bakery opened.

"I'm not sure, I- Jack, do you remember where that mechanism was? The one you activated?"

"Hey- are you saying it was my fault?!"

"No, of course not." She shook her head. "Just that if you attempted it once, you may know where those 'security pins' would be this time."

"I- huh. Well, maybe. But knowing where they are doesn't make them less sensitive to being tripped."

"It's still worth a try," Duke added. "Remember what the voice said? The first time you tripped one, it gave us a warning. If it does it this time, we leave it alone."

"I hate this," Jack muttered, standing up regardless.

Duke gave him an assuring nod as he walked past. She knew that his devil-may-care attitude was just covering up for trembling nerves. She couldn't imagine how scared he would be after witnessing his own death, even in a dream. Her eyes stayed locked to the panel in the ceiling.

Jack crouched in front of the door, and breathed a long, slow sigh. Nerves were something you learned to control in this business. Being scared made you shaky, and like a surgeon, it was important to have steady hands. He had to feel every little twitch and click inside the lock to know what it was doing, and he had to do it without tripping off any of the securements. Once he felt still, he withdrew his tools and began to work on the lock.

Sure enough, he remembered where everything was. The first security pin had tripped because he probed just a tenth of a millimeter too deep. If he could line it up exactly right, then he wouldn't risk death. All of the pins had to lift above the shear line, and they all had to have a certain tolerance to let the teeth of the key in, otherwise it just wouldn't function- so he had room to experiment without setting anything off. He closed his eyes as he felt for the movement. Every subtle click and tap told him something new about its shape. Whoever had built it was masterful at their craft. He'd opened dungeon chests, ancient vaults, secure facilities, but this was a genuine work of art. He almost wondered if he'd be able to remove it from the door when he got it open.

Click. The rest of the party looked to him with shock, waiting for the vocal warning.

"I got it."

Missy and Duke both breathed a sigh of relief. Jack kept the lock open, and twisted the knob to open the door. There was a sudden, ear-shattering pop.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest, and the three travelers in the back woke up shouting.

"What the hell was that?!"

"I thought you said you'd opened it!"

"I did!"

"Both of you, stop!"

Duke slapped a hand onto a wooden crate, getting Missy and Jack's attention.

"Missy, how could we have had a vision of having a vision?"

"I- I don't know! This isn't right, I've never heard of something like this happening. Every magical principle talks about things common folk would think are impossible, but I've never heard of this. Whatever this is, it's breaking the rules of magic, it's wrong, it- it-"

"I know I got the door open, Duke."

"You did. There were explosive charges lining it. You just died faster because you were right there."

"The explosive devices must have been set to activate if the door was opened without a key. Magical relays can detect when a specific object-"

"What the hell is that crazy bastard keeping so secure up there?!"

"Excuse me."

The driver stood at the back of the truck, staring at all of them as if they were insane. He wordlessly held up a coinpurse. Duke kicked open the trailer and grabbed him by the wrist.

"Put in the full fucking amount or I'm dragging you back up the road and feeding you to the ghouls."

He wailed and fumbled for his purse, pulling out a fistful of money that he tried to give her. Most of it spilled out of his hand, and she let go of him. He dropped the rest of their payment and ran back into his car, taking off for the main road with a squeal of his tires.

"This must be Chronomancy," Missy said, bewildered. "I've only ever heard of it as a warning. Wizards attempting to meddle with fate and the cosmos, turning back time."

"You mean someone's sending us back in time when we die?"

"I- I don't know, maybe, I-"

"What kind of sick joke is that?!" Jack shouted up at her.

"I don't know!"

"How can a mage do-"

"I don't know!"

"Jack!" Duke shouted down at him, and he stopped.

"We don't know what's happening," she asserted. Her voice was stern, and dark. "But we have to deal with it. If a powerful magician is doing this to us, we need to figure out how and why."

Jack took a deep breath, then walked off to kick a bucket across the street. Duke looked to Missy, who was holding herself and shaking.

"Missy. Are you going to be alright?"

She nodded. Her words seemed to halt in her throat before she managed to get them out.

"Whoever this is, they're very powerful. They could do anything they wanted to us, even just letting us die instead of sending us back."

"Do you think they'd have a reason to?"

She shook her head. "I- I don't know anything."

"Alright, it's okay. Just give it some thought, I'm sure you'll figure something out."

While they were talking, Jack had returned to pick up the coins the driver had left.

"At least you got him to give us more this time," he muttered. "Poor fool probably shat himself. I count another eight coins, on top of that fifteen he tried to take."

"I probably shouldn't threaten him next time."

"Next time?"

Duke took a deep breath, and blew it out.

"If this is some sort of repeating event we're stuck in, that likely won't be the last. We need to figure out how to get out of it, but first we need to figure out how to navigate it. Last time, I knew that the merchant had a lodestone to call the doctor, and a spare key. What else did we learn?"

"Not much. He confirmed that it used to be a wizard's tower," Missy spoke up.

"I learned quite a bit," Jack added.

"Yeah?"

"Well, whoever does his locks, they're an artisan. The thing was damn near impossible to get. Thankfully the room was quiet, no distractions."

"Aside from all of that weaponry..."

"Mm. Anyways, he's trying to keep something real secure. He's got the entire place booby-trapped to every hell there is. Gas sprayers in the lamps, that weapon turret- I bet there's more than one of those, too- explosives on the door, and it probably latches the same way as the front entrance."

"Do you know how that was locked?"

"If I had to guess, the deadbolts are probably electromagnetic. I think Missy was right, the key doesn't actually work like a key. It's a magical system that detects if the right device is in the keyway. Likely the real key is implanted with some small element that it detects to deactivate the latches."

"And you say I like to talk at length..." Missy chortled. Jack rolled his eyes.

"Pickproof?"

"Essentially. You can't pick something that isn't a lock."

"Damn. You think the potion seller's key might open the second floor?"

"That fool's just a doorman to the doc. You heard him blathering on, yeah?"

"Gods, yes."

"I got a pretty good read on him from all that posturing. Dr. Wurtzmann doesn't rely on him for anything except keeping the front door. If he's trusting enough to weaponize his waiting room, he definitely doesn't trust anyone but himself with the key to get inside."

"Well, where does that leave us?"

Missy looked over her shoulder at the tower, gazing up its side.

"Think you could levitate in?" Duke nudged her.

"Definitely, but he most likely has secured the rest of his tower through similar means. Levitation isn't exactly an uncommon method of magical burglary, I doubt he'd leave his windows unsecured. And if he does have magical defenses, he likely has *antimagical* defenses."

"Like counterspell?"

"There's much worse than stopping a spell from being cast. You can cause a magical rebound that harms the caster, or one that burns them from the inside with their own energy. It's all forbidden, but if he's willing to go this far to protect himself..."

"That idea of dangerous competitors is sounding more plausible by the second," Jack said.

"You think they're in town?"

"It's worth a shot." He shrugged.

"Alright. Let's talk to that merchant first."

"Why? He's just an idiot."

"Just follow my lead," Duke muttered under her breath.

The merchant angrily swung open his front door. It had taken exactly forty-nine seconds of insistent knocking before he answered. Whatever verbose tirade he had prepared died in his throat with Duke glaring down at him.

"Er- listen, I'll have the money ready in a week, alright? I know it's a bit late, but sales have just been slow! I-"

Duke put a hand on his door and stepped forward, causing him to stumble backwards into the shop.

"No more excuses, Goosefeather. You owe us."

"It's *Goosedown*, I... wait, how do you know my name?"

Shit. She had just assumed whoever was sending thugs after him would know who he was. She quickly recovered before her face could give it away.

"We know plenty about you, Ed. More than you think. Where's the money?"

"I don't have it! Really! Not the whole thing, it'll take a week for me to get the rest of it, please!"

He had backed up to his counter, hands planted on the edge.

“Crusher, take it easy,” Jack commented from her side. He looked up to her with a wink. “Let ol’ Slick talk to him. We don’t have to be un-neighborly.”
“Fine, Slick. But if he tries to weasel out I’m taking his kneecaps.”

She turned around and pretended to look annoyed, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. ‘Slick’ sauntered up to their ‘debtor’ with a cheesy smile, while Missy watched from the sideline.

“Crusher?” She whispered to her.

“I kinda like it,” she muttered back.

“What should I do?”

“Let’s just follow his lead. He knows more about this than either of us.”

“I don’t know anything at all about this.”

“Eddie! Can I call you Eddie?” Jack looked up at the shopkeeper, holding out a hand to shake.

“Uh- c-certainly, yes.”

“How much are you missing, Ed? Fifty? Seventy-five?”

“Er- I’m only a thousand crowns short.”

“So you’ve got the rest with you.”

Edwin nodded.

“And that would be...”

“Don’t you know?”

“I’m asking the questions, knucklehead!” Jack smacked the merchant’s knee with his fist as a reminder. “We wanna make sure you’ve got it all.”

“Yes! Yes, the other four thousand is in my vault. I only have about a hundred in the register.”

“Only about a hundred?” His tone was obviously doubting. He looked back to Duke, who reached into her bag for her crowbar.

“Fine! T-Two hundred fifty! But I need that to run the business, otherwise I’ll have to turn my customers away.”

“Tell ‘em you’re on hard times. Do a little discount. You’ve got a ‘gonna be buried in a roadside ditch’ clearance sale.”

The shopkeeper nodded aggressively, and Jack stepped aside to let him pass. He rushed around the counter to start counting. Jack looked back at the other two with a smirk. Duke rolled her eyes.

The first gunshot made her freeze. She hadn’t been hit, and neither had Jack- she snapped her attention back to Missy, but there was just a splatter of blood on the window. She’d already collapsed onto the floor with a hole in her throat. Duke started to turn around when two shots through her back sent her crashing forward against the wall.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest, causing the three companions to wake up with a startle.

"Damn it!" Duke kicked the crate across from herself.

"I knew that sack of shit would have a gun in the register."

"Alright, just- remember that. Missy, you alright?"

"I'm distressed by how quickly I'm getting used to this."

The three climbed out, and Duke marched around front to get the proper payment from the driver. As soon as he left, they went straight to the front door of the potion shop. After forty-eight seconds of insistent knocking, Duke kicked the front door open, splintering it at the knob and shocking Edwin into falling backwards. She lunged down to grab him by the lapels.

"Guess who," she said with a grunt, and shoved him into one of the shelves, sending a cascade of bottles toppling over beneath him. The merchant yelped, and immediately started pleading.

"Don't hurt me! I- I have your money, I swear!"

"Where is it?!" she bellowed.

"It's- it's in the safe! Please, just let me go get it-"

"Not a chance," Jack interrupted. "Crusher, keep him here. Slicer, make sure nobody comes checking in on our boy."

At that, he looked to Missy, who nodded and swung the door shut. A simple spell conjured a spectral lock around its broken knob, and she focused her attention back on the merchant while Duke kept a tight grip on him. Her gaze tracked across the shelves, and she began examining what contents remained on them one by one. Jack went around back to open the register first, flashing the revolver at the other two with a meaningful look.

"That- that wasn't for you, I swear! I just-"

"Easy, calm down. We're not gonna hold a grudge for you protecting your business, are we? There's all kinds of burglars about. Mhm?"

He nodded to Duke, who nodded as well. She kept that same stern glare the whole time, not breaking eye contact with their captive. Missy continued to examine the bottles with strange calm, which somehow seemed more unsettling than keeping him restrained like this.

"What's the code to the safe, Eddie?"

"How do you know-"

"We know plenty about you," Jack interrupted. "What's the code to the safe?"

"13 left, 5 right, 9 left."

“Good boy.”

Jack returned in a moment with a briefcase.

“I only count 42, Eddie.”

“I can have the rest by the end of the week! I need a little more time, we’ve just received some new product. It’ll sell plenty!”

Jack seemed to ponder it for a moment, letting the tension hold in the air. Missy, continuing her strange and disquieting behavior, moved up beside Duke to peer uncomfortably close to Edwin’s face.

“Alright. Let him go.”

Duke released her grip on him and took a step back. The shopkeeper fell to the floor, fumbling to his knees to try and plea with them.

“Oh, thank you- please, just- tell the Mother I’m sorry. I won’t be a cent under next month, I promise.”

“We’ll tell her,” Jack said with a smile. “And, uh- clean up around here. This place is a travesty.”

He led them out the front door, down the alleyway, and around back of Dr. Wurtzmann’s tower. As soon as they were away from the shop, he buckled, quietly hooting with laughter.

“What the hell, Jack?”

“I didn’t think I’d pull that off! That was the greatest con ever. Holy shit, Duke, you made that guy piss himself! I think I got startled for a moment. And Missy, brilliant- just-” he kissed his hand and blew it outwards, like a fanciful chef, causing her to roll her eyes with a sardonic smile.

“So, what do we do now?” Duke cleared her throat, eager to stay focused.

“We go somewhere public with this money.”

“Won’t that get us caught? I mean, it’s not ours, it wasn’t even owed to us.”

“That’s the plan. Whoever he owed that money to, they’re going to come looking for us. Then, we talk our way in, see who it is. Give them the money back, and see if we can get some information on who put a hit on our doc.”

Duke and Missy both looked at each other with wide eyes, rendered totally speechless. Missy broke the silence first, looking back to Jack.

“That’s... brilliant. How long did that take you to think of?”

“Mmm, sometime between you letting me do the talking and me dying in a shootout.”

“Well, it worked.” Duke shook her head. “Okay, let’s try to remember as much of that as we can. You’re... kind of right, Missy. I think I’m getting used to this.”

“It’s perfectly natural,” she assured her. “People adapt to their surroundings. Especially you. Do you remember the poison gas swamp? We had to keep those masks on all hours of the day, and have drinkable rations through straws. You adjusted right away.”

Duke shrugged. “I was already used to that.”

“From the war?”

“Let’s get going.”

Chapter 3

Trying to appear in public as much as possible, the three of them wandered around the city together. Larchmont was fairly large and populous, with winding streets that merged into bustling quarters. Each one was surrounded by shops and offices, plenty of which seemed to have a number of practical functions. Duke noted that most of the suppliers of things that Dr. Wurtzmann might need- machine shops, automotive stores, chemists- were within walking distance of his tower.

"Might be worth checking those out next," she added.

"I suppose he must leave his tower at some point," said Missy. "Surely these suppliers have done repeat business with him. We should tell them we're here on business, perhaps to pick up some goods for him."

"Come to think of it, if he's not dead, he should be out of the tower sometime today. Right?" Jack looked over his shoulder. He'd wound up walking in front, leading them around on this winding route, still feeling proud of himself.

"Maybe. I'd think he'd be a bit of a recluse if his office is secured this much."

"Do we think he lives there?"

"He planned to be there early in the morning, and he'd left a portable communication device there. If it's not his house, then he's at least sleeping there... mister Goosedown said as much."

"Well, I'm starting to get hungry," Jack commented. "We only had breakfast two deaths ago."

"Don't say it like that," Missy said reproachfully.

"I mean, it's right. If we're gonna count time like that... hey, what do you think happens if we go to sleep?"

"I don't know. Maybe we'll live long enough to find out now that we're not probing a death trap."

"I'm getting hungry, too," Missy said.

"Alright, let's find an inn for lunch. We've got plenty to spend."

"Ah-ah," Jack said, stopping them. "We need what's in this case to stay in it. It's a bargaining chip."

"Right. Well, we've got sixty crowns, that should get us a decent meal and a cot."

"Or the best room in the house."

"What?"

"I'm just saying, Duke- we die, that money's in our pocket again. Or maybe we just get the driver to hand over everything he's got. We don't have to save it."

"Jack, that's horrible!" Missy crossed her arms, and looked to Duke, expecting her to be just as admonishing. Duke was looking at the bag of coins in her hand.

"We don't need to rob him," she finally answered. "But we also might not need to scrimp if we've only got a day before it starts over. Alright, let's enjoy it."

"That's the spirit!" Jack ran off for the nearest tavern, with the other two following close behind. Once they were inside, he made a beeline for the innkeeper.

"How much is your nicest room?"

"Ten crowns, little boy."

"Hey!" Jack started to protest, but Duke dropped a stack of coins on the counter.

"Oh- my apologies." The innkeeper immediately stood up straight. "Erm- forgive me, sir, and ladies. Our suite has a fine, warm bed with downy pillows for the discerning of weary travelers. Can I take your bags?"

"We've got it," Duke said. "Can we look at a menu?"

"Certianly! I'll have one brought up to you, miss...?"

"Just put it under 'Prophet.' We're a traveling company."

"Fantastic! P-R-O-P-H-E-T. Enjoy your stay."

She accepted the coins and handed over a key, then directed them upstairs. The room itself was marvelous, almost decadent in comparison to sleeping in the back of a cart. Jack immediately threw himself atop the enormous bed, and Missy examined the bath.

"It smells like jasmine in here! Duke, can we stay in places like this more often?"

"If we ever get out of this city? Sure." She snickered, and started unlacing her boots. As used to rough living as she was, there was no denying how nice these lodgings seemed.

The three of them almost forgot why they were here, reveling in comfort. After each had enjoyed a hot bath, it was easy to lose sight of any troubles. When the menu came, Missy had ordered the most expensive dessert she could, and Jack followed her lead.

"I've never had steak," he told them. "I want steak."

Duke had almost thought to order rations for the road, as she always did when they stopped to rest. But she remembered that they were nowhere near close to getting out of this repeating day. After a moment's indecision, she decided to indulge in something with a fancy name that mentioned potatoes and cheese. The three of them stayed there for the afternoon, laughing and reminiscing about past adventures together, people who had joined and left their group, spectacular sights on their travels.

By mid-afternoon, Jack was already snoring. He'd laid out on a nearby lounge seat, which he said fit him more comfortably. Missy decided to curl up under the blankets, while Duke sat atop them.

"You can get under them if you like," she offered.

"I'm fine. The silk feels strange."

"You don't ever lie down, do you?"

"What do you mean?" Duke looked over her shoulder.

"Comfort. Like this. You don't really seem to like it."

"It's hard to enjoy when I know it's going to be snatched away."

"Mm. Just try to rest." She turned back over, settling into the overly plush cushions. Duke laid back against the headboard, watching the door while the other two slept.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest against its own functions as its driver paused his run, here in a small square of the merchant's quarter. Two of the three companions awoke groggily, while the third was already up.

"Damn it... we're back in the car?"

"Is it because we fell asleep?" Missy lifted her head.

"You died."

They both looked to Jack, who had a somber expression.

"It was late, I don't know how late though. An assassin. I woke up when he opened the case, and watched him cut both of your throats."

"What about you?"

"I tried to talk to him. He grabbed me, he cut out my..." he shook his head. "Someone didn't like us taking that money. They wanted it to be painful."

"That 'Mother' person, perhaps."

"I'm so sorry," he started, putting a hand over his face. Missy looked to him with concern, and reached over.

"It's not your fault, Jack."

"Yes it is!"

"It was a good plan, you-"

"I let you die! I watched him do it and I did nothing! I just waited there until he- he-"

"Jack." Duke put a hand on his shoulder as well. "She's right, It was a good plan. We can try again later. For right now, let's see if any of those suppliers might have a way in."

Jack pushed past, kicked open the trailer, and snatched the coinpurse from the driver. Duke followed out, helping Missy down. With the subtle rumble of an engine, he drove off, leaving them alone in the square.

"Alright, so we've got the drinking bird, and we've got those suppliers. Do you remember how to get there?"

"Well enough. Maybe we should have someone wait here to see if Dr. Wurtzmann actually does show up."

"You think he'll be here?"

"I think it's worth waiting to see."

"I'll do it," Jack sighed. "I can wait at the bakery and see if he shows up."

“Sounds good,” Duke said with a nod. “Alright, we’ll be back in a few hours.”

Duke and Missy made quick progress to the first supplier they’d come across. Jack had given them their fifteen coins each, and bought them breakfast as well. They ate while they walked.

“I think he wanted to apologize,” Missy noted.

“He didn’t have to,” Duke replied through a mouthful of sausage pastry. “But it’s nice to have breakfast and money. We might be able to use it with these suppliers.”

“Ugh. It feels like we keep walking ten feet into a maze and starting over.”

“I know. I’d almost rather we just try that same move again.”

“Taking mister Goosedown’s money?”

“Mhm. At least we know where that path leads. If we follow it, we can figure out the forks and branches. Get a lay of the land. Knock on the door, forty-eight seconds, then kick it open right before he gets to it. Secure the gun, take the money, wait at the inn. Then... hm.”

“You really are getting used to this.” Missy chuffed. “Jack said the assassin didn’t let him speak.”

“Maybe if we catch him first.”

“I have a few spells that could do that.”

“Next time.”

“Next time.”

Most of the shops had been a dead end. They had manufacturing orders, almost all of them stored on paper files, but they refused to give out any information. The only lead they’d gotten was to the library. As they approached, Missy flashed a handheld booklet to the man at the lectern.

“Misavellen Niandre di Danvelle-Arth, twelfth-year graduate at Markhold Academy for Mages. This is my research assistant. Are you familiar with Dr. Barnaby Wurtzmann?”

The man, who was dressed crisply and professionally, peered close at the booklet.

“Oh, yes,” he mused. “Dr. Wurtzmann visits us with some frequency. He’s a recluse, mostly keeps to himself. But I recognized a man of genius. What’s your business with him?”

“He hired us,” Duke interjected. The librarian gave her a doubting look.

“Dr. Wurtzmann is doing an experiment, kept very secret. You know how he is.” Missy added in, with a smile. “But he said that there were some books on hold for him here, said we should pick them up.”

“Oh, I’m afraid not,” the Librarian said with a shake of his head. “In fact, Dr. Wurtzmann owes us several books, which have gone unreturned for two weeks. He’s looking at quite the hefty fee if he doesn’t return them soon.”

Duke had a thoughtful expression at that mention of how long he'd been. Most of the suppliers had said something similar, if anything at all- one had a shipment waiting for him to pick up, and was quite irate about how long he was taking.

"Oh, goodness. He can be so forgetful- I'll let him know. Would you... perhaps be willing to let me know what those books were?"

"We aren't at a liberty to discuss such things, miss..."

"Misavel is just fine, sir. I don't need to stand on ceremony with my family name, we'd be here all day. And, I know it's so important to protect such things, but... as researchers, we're very familiar with how swept up someone can be in their work. If you tell me, I'm sure I can find those copies in his office and bring them back to you at speed."

"Oh... fine. Well, here's a list of the books he has to return. Oh- and he left this."

He handed her the list, and a leatherbound notebook, which looked as if it had seen significant use. Half of its pages were dog-eared, there were colored tabs sticking out of every side, and the pages seemed to threaten to fall out if she opened it too far. She accepted it with a smile and stepped away.

"So- what do those books mean?"

"Oh, mostly they tell us what he was researching. But this- this should be far more useful." She held up the book.

"What is it?"

"It's his journal!"

Jack stood up as soon as Missy and Duke returned. He stepped out of the bakery in case they decided to openly discuss their plans in a public place, as they often did. The three came together to one corner of the cobbled square, and moved down an alleyway.

"He didn't show. No sign of him at all."

"More than that," Duke countered. "He's been missing for two weeks."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Positive. Remember the glassblower? He was furious, said those custom pieces took a month to finish. Wurtzmann Offered him 2,500 crowns for the job. He's two weeks late to pick them up. Same as the library."

"I'll go ask Goosedown." Jack started to run off for the potion shop.

"Wait."

"What?"

"I've been thinking," Missy answered. "We're caught in some kind of temporal repitition. Arcane forces can't even manage to accomplish something quite so organized, it's usually a more chaotic alteration to the fabric of the cosmos."

"Do you understand her at all?"

"Not really," Duke shook her head.

"It- we're in a time loop. There's not a spell that can do that."

"Didn't you just say it was forbidden?"

"It is, because when wizards tried to do it, they wound up having all sorts of accidents. Some of them unmade their own existence, or wound up with pieces of their body scattered across centuries of the past. Some of them traveled decades into the future, babbling about things nobody understood."

"So... what?"

"What if the experiment did this?"

"What?"

"Look at the books Dr. Wurtzmann was studying. Some of these were records of those wizards' work. Theories of spacetime, particle physics, chronology, the shape of space."

"How the hell would an experiment put us in a time loop before we did it?"

"I think that it didn't. We got here and did the experiment already, and it went wrong, and caused us to repeat the same day over and over. Maybe it killed Dr. Wurtzmann, or sent him into the future, or teleported him across space."

"Oh, gods." Duke slumped against the wall of the alley.

"This can't be real," Jack said, walking in circles. "We have to have some way out."

"There must be. Up there." Duke turned around and looked up at the tower she was leaning against.

"Well how the hell do we get in?!"

Both of them looked to Missy, who was reading over his journal.

"I... what is all this...?"

"What's wrong?"

"Well, it starts with research notes. He definitely was studying how to travel through time. But it gets... strange. It sounds like he's going mad. He starts talking about people watching him, patterns in space, shapes and geometry. It just devolves into nonsense by halfway through."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I'd need to read further to understand what's happening, but it sounds like before he left this journal at the library, he was worried about someone coming after him."

"Maybe you were right after all, Jack."

"Damn. Well, the Drinking Bird's already been open for a while, we can't pull that con today."

"Alright, fine. Missy, did-"

Duke stopped. Missy was gone. The journal was lying on the ground in front of them as if nobody had been holding it.

"What the hell?"

"Missy?"

"Where did she go?"

"Missy!" Duke called out for her. Jack shushed her.

"We don't know if whoever took her is still here! Just- check the journal, what was it open to?"

"It wasn't, it's just on the ground." She picked it up, and opened the front page. There was just some sort of table, a series of numbers and letters. Some of them had been circled, some were crossed out. She flipped through a few pages, and handed it to Jack.

"Can you make sense of any of this?"

"Uh- not even remotely, it looks like tech nonsense. Except for this." He held it back to her, pointing to a phrase in the middle of a page.

"What's that?"

"It's a passphrase- do you not care where she went?!"

"Obviously, but if there's any way of knowing, it's probably in this book since it's the last thing she was doing. What's the passphrase for?"

"I don't know, but I recognize its usage. Security systems often have a short sentence that you wouldn't normally say out loud, which will deactivate everything. See this here? 'Yellow Carpenter Turns On Fifth Wheel To Midnight.' He even capitalized the whole thing."

"This book's full of nonsense, though."

"It's at the front, though! It's worth a try, isn't it? I'll go get Ed's key."

"Fine."

Duke continued to flip through the book while Jack ran off. She leaned against the other wall, occasionally eyeing where she saw Missy disappear, before looking back to the book in her hands. It really did sound like he was going mad. She flipped to the last page.

*June of Spring. The days are long and I am missing them all.
Eyes watch me from all directions. The stars are definitely looking back through my telescope, but I won't tell them that I know what they can see. When does an archivist not keep an archive? It is ten months and twelve days ago that I have learned the truth. Watching me. Watching me always. I will die soon, this I know. He is coming for me, as he has been coming for me, and as he is already here. He's watching. They all are. Waiting for me to trip and stumble and slip into the space between spaces.*

I stand at the corner of my rounded square, and see into a world that is not there. I've turned off my clocks. They distract me from what's really happening. The floorboards of my home are not rotting, they are being rebuilt.

It's almost here. It's never here. It was going to be here no matter what. I'll kill them if they let me. I'll destroy everything if they don't stop me. The machine is shut off but it's still running. Oh, gods, how I've missed you. The way you looked at me that one last time. Wretched machine of mine. My hands killed you, they were mine. I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me, even if I never say I'm sorry?

It's not too late for me, but it's never too early. A father of three takes his first steps at the top of the stairs. I stand astride two roads, on opposite ends. At one, I meet with death and am transported. At the other, I watch you burn, and remain earthly. Do I accept my oblivion, or do I languish in grief and pray that it may undo you? Who was the man who turned the handle? Whose meddling machinations took us down this encircling road, where destiny dares not to look? It was me, it was mine, the shame is mine! My mind falters feebly as I seek their guidance. They will not dare to find me. They know that I am looking.

Seek not what is written by the chroniclers. You are not ready for what they have to say.

The book tumbled to the cobblestones and clapped shut.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest against its own functions as its driver paused his run, here in a small square of the merchant's quarter. The three companions were awake by the time it finally stopped.

"Duke."

She lifted her head to Jack, who was already grabbing her arm with wide eyes.

"I got upstairs."

"You're joking!" Missy practically lunged forward to grab onto him. They looked between each other, equal parts thrilled and shocked. "How did you do it?!"

"The passphrase! I- wait, first: Where did you go?"

"I don't know, I was just about to ask you how I died in the alleyway."

"You didn't, you disappeared. And... so did you."

Jack looked to Duke, who wasn't looking at either of them. Her gaze was focused forwards, going over those words in her mind. *Seek not what is written by the chroniclers. You are not ready for what they have to say.*

Something about it was distinctly uncomfortable.

"Duke! Are you listening? What happened to you?"

"I don't know. I got to the last page, and then I was here."

"That's what happened to me, too. Was the book somehow enchanted?"

"Maybe. Possibly just that last page, then. I didn't read that far."

"How did you die?"

“On the second floor! I read the passphrase aloud, and I was right- it disarmed the securements. Well, it disarmed the waiting room. I picked the lock to the second floor, and none of those doors were locked. I opened his office first, and then boom. Gone.”
“So it only worked for one floor?”
“Well, it worked! We’ve got something. Let’s get our sixty coin, get that key, and check it out together.”

The clearing of a throat got their attention. Their driver was waiting impatiently at the back.

“Right- give us the full amount, old man.” Duke opened the trailer and climbed out, holding her hand out to him.

“I don’t know what you mean.”
She rolled her eyes.

Minutes later, and they were at the front door with the key.

“Alright, Jack. Talk us through what you did.”

“I got the key from Ed back there, then I opened the door. I said the phrase out loud, here, and the system told me it was disarmed. Then I picked the door to the second floor.”

“Alright, let’s give that a try, then.”

She placed the key in the door, and swung it open. Inside, someone was waiting.

“You do not belong here,” he said.

Chapter 4

The man was dressed in a crisp, clean, professional suit. It was a dark blue, with a black tie. But what was far more noteworthy was the shape of his head. There was no neck coming from the collar, just an empty space; and floating above it was a smooth, glassy shape, like two pyramids pressed together. It slowly rotated in place above his shoulders, the eight facets shining in the lamplight.

“...What?”

“You do not belong here,” he repeated.

“What do you mean?”

“We were asked to come here,” Duke asserted. “Dr. Wurtzmann hired us to come here today.”

Missy didn't move. She was staring at this strange man before her, trembling. She'd seen all manner of magical creature and mystical thing in her long years, especially at the mage's academy, but nothing like this.

“Why haven't we seen you here before?”

“What did you say?”

“We've never seen him here, Duke. Everything else keeps happening the exact same way. You know how long it takes for Edwin to come to the door, down to the second. Have we ever seen him before?”

“We haven't. Why are you here?”

“You do not belong here,” he said again. “Your presence in this position is an anomaly. Define your mode of existence or exit.”

“Do either of you know what he's talking about?” Jack looked between his companions, starting to feel tense.

“Not even a little,” Missy answered.

“That's not reassuring.”

“You are present anomalies. Your existence in this sector identifies potentially fatal factors. This will be corrected.”

He reached into his pocket, and withdrew a pair of scissors.

“That sounded like a threat,” Jack muttered, reaching for his knife.

“Wait, just- wait. Clearly something-”

Missy stopped halfway through stepping forwards, with one hand outstretched. Duke watched as a thin line, like a cut, opened up across her face- then recoiled in horror as it became a clean slice through the side of her head, and her lifeless body dropped to the floor.

“Fuck- What did you do to her?!”

The man said nothing. Duke reached for her pistol and took aim- but she wasn't holding it when she fired. The end of her arm was gone. She looked to Jack, who had been divided in two from one heel to the opposite shoulder. She felt something sever the back of her neck, and then nothing.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. The old machine let out a few coughs and pops of protest against its own functions as its driver paused his run, here in a small square of the merchant's quarter. The three companions were awake by the time it finally stopped.

"That was fast," Jack commented.

"What was he?"

"I don't know, but I'm not keen on finding out."

"I am." Duke vaulted over the edge of the trailer and charged brisquely for the potion shop.

"Shit- wait!" Jack stumbled over the trailer to try and keep up. Missy opened it and climbed down, looking to the driver, who offered her the sack of coin. She swiped it from his hands and rushed after her friends.

Duke was already coming back out of the shop by the time she caught up with them. There was blood on her knuckles. She inserted the key, and before the doors were all the way open, charged inside. There he was, waiting.

"What the hell do you want from us?!"

"You do not belong here."

"Stop saying that!" Duke stormed forward, and reached back for her revolver. Those scissors were already in his hand again, and by the time Missy and Jack had gotten inside, she was in pieces on the floor.

Jack grimaced, and Missy looked away.

"Look- whoever you are, you know we're in some kind of loop, right? Just wait a second and we can talk. Missy, come on, help me reason with this guy. Missy?"

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. Duke had lunged out of the car before it was even fully stopped. Jack scrambled after her as she fired a round into the doorknob of the Drinking Bird. Another gunshot later and she was walking back out with the key in hand, splattered with blood. Jack helplessly protested as she opened the doors again.

It was early morning when the car trundled across the flagstones, and came to a stuttering halt. An anguished yell came from the back, causing the driver to fumble the

bag of coins in his hand. The car bounced on its suspension as one of the travelers jumped out and ran across the street, screaming and kicking a nearby tree.

Jack stood there on the side of the road, watching this tirade with chagrin. The driver questioned Missy, who told him to just leave.

"Fucking goddamned motherfucking shit smug fucking fuck!"

She grabbed a nearby rock and hurled it across the road. It smashed against the cobblestones and cracked in two, causing Jack and Missy to jump.

"Duke! Calm the hell down!"

"What the hell am I supposed to fucking do with this shit?!"

"I don't know!!"

"Who was that?!"

"I DON'T KNOW!!!"

"Fuck!"

Duke kicked the tree one more time for good measure, before dropping to the ground, exhausted. She knew she'd wear herself out doing this. She wanted to be angry, but she needed to be focused. Now that the first half had been dealt with, she could move on to the second.

"Duke, are you alright?" Missy stepped up and put a hand on Jack's shoulder.

"I'm fine." She shook her head. "I hate feeling useless."

"You're not useless. We just need time to figure this out. Whoever that was. What we're supposed to do here."

"Why was he waiting for us like that?"

"I don't know. But... whatever he's doing, he's obviously a part of the time loop."

"Right. Right, he wasn't there before. You said that."

"Do you think he's causing it?" Jack leaned against the tree. His tone was uncharacteristically soft. Duke was rarely so outwardly angry.

"He didn't seem to know what was happening to us. He said we were 'anomalous.'"

"It means out of sorts, unexpected. Not working the right way." Missy added, trying to help.

"Or not doing the right thing," Duke replied. "He knows we're the only thing that's not repeating in the loop."

"So he's trying to kill us?"

"He said we had to be corrected."

"I don't much fancy finding out what that's supposed to mean..."

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