

Derelect

From my precarious perch, high in the blueprinting and schematics department, I could not only look out across the docking bay at the sleeping air-leviathans in dry-dock, but I just barely caught a glimpse of the depths of Hell I'd oh-so-recently pulled myself from. Down there, it was all rivers of molten iron and blazing furnaces—such that you almost thought you'd see the angel Zephon in the shadow of the gears that pumped the massive bellows. From down there, though, everything up here looked like Heaven. The unfortunate part? Satan followed you up. Jonathan Weimer—the owner of Weimer Advanced Aeronautics—was a Satan of Miltonian proportions. Though, one could argue, he was hardly sympathetic. The men in my current department always complained about him—said he was older than Satan himself. The riveters said worse. Having risen from the lowly rank of smelter, I could name a few choice comments myself, but never did. Weimer had a nose like a bloodhound, and ears like a bat (a vampire bat, to be precise), and could weed out dissent in his sleep. Bad things happened, I'd come to find in my ascension to Purgatory, when Jonathan Weimer heard complaints.

As a damaged cruiser was pulled into port, I caught sight of a vulture in the scaffolding. Partly obscured by a helium docking pontoon, Jonathan Weimer basked in the glory of a creation he took credit for, but had no hand in building. He was a bent, wizened old man—more twig than man, come to think of it—with sharp features that reminded me of the illustrations of vampires in those dime novels they sold in the train station. He was bloodthirsty enough to be one, after all. Far too many workers, unhappy with their treatment, had met a gristly fate in the iron bowels of the machines they toiled over. My grandmother (bless her soul) always told me there were no such things as coincidences, and as I glanced over to the empty desk to my right, I knew her to be correct. One too many times I'd had to bring some poor bastard's ashes to a grieving widow—and from what I

heard, I was lucky to have ashes to bring. The former occupant of the empty desk, Duncan Harper, had been caught in a boiler explosion in a place boilers had no reason to be. He'd been cut to bits by shrapnel and we'd watched the riveters, quite literally, scoop his remains into a box with a coal shovel. There were other deaths—men sucked into the engines of airships, or crushed during the docking process—but it was so hard to tell what was Weimer's work and what wasn't. I always felt someone should do something about all of this, but you don't bite the hand that feeds you. Not when you have a family to support—not when the threat of a return to Skid Row loomed so close over your head you could almost taste the slime in the air. That spectre haunted my every waking moment to the point that, sometimes, I couldn't even work. Or, for instance, hear my supervisor come up behind me.

"You don't want those pistons there," Donahue's hand clapped my shoulder as the other one stabbed a finger at my schematics, "You do that, you get friction and friction means static too close to the aether pool. One spark from that—boom!"

"Thanks." I found it hard to tear myself away from Dracula out there in the docking bay—I didn't trust him not to fly through the damned glass and sink his teeth into my neck—but I did anyway. With monumental effort, I put my head back down and went back to work, expecting Donahue to go about his own duties, but his hand stayed firmly on my shoulder.

"I have to talk to you later, Kerrigan." the Scot said in a strangely conspiratorial voice, "Meet me at the trolley?"

"What for?"

"Nothing much. I just have to talk to you about something."

It wasn't much for me to wait up for him; Donahue lived two flats above Ester and me, "I'll meet you down there after my shift's over, boss."

"Be sure you do," his brogue made him sound all the more grave, "Weimer's up to something again and I'm not sure I like it."

Our eyes travelled out to the catwalks in sync, where Mr. Weimer ambled, leaning on his cane—the one that I always thought looked like a human femur. From the look on

Donahue's face, he probably thought the same thing. After all, there were no such things as coincidences, right? Those beady little eyes fixed on us across the gap, and we both hurried about our work like a couple of schoolboys caught passing notes. We weren't going to end up like poor Harper: A lumpy puddle right beneath the pumping innards of another one of the Leviathans. I didn't find the thought particularly comforting as I continued with my work, trying to concentrate despite the eyes I imagined boring into the top of my skull as I bent my head over my blueprints and diagrams. Needless to say, I felt rather stupid when I looked up and saw that Weimer had vanished from the catwalk. I heaved a sigh of relief and half listened as the intercom in the corner buzzed and crackled to life. I didn't have much of a chance to just 'half listen' for long.

"Mr. Kerrigan." One could hardly tell if Weimer's voice was the thing making static, or if the speaker system was just that bad. I felt my stomach drop to my feet and freeze there.

"Yes Mr. Weimer, sir?"

"Could I see you for a moment in the office." Yes, it was a statement and not a question. Weimer didn't ask anything of anyone! Nor, I should mentioned, did you refuse him on any account.

"Of course, sir." Thankfully, the tremor didn't reach my voice though I could see the dotted line my shaking hand made across the wingspan of an experimental warship.

"Immediately."

"Yes, sir."

I bundled my work—careful of the wet ink—and very unsteadily pushed away from my desk and headed toward the door with the weight of impending doom on my shoulders. From his own desk, Donahue gave me a sympathetic look and a gesture that suggested he wished me luck. Not knowing what else to do, I waved back and slipped through the door.

Weimer's office was placed only two floors above my workspace—on the seventh floor and out of the way of most plausible docking accidents (unlike the blueprinting section—we'd had the bow of a Leviathan come crashing through the glass one day. It'd nearly speared poor Harper!). The stairs and walkways were built scaffolding-style into the

sides of the massive open space of the docking bay, though they were worn down from years of use. There were some places I was always afraid to step on. Unsurprisingly, though, the metal seemed less blemished away from the repair crews and closer to Weimer's office. Bolted to the brick, barely-insulated aether lines ran up to the charging stations currently obscured by a somewhat decrepit merchant vessel, and a few branched off toward the office ahead of me. The raw energy inside hummed maliciously and reminded me of home and of my childhood. I'd learned first-hand how, unlike electricity, aether could spark and crackle across the cobblestones toward you and fry you from the inside. I had to wonder, at that recollection, if Weimer had some sort of 'aether chair' in his office to use as a torture device. It wouldn't surprise me in the least! Or perhaps I was right about the vampire part, but perhaps he didn't drink blood—maybe he was some sort of strange aether-pire? I didn't have much time to expound on that, as I found myself at the door of his office. It felt like visiting those cliff dwellings way out West, the office situated so high that the glow of the furnace was nearly obscured by the day-to-day activity. Tearing myself away from the multi-story drop and taking a few calming breaths (that was to say I hyperventilated), I raised a trembling hand and knocked. Thankfully, the door didn't creak open.

"Come," barked a voice from inside. I did as told.

Weimer sat in front of the bay windows on the opposite side of the room. Below us stretched the city in all of its polluted, smoggy glory. In the distance, the mountains rose purple and white up to the clouds and you could just make out the ritzy Ridgeline area off to the Northeast. "You...you wanted to see me, Mr. Weimer, sir?"

"I did. Come here." He had a clipped style of speaking so unlike any of the upper class acquaintances I had that it unnerved me even more. Weimer sounded angry to begin with, and I didn't need this extra stress! Feeling like a mouse in front of a snake, I made my way across the dark floorboards. The creaking nearly made my heart burst, it seemed so loud! I very pointedly watched my feet all the way to the desk, barely taking in Weimer's spartan surroundings, though I could see the bottom drawers of countless filing cabinets. "Do you know why you're here, Mr. Kerrigan?"

Actually hearing a question out of him made the hair on the back of my neck stand up and brought a cold sweat to my palms. “I do not, sir.”

“You were one of the designers for the new Valkyrie model, if I’m not mistaken—the slimline cruisers. The Banshees.”

“I was, sir. Harper was the other designer but...well...” I suddenly felt like an idiot for bringing it up, but Weimer’s permanently-set scowl didn’t even twitch. Perhaps he didn’t feel I was implicating him in Harper’s death. After all, he did view all of us as peons—which we were—it wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine he thought me an idiot.

“Beautiful design. The prototype was received well by the Secret Service—they want to use it to escort the president’s flagship if we go through with it.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little pride despite my impending heart-attack. “Thank you—“

“But there’s one slight problem.” I felt my stomach return to my feet.

“A problem?” my voice squeaked more than I would’ve liked.

“These Banshees—they require that new perpetuity coil,” one boney finger slid across the diagram on his desk—heading toward the inset illustration near the engine, “and that new steel-carbon alloy around the engine room, yes?”

My mouth felt dry. “Yes, sir.”

“That’s too expensive. I have neither the space nor the facilities to create that alloy, as you know, Mr. Kerrigan, so we had to import it to make the prototype. I will not do that for an *entire line*.”

“But, sir, that alloy will keep the aether contained. It’s a natural aether grounding ‘wire.’” I tried to keep my expression as neutral as possible—pictures of Harper’s remains flashed through my mind, “If we use something else, there will be nothing to ground it, and some engineers don’t understand how to work with aether will...will die.”

Weimer stared me down, looking like I’d just told him I was king of the planet Mars, “And? It’s not my problem if someone’s too inexperienced to do their job properly. Let them fry—it’ll weed out the unworthy.”

It was incredibly hard to keep my jaw from dropping to the floor. “But, sir—this is safety protocol—“

“I don’t care.” His sharp rasp cut me off—clearly he wasn’t interested in logic. “The fact of the matter is that I have neither the facilities, nor the space to build a new line in order to create this alloy, and I’ll be damned if I have to rely on the Russians to have it shipped to me!”

“But, sir—these are human lives we’re putting in danger—“

“Potentially, Mr. Kerrigan, only potentially. I also see, “ He laced his talons together and pinned me down with his stare. I felt sick. “That you are a very argumentative individual. I would not have thought that out of such a quiet man.”

“But—” he cut me off once again.

“Allow me to put this succinctly, Mr. Kerrigan: You’ve worked for Advance Aeronautics for a number of years in two departments. However, I do not condone insubordination, even from those who have seniority.” I grew cold. “And unless you want to find yourself back in the furnace or out in the gutter, Mr. Kerrigan, I suggest you begin to trust my word. Understood?”

My mouth tasted acrid from fear and disgust. I lowered my eyes and concentrated on my shoes once again. “I understand, sir.”

“Good.” He leaned back and began to roll the diagram up, “You’re dismissed. Go back to work—I’ll expect the redesign within the week so we can avoid structural issues.”

Despite the fact that he was creating a structural problem, I nodded mutely and turned to leave without further protest. I practically ran down the catwalk and back to the fifth floor. Today would be the day from Hell, it seemed.

Evening couldn’t come fast enough. I swear I inked those revised concept sketches a million times before the whistle blew, telling us white collars that we were free until next morning. I abandoned the ink-stained desk with the little ‘M. Kerrigan’ plaque, stashed my schematics in the drawer, and was out the door as soon as I could grab my jacket and cap. There was a similar exodus occurring from the other white collar offices—all men like myself who couldn’t wait to leave Purgatory, even if it was just a temporary reprieve. Behind

me, though, I could feel eyes boring into my back. I tried not to look, I merely focused on the metal walkway beneath my feet—the steps, the concrete and cobbles as I descended to ground level. I could hear the tap of that cane against the walkway above: *tap, tap, tap—you're next! You're next! You're next!* Unconsciously I sped up, pushing past Callahan from Aether Containment 6 and nearly plowing over Rosco from the shipping hub; I didn't have to be all that fast—just faster than everyone else! Just as long as *he* wasn't standing behind me with that goddamned human leg in his hand!

“Where's the fire, Kerrigan?” I hadn't even noticed the lanky Scot until he grabbed me by the lapels. Good thing, too; the whoosh and whir of a motorized trolley pulled air past my face and knocked my hat askew. I'd nearly run headlong into it. My guts felt a little cold as the trolley clanked away down the hill—without me crushed beneath it, thankfully.

“Back there?” I motioned vaguely back toward the menacing hulk of Weimer Advanced Aeronautics where the bay doors up top were slowly splitting to allow entry to a damaged Valkyrie; the work of smugglers, no doubt—pirates if you prefer. As things went South, they were becoming more of a problem, but that meant more ships to fix, and more money for people like me and Donahue.

“You've got a shite sense of humor, you know.” he urged me ahead of him as the next trolley ground to a halt.

We rode in silence for a while, just watching the dingy industrial district pass before us as we travelled uphill. As we ascended, Skid Row spread out before us like an oil spill, punctuated by brief flashes of aether-light from leaking conductor wires. Lights from windows glowed as dull as a fever gleam. I didn't miss it. At least uphill you had less offal thrown on you—literally. The trolley paused at the gates to Pariah Town, the rather unfortunately-nicknamed middle class district, as the decorative gates squealed opened. We were cut off there, halfway between Skid Row and Nob Hill, but at least the air was clean. Well, clean-ish. Here, we weren't crammed like sardines into too-small tenements with bare conductor wires about to blow the place sky high at a moment's notice. True, we were the social outcasts—too rich to be poor, and too poor to be rich—those icky things that worked for Nob Hill and had bloodlines that ran into the slums, even in the Old Country, but at

least we had a clean place to live and were able to head to the grocer's even after paying rent. It was a Hell of a lot better than going hungry half the year. The trolley's whistle peeped as it passed the scraggly boxwoods at the entrance of Rivermire Park. The mirrors on the top of the carousel flashed in the fading sun.

"What was it you needed to talk to me about?" Donahue and I were the only ones left (save for the drunk slumped in the seat in the corner—passed out from the looks of it). Most of the other pariahs had come home in time for supper, so the whole place was relatively deserted.

Donahue looked grey for a moment and, for the first time, I realized how much weight he'd lost since he'd emigrated here from Glasgow. He was beginning to look a bit like someone from back home at the bottom of the hill, "You hear Weimer's going to hand the company off to one of his boys?"

"He actually has children?" I nearly choked on my own words as the Scot very calmly and gravely pulled a cigarette case from his breast pocket and went about having a smoke.

"Didn't believe it, myself, though the fact of the matter is he's got two buggers in line for the throne. I haven't heard who's the choice morsel, but it won't be long now. We'll have a different slave driver."

"'bout time," I offered weakly, "He's only been there since the dawn of time."

The Scotsman's lip curled wryly around his cigarette as the trolley pulled up to the stop at the corner of Fifth and Crosswise Avenue, but he didn't comment on the second bad attempt at humor that night, "I wouldn't be so enthusiastic about it, Kerrigan."

"Why's that?"

"Better the devil you know than the devil you don't." Smoke leaked from his nostrils and mouth like the steam that surrounded him at the factory, "I'll see you tomorrow, Kerrigan, I've got an appointment waiting for me in the pub."

I hopped off the trolley a bit perplexed, wondering why he'd made such a big deal about this news. Just because I didn't know about it didn't mean it was hush-hush, after all. I was hardly aware of my surroundings at work (who wanted to be in that place?) to begin with, "Good night, then?"

Donahue tipped his hat as the trolley backfired and then creaked its way up the hill in a geriatric caterpillar sort of way, leaving me to wonder if this was news at all. Either way, I had other things to worry about at that point. I took a deep breath as I headed into the building, swiping my identification card in the proper slot. Gears whirred like crickets somewhere in the walls as the locks disengaged and allowed me to head up the stairs to the third floor. The click as they shut automatically made me jump and I stumbled a little as I went to step onto the landing and the old man from 204 stared at me as I tried to act as if nothing happened. Then again, he stares at everything—and, sometimes, things that aren't there, come to think of it. With the prospect of not only going back to the furnaces but having to move out of Pariah Town and a workable life, I didn't have time to waste on loons. Oh God, how was I going to tell Ester?

It took me fifteen minutes before I could calm myself to the point that I could even swipe my card properly and another five before I could tap the door code into the little pad by the door, already worn with use to the point that most of the numbers were gone. I had to work by memory, which made it a longer process than my frazzled nerves really needed at the moment. Before I entered, however, I calmed myself and decided that I wasn't going to tell my family. Ester and the girls didn't deserve to know, so I opened the door and smiled for them like any other day—because it was any other day, right?

“You're putting too much thought into this, Michael,” my wife chastised me as I slid into bed beside her only a few hours later. My stomach churned with what I needed to do to keep my job—that I was going to potentially kill an untold number of airship mechanics to keep food in the icebox and a stable roof over our heads.

“I'm not sure Donahue's the sort of man that make light of a thing like *that*.” I ventured back as I pulled the comforter up close against the autumn chill. Through the wall, we could hear the girls talking, although it was long past their bedtime, completely unaware of what I'd been asked to do.

“He's obviously worried—probably about what his heir is going to be like,” Ester pointed out the obvious, “And he's all alone in that apartment upstairs, Michael—he has no one to share his worries with.”

Suddenly, the ‘appointment’ at Sweeny’s pub across town made sense. Who better to confide in than a drink? I leaned back against the pillows, “I suppose that makes sense...”

“You really do over think these things, Michael,” Ester shook her head before turning out the lamp on the bedside table, “You’re just going to feel like a fool when you wake up tomorrow and nothing’s happened. This is just like when the letter carrier mixed our mail with the neighbors and you thought we were being evicted!”

“Perhaps.”

A pause. “Michael?”

“Hm?” I rolled over to find Ester’s dark eyes boring into mine. Oh God, I thought she was going to find me out.

“You seem preoccupied—and it’s nothing about Alec, is it.”

“There’s something other than Donahue to occupy myself with?” I asked weakly. Even flustered, I never could manage to refer to my manager by his first name. There was a very tense pause during which Ester’s eyes narrowed somewhat dangerously. Suddenly I knew what an apple felt like as you cored it.

Ester rolled her eyes and folded the blankets around herself. She hadn’t realized I was harboring something. “Good night, Michael.”

I responded in kind as I made myself comfortable, wondering if Ester was right about this whole thing.

Wednesday brought with it an iron-grey morning, complete with a freezing drizzle that sat on my jacket and threatened to soak through. I’d woken up to the sound of bells—I never had quite figured out where that church was—and had grudgingly pulled myself from the warmth in my bed. It would be a cold morning at home, and an even colder one at work; my department sat high up in the docking bay. Sure, it stayed cool in the summer, but during the autumn and winter, it was a bit of a curse. The morning also, strangely, found me sitting alone at the trolley stop—Donahue was nowhere to be seen. I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets to hide my bare fingers from the cold. This was rather abnormal—Donahue practically ran like clockwork, and hadn’t he said just the day before that he’d fallen behind

in his work? Queer happenings, I knew, but Ester would remind me not to jump to conclusions. But, as the trolley clanked and hissed its way up to the stop, I couldn't help feeling that there was something behind Donahue's strange behavior. Either way, however, life would go on—there were ships to build and repair, and mouths for me to feed.

I hunkered down beneath the trolley's aether pool tank to keep some heat about me—the drizzle was starting to soak through my jacket and I wanted to feel some sort of warmth before work. I was farthest away from the little potbelly in the corner of the room, so I wouldn't have any sort of heat until seven that night. I sighed at a thought that never gave me any motivation: today was yet another day. The bass rumble of a Titan overhead reminded me that I'd be scribbling away with frozen fingers—how Bob Cratchitt of me. The sigh I had brewing couldn't be contained, and through the fog of my breath, I watched the Downhill slowly creep up to me as the trolley descended. The morning fog—smog, rather—hung around the Bottom and the Industrial District and hid the impurities, although the dim lights still shone through from the shantytown at the bend in the river. Just the sight of it brought the reminiscence of fetid water and open sewers with a hint of rotten flesh from the meatpacking plant and from whatever poor sap had decided to take a tumble (with a helping hand or without) from the bridge. The trolley whistle quite literally jolted me from my reverie and my foot slipped a bit on the edge, nearly pitching me into the gutter. I could tell I was nearly to the Aeronautics factory—the sewage in the gutter was starting to coagulate in a manner of grotesque ways. Factory run-off was wonderful stuff, if you know what I mean.

The trolley clanked and rattled to a stop two streets down in front of a mill. A couple of the girls in their blue uniforms were sneaking a smoke in the alley. Not that they could be blamed—just because the girls didn't sew by hand anymore didn't mean their fingers weren't at risk threading bobbins and adjusting cogs and levers on those monsters—I've seen those things. My sister used to work in a mill up in Detroit. Those machines have such force that they could snap steel beams in twain, just think of what they could—and did—do to a human arm. It didn't shock me so much now after seeing all of the accidents and otherwise out at Weimer's. Seeing men crushed during dry-dock or be pulled into airship engines by their hands tended to do that to you.

I jumped from the trolley to avoid the filth that'd washed downhill during the rain in the night and headed toward the Gates of Hell. To get in, ironically, you needed a card—the gates were computerized, and run by a former conductor. It was easy to put punch cards into a mechanized computation system when you've only got three fingers. Nice enough chap, though he knew he had it good out there away from Weimer's prying eyes.

“Morning, Phineas,” I rummaged around in my inner pocket for my card, “How's...things?”

There was no Phineas.

His machinery was running, and there was even a cup of tea steaming on the console, but there was quite literally no one behind the wheel. My eyes travelled from the empty guard shack to the doors only to find them ajar. Distractedly, I slipped my ID card into my pocket and eased my way in. I remember thinking that, at any moment the doors were going to slam shut and—bam! Michael sandwich with a side of Michael jelly right on the ground! But nothing happened, and I could hear the buzz of voices over the ungodly whoosh of the bellows and the clank and whirr of machinery and docking ships. A quick check of my watch showed 6:30. I still had time before work, and Donahue's strange behavior and Phineas's disappearance confused and worried me, so the distant sound of voices seemed like something worth checking out. I wasn't exactly the sharpest tool in the shed, but I could tell when something was going on. And, right then, there was definitely something going on.

I wasn't sure what I expected as I hurried up the stairs into the main level. Everything was normal outside of a strange lack of personnel. Workstations were left untended—this was a lapse of protocol! The thought that Weimer and the higher-ups would never allow this crossed my mind. Unless, of course, they'd killed everyone—but that was absurd, wasn't it? Despite the self-assurances, I couldn't help but notice the sound of my shoes tapping dully against the walkways was painfully loud—dull tap of wood, sharp tap on metal—was speeding up. The sound of distant chatter wasn't so distant anymore, and beyond the double doors at the end of the hall I could see the movement and shadows beyond the glass. Of all the things I expected, I don't think I was quite expecting to see the entirety of Weimer Advanced Aeronautics gathered beneath the docking area.

The room was huge, that much I believe I will always remember about that place. The docking area was massive beyond words—went up well over ten stories to allow all manner and size of aircraft. The whole factory was actually built around it sort of like an immense courtyard—only it rivaled the Tower of Babel and air-conditioned any part of the building that was far away from the furnace. That was to say, anything past the third floor (and I worked on the fifth, of course). It was like being inside an immense spinal column, with tiers upon tiers of brick and metal so old that they seemed to melt into each other in a nearly organic way. There were windows, sure, but they were so sooty that only the bloody glow from the furnace deep down in the sublevels diffused up through tier four. The rest was punctuated by the static firefly glow of welding tools high up in the repair and rebuild scaffoldings. They, however, were dim and still, their operators waiting on ground level and looking up—looking up toward what? I pushed through the sea of bodies, marveling at how the workers all fit in one room (colossal as said room might be!). There were sooty furnace tenders, bits of their gear—mainly masks and those massive gloves—hanging from around necks and belts. The design team and docking administrators were even there, milling about and looking smart in their grey and black uniforms. Someone, unsurprisingly, bumped into me from behind, causing a domino effect and bumping me into Devereaux, a riveter I remembered from my smelting days, and then into some stocky Italian-looking fellow who cursed in a language I wasn't familiar with.

“Sorry about that, Mike,” a thin, familiar voice managed to get in around the din.

“Oh—Mueller.” I was jostled a bit more, but managed to turn around to face my former supervisor. Mueller was one of the many first-generation Germans in the area. He was tallish, sandy haired, with eyes permanently squinted from dealing with sparks and furnace fire all day. He was a kind enough supervisor, though some days I had to wonder if he resented my promotion. “What’s going on here?”

Mueller’s mouth set in a grim line, “You haven’t heard?”

I could feel my brow knit, like my brain was perplexed before I even realized it. “Heard what?”

“You haven’t changed much, Mikey—you know that?” he shook his head, “course you don’t know.”

“Know *what?*” it had become a bit much by that point, like everyone was dangling a carrot right above me.

“Weimer’s dead, Mikey.” There was a sudden jarring sensation like a changing of gear. Things had gone from Donahue’s worried ‘Weimer’s stepping down’ to ‘Wiemer’s pushing up daisies.’ And, I do believe, my spirit fairly soared out the bay doors in jubilation. “Don’t act so shocked, the bastard was probably over a millennium old.”

I tried to wave him quiet without smacking the furnace cleaner next to me (I never ever did want to tangle with those men—they always hired *that type* to work such dangerous jobs), “Yeah, yeah, yeah—everybody here’s established that. What happened?”

“Hell if I know. Admin Coals just grabbed me this morning and asked me to shoo all the smelters away from the furnaces. Said we had someone who needed to talk to us.”

“Who?”

Mueller shrugged thick shoulders helplessly, you could see the line of soot where his coveralls normally sat, and motioned vaguely up to the stairs and platforms that spiraled up to the belly of a Leviathan in dock for repairs, “I guess we’ll be seeing soon.”

It took another fifteen minutes of milling around like steer in corral before something finally happened over our heads. There wasn’t much in the pomp and circumstance. A man in a deep green waistcoat exited Weimer’s office. I couldn’t be sure from my angle (and stuck behind an incredibly tall man). Eventually he appeared up in front of a conductor with an amplifier in his hand. It was strange for me at the time, really, because he looked down on us with such an air of neutrality. Was this the heir in question? Or the better question: what the Hell were we all staring at this chap for when all he was doing was staring down with an amplifier in his hand. It took a moment for the main in the green waistcoat to speak.

“I know you’re probably all annoyed at being made to wait,” he had such a normal voice—the kind you imagine narrating children’s stories in the town square during Midsummer festival, “but I’m sure you’ve all had to deal with the red tape in the past, no?” a chuckle passed through the crowd—mostly with the section supervisors. The laugh seemed

to break some of the tension. Or maybe it was because we were all bored and shoved in a place made small by numbers, “As you have all heard by know, no doubt, my father—Jonathan Weimer—passed away last night. My name is Saul—Saul Weimer—and according to my father’s Will, I have inherited the factory. Now, now—don’t grumble! I can hear you all perfectly from up here. I assure you that there will be absolutely no change in routine.”

“That’s the problem, ain’t it?” I nearly jumped out of my skin (and nearly took out one of the men from Maintenance and Repair when I did). Donahue had somehow managed to ghost through the crowd and stand behind me without being noticed. Mueller, however, didn’t seem as perturbed. “We get a change of administration, but not of the ‘routine.’”

I didn’t have a reply.

“Yes, yes, I can hear that, too.” Saul Weimer continued, sharp blue eyes scanning the overwhelmingly soot-covered crowd below, “I’m well aware of how my father ran this place and, frankly, I find it to be disgusting and inhumane. Obviously, my father didn’t realize that we have long since left the Dark Ages!” his voice rose (for emphasis, I’d imagine), shocking me into silence. I found it hard to believe that Weimer had anything to do with creating his son! “Now, I’m well aware that few, if any of you, trust me. But, rest assured, I will earn it and bring this factory into the present. Today, the factory will be on half-power because I will be speaking with each supervisor individually, but you will all be paid the day’s wages. Thank you.”

There was some half-hearted clapping in the brief sound vacuum that followed, but it was soon drowned by the subsequent hubbub. I couldn’t even make out individual words in the roar—neither could anyone else, but they still jabbered to each other like startled seagulls. I nearly sounded like one myself when Donahue grabbed me by the arm and dragged me back out into the hall. I slipped and stumbled a bit, as the wood floor had been made slick by a thousand wet boots. Donahue, however, righted me and held me at arm’s length by the shoulders for a moment. My ears still rang from the noise on the other side of the doors.

“Nice speech, wasn’t it.” His grey eyes were surprisingly chill—like Saul Weimer’s, only with a strange hardness behind it.

“I’m not much of a speech man,” I offered as he let me go, “So I wouldn’t know. But he seems different than his father.”

The lean Scot made a noise that I couldn’t quite understand—was it indignant or mocking? “Oh, he’s different all right!”

“Donahue, you’re doing it again...”

“Doing what?”

My brows knit, “Being enigmatic.”

“I am not—I’m stating fact. The point stands that he is different from his father—the polar opposite in some cases.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” I asked after a moment of thought. Donahue’s icy eyes narrowed and darkened, pinning me to the floor like an insect specimen.

“Remember what I said to you last night, Kerrigan?”

“About?”

“About Weimer stepping down and one of his sons taking over.”

“You said that proverb—‘better the Devil you know, then the Devil you don’t.’” I was quite proud about how I remember that tidbit.

Donahue tapped the side of his nose, his eyes flicking to the doors a moment as workers began trickling out to return to their stations. Phineas slipped by with his mangled hands shoved in his pockets, murmuring with a furnace cleaner I didn’t recognize. “My point exactly. Now, you’d best remember that, because this Saul character, he—“

“Donahue!” a young riveter (whose name still escapes me) interrupted as he stuck his head out the now-open door and let a bit of the roar in, “Mr. Weimer wants to talk to you next.”

The Scot’s face hardened for a moment—he wasn’t a man who liked interruptions, “Just keep that in mind, Kerrigan. Keep that in mind.”

He left before I could stop him, the door slamming shut behind him and bringing the noise of the crowd back down to a dull roar. My face reddened in indignation, “Oh, come

on! Can't you just come out and *say* something to me for once damned--haggis!" I gestured at the double doors, exasperated, and pushed past two repairmen who I noticed had been staring at me during my tirade, "What are you looking at?"

They didn't offer me an answer and I stomped to the stairwell in something of a huff. What was the world coming to when you couldn't even get a straight-out explanation from your supervisor?

Needless to say, on the trolley ride to work that day I didn't concentrate so much on the muck in the gutters or the smog in the air. Why should I have? Weimer was dead and I was a free man! The people on the trolley with me probably thought I was a complete loon with how I was laughing to myself. But, then again, I really don't blame them—not everyone could justify being happy on their way to work. Most of them had bosses like the older Weimer. But me? Not any more! Whistling, I hopped off the trolley and practically skipped up to Phineas's booth.

"Morning Mike," he offered, checking my card in the machine before handing it back.

"Morning Phineas. Lovely day, isn't it?" I smiled and tipped my hat as I slipped my card into my pocket.

"Sure, sure." He didn't seem quite as convinced of that as I was.

I fairly floated up the five flights of steps up to my department. It was a bit chilly, but I barely noticed. Weimer was dead and I was off the hook! I greeted my coworkers, and set to finding those incriminating blueprints to destroy them—whistling the whole while. Well, whistling for a little while, anyway. When I opened my desk and found said incriminating blueprint to be missing, my guts shriveled and froze in fear. I felt sick—very sick. The originals were there, yes, but the concepts Weimer the Elder had asked for were missing—all of them. Even my little scribblings! I can't even begin to describe what it was like. Perhaps being stabbed with an icicle would be the best way to describe it. I felt all cold inside and my palms dampened in panic. No. I was not a free man. The intercom crackled to life, but I was too numb to react.

“Is Michael Kerrigan on the clock?”

“Yes,” Donahue answered for me, “he’s at his station, getting ready.”

“Could you tell him Weimer wants him in his office.” Oh God, I was reliving that same nightmare!

My manager turned toward me with some strange unreadable expression—what was it? Suspicion? Distrust? God only knew, and I was panicking too much to put much thought into it. “I’ll tell him right away.”

I remember shaking my head—probably saying ‘no,’ but I couldn’t be sure—and Donahue saying something. He seemed angry. That scared me even more and I chose the unknown rather than the known for some odd reason. Facing Donahue’s anger seemed a bit more terrifying than facing the huge, gaping maw of the unknown that Saul Weimer represented. Either way, somehow my feet managed to find their way up to the main office without pitching me over the edge and into the belly of the literal, mechanical beast (though that definitely seemed like an option at the time). And, arriving at the door to Hell, I didn’t knock so much as randomly threw my numb arm at the door. It must have worked, though, as there was a reply—and at least Saul didn’t ‘bark’ like his dad. With something of a sobbing breath, I opened the door and prepared to meet my fate.

The place was a shambles—literally. All of those file cabinets I remembered had been opened. All of them. Their contents lay strewn about the room like inky entrails. I began to wonder if he’d ransacked my section like that. After all, that was the only way he could’ve found that little bit of incriminating evidence. As I lifted my eyes to my Judge, I saw that little cherry unrolled between his hands. I suddenly felt very naked, especially with how Saul acted when he noticed me standing there like a criminal at the gallows.

“Ah, Mr. Kerrigan!” he smiled brightly—hardly the noose I was expecting. “Good morning to you! Did you have a lovely evening?”

“I-I did.” I barely managed to stutter.

“Did you spend a night at the pub, then?” At least he knew the local pastime. Either way, I was tossed further into confusion by the small talk. Would you do that to someone you were going to throw to the dogs?

“Ah. No, no—I have a family. We spent the night in the park.” I wrung my hands, trying to dry the nervous sweat on my palms.

“Mason Ridge?”

“No, no—Rivermire.”

“Ah—that’s right.” He spread the blueprints out over the cluttered desk. I could see my original concepts peeking out from beneath. Oh dear God, he knew! “You live in Pariah Town.”

“Y-yes sir.” From the look on his face when he met my eyes, he realized I was nervous.

“Come now, Michael.” He smiled, moving out from behind the massive mahogany desk to clap me on the shoulder. This geniality surprised me, considering his surname was Weimer. “You’re not in trouble!”

I didn’t believe him. “Then why am I here, sir—if it’s not too bold of me to ask?”

“Ah, yes!” back behind the desk he went. “So. I did a little snooping today while I tried to make heads and tails of my father’s mess. He put you up to this, didn’t he?”

Once again, I didn’t believe him, but for another reason. His father’s mess? Putting me up to it? Was I *not* going to burn alive in the furnace? “He-he...”

“Well come on, man—spit it out!”

I stared at the floor, wringing my hands. “He said that steel-carbon alloy was too expensive. That he wanted me to redesign the engine compartment because he wasn’t going to spend the...money on it.”

“Ah, good old dad.” He rolled his eyes, rolling the new design up and tossing it in the corner, “Always about the green—it was his god, practically. Either way, that doesn’t exist anymore. I’ve got a shipping agreement in the works so we can import that alloy—there’s a place in Canada that manufactures it, you know—and use the original concepts. They were fine as they were, after all.”

I thought I was going to faint. “So.”

“So?”

“I’m not in trouble?” I asked in a voice that was practically a squeak.

Saul looked up at me, eyebrows practically at his hairline. “Why would you be?”

“Well, I-I thought t-that if you found those sketches you’d th-think it was me.”

“Why would I?” his eyebrows descended slightly “Let’s be reasonable, Mr. Kerrigan. My father was a miserly bastard. I watched him deal in business all of my life, so I can spot his work in an instant.”

“That makes sense.” I nodded, the adrenaline still flowed through my veins. It made me tremble so—though in relief this time.

“So—off you go.” He replied with another one of those dazzling smiles. “You’ve got work to do and I’ve got this mess, I guess you could say!”

“I guess.” We both chuckled at that. “Good day, Mr. Weimer, sir.”

“Good day.”

Good God, I was a free man again!

“Would you lookit that,” Nathan Hull, Harper’s replacement, mused.

“Huh?”

“Weimer the Younger can talk to his workers without shouting.” He pointed out the window-wall toward one of the lifts up to the repair bay. Saul Weimer seemed to be deep in conversation over some schematics with his brows knit in conversation. An engineer I didn’t recognize explained animatedly while Donahue stood off to the side, grim. From what I saw of the schematics, they were his work. I found it strange that he wasn’t the one explaining it—Donahue was always happy to explain things in detail if you didn’t understand something he said. Saul, to move onto the more pleasant part of this memory, was wearing a blue waistcoat today. I hadn’t noticed in his office for the nervousness. It stood out against the grey and brick-red of the factory. It was sort of festive, really, and a bizarre yet pleasant sight.

“I think my heart’s failing!” I clutched my chest dramatically, throwing my other arm back and splattering ink all over Hull. You could barely notice against all the other ink stains.

“Right! I think I can handle this guy breathing down my neck!”

“Cause he won’t sink his fangs into it.” Son-of-Dracula definitely lacked the vampire aura, I had to admit. Hull looked over at me, stared, and then laughed heartily. I’m not the

most humorously-inclined person, but I think the lack of tension made Hull—and the rest of the factory, really—a bit giddy from relief or, perhaps, from hope. Saul Weimer, from what I saw from my narrow little window out to the world, was the dawn of a new era at Weimer Advanced Aeronautics. I couldn't quite help myself and I smiled slightly. However, while Saul didn't seem to be staring at us from across the docking area, Donahue definitely was!

“Hey—look alive,” I tapped Hull's shoulder with a roll of paper, my eyes never leaving the stock-still Scot, “I think Donahue's taking old Dracula's place.”

“Shit.” Hull's head went back down close to his desk, “What's crawled up his arse, anyway?”

“Huh?” I asked, knocking over my ink well (with the appropriate expletive, of course) and attempting to mop it up with my handkerchief.

“Donahue. You haven't noticed that he's been acting like a flaming dick ever since Weimer kicked the bucket?” Hull explained it as if to a small child. I wasn't sure whether or not to be insulted.

“He hasn't acted like that to me.” I offered in something of a small voice. He'd been infuriatingly roundabout, but he hadn't been necessarily annoyed.

“That's 'cause you're his favorite.” Hull gestured toward me, his eyes somewhat hard behind his mass of black curls. Why had he been so upset? He'd only worked at the factory for a month, “But ever since Old Weimer died, he's had a bug up his arse about the new boss—”

He had, hadn't he—been a bit uptight about the whole situation. I tuned Hull out as I tried to mop up the spill and thought. Ever since Donahue had mentioned the change of hands going on up top, he'd been suspicious—not of the whole situation (from what it seemed to me—but what had I known?), but of Weimer's sons. Well, his *son*, anyway—Saul, to be precise. The why behind it confused me to no small measure. Everyone was actually a bit happy now, hopeful even. To top things off, there had been a dearth of strange accidents over the past few weeks. Saul Weimer had even adjusted safety protocol to keep his new workers protected—after his father, could someone who at least pretended to give two figs

about the us (not to mention let me off the hook for Weimer the Elder's greed) here have been so bad? When I glanced over, it seemed that Hull had finally realized I wasn't listening to him, but the 6:30 whistle saved me from my rather annoyed coworker.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Nathan," I replied, pulling my cap from my drawer and shrugging back into my coat, careful of my inky fingers. The handkerchief stayed hanging from the corner of my worktable.

"Yeah. Right," Hull muttered as he went about organizing his work station—he was annoyed about being ignored, it seemed, but I tended to do that when one's statement began with 'you're so-and-so's favorite.'

Either way, there I was—just minding my own business—when I found myself between two somewhat familiar figures (thankfully, neither of them were particularly large and only one was Italian). Not thinking much of the situation as I headed down the stairs, I merely made my way to the line gathering on the far end of the factory—I needed to clock out. Not being the most aware of my surroundings, the two fellow worker-ants had to tug me back before I noticed they were attempting to catch my attention. It seemed my own inability to take in the world around me had ruined their chance to be discreet about it.

"You lived in Skid Row for a while, right Kerrigan?" Rosco—the aforementioned little Italian—asked from my right. What a strange question to ask!

"Up until five years ago, yeah."

"Cause you were promoted." The man on the left, a smelter from the looks of it, but he was new. His name began with an 'S' but it was too Eastern European for me to remember.

"Yes. Moved with the wife and kids up to Pariah Town." Better quarters, but not better treatment—being squashed in the middle meant that everyone else looked down on you (even if they were physically looking up).

"Noticed." Rosco noted, and I couldn't help but notice the way he sized me up despite the fact that I'd known him since I was hired at Advanced Aeronautics eight years prior, "You still keep in touch Downhill?"

"I do. What of it?"

The little Italian cast a look back as one of the supervisors hurried in the direction of the younger Weimer's office, "You hear about what's happening in Trinity Commons?"

"No." I remember blinking like an owl against the confusion, "What's happening in Trinity?"

Rosco regarded me like I was some sort of idiot for a moment (to be fair, I'm not all that bright), which probably helped me little if at all in terms of his scrutinization—something he still seemed to be doing. Or perhaps he wasn't regarding me as an idiot, come to think of it, the look was more one of insult than of accusing idiocy, "Let me keep it simple for you then: We're getting tired of having shit roll down from uphill, and we're getting a lot of promises from White House hopefuls now that elections are coming up. Here I found out that Weimer's even backing one of the guys—heard of Lawrence Dent?"

From his tone of voice, he definitely didn't expect me to—and I didn't, to give him credit! "No."

"Go figure. But you should come down and see him. It'll be worth it."

"Really, Rosco, I can't—Ester's waiting for me and she'll have supper on—" I didn't get the chance to finish, as Rosco had me by the arm. He even plucked the punch card from my stunned hands and clocked me out before pulling me into the blinding autumn sunset. Damn the factory for facing west!

"If she would've been here, she'd want you to go, too." He explained as he and his smelter friend lead me Downhill toward the crumbling wall that quarantined Skid Row from the Industrial District (not that you could tell the difference between the two). I tried, politely, to protest, but I found that the only diplomatic option was to follow the rather pigheaded shipping worker. At least I managed to catch Donahue's attention before the early-evening trolley clanked away to Pariah Town.

The descent was just as I remembered. It wasn't that everything became shabbier and shabbier the closer you came to the river—it was just that more and more of the place lacked true color. The smog blowing over Skid Row and the river quite literally coated everything and didn't give dye and paint much of a chance. Though after living in Pariah Town for years, it was a bit of a shock to come back to a place I hadn't seen since I was

eighteen. Strangely, everything looked about the same—it'd all been frozen in a certain state of decay that reprinted itself into my psyche. Even now, I find it strange how the memory of your childhood home can blur when you're away long enough. Though, I have to admit, there was a level of nostalgia involved if you could call it such. Pariah Town was relatively clean, so returning to the grime-encrusted, sewer-labyrinthine streets of Skid Row was halfway between nonchalance and a shock to the system. Suddenly, I felt very out of place. Whether Rosco and his relatively silent friend realized this was unclear. But, either way, they lead me into Trinity Commons as if we were on a Sunday stroll—a very awkward Sunday stroll.

Trinity Commons was actually as big as I remembered, but like the docking station during Saul Weimer's address, it was made small by the crowd. I saw a number of familiar faces, but the familiar faces didn't seem to recognize me, so I left well enough alone. The place itself was actually just a repaved section of the riverside section, itself. Way back, an aether line had exploded, sending a portion of the town sky-high. No one ever bothered rebuilding condemned housing, so it'd been paved over. Some loved one had carved a crude memorial on a bit of stone, but I was unsure if grime and weathering had defaced it. The crush of bodies didn't allow me to see that far. That wasn't, however, the focus. After a moment, I realized I was the only one looking anywhere but forward—toward the fountain where a platform had been hastily constructed, and toward a man who stood near someone rather familiar. He'd drabbed down since work, but I could still see that blue waistcoat! The crowd's murmuring didn't subside as the other man—someone I suspected was the mysterious and wonderful Lawrence Dent—stepped forward.

“My friends,” he began, smiling so brightly I thought I'd need my sunshades. The hand-held amplifier carried his voice (the man had to be a stage actor!) over the crowd. “I'm not going to bore you with drawn-out allusions and petty, upper-crust lies. It's all rather obvious why you're here—or is it? You all do know why you're here, don't you?” I glanced around as the murmuring increased in volume. Donahue's familiar tweed hat bobbed its way toward me in the crowd, and I suddenly felt a bit better for myself—I wasn't alone! “Ah. I

can tell from the tone that you understand your plight, my brothers and sisters. You are here because you have been put here.

“They preach to you down here in Riverside—they tell you to educate yourself to improve your status, yet your children need to die of black lung in order to keep the family from starving. Your mothers, wives, sisters must whore themselves out or else be sent to the mills to be drawn and quartered. My brothers—do you not go down into the depths of hell to churn and churn and churn metal for war machines from dawn ‘til dusk until your body gives out or until you’re incinerated—whichever comes first? What we have here is the crudest form of the feudal system! Look around! They even separate you from the middle class!” *Then* I felt out of place! “Not only is there a wall—crumbling like the institution—but the buffer zone of the industrial section to poison your air and foul your water. You have been put down here by *them*.” That smiled darkened for a moment, his voice turning to a growl as he stabbed his finger accusingly uphill.

Dent growled some other things, but the crowd’s murmuring had become something much more than a dull roar by that point. A sudden tap on my shoulder freed me from a daze I hadn’t realized I was in and I shifted to look. Donahue nodded to me, his green tweed cap pulled low on his brow, and gestured with his head toward the east gate. Rosco and his friend seemed to be in very animated conversation and gave me room to take my leave without causing too much of a fuss.

Thus freed from my strange Italian friend, I squeezed through the crowd after the grim, silent Scot. We didn’t talk until Trinity Commons and Skid Row were safely behind the wall. I started to thank him for intervening, but Donahue cut me off.

“What the fuck d’you think you’re doing down there, Michael?” his brogue thickened noticeably, and I involuntarily shrunk away a bit at the use of my given name.

“I ran into Rosco—from shipping? He said I should listen to that Dent character.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m from Skid Row seemed to be his logic, Donahue, but—“

“No damn ‘buts’ Kerrigan! That was an idiotic move and you know it!” he removed his hat a moment to scrub at his hair. I thought I saw some grey in among the black, but I

could've sworn he was no closer to thirty than I was. In the distance, Dent was roaring and the crowd roared back—something about the American tradition of rising up against the elite oppressors and taking what was rightfully ours. The crowd seemed to approve of the reference to the supposed rebel heritage. He began screaming about Marie Antoinette soon afterward, and the crowd roared in approval to something I couldn't quite make out. Something about a 'Downhill revolution'—some bad pun on the French Revolution, no doubt.

"All I did was follow them," all right—so I'd been lead! "down to Skid Row to listen to some man talk, Donahue. What harm can come from that?"

His grey eyes were grave as he regarded me. I felt pierced, "More than you know, Kerrigan."

We walked in silence for another stretch of road. Our shoes crunched over the dirty cobblestones in a decidedly unsanitary fashion and, now and again, the steamy hiss and metallic clatter of a trolley sent us skittering toward the gutter. Most of the trolleys were remotely operated, so we couldn't count on a conductor to slow the car down for us if we happened to dawdle too close to the track. After the last one had passed, I worked up the courage to continue, "I'm not sure I quite understand what you're talking about, Donahue."

The Scot was silent for a while, regarding the road before us as if it were some sort of map, "Did you notice anyone familiar at that rally, Michael?"

Again with the name! "I saw a lot of the sublevel workers. I used to see them a lot when I was still smelting."

"They don't count." He interrupted, "Not anyone who lives in Skid Row, Michael—did you recognize anyone *not* from the slums?"

I had another owl-in-bright-light moment, "Come to think of it, Saul Weimer was up on stage with Dent—"

"Exactly!" the Scotsman rounded on me with an energy I'm sure sheep noticed right before a wolf pounced on them, "Both of them didn't belong there! Why else would a Robber Baron's son be behind a guy that preaches about the robbing of the poor to feed the rich, huh?"

“Perhaps he sponsors Dent?” That received an indignant snort and an expectoration into the gutter, “Or perhaps he gives charitably?” After all, Ester and I tried to do so every Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“Ha! Doubtful! You don’t dress that rich when you’re charitable, Kerrigan, believe me.” he nearly sneered—a tone I’d never heard in Donahue’s voice in all the years I’d known him, “And notice how he tried to hide those clothes, too! He knew he didn’t belong—neither of them did. You know that the Weimer estate is out of town, and I happen to know that Lawrence Dent fellow lives out on the Ridge, too. “

“Surely they wouldn’t be that hypocritical...?”

Donahue rounded on me again, seeming shocked that I’d even uttered those words. I instantly felt a fool for even opening my mouth in that situation. However, his face clouded back over and melted back into barely-neutral. He was being patient with me. I knew because my mother used to give me that very same look when I was a boy. “Hypocritical? Kerrigan, did you see Weimer skulking around behind that Dent character or not?”

“I thought I did—he had the same waistcoat.” Another trolley whooshed by as Donahue continued the you’re-an-idiot stare. I didn’t like it.

“For God’s sake, Kerrigan, you said so yourself that you saw that sneaky bastard up on stage with that Dent fellow!”

“I said I thought I did, Donahue—he just had the same waistcoat!”

A trolley whooshed by, punctuating the continuing stare from Donahue. His grey eyes were icy. They chilled me. “Kerrigan, for the love of God, open your eyes! Those two are up to something!”

“And how the Hell do you know! What if he’s just interested in the cause?”

“The cause?” he advanced on me. I nearly stumbled over the trolley rail, but managed to right myself. He didn’t stop until my back was against the façade of a shoemaker’s shop. The bricks dug into the back of my head. “Michael—don’t you hear them? They’re down there, screaming about Marie fucking Antoinette and how robber barons like Saul Weimer are telling the lower classes to ‘eat cake.’ Now, Saul might be all sunshine and roses at work,

but the bastard's up to something! Why would he be riling those people down in Skid Row up and convincing them that people like him are the cause of everything?"

I tried to look away from those piercing eyes, but he kept drawing me back. "W-what if—"

Donahue grabbed me by the jaw and forced me to look him in the eye. "What if what, Michael?"

"What if he's got a heart—unlike his dad. He actually cares, Alec, he w-was kind to me when his father tried to make me do something against safety protocol."

"So? That was a bloody business venture, Michael—of course he changed it! Are you seriously so stupid that you can't see what's in front of your damned face?"

My stomach churned, my blood boiled. Not this—not from him. "I'm not an idiot, Alec—I can see he's got a good heart!"

"A good heart?!" He gave me a shove and my teeth rattled as I hit the brick behind me. "My God, Michael—if his father was Dracula, then Saul's a fucking changeling. He's got a damned glamour over you and the rest of those poor people! You're a goddamned idiot if you can't see that!"

"I'm not an idiot!" I don't know what possessed me right then, but I pulled my arm back and slugged Donahue as hard as I could. My knuckles hit tooth and I felt the cut, but my wounded pride didn't allow me to wince.

Unprepared, as he was, Donahue's head snapped back and he stumbled into the street. But Donahue was tough as nails, and he'd been in too many scraps before to be phased by the world's weakest punch no doubt. He held his mouth for a bit, but was soon back on track. I yo-yoed back and forth between regret and righteous anger for a moment before deciding on the latter. Donahue had it coming if he was going to slander the name of a good man.

"Fine." His eyes were hard and they made me quail. "You cast your lot in with the likes of him, and you'll end up like Harper."

"That's not true, and you know it."

“Like Hell it isn’t!” His voice echoed down the street, and a small group a few feet away made a hasty retreat into a tailor’s. I kept my back up against the wall. “I’ve been trying to help you, Michael, but I see now that you can’t help a man who’s willingly blind. You’ll end up like bloody Harper—but mark my words, Kerrigan, I won’t be at your fucking funeral.”

I didn’t reply—I merely stared, wounded hand clenched. However, he soon lost interest in me and disappeared up the street into the evening fog. While I’d originally felt that had been the right thing to do, that little voice in the back of my head taunted me, and made me wonder if I’d been wrong the whole time.

Donahue said nothing to me at work the next day. There was some sort of unconscious truce—or maybe a cease-fire—that involved disappointed glances and long, uncomfortable silences. Well, long, uncomfortable silences from me, anyway. Donahue had been sort of my older brother after my promotion—slugging him in the face hadn’t exactly been something I was perfectly fine in doing, despite the circumstances. However, Donahue, himself, was chill. It gave me the shivers despite the fact that the potbelly in the corner was glowing nicely. After a few hours of that, I was more than happy to leave the factory for lunch!

A turnover from the bakery on Second and a couple of random pieces of fruit seemed like a good enough lunch, though by the time I’d finished with my treat, I was beginning to run late. I ate my apple as fast as possible, throwing the core into the gutter as I hurried back toward the factory, and started in on what, well, I assumed to be some sort of fig, anyway! I looked a bit like a gawky suckling pig as I held it in my mouth and waited for Phineas to run my information through the security system. Impatiently, I bounced on my heels and alternated between looking at my watch and looking around to see if I was the only one coming back late from lunch. Though I doubted I would be in any sort of trouble on my first offense—especially from the new Weimer. My heart raced a tad slower at the thought. Slipping my watch back into my pocket with a bit of a stress-relieving sigh, I occupied myself by scanning the area while Phineas worked. Nothing new, it seemed—just

the warehouses across the street, grey upon the grey cobbles, a bit of garbage that had rolled down the street, now and again some worker, grimy with red-rimmed eyes, would pass by and ignore everything around him. A burst of laughter echoed down from the alley next to the cotton mill—the girls were on break. I'd only just started to eavesdrop (out of boredom, of course) when I saw something familiar: a bright green waistcoat disappearing into an alleyway. How strange I thought it was to see Saul Weimer's signature bright waistcoat and his carefully groomed hair turning the corner. Hastily, I snatched my ID card from Phineas and tried to sneak after them. I ended up stepping out in front of a horse-drawn cart, the driver livid and the horse startled, but no one poked their head out of the alleyway, so I continued on.

Peeking around some shipping crates, I noticed a man that was most definitely Saul Weimer talking with Rosco and the tall Eastern European man from the day before. They were speaking in low tones, though Weimer seemed surprisingly sharp—his light eyes flashing as he gestured almost threateningly to my two fellow workers. I couldn't hear them, but it sounded dire. Still struggling to make out words (which I couldn't, alas), I craned forward just as an envelope and what looked to be a security card—you couldn't miss the little blinking light on the right corner—was handed over to Rosco. This seemed decidedly clandestine! Seeing that their little meeting was drawing to a close, I turned to hurry back across the road, and was surprised to see Donahue doing the same thing. Had he seen this as well? Confused further still, I bounded toward the factory and up to my sections as a bit of a cold feeling began in the pit of my stomach. Had Donahue actually been right—or was I just seeing things? As I flung my coat over the back of my chair, I could only hope it was the latter. Donahue didn't look up as I sat down, but I attempted to initiate conversation—questioning, rather—anyway.

“Were you following me earlier?”

“No.”

“I thought I saw you behind me—near that alleyway.”

Donahue gave me a rather dark look as he moved to pull a new bottle of ink from inside his desk. “I wasn't following you, Kerrigan.”

I twirled my pen around in my hands watching the shadow swing across the concepts for a new, wholly aether-powered engine. “Did you see what I saw, then?”

It was very quiet, the scratching sound of his pen sounded louder than the roar and rumble of the factory beyond our window. I was rather glad Hull hadn’t returned yet. “Do you believe me now, then?”

“I don’t know.” I kept my eyes down, but I could tell he was watching me. I could feel those slate eyes stabbing my skull.

“Suit yourself—you’ve already seen something with your own eyes, Kerrigan. I suggest you come to a conclusion on your own.”

“But Weimer’s been good to us so far—would he really be...”

“I said figure it out on your own!” I shrunk back like a scolded child and then relative silence settled on the room. Strangely, Hull hadn’t returned, but at that point I was more absorbed in trying to make something ten-by-twelve fit in a five-by-nine space as well as disappear into my desk to escape the chill emanating from Donahue’s desk by the window. The knuckles on my right hand throbbed with phantom pain every time Donahue’s eyes swept my way, and it took a moment for me to realize that it was what true guilt felt like. Somewhere beyond the window, probably down in the furnaces, there was a resounding *boom*, though it wasn’t wholly uncommon for a boiler or an aether generator to blow. Such sounds tended to fall on dead ears when you’d worked at Advanced Aeronautics for a few years, and mine had long since learned to filter out explosions. Judging from the fact that Donahue had bent back over his work again, he didn’t seem to think anything was wrong, either. This delusion continued for the next half-hour or so. Unfortunately for me.

A resounding thud broke the cold silence between my supervisor and me, and our heads whipped around to face the door, where someone was desperately and clumsily trying (and failing) to use the doorknob properly. Brows knit, Donahue pushed away from his desk to lend a hand. A rush of excited voices pounded at the door along with the desperate knob-turning, and I suddenly felt a sense of *déjà-vu*. Little did I know would be the third time in my life in which the tidal noise of a thousand voices would usher in something that would change my life forever. But, first things first, Hull practically fell through the door as

Donahue freed the knob—Hull had jammed it in his haste. Eyes alight and curly hair flying more wild than usual around a flushed face, he gasped for breath a moment before trying to usher us out the door.

“You have to see this—get to the dock.”

Donahue resisted the incessant tugging on his sleeves. “See what?”

“Riot!” Hull gasped before adding his own footsteps to the stampede of tired, sooty workers that hurried up to the top floors to watch.

“Still think this is all coincidental, Kerrigan?” Donahue turned to me in the doorway, voice like acid. I opened my mouth to respond, but Donahue had already jumped into the crowd and let the human river carry him to the top of Weimer Advanced Aeronautics. Two strides later, I was swept into the torrent, as well.

I think I learned, at that moment, what it was like to be inside of a geyser—all that force building up behind you before propelling you up and up and up. The feet of the thousands of men that kept the bowels of Advanced Aeronautics churning thundered on the stairs and walkways. I could feel it shudder beneath my feet, and I waited for the resounding crack that would send us all into the furnaces below. Thankfully, that never came. Barely walking on my own, I fought to keep my balance as the human stampede reached the top floors and out into the blinding autumn sunlight. The cold air sucked the condensing air from my lungs, but I felt little warm—even up here we were packed shoulder to shoulder, and the heat stayed. Or, perhaps, that was from the shock. Using my slim build to the advantage, I squeezed through the crowd nearly to the safety railing to see the riot Hull had been so desperate to tell us of.

Far below, a dark shape like a tidal wave rushed out of the riverside district. Whether it had sound, I’m still unsure—the excited murmuring of a thousand confused men cancelled out whatever noise came from below, and the sub-zero winds carried it away. Not like most of us needed it—the vast majority of us came from Skid Row, where riots were as regular as an April shower. One of this scale, however, was unlike anything we’d ever seen before. As the excited fever from the crowd began to infect me, the human tide below began to seem almost like one of the Plagues of Egypt—raging locusts armed with rifles and aether-prods

and whatever was at hand. You could see muzzle flare and the sudden green-blue-white fireworks display of an aether discharge. Anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way was not only swept away by the tide, but destroyed by it as well. A small dragonfly of a helicopter buzzed into view a block away, dipping and weaving a safe distance above the raging torrent below: a surveillance drone.

“Radio!” someone behind me yelled. “Someone turn on the damned radio!”

There was a flurry of feet as someone ran to find one. After all, if there was a surveillance dragonfly drone, the newscasts wouldn’t be far behind. No news company would pass up reporting on this plague of human locusts! Unhappy with the few victims they’d been able to claim, the swarm began to march on the factories. I remember, back when I was a kid, there was a dead rat on the sidewalk outside. It was during the spring, so insect activity was at a peak—but the first to get there were the ants. Within hours, they had the body stripped to the bones. In a day, even the bones were gone. Changing roles, the rioters set their sights on the ‘rats’ in this case. Most of the factories on this side of the industrial district were old and bordering on decrepit. They lacked the advanced security systems that most houses even had nowadays. Down the street, flames leapt from the upper windows of a crumbling red-brick warehouse. As the flames spread and the workers fled, the mob swelled in number. What was it, I wondered, that convinced these people that staying there among the rioters was any safer than a burning building? I found myself gripping the rail, white knuckled, while the rusty paint cut my palms. The sting was barely noticeable. Outside, the mob swarmed closer, leaving aether discharge and fire in their wake. The collective employees of Advanced Aeronautics sucked in a breath as the tide surged toward us. A few gasps and cries of panic—voices high and tight like violin strings—rose from high in the docking bay behind and above me as our doors were tested. The entire building seemed to rattle for a moment as the mob rattled the doors and beat the walls with a fury I wasn’t aware any group of human beings could ever muster—it was like having a Titan knocking on your door. But, just before the first screams were readied, the tide broke and moved on to the mill up the road. There were sudden firework blasts of aether discharge as the walls and doors were tested one more time, but that was it. The sea of anger surged

onward, leaving us like an island in bedlam. Another louder murmur ran through the cowering workers as a young riveter climbed up onto the wing of the currently-docked airship and held his radio up so the the rest of us could have a narration to the chaos.

“—crowd seems to be entirely composed of factory workers and slum dwellers. First reports of aether-fire occurred mere hours ago in the riverside district, and have advanced at an alarming pace. So far, there have been fifteen reported deaths, and the number continues to rise—”

The rest was drowned out by a more ominous rumble.

Some of us looked up as others looked down. Above rose two special forces Valkyries, flying low and, on the ground, a counter-tide of dark-uniformed riot police advanced on the mob. Their scaled armor—designed to deflect even aether discharge—glinted in the blinding sun, and the charges held at the tips of their suppressor spears reflected eerily off their riot shields. The Valkyries rumbled to a halt, hovering over the thick of the crowd, as their bellies disgorged smoke like sleeping dragons: tear gas. Protected from the noxious fumes by eerie, glassy-eyed gas masks, the special forces troopers advanced. Weakened, panicked, and in pain, the mob was no match for a more organized violence. We all watched in stunned silence as the rioters fled before the blinding aether-discharge. Charred, smoking, twitching bodies were tripped over by comrades and stepped across by the unyielding riot police.

“—have since dispatched riot police in key locations around the riverside district.” The radio could just barely outdo the Valkyries’ angry, shrieking engines. “So far, the police have had luck in quelling the violence, though rioters have broken through defenses at the harbor—“

Funny how the indiscriminate aether-fire of the riot police wasn’t considered violence! A sudden gust of wind, reeking faintly of tear gas, blasted my face, and another one of those dragonfly drones rose in front of me. It’s many-lensed, compound ‘eyes’ regarded me before flitting over the rest of the crowd and back out again. The factory speaker system screamed to life above the din not five minutes afterward, just barely managing to cut in above the rest.

“The police have informed me that we are all to stay inside until further notice. I’m sorry for any inconvenience, but please sit tight. I’m sure they’ll have everything sorted soon.”

And that was it. I didn’t notice it at the time, but Weimer didn’t seem in any way distressed or dismayed. Back then, I chalked it up to wanting to keep us nervous workers in something of a calm mood, but now I know his actual intentions. Stupid me for not figuring it out sooner. Unable to do anything else, I watched the detritus build up behind the retreating human tide with its soundtrack of pistol-crack, aether-snaps, and wild, helpless, heart-rending human screams.

It was nigh twelve o’clock before we were given the all-clear. Even then, in the dark you could see the flashes in the distance where the battle waged on well within the walls of Skid Row. By then, though, we were all so tired and so numb from cold that it was all we could do to begin the long shuffle down to the first floor to clock out. Mr. Weimer assured us that we would be paid for our troubles. Thank God—the end of the month was nearing and, with it, the ever-looming bills. Bleary eyed, I let the press of bodies carry me down to the ninth floor so I could grab my things. I barely noticed as I shoved my hat down onto my head (backwards, it seems) and managed to shove my stiff arms into my coat. Hull had already been there, it seemed, as his workspace had been hastily cleared and his effects were missing. Donahue’s station, however, was still covered in ink bottles and piles of schematics. Odd—I would’ve thought he’d been there before me. Shaking my head to dispel some of the cobwebs therein, I slipped out the door and made to follow the retreating backs now seven floors below me. It was then, however, that I noticed one figure going in the opposite direction.

Donahue was impossible to miss—that long, albeit stiff gait was so singular! Had the rest of the factory not been deserted, I would’ve thought that Weimer the Younger had called them all to his office, but I was quite sure that I’d seen many supervisors amid the crush of bodies now desperate to flee the industrial district and cower in the safety of their own homes. His earlier words flitted through my head, wraiths that roused a sense of

impending dread and sent an uncomfortable tingle up my spine. Did I think something was amiss then? Why yes—yes, I did! Adjusting my hat correctly, I hurried up the stairs after him.

Indeed, the entire plant was empty now. It was so obvious up in the higher levels with only the echoes of the constantly churning furnace below. Even that, however, was reduced to a muffled, sleeping heartbeat without the furnace workers to kick the machine into action. What a sleeping giant this place was, with the heart and guts pulsing slow with unnatural sleep! I couldn't help but notice how the aether and electricity lines bolted into the wall seemed arteries and veins, going to and from the different stations and gathering together in the sort of perverse nerve cluster that was Weimer's office. I felt, suddenly, that even the slight noise of my feet on the walkways would wake this creature—that, at any moment, something would rise from the depths and swallow me whole. Needless to say, I was winding myself up, and the relative silence was both striking and eerie. It brought a queer feeling to the pit of my stomach. I fairly slunk the rest of the way up, and found myself hunched over like a frightened cur by the time I reached the office level. The door to Weimer's office stood ajar, letting out a sharp dagger of yellow lamplight and the sudden, barked punctuation of angry speech. Breathing quietly, evenly, through my mouth, I edged closer—the sudden feeling that I shouldn't be here stabbed at me and nearly sent my sorry carcass running back toward the entrance. Curiosity, however, was not a force to be reckoned with—and Donahue had been so enigmatic as of late that I couldn't help but eavesdrop. A meddling man, I'm not, but there are some things you just have to know. Donahue had said I needed to start processing the information around me and, well, now I had a chance to do so. Still taking deep breaths, I leaned up against the wall and ever so slightly peeked around the door jamb.

“—saw you with that Dent rabble down in Trinity Commons.” Donahue growled. No doubt he was leaning over Weimer's desk, just inches from his face—he did that to me when he was angry, anyway.

“Oh, did you?”

“And I’m not the only one, either. I’m probably not the only one fooled by this ‘steal from the rich’ garbage.”

“Why-ever would you think the concept is garbage, Mr. Donahue?” Weimer seemed far too chipper and it put my teeth on edge. “I know very well how Glasgow is doing at the moment—not well, it seems, considering your emigration. Is the problem not the same?”

“It’s the bloody same everywhere!” the Scot roared. The sound of wood and flesh connecting followed—he’d, no doubt, slammed his fist down on the desk. Another Donahue-ism I was quite familiar with by now. “But we don’t have robber barons like yourself trying to stir everyone up with empty, inflammatory speeches like your chum Dent does. What? Is he your mouthpiece?”

A pause. “‘Mouthpiece’ is such a strong word, Mr. Donahue...”

“But that’s what he is, isn’t he! And as for *you*, I know your type. You rouse the rabble and take advantage of the unrest—a social businessman. You’re just a bloody vulture—a conniving, manipulative monster who’s willing to sacrifice his ‘people’ to the riot police just for a show!”

“Now, now, Mr. Donahue, they died as heroes for their cause.”

“Martyrs for your own gain!” Donahue’s voice hissed, growled, spat—I lamented not being able to see Weimer’s reaction. “Most of these men are too ignorant to realize you’re just a sewer rat with his eyes on the money. And, when you’re done, you’ll toss them out with the garbage. Their friends and families will vow revenge, and you and Dent will encourage this pell-mell rush against the police, against the military next, no doubt—and for what? Just a rallying cry. Just to point at a pile of bodies so you can say ‘look what they did to you—fight back!’ You’re just trying to get everyone riled up so you can blame it all on someone else.”

“But it *is* someone else’s fault,” came the smooth reply—the tone nearly laughed, itself.

“Sure—you paid it to be Rosco’s and Szczerkak’s fault. You gave them security keys for those factories, too, so you could keep yourself in one piece and get rid of your business competition at the same time.”

“I’m not sure I like your tone, Mr. Donahue.”

“Too bloody bad! Though you won’t have to worry about it anymore. I *quit*.” The Scotsman spat the last two words and I froze as heavy, angry footsteps stalked toward the door. They paused before they reached me, though I could see Donahue’s hand on the knob. “And just you wait—you’ll see the tables turned on you yet. Rats like you always get flushed.”

He stepped forward and we locked eyes for a moment—both of us surprised to see the other.

“Oh, do we, Mr. Donahue?”

There was no space to answer. There was the sudden sound of light, rapid footsteps and a sound and smell like lightning right before Donahue spasmed where he stood. His jaw clenched, breaking teeth, as his body seized. Smoke leaked from behind his locked jaw and his eyes blackened and shriveled in their sockets. His lips blackened and pulled back as blood ran from his ears. An aether discharge cooked Alec Donahue from the inside out before he even knew what hit him. It was all I could do not to vomit—from fear, from disgust, from guilt. What had possessed Saul Weimer that he found this to be the fitting punishment? The ghost of Harper’s remains flitted through my head for a moment along with a sickening sense of *déjà-vu* for the second time that day. Oh God, this was just like before, only this Weimer was more physically capable of coming after you!

Frozen in place by shock, I didn’t have a chance to react to the sudden movement inside as Saul Weimer moved to pull Donahue’s body inside—he had to get rid of the evidence, after all! There was a dry crackling sound like corn husks as Weimer grabbed the body by the shoulders and tugged. However, it wasn’t as if I had the best hiding spot, and it wasn’t long before my presence was noted. We stared for a moment, neither of us really knowing what to make of the situation. This state of limbo continued for what seemed an eternity—that was, until Saul’s face split in a goblin grin. Perhaps Donahue hadn’t been all that far off in calling him a changeling.

“Oh, Mr. Kerrigan,” he sighed, straightening. In one hand he held something similar to a suppressor-spear, only this one was smaller, lighter—deadlier. “I really wish you hadn’t seen that.”

This, I knew, was my cue to run—so I did. Behind me, Saul Weimer called something to my quickly-retreating back, but it was lost in the deafening rush of blood in my ears and the thunderous beat of my heart. I jumped the last two flights of steps, having to somersault the last as I tripped. The door was in sight, and I was nearly free at least! Well, that was, until the doors slammed shut of their own accord. The security system—I’d forgotten the security system! It was remotely operated from Phineas’s station *and* Weimer’s office! The oily bastard had put the factory into lockdown! I threw myself at the door like one possessed, but only gained a bruised shoulder in the process. Tugging at the massive handles produced tantalizing rattlings and glimpses of the street outside, but nothing more. Thin as I was, I wasn’t able to squeeze through a gap that small. I’d been swallowed by Hell, it seemed. And now, more than ever, the darkened chassis of the factory seemed ominous and deathly. My mouth dried and my hands began to shake as I thought through my prospects—there were no windows save for high up in the docking bay, and even then I wouldn’t survive a jump of a few hundred feet. Or, perhaps, suicide would be better than what lay in store for me—either way, my death would be ruled as an accident, but at least this way, Ester would have a recognizable body to bury.

“I told you not to run, Mr. Kerrigan,” his voice taunted me over the intercom as I ran back the way I came, desperately looking for a weapon—any weapon would do! “You’re only prolonging the inevitable.”

Perhaps an engineer’s tools would work. They had to wear those suits to keep the aether from char-broiling their innards and barbequing their brains, too. My gorge rose as the memory of Donahue’s smoking corpse came to the forefront. I was sick in the corner for a moment, but it didn’t last long—blind panic kept me from dwelling on the purge. My heart was going to jump out of my chest, I was sure, I could nearly taste it in my throat already. Beneath my feet, stairs skimmed by like blurs; I was skiing uphill, a task made effortless by the adrenaline pumping through my body. I could taste it. What possessed me

to go upstairs, I'm not quite sure, but either way, I was trapped. Any way was better to go than going quietly, I suppose. That didn't mean, however, that I wasn't running blind. Literally—Weimer had hit most of the lights.

Cursing, nearly sobbing, I stopped to catch my breath on a landing. My back against the wall, I could feel the pulse of the factory—it was mocking me, you know, with life when my own was about to be cut tragically short. My breath ragged, I tried to formulate some plan. Where could I hide when my pursuer knew the factory as well? If I went down, it would be more than easy to fall into a pot of molten metal or be sucked into churning gears and if I went up, I was heading for a long drop and a sudden stop. Lose-lose. Snake eyes. Goddamnit. Still breathless, I danced from foot to foot as I went about choosing how I wanted to die. Weimer, however, didn't give me much time to do this. Dropping from the landing above—he was a spry monster, wasn't he!—I just barely managed to jump as the crackling whine of his charging spear began. His thrust drove the point deep into the brick where the aether snapped and crackled angrily without anything to consume. Saul wasn't all that happy about it, either—his normally jovial face twisted into demoniacal, frustrated frown. Suddenly, I was in some sort of Grimm Brothers woodcut. Lucky me.

“Won't you hold still, Mr. Kerrigan?” he said through clenched teeth, grunting as he freed his spear—its brassy length gaining a rainbow patina from the indiscriminate aether discharges. Perhaps it was made of copper? I suppose I'll never know—and I'm not very sure as to why I remember this to begin with. “This will make things so much easier for you in the end.”

Unfortunately for him, I discovered that I have survival instincts. Though I was never one for wrestling, I found myself in some sort of grappling match—the sort you see on Grecian urns and such. From years working in the sublevels, I'd built up some muscle, but not much. Either way, I was barely a match for Weimer and his obfuscatingly slim build. Perhaps frenzy leant him an almost supernatural strength—or perhaps Donahue had been right to describe him as a changeling in the first place. Halfway pinned beneath him, I quailed at the sight of those eyes that pierced me like daggers and drove shafts of icy panic

deep into my core. Between us, the kaleidoscopic light of built-up aether nearly blinded me and sent eerie shadows dancing across Weimer's face. I was seeing the Devil, wasn't I?

"Just give up!" Weimer hissed, trying a new tactic with his spear. Instead of attempting to stab, he tried to crush my windpipe with the length of it, driving all of his weight onto the spear and bending my arms at awkward angles. My elbows gave out and the scalding metal pressed hard against my throat—the next thing to go would be my windpipe. Giving a mute cry—all I could muster around the choking metal—I bucked and kicked, sending my knee into Weimer's diaphragm. Nothing, I tell you, *nothing* was more relieving than the sight of the Devil's face contorting in shock as he toppled over and struggled for breath.

Because I was close to the stairs, I chose to go up—and I ran. Shaky and panicking, I found myself running out of breath easier than I should've, despite the adrenaline, even! Chest heaving and heart fit to burst through my ribs, I took cover behind a couple of helium tanks. Stupid idea, I know, but a man needs air to function, and right then I had disproportionate amounts of air and adrenaline in me. This, of course, is probably why I didn't expect Weimer to recover himself in any amount of time and sling himself up onto the landing next to me—I hadn't realized that I'd been sitting there long enough for him to bounce back. Giving a strangled cry, I rolled just as the spear came down fully-charged onto the metal. Aether sparked and I felt that familiar, burning tingle where my body touched the metal of the walkway—aether was dangerous, even at a distance! As I scrambled forward, I felt and heard the manic thrusts behind and the air burned with raw energy.

"Do hold still, Mr. Kerrigan!" I rolled just as another thrust dented the metal where my shoulder had once been, and I teetered over the edge. My fingers tore and bled as I scrambled for purchase—Weimer forgotten until his lithe, demoniacal form loomed over me with a face jack 'o lantern-lit as his suppressor spear charged. "You've made this so much harder than it should have been!"

Up went the spear, down came the spear—I felt the sparks fly off the metal and sting my face and arms, felt the sudden tingle in my limbs as my muscles danced to a tune I wasn't mentally aware of. I could feel my eyebrows singing—it smelt a bit like lantern oil, come to

think of it. Either way, I spasmed, my hands loosed, and then I was falling back—down into Hell with the Devil’s son looming over me and grinning like the Cheshire Cat. But, instead of soul-shriveling hellfire, I came to a sudden and somewhat painful stop: the wing of the dry-docked Leviathan. My luck, it seemed, felt it should visit me in this, a time of dire need—even if most everything below my neck complained at her intercession. When my mind finally caught up with my body, I scrambled—mostly by memory, all these ships were built alike, and I should know!—across the wing and down toward the gondola. Perhaps—perhaps—he hadn’t seen me. Perhaps he thought I fell down into the furnace or had been chewed up in the machinery that ran the bellows. Ha—the desperate daydreams of the feeble-minded!

Unwilling to look into Saul Weimer’s suddenly soulless eyes, I scrambled to the most dangerous place to hide and hoped, like a child in their parents’ room during hide-and-seek, that Weimer would never find me. As I slunk into the engine room, I squinted my eyes against the dull blue glow of the aether pool and its un-insulated wires. The only thing left in the room that was moveable (and not deadly) was a pair of discarded gloves. They had that same bronzeish alloy that riot police used in their armor—it was a natural aether ground. However, that really didn’t help me; they were useless without the rest of the suit, and made shoddy weapons by themselves (though I put them on anyway)! So, finding the darkest shadow I could, I squeezed my eyes shut and dared myself to wake up from this nightmare. I never did. As soon as I began to relax, the sound of footsteps floated into the open engine-room door and past the silent, still, crippled gears that made up the Leviathan’s inner workings. Weimer had found me.

“Mr. Kerrigan? Come now—I know you’re in here! You might as well come out and face your fate like a man, Mr. Kerrigan.” He was right outside the door now, still wheezing from the kick—and now I could see his feet. My throat clenched, and it took all my willpower not to scream. “After all, you are cornered now.”

I made the mistake of squeezing my eyes shut again. There was no sound from Saul Weimer—how peculiar! Confused, I turned to look back toward the entrance but found nothing. Here, stupid me, he was actually standing right next to me. As his suppressor spear

sparked to life, the aether dancing around on the floor in little, seemingly innocuous sparks, I felt everything clench and chill. Once again, Donahue’s image came back to me like a revenant and I couldn’t help but wonder what sort of pain seeing that would put Ester and the girls through. So, on instinct mostly, I dove. The spear discharged with a sudden lightning crackle, sending bolts out in all directions like fiery snakes that stung my feet and legs as they struck. For as small as it was, Weimer’s weapon held quite a kick. My mouth felt dry as I saw I was cornered against the aether pool and those massive, arterial wires; if Weimer didn’t get me, the pool and fuel lines most certainly would! Either way, though, I was still cornered. I faced my fate with dull eyes, though half of me wished he’d say something to me instead of smiling as he was—as if this was all in a day’s work. Or, perhaps it was!

“I’m so sorry about this, Mr. Kerrigan, but I do require a level of secrecy in my work. I can’t have the cat come out of the bag so soon—you understand, right?”

“Fuck off.” I felt it was necessary to say something incendiary in Donahue’s honor.

“Goodbye, Mr. Kerrigan.”

It occurred to me then that I was still wearing an engineer’s grounding gloves—they’d hardly help the rest of my body when that spear discharged, but it would give me a chance to take Weimer out with me. This proximity to death makes one so bold, it seems! The spear swung down and I, used to handling the massive machinery in the sublevels, just barely managed to catch it before I was skewered. Oh God, the pain was unbearable! A thousand little fires started in the nerves just past the reach of the gloves, and sent my heart racing faster than it should’ve. I’m surprised it didn’t burst. Either way, death-emboldened, I pivoted and drove the point of the suppressor spear into one of the aether fuel lines. And then—whiteness and pain. I couldn’t even tell if either of us screamed—it was just us, and pure, unfiltered, searing light. Was this, perhaps, what Heaven was like? Either way, it was oblivion, and I let it take me in my helplessness.

I don’t remember much about what happened next, only that I was in extreme pain and someone was shaking me. Colors danced past my eyes in nauseating pirouettes for a

moment before the white and red of a medic's uniform coalesced. My aether-addled brain, however, hadn't been very capable of responding intelligibly, so I merely stared at him dumbly.

"Welcome back to the land of the living." He was a young man, tired-looking—no doubt from having to treat the riot victims. "Stay very still Mr. Kerrigan—you're very badly burned."

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw a white blanket—blood and worse beginning to soak through—tossed over a stretcher. A charred hand bobbed in time with the other two medics' footsteps as they carried the changeling's body away. Weimer, it seemed, hadn't survived.

"It's a good thing you had those gloves," Oh? Had I actually done something intelligent for once? "It routed most of the aether off to the side. But, still, could you tell me what happened, Mr. Kerrigan?"

I ran a dry tongue over burnt lips and winced. "Riots..."

The medic sighed. "Jason—get the third ward ready. It looks like those bastards found their way in here, after all."

Strangely, no one ever took my story any farther than that. No one could believe that Weimer Advanced Aeronautics had been spared by the mob, so it was far too easy for them to accept the somewhat delirious reply of a badly-wounded man. Either way, I wasn't going to correct them. After all, who would believe me? It wasn't as if random young, wealthy men tried to stab someone with a stolen and modified suppressor spear, anyway (or so I hoped). That, however, was the least of the troubles weighing on my mind as I listened to a set of great-pipes groan out "Amazing Grace" at Donahue's lonely funeral. Ester stood behind me like a guardian angel—hands on the handles of my wheelchair (God, I'll be glad to get out of this damned thing)—and the girls stood off to the side, being patient at the funeral of a man they barely knew. How unfortunate. His death, however, was a doorway for my own life.

The riots would continue—this I know. Just because I'd inadvertently killed Saul Weimer in self-defense didn't mean that this Marie Antoinette nonsense was dead. Saul Weimer was only one puppeteer, after all, and the mouthpiece was still at large. Even if there

was one or two more conniving bastards still around, Lawrence Dent would cause all the trouble he could with that big mouth of his. I sighed along with the wind that whispered to the pine trees, dropping a few needles here and there. My youngest daughter skittered away for a moment to collect a pinecone while the dour priest ended his eulogy to the sparse crowd—my family and a handful of workers (well, those that hadn't joined the riots and died) the only ones in attendance. Stuck as I was in my chair for now, I let my daughters throw a handful of earth into the grave's gaping maw. The dull thud of soil on wood sounded so similar to funeral bells. Poor Donahue.

As for me? Well, I plan to leave. It's been two weeks, and still the riots continue. I've seen the faces of too many coworkers on wanted posters, and I can only imagine this will happen more and more as even more mobs of the ignorant join a fight led by the same people who keep them crushed into the dirt. A place like this, the epicenter of ignorance, isn't a good place to raise a family—much less try to eke out a living for yourself to begin with. So, with grim countenance, we face the West, and flee before the rising tide. We can't stop this vicious cycle of violence and ignorance but, perhaps, we can take some time to hide from it and pray it passes us by.