

*Embedded
Heart*

JESS SEBASTIAN

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Time was running out. Kettec stood in front of the condemned Palace, cool night air tickling the back of his neck. They were going to knock it flat. In the name of “modernity” the government were going to tear down the historical seat of power in Capath, obliterate the genesis of their own expansion from city to empire. Kettec knew it would be even worse than the all-too-common destruction of a monument. He knew that somewhere, deep within the poorly mapped catacombs that twisted beneath the ancient edifice, was a cache of artefacts that could change history.

He told himself again that there was no other choice. His attempts to use his position at the Office of Records to mark the Palace as a protected site had taken weeks to assemble, only to be brushed aside in moments. Kettec had tried to wheedle his boss—the implacable Mrs. Panossia—into granting him funding for an exploratory mission, and, predictably, failed. Even his final, long-shot, underground tactic was taking too long. It was time for the direct route. He was going to break in and find the evidence that would save the only place he cared about. That would keep his dream of rectifying an age long injustice alive.

Kettec gulped down a deep breath and approached the base of the outer wall, feeling exposed in the moonlight. He checked behind himself, trying to dispel the invisible pair of eyes he felt on his back. The night was quiet and the street deserted. Coiled around buildings thirty times their age, the bronzed steam tubes that provided power hissed

and rattled. Gas streetlamps flickered, casting pools of yellow light onto uneven cobble stones.

Satisfied he was alone, Kettec placed a hand on the ornate carvings that covered the walls of the Palace. The stonework was worn smooth by time and hands just like his, touching history. Kettec changed his caress into a grip and began to scale the Palace.

Despite his bookish inclination, Kettec was no stranger to climbing. As he pulled himself upward and closer to where he intended to force his way through, he felt his muscles warm up. Losing himself in the methodical euphoria of identifying a route and ascending through it, Kettec momentarily forgot his nervousness over his impending crime.

Bitterly cold wind whipped at his hair and chilled his knuckles, whispering in his ear and daring him to fall. It was nothing new; Kettec had already been inured to its call. One arm length at a time, he hauled himself higher and higher.

Before long Kettec had reached a modern window in the antique facade. Clinging to the outside sill, Kettec released and shook his limbs one at a time to restore blood flow. He looked back down at the street, feeling elation. The cobbled road looked like a narrow vein at this height, the streetlamps colourful baubles. He returned to his task.

Carefully removing a shim from his backpack in a practiced one-armed motion, Kettec inserted the thin piece of metal between the sill and sash. Wiggling it from side to side, he heard a clank as it connected with the locking mechanism. Bracing himself with his specially-made climbing shoes, Kettec put some weight behind the shim, and wrenched it horizontally, hearing a crunch as it forced

EMBEDDED HEART

through the lock.

Restowing the shim, Kettec then tried to force the window upward. His grunts of exertion fogged the glass in front of his face. The window didn't budge, and he cursed under his breath. It was difficult to get a good grip, and, as much as he was comfortable at this height, frantic jerking motions and precarious climbing positions didn't really go well together. Kettec rocked the sash from side to side trying to loosen it. The window must not have been opened recently and bits of paint and wood flaked off in his hand. Trying again, Kettec succeeded in creating a narrow opening and used that to push the window up further, slapping at the sill with his palm.

Good enough, thought Kettec, wedging the sash open by tilting it in the frame before pushing his head and shoulders through the space. Before him, the Palace's hallway was bathed in the moonlight. Marble floors polished to a mirror-sheen and gilded furniture all glittered in the pure white light. Even this out of the way corridor was a breathtaking display of opulence and history. No doubt bound for an auctioneer's racket and then hidden away from the public as a conversation piece for the corpulently wealthy.

Once inside, all he had to do was find his way to the catacombs. Kettec started to heave himself the rest of the way in. With a loud pop, the window dislodged itself and slammed down on his shoulders, trapping his backpack—and most of his body—outside. Kettec let out an involuntary yelp and scabbled at the inside wall to keep from sliding the wrong way out.

A shout echoed up from the entrance hall below. "Hey! Who's there?" The commanding sound of footsteps heralded the approach of the night-watchman. Kettec thrashed

harder, but couldn't get proper leverage without risking a fatal drop onto the street below. Light accompanied the growing sound of the footsteps, and before he could work himself free, Kettec was blinded by a hand lamp.

"What are you doing?" shouted the guard, a dark silhouette behind the light.

"Help!" Kettec urgently squeaked.

The watchman dropped his lantern and grabbed Kettec's arms, helping to pull Kettec in. Wood creaked and groaned and the pane of glass cracked with a horrible crunching noise just behind his head. With a final burst of effort they tore Kettec through the rest of the way, removing the sash from the frame completely.

Kettec tumbled onto the ground, gasping for air, his face pressed on the cool marble. The guard scrambled up and kept him pinned there.

"Shoulda let you drop, you thieving git. Now let's see—" The watchman righted his lamp and brought it closer. "Kettec!?"

Kettec finally recognized the voice and twisted around to see the face of his captor. "Ganzer?" Technically they were colleagues, as the Office of Records oversaw the Palace's security. Kettec's cheeks burned with embarrassment. He'd been frustrated at being caught and having his plan to save the Palace ruined, but to have it also be by someone he knew?

"What in the goddess' name are you doing?"

"Uh...trying to...y'know, get evidence to stop the Palace from being flattened?"

"Oh. Yeah, that whole thing. Maybe I should thank you fer try'nà save my job." Ganzer let out a chuckle and helped Kettec to his feet, roughly patting wood slivers, glass shards,

EMBEDDED HEART

and paint chips off his clothes. "How'n the heck did you get outside of that window?"

"I climbed?"

Ganzer laughed again, revealing two black molars. "Right, right. Like it was nothing."

"So," began Kettec, "What now?"

"Well I'm not gonna book ya," said Ganzer, eliciting a sigh of relief from Kettec, who was glad not to have to explain to his mother why he was in jail. "But I am gonna march you back to the office, where we'll wait for Mrs. Panossia to come in."

Kettec's stomach dropped.

That was worse.

"Kettec, do you understand?"

Kettec looked up from his shoes, pulled back into reality by his name and the direct question. He was seated in his boss' cluttered office, slumped into a chair he was unfortunately well acquainted with. Mrs. Panossia peered over her desk at him, worried creases rippling upward from her brow. Kettec had been thinking about the embarrassment of being caught, the next step of his plan to save the Palace, and how he'd rather be anywhere but here.

He'd completely missed whatever had just been said. Kettec took a moment to assemble a contrite look on his face before speaking.

"Yes ma'am," he said, "I'm very sorry, and it won't happen again."

Panossia let out a weary sigh. That hadn't been the right thing to say.

She ran a hand through her close cropped hair, “Well, I’m going to assume that you were checked out for my whole speech. It was very gentle, even eloquent. Now you get the short version. You’re fired.”

Kettec choked on his first attempt at a response and swallowed hard before speaking. “But the Palace is going to be destroyed!” he croaked. “Soon! We can’t let it go without—”

She raised a hand. “Yes, we can. And this isn’t just about last night...perhaps we could have overlooked this incident, or spun it as some misplaced zeal for your position in Records, but,” she gestured at the two of them, “Right now? Me having to explain everything twice? This means you get the boot.”

“But—”

Panossia stood and straightened her suit-jacket, again cutting him off. “The Office of Records is disappointed that this was necessary. You are terminated immediately. Please gather your affects, and leave the premises. Records wishes you the best of luck with your future pursuits.”

Her words thudded dully across the room, rolling into Kettec like a series of body blows.

Panossia’s face softened from a grimace into something simply weary. “You were a passionate worker, Kettec, but you need to get out of your own head. Think of the consequences *before* acting. Okay?” She extended her hand.

Kettec, rose, shook the proffered palm, and stumbled from the room. He shuffled down the drab hallway towards the pit, an open room filled with partitions and desks.

Emotions swam over Kettec as he made the walk back. He was exhausted after spending the rest of the night in the

EMBEDDED HEART

office with Ganzer, waiting with nervous anticipation for his impending conversation with Panossia. Ganzer had continued to calmly fill out paperwork.

Even after all that worrying Kettec had never expected he'd get fired. Now what? The Palace was so important; it was hard to accept that he'd failed.

His concern for the Palace was born out of more than merely the desire for historical preservation. As one of the oldest buildings in Capath it was officially titled Palace of the Arms but was more colloquially known as Absollo's Insurrection. All his life Kettec had been fascinated by history, and by Absollo in particular. He felt that the man was misunderstood and had been vilified to fit a more convenient political narrative. Kettec also had some sense that Absollo didn't adhere to the repressive social norms of the time, making for even more cause to have the man cast as evil. A continued slander of his supposed identity which sparked an uncomfortable feeling of personal indictment.

The desire to know what had really happened during the Hundred Years Siege, when Absollo had supposedly deceived his countrymen out of spite, had driven Kettec all through school, and culminated in him becoming an employee at Records.

He'd gathered evidence from primary sources on the Palace's catacombs for years, making a startling discovery. Within Absollo's last journals were some allusions to where he'd hidden the old artefacts of rule along with the rest of his records.

When the news had come down that the Palace was going to be levelled for some other development, Kettec's personal project had turned into a race against the complicated machinery of Capath's government. The collection

that could absolve Absollo's name from being synonymous with betrayal, and provide the basis for an entirely new interpretation of history, was in danger.

And now he'd lost his greatest tool. If he wasn't working in Records, he'd no longer have access to helpful documents or to the channels necessary to try and put a stay on the destruction of the Palace. He was just another citizen.

At least he was lucky that he wasn't a prisoner.

Arriving at his desk in the pit, Kettec stared into the empty box that had been placed on his stool. He didn't *feel* lucky. He felt a deep, back-itching irritation alongside a sharp anger at being delayed. It was only moments before his emotions started to run cold and crystallize into doubt. What if he was already too late?

He had to focus on his only other plan: the underground exploration.

Kettec put his notebooks into the box, and his sickly Thornike plant on top of those. The revelations were coming faster now, things that should have been obvious. With no job he'd lose his income. No more buying dinner for Fenna and Ediox. That new climbing harness was out too. Kettec started dumping things into the box haphazardly, bruising the leaves of his dishevelled plant further. It meant he wouldn't be able to move out. He wouldn't be able to come into a job he liked and do the work he cared about. Tears welled in his eyes. What was he supposed to do now?

Keeping his head down, Kettec scooped up his stuff and lurched towards the stairwell. Somebody might have tried to say something to him, but he could only hear his heart in his ears. Down the stairs and through the foyer, Kettec pushed open the door to Records with his free arm.

EMBEDDED HEART

He staggered out into the street. Into the narrow roads and dizzying heights that made Capath, a metropolis of the new strangling the ancient.

With the last of his tears drying, Kettec looked out over the city. He'd ascended a public staircase, and then clambered over a banister, ending up on one of his secret ledges. Capath was a vertical and dense place, built up over the centuries into a maze of marble. Buildings often had ornate outcroppings, stone shelves that ended in leering gargoyles or solemn saints. Most roads were only open to foot traffic, and wound back along themselves, multiple levels sweeping through the city. This intricate yet haphazard construction meant that there were plenty of abandoned or seemingly inaccessible places, and over the years Kettec had catalogued his favourite hideaways. His explorations were out of necessity at first. Those early school years had been difficult, and any nook that he could sequester himself in had been indispensable.

After years of climbing out of desperation and fear, Kettec had grown stronger, less afraid. Now he could climb almost anywhere, find ledges where he could be all-seeing yet invisible to those below. Kettec sat on the pock-marked stone and nibbled at the sandwich that was to have been his working lunch.

Capath stretched out below him with its clusters of cathedral spires and arched bridges interspersed with occasional skyscrapers. The new incongruous slabs of steel and glass stared down on their more ornate elderly neighbours. Kettec could see the main road stretch away from him on his left, one of the few straight pathways capable of supporting bulky steam-carriages. Farther off to the right was the

ring-station, its huge glass panes suspended in brass and glittering in the sun. Next to the delicate looking structure was the ring itself, a suspended track that circled Capath and led out to the rest of the nation. He couldn't hear the chuffing of a train as it pulled into the station, but he could see the tufts of white smoke spewing from its engine and imagine the sound.

The city always inspired such awe in him, even now, as he mourned his shattered plans. It was so built up, filled with so much art and architecture that this panoramic view threatened to overwhelm him. Every statue had a story, and there were so, so many statues. That there lay almost as much of the city below them, buried and forgotten, gave Kettec a shiver. He would still go underground tomorrow, as planned. It was the only method left to reach the Palace, but he had selfish reasons for looking forward to it as well. Things were simpler down there. Old stone would not judge him.

Kettec finished his sandwich and realized that he'd left his choco-square in the office cooler. That the lost dessert almost brought him back to tears was a good indication that he wasn't ready to go back home yet. His mom had been so proud of him for getting into Records, he didn't want to face her as an unemployed blubbering mess. Or at all really.

Back down on street level, Kettec sat down at a public communications hub. The hub was just a few benches tucked into an alcove and crammed with people. Each person had a rectangular device of varying sizes on their lap or next to them. The metal boxes were studded with an array of buttons, and chattered constantly, spitting out thin strips of paper. Finding a free seat, Kettec fished around in his box for his LINE terminal, shoving papers around and pricking

EMBEDDED HEART

a hand against his long-suffering plant. The device had, of course, made its way to the very bottom of his things and Kettec was just about ready to upturn the whole container when his hand closed over the cool metal slab.

With terminal in hand, Kettec then retrieved a thick cord from its recess in the bench's armrest and plugged it into his LINE. The machine clicked and whirred as steam shot into it, spooling up. If his LINE wasn't the most ornate among those already hooked in, it was definitely the smallest. It had been an uncommonly extravagant gift from his mother upon completing school. Kettec's previous LINE had been so big and clunky as to be practically immovable, and it still rested at the foot of his bed.

The LINE finished warming up and hummed in his hand. Kettec waited for any messages to make their way through the connective wires that cobwebbed Capath. The first slip of paper jerked out, bearing the name of one of his previous co-workers and Kettec crumpled it up without reading it. The next was from Ediox.

*~Yo K, u good for tongiht, yea We hangin with erylone
WEEKENDN OH YES!q*

Kettec had long ago given up on berating Ediox for her error ridden and often unreadable messages. Using the round buttons on the top of his LINE, Kettec thumbed a message back.

~Yeah. Where are we meeting?

Only after he hit send did he stop to think about whether he actually wanted to go out with his friends. Could he really just go back to goofing around today? And while he could count on Fenna for some sympathy, Ediox would probably rib him mercilessly about his firing. Her teasing often targeted him and got out of hand. He wasn't sure if

that was because she liked him or because she didn't. Was that really what he wanted for tonight? A message interrupted his internal debate, reminding him that he'd already sort of decided.

~Shiyt i foogrot the inert was closed SHIT! Just meet ther neway an weel figure it out LATES

Kettec sighed, resigned to his fate. This would probably be a good thing for him. Keep him from moping for tonight at least. Kettec reached around to disconnect the cord just as another message rattled out. It was Ediox again.

~Uh dud you hear antyhing from Fenna?

~No, why? he messaged back. Her answer was immediate.

~Nuffin actuly, just forget it see ya soon dummy!

Kettec put his LINE back next to the Thornike. Staring down at the plant, he took a moment to re-arrange things around it better, and puzzled over what Ediox had meant by "anything." Had something happened? It was strange of her to inquire about someone else.

Walking now, Kettec was back obsessing about his firing and the Palace problem, vacillating between holding back tears and holding in shouts. His body, almost on its own, headed towards where The Inert Gambler hunched. The recently shuttered restaurant had been an old establishment in an even older building, and it had served as their hangout spot ever since Kettec had met Ediox during the later years of their tutelage. Its closing had been abrupt and upsetting for many. Kettec thought about how quickly a place could disappear, how all the memories and paraphernalia could be washed away by the tick of some Lord's pen.

Kettec followed his feet for blocks, but eventually his ability

EMBEDDED HEART

to navigate a crowd on autopilot was overwhelmed. His attention snapped back to the sidewalk and Kettec narrowly avoided ploughing into someone's back with his box. Instead of the expected shift-workers filtering slowly into the streets, there was an orderly line of people flanking either side of the unusually wide road. Those of all ages enthusiastically waved little pennants about and craned their necks to peer down the street. Kettec became aware of some distant music, brash trumpeting, rising in volume over the sound of the crowd.

The scene around him finally clicked into understanding. Kettec remembered that a parade was being held today to mark the coronation of their newest Lord, and he had bumbled right into its path. Kettec attempted to make his way out to a side street, finding that the space behind him had filled with people. In his attempts to squeeze past, Kettec earned dirty stares from fathers balancing children on their shoulders and insults from those whose feet he trod on. He quickly gave up. He would have to wait it out.

Twisting back around to face the road, Kettec tried to protect his box from being flattened by the increasingly oppressive crowd. In advance of the procession, the constabulary came past and pushed people away from the curb, exacerbating the problem. It became hard to draw breath, and Kettec tried to focus on anything other than being trapped. He could squeeze through a collapsed tunnel whilst hundreds of meters underground no problem, but replace stone with people and suddenly it was all too much to handle.

To abate his encroaching panic, Kettec focused on recalling the last article he'd half-read about their new ruler. It was strange, despite all his fascination for the affairs of

state in the past, current politics bored him. Details of the royalist paper's complaints came to mind: the Lord was an outsider, he was too young, and he didn't have Capath's interests at heart. The commonly held belief was that whatever the paper stated, the opposite was true.

Capath had seven Lords—elected into the position despite the title—each with the dual role of governing the nation as a whole and the capital city itself. Two of the Lords were special cases, and were appointed not by Capath, but by the other two major nations of the world. The idea was that the terrible, globe-spanning wars of the past could be avoided if everyone had a little stake in everyone else. There were likewise Capathian rulers abroad, and part of the agreement was that these shared-rulers would be afforded everything that a native Lord would. They were to serve as equals.

In Capath, new Lords were traditionally welcomed with a parade. So, if the local Lords wanted to keep their pointless, lavish processions to mark their own coronations, they were forced to throw them for the outsider rulers too. Kettec watched, staring as a marching band oozed past, followed by a phalanx of dancers, waving coloured scarves in time with the beat. He was jostled on all sides by a cheering, flag waving mass. This new Lord was clearly more popular with the average citizen than the other six ossified old men and women that currently held power.

Some soldiers marched past, spears upright and clad in gleaming anachronistic armour. How much were they being paid?

Government waste was not something Kettec would have normally thought about, except that budgetary constraints had been evoked when his early excavation

EMBEDDED HEART

proposals were denied. He scoffed silently to himself: With a crew of three and a few weeks exploration, he'd have a historical treasure to show for it. Now a hundred soldiers strutted past and that was for what?

The main float approached, preceded by a band of jesters, bells suspended from every joint. The colourfully clad performers capered and threw candy to children, cackling as they did so. Finally perched upon a garish cart, Kettec saw their latest Lord. His dark skin set him clearly as a resident of the Ubran Republic and Kettec stared closer, trying to remember the name he'd read in the article. The Lord was young, only a few years out of school by the looks of him. He was around Kettec's age maybe, which was really young for a Lord. The man sailed by, his eyes flitting over the assembled mass. There was something about him that held Kettec's attention; that demanded it. He was swaddled in an ill-fitting suit of the Capath style but managed to make the wretched garment look stately through sheer force of will. The new Lord projected dignity using his impressive height and commanding stare. His sharp blue eyes fixed on Kettec for a moment. Time stopped.

Mell Wess. That was his name.

Then the float went past and Kettec let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Kettec waited out the tail end of the parade and snuck away as soon as he could. The Lord's electric gaze was soon forgotten, and by the time Kettec turned down the street to the Gambler, he had fallen fully back into his other concerns: recently fired, palace in danger, not moving out, forced to put on a face for his friends, an impending conversation with Mom. And, to top it all off, no choco-square.

JESS SEBASTIAN

He comforted himself with the thought that at least tomorrow he could go underground. He would get up and enter a different world, one where he was alone with history. Down below there were no government jobs or difficult conversations, and his only barriers were tangible stone. He was going to reach that cache one way or another, official backing or not. Absollo was not the man he had been made out to be; neither a deviant nor a traitor. And if Kettec had to dig through half of Capath to prove that, then so be it.

II

The sign for The Inert Gambler, depicting a coatless man slumped over a bar, had been removed since the last time Kettec had been here. He could see the outline where the stone had been protected from years of sun bleaching and rain-borne grime. The defunct establishment's wooden doors had been bolted, and newspaper had been taped up over the inside of the front windows.

This had always been a quiet side street but now it felt dead. It was not a destination anymore, just a passageway. Kettec lowered his box to the cobblestone sidewalk and loitered next to the restaurant's husk, waiting for the others to arrive. Capath's serrated skyline bit larger and larger chunks into the setting sun, and Kettec blew a long ragged breath out from pursed lips. The day was finally over.

Someone turned the corner and Kettec brought his gaze down from the fading light to see Fenna approaching. Despite the moderate weather, she had already switched into her winter clothing of a thick fabric skirt, long-tailed jacket, and knitted scarf. All grey. Her fair, almost white, hair caught the last of the light, illuminating her like a candle.

"Hey Ket," she said, her typically quiet voice barely audible over the ambient noise of the city.

"Hey Fen!" returned Kettec with false cheer. She would probably be the first he'd tell about his firing, but not tonight. A quiet moment passed between them, and Kettec noticed that her eyes were rimmed red, as if she'd been crying.

Fenna might have asked him a question but it was drowned out by an incredibly loud whooping holler. Ediox had arrived.

“Oooheyo!” Ediox stomped over, slapping them each on the back. Her perpetual smirk widened into a grin. “Weekend starts now! One more second in that factory and I’d have died in real life. Hurk! Done,” she mimed lying stiff in a coffin, arms crossed. After a peal of laughter, Ediox pivoted and gave Fenna’s scarf a pat. “Love the wrap bee-tee-dubs!”

“Thanks,” Fenna stammered, “I made it myself.”

“No way! Hook me up! Anyway, you get fired or what, Kay?”

“What?” said Kettec in surprise, already struggling to keep up with Ediox’s conversational whiplash. “Uh, what makes you say that?”

She gave him a witheringly dry stare and pointed at the box between his legs.

“Oh.”

Ediox let out a peal of laughter. “Goddess what an air-head! So what happened? You finally snap and stab someone for talking ill about Absollo?”

“No! It’s a long story.”

“Oh right, so you were waiting for us to get settled in before telling us. Good idea!” said Ediox.

“No, I wasn’t going to—”

“Let’s goooooo!”

Ediox charged ahead, Kettec sighed. In hindsight, the box packed with his desk stuff was kind of a give-away. He and Fenna chased after their excitable friend. Ediox led them quickly through the turns of the city, stopping in a small courtyard filled with cafés and restaurants.

EMBEDDED HEART

“Shit!” yelled Ediox, exclamation bouncing off the closed shutter in front of her. “Why is it closed!? One sec guys.” She dug a wrinkled pocket notebook out from her scuffed purse and consulted it intently.

Kettec and Fenna took the opportunity to catch their breath, knowing that Ediox would not be swayed to settle for one of the nearby restaurants. She had an ongoing list of the best spots and would accept nothing not to her tastes. The last time Kettec had suggested a place, Ediox had made gagging noises, going on to hyperbolically list all the things she would eat over an automaton-prepared, warmed up, conveyor-meal. She got to corrugated tin slathered in pig offal before he had convinced her to stop.

Fenna touched Kettec’s elbow gently, drawing his attention. “Are you okay?” she asked. Fenna’s eyes were wide with intense concern. She knew how much he’d had riding on the job. He also noted her puffy lids again, and remembered Ediox’s out of place question from earlier.

“Yeah. Fine.” Kettec lied. “Um, what about you?”

Fenna studied her boots intently for a second. “Café tomorrow?”

“Sure,” said Kettec. Something was definitely up.

Fenna nodded. “I’ll LINE you.”

Ediox let out an exaggerated “Ah-ha!” and set off again. She didn’t make it far before remembering to check that she was being followed. “Come *on* guys!” she whined. Sharing a look, Kettec and Fenna continued their chase.

At last, the three of them were seated at some mom-n-pop shop in the lower level of a converted cathedral, and Ediox’s earlier idea to get Kettec to explain his firing seemed to be forgotten. Under Ediox’s guidance, they quickly ordered.

Then Kettec and Ediox argued over which serial story was the best while Fenna tried to decide if the bowl of stew she'd shared with Kettec was uniquely delicious or plainly disgusting.

Eventually their food was finished, and it looked like Ediox was going to lose their friendly debate, not from any cogent point, but from the fact that Fenna—finally coerced to give her opinion and break the tie—had taken Kettec's side. Ediox, rather than admitting defeat, turned the conversation around to current events.

“Did you all see the new Lord today?” asked Ediox.

“Only in the paper,” whispered Fenna, “Imagine being a Lord at our age.”

“Well this is an argument I won't lose, right here. Hottest. Lord. Ever,” said Ediox.

Kettec thought back to the parade and that split-second connection with Mell Wess. He wondered what it would be like to have the kind of pressure the young Lord must be facing, being so far from home and under so much scrutiny. Kettec wouldn't be able to handle it. He'd curl into a ball until everyone left him alone. But Mell had been unbowed. Had borne it all and looked good doing it.

Ediox flicked Kettec on the forehead. “You in there?” she asked.

“What? Yeah.”

“Wait!” she shouted, “Your job! You forgot to tell me.”

Kettec decided to avoid the painful topic all together. “Actually it's getting late.” He got up and dropped some coins on the table. “See you two later.”

“Aww boo!” jeered Ediox. “Fine, go on if you're gonna be stingy like that. But don't forget about my party next week. That goes for you too Fenna. *Everyone* worth anything is

EMBEDDED HEART

coming.”

“Sure,” said Kettec, as he turned to leave.

“Kettec!” The small voice, working to be loud, got him to spin back around. Fenna pointed at his box, which he had stowed under the table.

“Ah,” said Kettec, reaching down to slide it out. “Thanks.” He went to leave again.

“Bye, airhead!” Ediox called after him.

Kettec wandered home, his path lit by gas lamps and a gibbous moon. Removed from his thoughts by exhaustion, the trip passed quickly. Before long he had passed through the foyer of his building and was standing in the darkened entranceway of the apartment he shared with his mother. She was, to Kettec’s relief, not yet home from work. He closed his bedroom door behind him, imagining it as an impermeable stone rolled in front of a tomb. Kettec flopped into his bed, falling asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

Pre-dawn Capath was wreathed in grey, looking as velvety as Fenna’s winter wear. The crannies and crenellations of the older buildings were outlined in an inky darkness, deep, painted-on shadows that looked like ornate tattoos. Kettec shifted his heavy bag to his opposite shoulder and stalked through the half-lit streets.

He had packed quickly that morning, half from excitement to get back underground, and half from wanting to get out of the house before his mother woke up. It was a zero sum game, since eventually she would catch up with

him and be extra incisive due to his avoidance. That was a problem for the future; right now he was fine with thinking only of the catacombs.

Kettec arrived at Sheppeth Courtyard, a roughly octagonal area with an ancient fountain as a centerpiece. The fountain held an exquisitely carved woman, water pouring from between her cupped hands. She was the lost Goddess. Her fingers were worn to nubs from the passage of hundreds of years of the aquifer sourced liquid. Despite spending a significant amount of time inspecting the statue, Kettec was never able to exactly identify the woman's expression. It had probably been ambiguous to begin with, and time had smoothed her placid face further.

Storefronts and trendy open-air cafés made up the sides of the court, still closed at this early hour. Kettec sidled down an alley and stood in the middle of a narrow, single-arch bridge. Once it had crossed a small man-made canal but the subsequent years of Capath's expansion had dried it up. Now the green-stained cobblestones were just another superfluous feature of the haphazard city.

Making sure there were no obvious witnesses, Kettec hopped over the bridge's thick, cracked railing and dropped into the canal below. His backpack jingled as he absorbed the fall with his legs. Creeping along uneven stones, he made his way to a blockade of water-damaged boards, sealing off a drainage tunnel. What looked to be a haphazardly collapsed obstruction was actually a facade made by Kettec to discourage discovery. He lifted a cleverly concealed door aside, entered, and pulled it closed behind him.

Stooped and scuttling in absolute darkness, Kettec didn't bother to turn on his steam-core powered head lamp. He knew by heart every lump and bump of the passageway.

EMBEDDED HEART

The sound of his breathing filled the small space, and Kettec continued on, feeling his worries and distractions get stuck in the tunnel behind him. He thought of this tube as a passage to another world where the problems of the land above could not follow.

The closely-fit tiles of the tunnel sloped down for a while and Kettec went on, crouched and scraping his bag along behind him. Finally, the walls disappeared altogether—he'd arrived at the entrance cave. Kettec stood up and stretched for a second, then hunched back over, feeling his way in the dark towards where he had left a gas lantern. His hand bumped the metal cylinder, and with a few turns of the lighting screw, warm amber light blossomed.

He could now see the huge, naturally formed cave that had once served as a reservoir. The floor was rubbed smooth by long absent waters and undulated slightly, like a gentle stream that had been frozen mid-burble. Dark stains marked the walls, reaching three quarters of the way up to the craggy stone ceiling. His lantern's light faded before it hit the far wall.

This was his entire world. His secret domain where no one else had set foot for hundreds of years. Kettec took a deep breath, hearing his inhalation reflected back. It was if the caves breathed with him, a measured, steady sound.

Farther along the sloping walls was a tremor-created crack. Through this split in the stone was the bottom of a dry well. Up that well was a tiny, excavated room, part of a maze of tunnels and underground bunkers from the days of the Siege. This stone network was normally inaccessible from the surface as modern Capath sat on a colossal layer of concrete and mortar known as the Cap. The Cap separated the ancient from the old, serving as a foundation for

the whole city. A relatively new, artificial bedrock to replace their crumbling, honeycomb basement of eras past.

Kettec had found a way below the city, below the Cap, and he was going to use the long dormant passageways to work his way towards the Palace.

Next to the lantern was a pile of old ropes, a sleeping bag, and containers of other miscellaneous gear. Years had passed since Kettec had first crawled into here, filthy and awed.

Now he was here for a specific reason, and there was a deadline. He re-sorted the contents of his bag, packing ropes, pitons, cams, and extra steam-cores for his head lamp. Then he took out two notebooks. The first was a hand transcribed copy of Absollo's final logs. Written hundreds of years ago in the months when Absollo had supposedly went mad; the log was Kettec's primary source of evidence that there was a cache under the palace. Buried under all the ramblings—descriptions of the face of a goddess, of the shadows that chased him—were factual recordings of the causeways under the city and accounts of where the artefacts of rule were stored and moved during the Hundred Years Siege.

There had been many scholarly efforts to decipher the journal, largely funded by the government in the period of reconstruction that had followed the siege. Supposedly independent, these historians would not contradict the party line that Absollo was a perpetrator of regicide. These early accounts were cleverly biased and coloured all further research around him. It was simpler to discount all of his metaphorical language, take his writings at face value, and paint the man as the blood-crazed, murdering, betrayer he

EMBEDDED HEART

appeared to be.

Kettec was one of a few scholars—or conspiracy theorists, depending who was asked— who saw otherwise. In his reading, Absollo was a man of compassion and intelligence who had been driven to commit sinister deeds for the good of the nation.

The other book Kettec readied was his catalogue of the underground city. Over the years, he had explored hundreds of empty cuboid rooms and miles of hallway, coming up with his own notation scheme to keep himself oriented. The final result was a series of numerically sorted maps, cross-referenced with passages from Absollo's text. Kettec ran a hand over the books' battered covers, and then put them away, unopened. Unfortunately, he'd likely not be finding anything new today.

His forward progress had been stymied by a hallway that had collapsed. There seemed to be no other way around it, since the corridor served as a vital chokepoint. He had no choice but to clear the blockage before continuing. That was his job for now. Kettec might have otherwise been frustrated at being forced to chip away at a mound of dirt—at the lost time—but the underground would brook no impatience on his part. He had the scars to prove it.

Relying largely on muscle memory, Kettec followed a path along previously placed ropes and pitons up into the bunker. It was hard work climbing the well, even with a rope, and even greater challenges waited for him above.

He spent the morning packing his bag with stones and dragging it back to a room that he had filled with rubble. The single-mindedness that plagued so much of his usual day-to-day life was an asset down here, keeping him alert

even after hours of hard labour. Kettec was aware of every movement of his body and of the stone he felt in front of him. He could identify what needed to be cleared away next, and he had an idea of what lay ahead, just on the other side of this stone barricade. It was simple.

After hours of work in the dusty, stale, air, Kettec grabbed for another handful of rock, and heard the sound of sliding dirt. Dirt sliding away from him. Shaking as he brought his hand light to bear, Kettec saw an apple sized hole that widened to a hallway. He'd broken through.

Kettec smiled in the dark, a clean set of teeth poking out from a dirt caked face. Down here, progress was inevitable.

Though he wanted nothing more than to dive through the hole, Kettec knew he had to stop. Every step he took forward was another he had to trace back, and he was already exhausted. He limped along the hallway one last time, tracing his way to back to the well. Kettec slid down into his cavern and crawled up the tunnel, kicking his door out into the canal. Crystal clear sky and a noon-time sun greeted him.

A second after opening the door to his apartment, all of Kettec's hard earned elation fled.

"Kettec?" said his mom, "Come here."

Kettec went into the living room and saw his mother seated on the couch, legs crossed, with a book set aside on its open pages.

"You look like a coal miner," she said flatly. Kettec looked down at his clothes, caked in chalky grey dust. He had constructed many readymade excuses for his appearance—and disappearances—since it was important that the

EMBEDDED HEART

underground was kept a secret from everyone.

“Uh, I—”

She pre-empted his explanation. “So when were you going to tell me you got fired?”

“What? How did you hear?”

Mom pointed to the box on the kitchen table. The box he had plopped there last night and then promptly forgot about.

“Oh.”

“What happened?”

“Can I have a shower first?”

“Fine.”

Kettec picked up the box and retreated to his room. Out of habit he plugged in his LINE and then peeled himself out of his clothes and huddled in the shower. He alternated between scraping mud from his hair, and wondering about what he was going to say.

The hot water ran out before he could come up with something acceptable. Back in his room, Kettec was getting dressed when a message clattered in from his LINE. It was from Fenna.

~If you're free, I'm at the Quiet Waters. We can go somewhere else though, if you want.

That was right, they had arranged to meet today. Perfect! Kettec burst from his room and ran for the front door.

“Sorry Ma, I promised I'd meet Fenna, and I'm late! Bye!” he shouted.

“Hey! You little—”

The door swung shut on her coming epithets.

III

Mell stood in his palatial apartment, surrounded by polished wood and gold fittings. The entire roof of the suite was painted with panoramic scenes of nature and every corner was filled with loops of stucco vines. A gigantic four-poster bed was wreathed in yards of tissue thin gauze and dressed with genuine silk sheets. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the city, letting morning sunlight in to refract against a jewel-encrusted mirror above an immense vanity. Everything was sumptuously overdesigned, objects of art as well as function.

Mell hated it all.

He'd arrived to this ridiculous room yesterday after an arduous intercontinental journey, carrying only a single suitcase. This place made him feel like a loose pebble rattling around in a washtub. He missed his home country, his simple apartment, and his bed-mat. Mell looked at himself in the garish mirror. He missed his robes most of all.

After months of travel, Mell had stumbled off the steam ship and been immediately introduced to Decienne, his "First Assistant." The aged woman curtly told him that his welcoming parade was scheduled later that afternoon. Ignoring Mell's protests, she frog-marched him into a nearby clothing shop and informed the tailor that he had two hours to properly dress this man.

Although his first-ever suit had been assembled in record time, Mell looked like he had borrowed the garment from a jester. For his debut public appearance he'd been

unwashed, unfed, and basically undressed. One day of exile down, a lifetime to go.

There was sharp knock on the door and Decienne swept into the room, not waiting for permission to enter.

“Good,” she said, “You’re dressed.”

“And if I wasn’t?” asked Mell.

She ignored the question and stuck a folder out at him. “Here. Those are your new papers. Don’t lose them.” Mell dutifully took the paper bundle and set it on a nearby hutch. Decienne dug into her bulging shoulder bag and began shoving things at Mell. “Here is a purse and some coins, just until we get your depository set up. Here is a map and your ID book. Here is a new LINE, cord, and contact sheet—the other Lords already have the number for this terminal. And here are the keys to your office.”

Mell looked down at his armful of gear with bemused patience. “Is this all?”

“No. Here are your train tickets.” When it became apparent that he did not have a free hand, Decienne just garnished them on top of his wobbly pile. “Get off at Tredda Station. Lord Vespian has graciously agreed to meet you there and take you to your office.”

“You aren’t coming?”

Decienne sighed as if he’d asked her to count the stalks of a crop field. “No. I have other matters to attend to. I’ll be there later on this afternoon.” Decienne turned to leave, and then added, as almost an afterthought, “Sir.” The door clattered shut behind her.

“Gee, thanks,” said Mell, alone again. He dumped his newly acquired stuff into a bag his father had woven for him, and then took one last look in the mirror. He might as

well have been swimming in his pants.

Mell arrived at the ring-station on his third try, struggling to find his way through the byzantine city even with the map. Only after he consulted with strangers, and memorized their long strings of directions, did he make any sort of headway. The station, like everything else he'd seen in Capath, was ostentatiously appointed. It was encased by a huge glass and brass dome, which was open on one side for the tracks, and its central area was filled with benches, ticket counters, and cafés. Mell made his way to—what he hoped was—the correct platform and waited for the next train. He craned his neck back to look at the wrought metal cage above him.

So this is what generations of oppression and exploitation gets you, he thought. The Ubran Republic had served as a vassal state to Capath for hundreds of years, and had been drained of so much physical wealth during that time. Mell wondered if there were even some Ubran sourced metal in this very enclosure, if there were Ubran gems in his mirror. Capath had taken everything, and now he was serving them. Expatriated from his home and burdened with a lifetime appointment as a Lord in this ill-gotten place.

The other members of his own Council had said that becoming a shared-ruler was an honour, and that he would have the opportunity to serve the interests of the Republic from afar. While Mell agreed that the position was important to keeping the peace between their nations, he also knew that the Council was only trying to get him out of their affairs, and stop his relentless pursuit of their corruption. And so they shipped him off, never be heard from again.

EMBEDDED HEART

He knew it was a trap and he'd still found himself forced to accept the role or risk undoing what little good he'd accomplished. He'd been outmanoeuvred completely. He'd lost. So here he was. Now what?

The train arrived, squealing as it pulled into the station. Steam billowed out from the undercarriage, causing his ill-fitting pants to flap about. Mell shook his head and got into the closest car. One step at a time, he thought.

Two stops had jostled past before Mell realized that he was drawing more than his fair share of attention. He kept on catching people taking furtive sidelong glances at him. Now aware of the strange looks, Mell catalogued a further list of curious activity. The train-car was fairly well packed with morning commuters, jostling arm-to-arm, but no-one had so much as grazed an elbow near him. Furthermore, while there was some chatter among coworkers elsewhere, the conversations around him were whispered directly into neighbour's ears.

Of course he would draw interest. People from Ubran were rare enough in the heart of Capath, let alone ones of his height and skin colour. He was also a Lord now, and his face would have undoubtedly been in the papers already, so it was natural for there to be some response to that power and fame.

Still, Mell couldn't help but feel that there was some other tension running underneath. People seemed happy enough to see him at the parade yesterday. Was he breaking some sort of social taboo? Perhaps it was his joke of a suit.

The train again slowed to a stop and Tredda station was announced through speaking tubes by a bored sounding man. Glass paneled train doors slid open with a clunk and

Mell spilled out onto the platform, stepping quickly aside to let the disembarking mass surge past him. Another glittering dome surrounded him, a nearly exact copy of the last one. The transfer of people onto or away from the train continued, clearing up the platform, and Mell looked around for Lord Vespian. It was a good thing he'd familiarized himself with notable figures during his interminable ocean crossing.

Someone far up towards the front of the train caught Mell's eye, and he made his way over. It was most certainly Vespian, identifiable by his steel grey hair and pointed beard. The old man was dressed in an exquisitely tailored suit and had a thick black coat resting on his hunched shoulders. Every accessory was gold, from his numerous buttons to the aglets on his polished shoes. Vespian's hands rested on a cane, a straight rod of obsidian wood topped with an ivory carving of a curled claw.

Vespian was watching the open doors of the first car and did not see Mell's approach.

"Lord Vespian?" said Mell.

The old man turned and looked over Mell for a few long moments, before finally meeting his eyes. There was a considerable height difference in his advantage, but Mell felt like he was the one looking up all the same.

"Lord Wess," said Vespian. "This way, if you would."

Vespian turned and strode off, and an unperturbed Mell followed in his wake. Vespian offered no further conversation on the journey to Mell's office, so Mell focused on memorizing the twists and turns for his next trip there. There were no street signs, and one narrow, building-flanked road looked the same as another. How did anyone not get lost here, he wondered.

EMBEDDED HEART

They made one last turn, and Vespian walked onto the landing of one of the buildings. Mell was unable to tell if the green-gray structure was more or less ornate than the average. Vespian said nothing as he waited by the door. Did he expect me to open it for him?

Mell grabbed the handle and pulled, yanking ineffectively on the locked door. Vespian watched him with unbroken silence, face unreadable behind his whiskers. Mell sighed, and dug through his bag, pushing aside paper and wires to find the key-ring Decienne had given him earlier.

On the fifth key, Mell clicked the lock open, and fixed a strained smile on his face.

“After you,” he said, holding the door open as if long seconds of awkward fumbling silence had not just transpired between them.

“Appreciated,” said Vespian.

The lower floors of the building were apparently dedicated to other businesses and Mell peeked in through doorways as they climbed the stairs. At the top level, Vespian again stood next to the door, and they replayed their farce while Mell tried to find the right key. Mell was determined not to be flustered by Lord Vespian—ostensibly his colleague—despite their nearly half-century age difference.

Inside was a boxy room, filled with desks, and bulky hard-wired LINE units. Filing cabinets lined a wall, and the far side of the space was glassed off, revealing an imposing desk and chair through partially opened blinds. His office.

Vespian strode into the center of the room, resting his hands on his cane.

“On behalf of the Sevenfold Lords of Capath, I welcome you to our ranks. This will be your headquarters. An appropriate staff has been chosen for you and will be present

starting next week.” Vespien shifted his grip on the ornate stick, working his hands around its polished neck. “Now if you’ll allow me to dispense with formal politeness, I have some advice.”

If that was politeness, I look forward to experiencing how your candour differs. “Sure,” he said instead.

Vespien nodded. “I am not certain if you are aware of your predecessor; he was a good and honourable man. He recognized his status as an outsider and would take the council of his peers to heart. His death saddened us all.”

Mell would have described the man as a slovenly, greedy, figurehead, who was bought off for the low price of three extravagant meals a day. He would definitely not call such an ineffectual sycophant who made a mockery of the position for personal gain a “good and honourable man.”

The other Lord went on. “So, I would hope you take lessons from those who came before you, and stay out of things you don’t understand.” Vespien explained as if speaking to a child. “We’ll all get along better that way.” With that said, he strode out of the room and down the stairs, clicking his staff as he went.

Well, thought Mell, at least I know where I stand.

Alone in the empty room, Mell walked across to his office proper. He went around the expensively detailed desk and sunk into the plush leather chair behind it. He was not surprised to find that the political elements of Capath found him inconvenient. In fact, it even made him a little nostalgic.

Mell closed his eyes and listened to the hum of the building. He could hear the muffled activity of people working below him and the steady whir of his desktop LINE. He

EMBEDDED HEART

went over the failures that led to his current situation one last time: the meetings where he rode roughshod over tradition, his insistence on publicly revealing every shortcoming of the Council, no matter how slight. Now he set all those memories aside. There was nothing he could change about the past.

The question was what he was going to do now? What did he want to accomplish in his new place? Would he remain loyal to a home country that had cast him out? Mell had spent much of the previous months asking those very questions, but it wasn't until Lord Vespian's puerile little speech that he knew.

Just do the same as before. It was clear the people of Capath liked what they had somehow heard of his old career, and that they were expecting him to accomplish the same thing here. So rather than worry about what the rulers of Capath or Ubran wanted, Mell would do his own thing. He would fight to make things fairer and to expose the wrongs of those in power. He would start by figuring out what Vespian and the other Lords didn't want him meddling in and then get to meddling. Mell sat up in his chair, filled with a resolve he thought he'd lost in defeat.

And this time he was a life-long appointee.

The rest of the afternoon passed quietly. A large collection of reference volumes on basic Capathian law filled the bookshelves of his office—either a remnant of his predecessor or another subtle insult—and Mell dove into them. Like Capath's architecture, the laws here were ancient, twisty, and layered. There were thousands of amendments and asides, and it was nearly all new to him since the only study materials he'd been able to source in Ubran were

out-of-date overviews. Luckily Mell had a head for legal minutia, and by the end of the day he was starting to have a simple framework for the larger legal structure. He also found some eerie familiarities, things that likely hadn't been fully excised when Ubran had gone about re-writing its own constitution.

His desktop LINE rattled out a paper-message, surprising him out of his studies. It was Decienne, informing him that she wouldn't be making it in after all. No explanation. Mell would have to speak to her, just to see if she really was his assistant.

The timecode on the printout surprised Mell. He looked out the window to see the sun low and orange. Deciding that there was no point in sitting here alone, Mell gathered up a few key books and traced his way back to the station.

Lost in his thoughts, the train trip back passed quickly. Mell caught his stop just in time and slid out between closing doors. In his haste he bumped into a woman on the platform.

"Sorry, I was just in a rush," he began.

"Well holy shit! Lord Wess!" The person had turned and was looking intently up at Mell. She was roughly his age, and was wearing a mile-wide grin on her freckled face. "What is someone like you doing back here?"

"What? I was just taking the train?"

"No," the woman pointed at the front car, just as the train was pulling away "I mean, why weren't you in that one? The rich-ass—ahem—I mean, 'special' car."

"There is a special car?" Mell asked.

"Yeah, for like plutocrats and barons. And Lords. No one told you this?"

"No," said Mell, recalling Vespian waiting at the front

EMBEDDED HEART

that morning, “No-one did.”

“Typical. Oh! I’m Ediox, by the way. Real pumped to meet you!” She grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously. “So how’re you likin’ Capath, Lord Wess?” she asked, still holding on. Mell wondered if he should start getting worried.

“Just Mell, please. And it’s certainly something. My place in the Jenher building is a little big for just me though.”

Ediox’s eyes widened at this last statement. She made a little choking noise and then erupted into a fit of laughter.

“Goddess! Oh right, you’re from Ubran and all. Well here’s a tip. In Capath it’s sort of like...” she waved her hands around, “A thing for someone to know where you live.”

A quick blurb about this in an etiquette book he’d read, pinged in Mell’s head. He’d assumed it was an antiquated custom. “A thing?”

“Yeah like for close friends, or if you’re scr—ahem—in a relationship with someone.”

“Apologies, I meant no offense. Or insinuation.” Mell grinned, hoping to defuse the awkward situation.

“No sweat, no sweat! And you’re already the coolest Lord in my eyes. All those other ones are just so...old. Oh! You should come to a party I’m having this weekend! Guest of honour for real.”

Mell wasn’t sure what to say. They had just met. She was still babbling on about something to do with musicians, and Mell laughed along. He was a pretty good judge of character, and Ediox seemed nice enough, if overly enthusiastic. It would be good to get to know some people around here, he reasoned, thinking of his uneasy night alone in the austere apartment.

In the next of Ediox’s infrequent pauses for air, Mell

said, “Yeah, actually that sounds interesting. Send over the details.” He fished out one of his LINE number cards and gave it to Ediox. She was, momentarily, speechless.

“Seriously? Hot damn! It’s gonna be. The. Best. Ever.”

“Looking forward to it. Can I ask a favour?” said Mell.

“Anything man! We’re tight now, seriously.”

“Where is a good place to get some food around here?”

Ediox’s eyes bugged out, and she took a deep breath.

After dutifully collecting information on what seemed like every restaurant, bar, café, and stall in Capath, Mell pried himself loose of Ediox and they parted ways.

Outside the station, Mell ambled down a vaguely familiar road. A gust of wind funnelled between the tall buildings that flanked the path, carrying fresh air and blowing away the thick grey steam that permeated the city. Mell let a smile inch along his face. His second day of exile had certainly been better than his first. He had a new mission, and the Sevenfold Lords of Capath would probably be less than pleased to hear so.

Mell looked at Ediox’s list in his notebook, picking out a place that was close to his building. He chose a small café that supposedly had real proper coffee and an interesting name: The Quiet Waters.

IV

Fenna's neatly folded coat lay on the chair across from Kettec, and he noticed that it had been mended recently. There was a neat line of grey thread criss-crossing along a seam. Kettec's eyes traced the fibrous procession back and forth as he waited for the garment's owner to return from the washroom.

While the two of them had been at the café long enough for Kettec to finish a sandwich and two teas, they had not talked about anything more complicated than the weather. He had not told her about the circumstances surrounding his firing or the ensuing anguish, and she had not revealed to him what had been bothering her.

And Kettec was certain now that something was greatly bothering Fenna. While she had always been someone comfortable with silence, the pauses they shared that afternoon were different, heavy with an anxious vertigo, as if they were teetering on the edge of a cliff together. Tracing a finger idly through the crumbs on his plate, Kettec tried to see if could piece together an idea of what the issue might be.

The primary piece of evidence was Ediox, and her cryptic LINE message from yesterday. Either their freckled mutual friend had noticed something bothering Fenna or she was the one who had instigated it in the first place. Kettec had to admit that he found the latter case more likely. And while he'd been preoccupied with his own concerns during their dinner last night, thinking back revealed

that there seemed to be a hesitation between the two of them. Fenna had stayed out of their conversations, more than normal at least, and only responded to Kettec directly.

So something had happened between the two of them. Kettec ignored the murmur of the other post-lunch conversations, and furrowed his brow, concentrating as he tried to imagine what it could be. Fenna had known Ediox long enough to understand that any caustic remarks were not personal and Ediox likewise had come to understand that Fenna's caginess was borne from modesty rather than cultivated aloofness. They had hashed all that out long ago, and, as far as Kettec knew, even met occasionally for one-on-one hangouts.

Fenna was one of his closest friends, helping him through so many tough times. She was a confidante and sounding board, and she was always meting out sage advice. Although she appeared outwardly as a stammering, fragile wisp of a person, Kettec knew she had an iron core and had survived trials that would have shattered him. It was therefore disappointing that he couldn't come up with a problem more specific than "maybe an argument happened." He wished—and not for the first time—that he had his mother's incisiveness, that ability to look someone in the eye and divine precisely what they were thinking. Maybe he would grow into the mind-reading, he mused.

A gentle voice that Kettec had been tuning out with the rest of the general chatter, broke through.

"So what should I do?"

With a start Kettec realized that Fenna had returned. More than that, she was looking at him expectantly, face beet red.

"Um, sorry?"

EMBEDDED HEART

A devastatingly crestfallen look flashed over Fenna's face, but she locked it down immediately. "No, I'm sorry. This wasn't the right time, especially with your job and all."

"I wasn't thinking about that. I was just trying to figure out what—"

"It's fine, Ket, really. I'd better get going anyway." Fenna got up, grabbed her purse from under the chair and her coat from on top of it.

"Fenna!" Kettec got up too, aware of all the eyes turning to look at him after his shout. "I just want to help, what was it?" said Kettec softly, trying not to make a scene.

Fenna shook her head. "I'll see you later." She rested a free hand on his shoulder. "Take care, okay?"

Then she walked down the aisle and out of the Quiet Waters, not looking back. Kettec slumped back into his seat and held his head in his hands.

"Is there something wrong with me?" he asked his plate. It was stupid of him to lose his job and now his best friend over the same inattention and just now think to question it. Maybe one day you'll be able to read your own mind, he thought.

The prospect of returning home, and to another confrontation, was too dire to even consider in Kettec's shaken state so he remained at the table in the café. He sipped his luke-warm drink and fidgeted, trying to reclaim any kind of sub-conscious memory of what Fenna had said to him. Failing at that, he continued berating himself for his negligence as a friend.

Things quieted down in the café as the lunch crowd left in piecemeal groups. As awful as it was, Fenna was not the only problem he had, and the Palace's demolition was not

going to be postponed to accommodate his bone-headedness. Kettec took the two notebooks out from his bag and immersed himself in translation and mapping. Now that the blockage in the hallway was cleared, he would be entering another nexus, a former barracks if his deciphering was correct. Through the barracks lay a storeroom connected to a supply route, which in turn, was a direct pathway towards the Palace's catacombs or, at least, the next collection of carved out rooms.

As Kettec studied his notes, another issue reared its head. The barracks had numerous supply rooms and multiple exits. The whole area was designed to stymie and split up invading soldiers while allowing defenders to regroup and attack from advantaged positions. Ancient Capathian soldiers would have trained in the tunnels for weeks, memorizing the layout—a layout that was a closely guarded military secret. Kettec looked at his question-mark filled maps and imagined that he was feeling some of the same frustration that the invaders during the Siege might have felt.

There was a book that might help sort things out, possibly even containing a map, but the only copy that he knew of was locked up in the Office of Records. He'd only leafed through the tome once, and a while ago at that, intending to come back to it when necessary.

Kettec scribbled angrily in the margin of his notebook, making the paper shiny as he rubbed graphite into it. It would have been nice to still work there, he chastised himself.

Someone plopped into the seat across from him, and Kettec thought, improbable as it might be, that Fenna had come back to talk. He looked up and saw instead the wide, friendly face of Soldeg, current chef of the café and previous

EMBEDDED HEART

owner of The Inert Gambler.

“What’s cookin’, good lookin’?” she said, showing coffee-stained teeth from between garishly red painted lips.

Kettec sighed. “The usual I guess. Ruining everything.”

Soldeg cackled, a hearty rasp that Kettec found warmly familiar. Over their years of patronage to the Gambler, Soldeg had become well acquainted to him and his group. “I betcha I could solve all yer baby problems in three shakes.”

“Well I got fired, and Fenna hates me now too,” mumbled Kettec. And the Palace, he added to himself.

“Easy! Yer a smart young boy, so’s there’ll be another job for ya lickety split. An’ Fen’s not got a hatey bone in her whole bod’ so you good there too!” Soldeg mimed dusting off her hands, and treated Kettec to another laugh. “Done! An’ in only two.”

A swarthy man poked his head out from the kitchen and hollered at them. “Soldeg, if you let these pastries burn I’ll be takin’ the next set out of your fat ass!”

“Stuff it, ya horrible buster!” Soldeg yelled back. She levered herself out of the seat and patted Kettec on the arm. “Meal’s on me kiddo. You’ll be back on yer feet ‘fore ya know it.”

“Thanks,” said Kettec sheepishly. Soldeg waved and wobbled back to the kitchen.

Bolstered by his brief chat with the friendly cook, Kettec reached over to the next table and retrieved a discarded newspaper, flipping it open to the jobs columns. He plugged his LINE into a jack retrieved from below the table and sent off some interview request messages. Kettec wasn’t wholly sure he needed to add a job search to his current list of concerns but he couldn’t very well spend all his time moping and spelunking. At the very least he would need

money for more ropes.

With that task out of the way, Kettec was feeling particularly inspired. He had another epiphany while browsing through the rest of the paper. There was a small article about the result of a citizen's petition in regards to a land dispute, which was probably only covered because the petitioner's name was Jendeth Complainer. It was stated that Mr. Complainer had spoken directly to the Sevenfold Lords, reminding Kettec that the Sevenfold were required to hear out a certain number of public issues due to some old constitution. Now that he wasn't employed by Records, and therefore no long a government worker, Kettec could also make a general citizen's petition of his own. The chance of him getting a hearing before it was too late was slim though it was a new avenue to pursue. Kettec got to work immediately, outlining why the destruction of the Palace was a public concern, drawing on knowledge he'd gained from his previously rejected internal proposals.

Wrapped up creating a list of things to research further, Kettec was insulated against the passage of time, and when he at last took a break from his work to look around, he realized that twilight had approached. As Kettec stretched and began gathering his things together, the door jangled open and closed. There was a sharp change in the atmosphere of the room.

Mell Wess filled the entrance of the small café; still dressed in the baggy suit Kettec had seen him in yesterday at the parade. After his cerulean eyes had quickly surveyed the place, Mell strode up to the counter, passing within an inch of Kettec. He smelled of spice.

Kettec watched in naked fascination as one of the Lords

EMBEDDED HEART

of Capath ordered a coffee and biscuit and settled into a small table in the corner. Alone. Shouldn't he have a guard or an escort or something? Feeling suddenly exposed, Kettec unfolded his newspaper and hid behind it, trying to furtively scan the room for anyone out of place. No one had entered after Mell, so unless a plain-clothes bodyguard had been sitting somewhere already, the Lord truly was on his own.

Turning back, Kettec peered over the top of the newspaper at the foreigner. He was leafing through a thick book, occasionally pausing to take a sip of coffee or look out the window. Though this must have been his first time at the Quiet Waters, there was a familiarity and confidence in his actions. It looked like he'd done this very same thing for years. Was that confidence born from being a Lord, or was it just a trait he'd always had? And how could Kettec get some of that?

Mell set his book aside, and got up, looking like he was probably headed to the washroom. The Lord passed by Kettec again, causing him to duck his head back behind the paper and stare hard in the general direction of some words. Kettec realized how silly he was being. Why was he so fascinated with that man? Come to think of it, if he was going to be making a citizen's petition, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to know a Lord.

Before he could fully finish his thought, a voice came from behind, "Are you planning to assassinate me by chance?"

Kettec yelped and turned around. Mell Wess was standing behind him with those piercing eyes staring right into him. Kettec managed to sputter, "What?"

Mell flashed an easy grin, revealing his symmetrical

dimples. “Kidding of course. But you are giving me quite a bit of attention. Have we met somewhere before?”

“No, I—”

“Of course! You were at the parade.”

“How do you know that? There were so many people there.”

“Oh, I never forget a face. Trick of the trade,” Mell said as he extended a hand. “Mell Wess. Pleasure to meet you.”

Kettec’s heart was hammering so hard he thought he was going to die. He hastily put the paper down to shake the proffered hand and ended up knocking over his half-full teacup. Liquid splashed over the paper and onto Kettec’s pants. Kettec leaped out of his seat to avoid a further soaking, catching his right foot in the legs of his chair. He lost his balance, tumbled into Mell, and the two of them went over backwards. Mell let out a muffled “Oof” as they landed.

“Oh goddess, I’m sorry!” Kettec cried as he leapt to his feet. “I’m so sorry.”

Mell, still on the ground, rubbed his backside. “No worries. Are you all right?”

“I—” The café was silent, and Kettec’s face went hot. All eyes were on him. On the man who’d just knocked over a Lord. Kettec turned and ran.

Once outside, Kettec didn’t stop running until he got home. The whole way there, one thought dominated clear through the embarrassment: he wished he’d just spent this whole accursed day underground.

V

EMBEDDED HEART

Hunched over in a bored out barracks tunnel, Kettec tried to rub grit from his eye with an equally gritty knuckle. The air around him was close and his headlamp flickered intermittently, partially illuminating an almost illegible hand-drawn map. He had to wait for the lamp's steam-core to completely die before replacing it, since he could no longer afford to be cavalier with the expensive parts.

Rustling his scribbled papers, Kettec made a few new marks with a charcoal pencil. With no clear idea of where to go next, he stared at the rough shapes, absentmindedly chewing on the end of his writing tool.

Over the course of the past week, Kettec had chewed his way through an entire box of pencils, gnawing at a wooden shaft until it was unusable, pitching it, and beginning again on a new one. It was a miracle that his gums hadn't been filled with splinters. At least pencils were cheap.

The reason for his misguided mastication was a pervading blockage, and he was stymied at every turn. He'd been to two job apprenticeship interviews but both had been busts, no doubt due to his stiff nervousness, Fenna had been avoiding him despite repeating that nothing was wrong, and his progress on the citizen's petition had been negligible.

Then there were these damnable tunnels. Kettec's love of the depths was being sorely tested by the endless maze of intentionally confusing and uncomfortable passages. They were a far cry from the majestic undulations of the entrance cave. No matter how many exits and loops he mapped, Kettec always ended up in the same collection of excavated rooms, intensely aware of his lost time. Without the pressure to reach the Palace, Kettec might have continued poking away at the problem, one excursion at a

time, certain that eventually he'd make his way through. However, if he wanted to make progress with any kind of efficiency, he really did need the book of old schematics from the Office of Records.

After working up the nerve, Kettec had tried to contact some of his more amenable ex-co-workers, asking them to sneak the book out for him. Everyone had politely declined, preferring not to risk the wrath of Mrs. Panossia. Kettec couldn't exactly begrudge them for deciding to look out for their own jobs, but he was disappointed nonetheless. Exacerbating all these frustrations of job searching, tunnel fatigue, and friend failure, was the fact that he could never again go to the Quiet Waters. Kettec had even started avoiding the entire block. He couldn't risk another run-in with a certain Lord he'd been thinking quite a lot about. Even now, even here, he felt his stomach churning as he thought back to the disastrous encounter.

Kettec's lamp finally gave out, plunging him into immediate and total darkness. With a frustrated exhalation, Kettec crumpled up the map he could no longer see. Though if he was being honest, the pitch black didn't make it that much less readable. With some difficulty he set about replacing the exhausted lamp core with his only remaining spare, and then turned around in the tunnel, intent on heading back towards more familiar areas.

He had to have that book. With no other options, it was once again time to try his hand at amateur burglary. Tonight was a repeat performance of his ill-advised "Break In After Hours" gambit.

At least he couldn't get fired this go around.

EMBEDDED HEART

Kettec crept through the sleeping city, his familiar work-bound route rendered strange by the deep night. The occasional gas streetlamps were sparse and insufficient under the fully overcast sky. This pervading darkness eased his nerves somewhat, providing a sense of security to his clandestine activity. Kettec arrived at the building of his one-time occupation and craned his neck to look at it. The Office of Records rose out from the darkened firmament as if carved out of stone in high relief.

Approaching the door, crouched below the glass, Kettec went to unlock it with a spare set of entrance keys he thankfully hadn't gotten around to turning back in. He was able to turn the knob before he'd fully inserted the key. Kettec stared at the already unlocked door, wondering if someone was in the building. There hadn't been any lights on in the windows. Had Panossia forgotten to lock up? That seemed incredibly unlikely. He wondered if he should turn back but quickly decided to risk it over facing another excruciating session in the tunnels. Kettec slid through the doorway, gently pushing it shut behind him.

He crept past the darkened foyer and ascended the stairs to the office level gingerly, ears straining to hear for any other interlopers. Kettec forced himself not to dwell on his last disastrous trip down this very stairwell. His climbing shoes tread softly, but the steps were wooden and aged, creaking at the slightest provocation. One board sounded off as if he'd trod on the tail of a cat, causing Kettec to freeze, hold his breath, and listen for shouts or approaching footsteps. None came.

It was likely that nothing had been reorganized in the

short time he'd been gone, so Kettec turned on his headlamp with a twist and went straight to the archive door. The gilded letters glittered on the frosted glass. Kettec turned the knob slowly only to meet resistance. It was locked, of course, and he only had keys for the front door.

Kettec accepted this setback in stride, thinking through his options. He could smash the glass, but he preferred not to leave any damage or indication that anyone had been here. He remembered that there were spare keys for the archive rooms in the main office. People were in and out of these rooms all day, and the key box was often left open for conveniences sake. It was worth a try.

Back down the hall, Kettec entered the pit. He couldn't resist taking a route that would lead him past his old desk. The shaft of light emanating from his headlamp passed over the small enclosure, and he found it filled with the personal effects and papers of his replacement. Kettec stared at a framed image of a group of young women, wondering which person was the new employee and if they were better at the job than he was.

The sound of footsteps shook Kettec from his inopportune reverie. They were getting louder. He froze up, remembering the guard and the Palace. His stomach clenched, forcing acid into the back of his throat. He was going to go to jail. Two voices approached, one high and one low, and a shrill laugh rattled through the otherwise silent building. Overcoming his fatalistic worries, Kettec found the presence of mind to crouch behind the desk and switch his headlamp off.

Just as he did, the two people entered the room.

"Oh, you're a rascal, you know that!" said the first, adding a vacuous sounding giggle.

EMBEDDED HEART

“You just have that effect on me. And what better way to leave our mark,” said a second, lower, voice. A sloppy smooching sound accompanied the words. Kettec, still holding his breath, dared a peek. Arm-in-arm, and in a state of undress, he saw Jans, one of Records’ translators, and Prount, their handsome secretary.

So they were having a tryst in the office? Well that explained the unlocked entrance at least.

“Boardroom table next, big boy?” breathed Jans.

“I’ll show you a board, baby,” Prount replied, hand secured firmly on Jan’s rear. Kettec rolled his eyes, but thanked them nonetheless for their romantically induced carelessness as they passed by without noticing him. After an interminable amount of groan-inducing dirty talk, nothing but moans emanated from the boardroom.

Kettec crawled out from under the desk and snuck over to the key box. He opened it carefully, keeping the rows of keys from jangling. With a hand covering most of his reactivated light, Kettec retrieved the correct key, and made his way out of the pit and through the hallway. He wasn’t sure how long Jans and Prount would be occupied, and he wanted to be long gone before finding out.

In the rows of ancient, book-laden stacks, Kettec quickly found the tome of military blueprints and stuffed it in his bag, only feeling a twinge of guilt. It would be kind of hypocritical for anyone to raise a stink over his mistreatment of this book when who knows how many were in more danger under the Palace.

Trying not to focus on the continued noises of passion, Kettec returned the key to the box, and exited the main area. He took the stairs at speed, not bothering to conceal his steps and dashed back into the street. Kettec sprinted

home, clutching his loaded bag to his heaving chest.

Back in stealth mode, Kettec crossed the apartment and headed for his room. He opened the door, and turned around to close it silently behind him.

“So where have you been, then?”

Kettec nearly jumped out of his skin and fumbled in the dark for something to defend himself with. His mother lit the lamp on his bedside table and re-crossed her legs.

“What are you doing in here?” gasped Kettec, sliding down to sit on the ground.

“Take a guess. It probably has something to do with why you’ve been avoiding me all week. What is going on? Why don’t you have your job anymore?”

Kettec had been successfully circumventing her until now. He wasn’t sure exactly what she did for work—something about providing distributed management to third-parties that made his eyes gloss over whenever it was explained to him—but whatever it was had been eating up a significant chunk of her time. He’d been thankful for that. His mother looked at him wearily, bags under her eyes accentuated by the deep shadows cast by the small lamp.

“Kettec,” she said again. “Answer the questions.”

No escape now. He might as well get it over with.

Kettec took a seat at his desk and told her. He explained how he’d broken into the Palace for proof of the cache, and then how he’d been caught and fired because of it. That, and, in all honesty, because Mrs. Panossia was tired of having to deal with him. His mom stayed silent, watching him closely with an unreadable face. Kettec was reminded of the worn statue in the fountain. He quickly ran out of words, and stared at his feet, still clad in his climbing shoes.

EMBEDDED HEART

“What are you doing about it now?” she asked, after a long, quiet moment.

“What?”

“If you are anything like your father, and you most certainly are, then you’re incapable of just letting the Palace thing go and getting another job. So what are you doing now?”

“Um,” Kettec needed to keep his underground exploration secret. “Oh, right, I’m working on a citizen’s petition to prove that the demolition should be delayed until a proper search has been done.”

“Is that so? Well I can help out with that if you’d like. I used to work as a governmental aide remember?”

“Really?”

“Yes. But Kettec,” her eyes flashed, glinting in the half-light like silvery coals, “I know that’s not the whole story.” She got up. “You’re grown now. Almost moved. I know you don’t want to be blabbing about every little thing to your mother. I get it. Just try not to do anything too stupid, okay?” She opened the door and stepped out, turning around for one last word. “You’re all I’ve got.” She closed the door, and Kettec heard her light footsteps head towards the half-empty two-person room on the other side of the apartment.

It was late afternoon by the time Kettec woke up, having been exhausted from his nocturnal escapades and confrontation. Both had gone better than he expected, but he still felt lingering guilt over lying to his mother. Kettec pushed himself out of bed. After a shower and some leftovers from

the ice-box, Kettec thumped the stolen book onto his desk and got to work.

The tome held a collection of diagrams and floor plans created by and for the military over the years. There was nothing about the specific underground barracks he was stuck in, but he could use it to determine the mindset behind the construction and narrow down some of his false exits.

Rubbing his eyes after hours of struggling to read some ancient—and awful—penmanship, Kettec heard his LINE clatter on behind him. He turned and snatched the short slip of paper without leaving his seat. It was Ediox.

~Twofon station. NOW!

For a moment Kettec was worried something had happened, but he remembered that Ediox's much hyped party was today. He crumpled up the paper and groaned. A party was not high on the list of things he wanted to do, however, he had promised Ediox multiple times that he'd be going. At least Fenna was to be there too, so maybe he'd have a chance to fix whatever was going on between them.

Kettec pinched the bridge of his nose, spreading his fingers out to rub his eyes. Too many problems.

Shortly later, he arrived at Twofon station, finding Fenna waiting for him on the steps.

"Hey Fen," said Kettec, "Where's Ediox?"

"Hey," Fenna handed him a train ticket. Scrawled on the underside of the slip of paper was a note in Ediox's sloppy hand. *Not waiting for that treacle assed numbskull to fart his way over. Give him this. ~E*

"Wonderful." Kettec pocketed the ticket and they headed up towards the train.

EMBEDDED HEART

All throughout their journey Kettec was unable to get a moment to speak to Fenna. It was too crowded to get more than a word or two in. Fenna seemed her usual self, but Kettec could feel a wall between them. She was keeping her distance, if not physically, then emotionally.

They finally arrived at what looked like a decommissioned warehouse with sounds of drumming and cheering emitting from inside. A large and unspeaking man stopped them at the door with an outstretched hand. After a long moment where Kettec tried to think of something to say to gain entrance, Ediox danced out from behind the man, dressed in a short skirt and a loose, vibrantly green and yellow top. Her hair had been done up into a spiked bun, and her makeup suggested a predatory feline.

“You guys! Welcome!” she handed them each a rubber loop. “Here are your bands. Keep ‘em on the whole time. These’re the special ones too, for free drinks. Wow, I’m the best right? I know!”

Ediox took a second to lock eyes with Fenna, and Kettec was aware that much had transpired in that moment of non-verbal communication.

“Okay, have fuuuun!” Ediox shouted as she scooted back in. They could hear the cheers from those welcoming her back, though she’d only been gone a second. Kettec was sure that being treated like a queen served Ediox just fine. As they slipped their bracelets on and passed by the gatekeeper, Kettec fruitlessly watched Fenna for any hint of what was going on.

Inside was a churning mass of people, all dressed in later-than-latest fashions and jumping roughly in time with the music. A stage dominated the center of the area and

served as a focal point for the densest mass of people. The band onstage was using incredibly complicated instruments to create a deafening, mostly rhythmic noise. It looked to Kettec like the unrecognizable implements were somehow being enhanced by a LINE connection. He guessed it was probably foreign tech. The other nations were rumoured to be far ahead of Capath when it came to LINE applications. Typical of Capath to be suspicious of any innovation that wasn't home grown.

Against the left wall of the open room was a makeshift bar and a smattering of beat up couches. Kettec realized that Fenna had disappeared during his gawking at the stage, and so he decided the far right wall—the closest he could get to an unattended space in here—would be his home tonight. Kettec pushed past people, trying to keep an eye out for Fenna. He was already beginning to regret coming.

Kettec leaned on the concrete wall of the factory, and watched those with fewer inhibitions than him dance and hold raucous, shouty conversations. He wasn't exactly jealous, but Kettec couldn't help wonder what it would be like to be able to cut loose. Logically, he knew no-one would be paying attention to his likely awful dancing, and that he would be just another reveller in a crowd. The idea of it caused him to shudder. Even up against the wall in an unlit corner, he felt like everyone was watching and judging him. As it was, he fell back on thinking about the underground. He'd be ready for another trip tomorrow, and he hoped that he might finally get out of the barracks with the help of his stolen blueprints.

It was as he was lost in his plans that someone tall, their face obscured by darkness as the lights went down in-between acts, broke free of the main mass of people and

EMBEDDED HEART

joined Kettec in leaning against the wall.

“Phew. Crazy place, huh?”

Kettec looked up at the familiar sounding voice.

“Oh hey,” said Lord Mell Wess, “Café parade guy! How’s it going?”

VI

Forced, yet again, to look up at the intimidating presence of Lord Wess, Kettec viscerally remembered their last meeting. He could feel heat rise to his cheeks, mirroring the warmth of his tea-spattered pants at the café. Kettec immediately decided that his plan to talk to Fenna or Ediox tonight was clearly not going to work, and that it was well past time for him to head home. After another few moments of total paralysis—excruciating seconds in which Kettec was fully aware of his unmitigated gawping and Mell’s hanging inquiry—the “flee” signal he’d been frantically sending his feet finally kicked in. Kettec mumbled some inaudible excuse and stumbled towards the heaving crowd between him and the exit. He had not made it far before Ediox materialized in front of him, surrounded by a gaggle of sycophantic partiers. She grabbed him by the shoulders and shouted into his ear.

“Hey Kay,” she yelled, her voice still barely audible over the sounds of cheering and music, “This best party or what?”

“Yeah, crazy. I was just gonna head out though.”

“What? Speak up!”

Kettec tried again, and louder. “I said, was just planning on leaving!”

Ediox laughed. “Wrongo, mister. You’ve not even had a drink yet. Oh!” Ediox looked behind him and waved at someone. “Have you met our guest of honour?”

“No? But I’ve really got to go.”

“Right this way!” Ediox spun him around and practically dragged him back through the press of people.

Guest of honour? Surely she couldn’t mean the man he was just running away from.

In the relative quiet of the area around the wall, Kettec stood once again in front of Mell Wess. Maybe if he was lucky, he thought, his heart would give out and he’d escape via the loss of his mortal coil.

“Hey Mell!” said Ediox, “This’s m’friend Kettec, the guy I was tellin’ you about. Kay meet Mell, best Lord Capath has seen since...no contest actually!”

Mell extended his hand, eyes glittering with mirth. “Pleased to finally be introduced, Kettec.”

Kettec sighed, resigned to his fate, and took Mell’s warm hand. “Sorry about the other day,” he stammered.

“What? Have you met?” asked Ediox.

“You could say we bumped into each other once before,” Mell said, smiling at his private joke. Kettec barely stopped himself from groaning in pain.

Ediox looked quizzically at the two of them. “Cool. Anyway, Mell, you good? Need anything else?”

“Not at all. I was worried when I got to Capath everything was going to be stuffy galas and costume balls and so on. But this is just like a big bapndap back home!”

Ediox’s eyes widened at this praise. “Hot damn, I got a Lord here callin’ my thing an Ubran bapndap? I peaked too soon!” She let out a peal of laughter. In typical Ediox fashion, she pivoted instantly to address another matter entirely. “Oh, Kay, since Mell here is Mister well-ons, I figured he might know more about your Palace thing. Connections right? Thank me later! By the way have you seen Fenna? She was—” Something on-stage pulled her

flighty attention. “Shit, gotta announce the next band. Play nice you two!”

Ediox skated off towards the stage, high-fiving people as she went, leaving Kettec and Mell stunned in the wake of her explosive conversational style.

“So,” said Mell at last, “Palace thing?”

Kettec struggled to repress the urge to strangle Ediox. It was true that an introduction to a Lord would be helpful, but this party definitely wasn’t the right place or the time. Besides, Kettec had already ruined his chances with this particular member of the Sevenfold. Plus, he thought, some warning from Ediox would have been nice. Kettec decided not to risk any more damage and just get himself home. He wished he could teleport underground, close his eyes and leap to his silent, lonely, confusing-but-knowable caves. He turned to answer Mell who was still waiting patiently for a response.

“It’s nothing. Sorry about Ediox, sir. She can be enthusiastic. I’ll leave you be. Sorry.” Kettec dipped his head in an awkward bow and started to back away.

Mell nodded, eyes cast slightly down. “Sure, but one thing before you go?”

Kettec froze. Was he going to threaten him over the café event?

Mell laughed at Kettec’s stricken look. “You don’t need to apologize to me anymore! It was just a mistake. I was only going to tell you that stopping the Palace’s demolition sounds like something I’d be interested in helping with. When Ediox was talking to me earlier, she mentioned a little about it.” Mell looked at Kettec and flashed another of his easy grins. “More than that, I’m new here, so I’d appreciate the company.”

EMBEDDED HEART

Transfixed by deep blue eyes, Kettec's already taxed brain felt like it was suddenly the consistency of soup. "Drink?" he squeaked, pointing towards the bar on the other side of the room.

"Sure!" Mell wagged his rubber wristband, yellow like Kettec's, "We can break these in."

Trailing Mell as they crossed the main floor of the warehouse, Kettec noticed two things: that their passage was easy due to the invisible bubble Mell's status afforded him, and that Mell had been to see a proper tailor. His clothes were well appointed, accentuating his slender height, and melding the stiff lines of Capathian styles with the vibrant colours more often found in Ubran. Kettec glanced down at his own clothes, an ill fitting button-down—his one and only all-purpose "nice shirt"—stuffed hastily into worn slacks. It was clear that he didn't care much for fashion.

Smoothing down his wrinkled top as they arrived at the still crowded bar, Kettec was content to let Mell take the lead.

"You find a seat, and I'll wade through this, okay?" said Mell. Kettec nodded and wandered over to Ediox's collection of worn couches and repurposed crates. It was quieter here, isolated by distance from the brunt of the caterwauling sounds emanating from the stage. Wandering aimlessly in search of an open seat, Kettec caught sight of some of his acquaintances, Ceese and Seyzoana, together on a padded pallet, but decided that they were far too engaged for him to interrupt comfortably. Nearer to the corner, another couple got up to leave and Kettec made a beeline for their recently vacated spots. Seated on the threadbare fabric, Kettec took a deep breath and tried to regain his composure. He'd been

on his back foot all night, it felt like.

He took in another breath as he tried to sort through the facts. Lord Mell Wess was somehow friends with Ediox. More importantly, he had forgiven Kettec for the café incident. That was good. Maybe Kettec could go back to the Quiet Waters now without wanting to throw up. He missed Soldeg. Next, Mell wanted to hear about the Palace, which was great. For the citizen's petition to pass, Kettec had to have a majority of the Sevenfold agree with him, so if he could get Mell onboard, he'd already be a quarter of the way there. Lastly, Mell said he was "appreciative of his company." At this idea, Kettec's attempt at rational classification broke down. Was there another meaning there? Why did he care if there was or wasn't? And, for that matter, why was he so intimidated about Mell's status? A little voice in the back of his head shouted that it was not the Lord's status that intimidated Kettec; it was Mell's eyes, his easy smile, and his sinuous grace.

Shaking his head, Kettec refocused on the demolition of the Palace. He had a chance here to make things easier on himself. Mell would be unfamiliar with their history, which might work in his favour when bringing up Absollo's writings. He could think of it as a trial run of the proposal he'd been picking away at.

Kettec decided he was ready. He would get through this night and then tomorrow get underground. He took another deep breath, imagining the cool stone and dusty caverns that lay in wait for him. His recently acquired book would help him get through into the next area. Kettec mentally ran down the corridors of the subterranean maze taking great solace in their solid lengths. He paused this train of thought to wonder when Mell was going to get back

with their drinks. Kettec looked up and found Mell already seated a hand's width away from him on the couch, holding two drinks and sipping from one. He was grinning and watching Kettec.

"Sorry," Kettec began again.

"Hey!" said Mell, stopping him up short. "Your numerous apologies have lost their value entirely. Devalued! As penance I'll accept only an explanation of what you were thinking about."

"What?"

"You were lost to this world," Mell leaned in, face lit up by shifting lights of the party, a smirk gently teasing at his lips, "And I want to know why."

"Um, it was nothing. So, about the Palace—"

"Were you thinking about *inappropriate* things?"

"What? No!"

"Okay, then what?"

Kettec's rehearsed spiel nearly fell by the wayside. The underground was his and he wasn't ready to tell anyone about it. Certainly not someone he'd just met. "Are you always this forthright?" Kettec asked.

Mell laughed. "Chalk it up to cultural differences. Anyway, Kettec, tell me about the Palace of the Arms."

"Right." Kettec tried not to dwell on how his name sounded in Mell's slight accent and went on. "It starts with the Hundred Years Siege..."

As the party continued around them, Kettec gave Mell a brief history of the Palace, how it served as the last bastion in the Siege, and of Absollo's role in commanding the defence of Capath and protection of its culture. He explained how he believed that Absollo's notebook was the key to finding a trove, but how his status as a betrayer overshadowed any

such interpretation. Kettec found that Mell was a capable listener, engaged and asking incisive questions. It was rare to find someone who would tolerate his exhaustive recounting of history like this, and Kettec found himself babbling about increasingly tangential matters.

“So,” said Kettec, trying to wrap up, “The cache is important! Even if the Palace is destroyed, some time should be spared for a proper investigation.”

Mell chewed the inside of his cheek. “Undoubtedly. One last thing. Do you know *why* the Palace is going to be torn down?”

“Actually, no. But that shouldn’t matter right? Since I’m just looking for a delay.”

“You’d think so, but when politics gets involved, sometimes up is down.” Mell, who had slouched into the couch during Kettec’s history, sat up, and fiddled with his empty cup. “It might be important to find out why there has been resistance. A company might be pressuring the city for the land or something like that, like paying to speed up the process.”

“You think there are bribes involved?” Kettec had never considered anything other than the stated reasons for why his proposals had been so soundly struck down during his time in records. He felt naive.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned about sticking my nose in the wrong places of government, it’s that if something seems pointlessly cruel, it’s because somebody somewhere stands to make a coin off it.” Mell adopted a far off look, brow drawn down in some mixture of anger and resolve.

“Nose in the wrong places, huh. Is...that why you had to come here?” asked Kettec.

Mell let out a sigh. “Yeah.” He flopped back, smiling

EMBEDDED HEART

again, “Anyway, I’m here for good now, and it looks like trouble follows me!”

At the mention of corruption, a new idea had wormed its way into Kettec’s head. “Maybe the Palace doesn’t need to be destroyed at all! I had a, ah, chance to briefly see the inside, and it was magnificent. The walls were works of art, covered in murals and sculpture, and hundreds of years of history. Solid marble floors with gold in the seams, polished up like a mirror. The doorknobs were even gemstones!”

“Opulence with a human cost,” said Mell who had grown stiff.

“What?”

“Ubran stone and Ubran gold mined with Ubran blood.”

“Oh, yeah, but, that was a long time ago, and things are better now.”

“Is that so?” Mell’s blue eyes looked like rings of hardened old ice.

“No, I mean, it wasn’t right, but like, its history and—”

“The effects of plunder do not disappear after a few generations.”

“Right. I just meant...” Kettec stopped stared at his feet, struggling to find the words. He’d read books detailing every step of the Palace’s construction, from the decades of work of genius architects to the hidden features of the many statues. Never once had he read about where the raw stone had come from. Worse still, never once had he wondered.

Kettec bolted to his feet. He was about to apologize, but he remembered Mell saying “Devalued.” Kettec decided to leave. He pushed his way through the throng, ignoring Mell’s call after him. He passed the outward facing bouncer and ran towards the station.

It was like the week hadn’t passed at all, and Kettec

hated himself for it. It was as if he was still running from the Quiet Waters, tea dripping down his leg.

The only light that existed in the entirety of the underground flickered. Kettec froze, suddenly remembering that he no longer had a backup core.

“Shit.”

The fact that he’d forgotten to buy a fresh core before descending was the latest of the many hints that his spur-of-the-moment expedition was a poor idea. Hopefully the flicker was only a loose connection and not an indication of a soon-to-fail core.

Kettec was tired, both from his disastrous evening out, and the clandestine activities that had kept him up the night before. It would have been smart to get a good night’s sleep and come down first thing in the morning. He had, however, left those rational arguments in the entrance tunnel with all his other problems.

The lamp’s beam seemed to remain steady so Kettec continued down the rough-hewn tunnel. Even though he’d spent a week marking entrances with chalk, and now had copies of the blueprints in hand, Kettec still stumbled upon unmapped entrances with startling regularity. It was said that the architect picked to oversee excavation had been hired solely because he was mad.

Turning a wide, sloping corner, Kettec arrived in yet another antechamber. It was the same as any other of the rooms he’d come across, a barren cube of chiselled rock, with one entrance and many exits. Some bits of petrified wood suggested the shape of a barricade, a choke-point

EMBEDDED HEART

manufactured by Absollo's men. Any artefacts of note were long gone, but perhaps a battle was fought here. Kettec reached over his head and fished his copy of Absollo's writings from a side pocket in his backpack. By the yellow light suspended on his forehead, Kettec flipped through page after page of annotated notes, trying to determine if there was some record of this place that would help him locate a pathway.

Absollo's lengthy and esoteric entries blurred into one another, and Kettec rubbed at his eyes. One snippet sounded particularly relevant and he peered at it, skimming the half-memorized text.

One in and four out. Three are but ruses and we run short on more like the fourth. Iridescent wings batter the walls after my company, pushing us forward when we are already stood on a cliff's edge. Poor Genrer has made a wall of wood, but they will rend it as easily as they pull flesh from our bones. We must make our peace.

The description was a match. Kettec placed himself as standing in the entrance point with four exits sloping downward out of sight on the other side of the room. He couldn't make a similar match on the blueprint however, and, in fact, he'd already passed through many similarly configured rooms. Still, the others hadn't had signs of occupation, and they didn't feel right.

A trill of excitement shivered down his spine, an almost nauseatingly intense feeling of being connected with history. It wasn't hard to imagine the lost company filling the cramped room, on the run from invading forces, heading towards the Palace for their last stand—and to the scene of

Absollo's supposed regicide.

From memory, Kettec knew that soon the notes would get harder to understand, full of references to impossible underground structures, and to a burden given by the gods, then ending abruptly just before that final fateful night. It meant that if this was the room he thought it was, Kettec was on the right track. Unfortunately, there was no indication in the text for which exit was the real one. One in four was better odds than he had in a while though, so Kettec crossed the uneven stone floor, picked the leftmost exit, and continued downward. Chances were, he'd loop back to an earlier room, and could make his way home from there. He would come back and try again tomorrow, unless he got it on this first try, which seemed unlikely based on the run of luck he had been having.

Kettec yawned, lulled by the gently undulating corridor as he continued tromping forward. It had been the work of centuries to chisel out these tunnels. He could forget the scale of the place sometimes, too consumed by his rush to re-map it. He thought now of the thousands of men and women painstakingly inching through solid rock at the capricious whims of a paranoid royalty. How many lives were lost? Ahead in the darkness, he imagined he could see Mell's eyes glittering, just out the reach of lamplight. *How many of them were Ubran?*

"You aren't down here," Kettec said, speaking to the darkness. "No one is." He continued on, alone.

The pathway continued downward. If it was a fake-out then it was the longest Kettec had ever taken. Instead of doubling back, Kettec pushed on, dragging his legs through weary steps. His light dimmed and for a second he thought the core was going again. His light was not going out, it was

EMBEDDED HEART

just being dispersed. He was standing on the edge of a giant cleft. Seismic activity had caused the ground in front of him to collapse, swallowing up the tunnel, and replacing it with a deep gash in the stone. Crouching carefully at the edge of the sharp drop, Kettec touched the edge. It was solid, worn smooth. Whatever happened here had happened long ago.

Tracing a hand along the lip, Kettec brushed against something metal. Unnatural. He swivelled his lamp and saw a loop, flaky with rust, driven into the ground. A piton. Kettec looked back down the cleft in alarm, calling to mind another of Absollo's passages. Kettec knew that this was the "throat." The same place soldiers had descended so long ago. At last, he had passed through the Barracks. With hands shaking from fatigue and excitement, Kettec took climbing gear out of his bag. He hammered a bolt into the rock and tied a loop of thin strong rope around it. He didn't have his good climbing shoes or crampons with him, but he figured his boots would serve fine enough. He wasn't turning around now.

Attaching the rope and descender to his donned harness, Kettec kicked himself backward over the ledge. Letting himself down slowly, Kettec remembered Absollo's description.

Trapped by our own construction, we were set to perish as was designed. My Lady—though of water—spoke with stone, and opened her throat. I was... Wrong. I know the path now. Those chattering evils have been excised, and downward we head foreword.

He had found the old caves of Absollo's book. Nearing the end of his rope, Kettec peered downward, seeing the

cleft widen and finally terminate in solid ground. He'd have to pin his rope here, and finish the rest by hand. Dangling in midair by his harness, he fished out his free-climbing gloves. He was so close now, Kettec thought, daring to hope that there might even be some more things left behind by Absollo's company. If he'd been rested, Kettec might have had the patience to climb back up and return with more rope. He might have made sure to bring his crampons. Finding a handhold by inserting his fingers into a crack, Kettec took a deep breath and unclipped his rope.

His grip was good, but the stone was not.
Kettec fell.

VII

The headquarters of Lord Mell Wess buzzed with early morning activity as staffers flitted from desk to desk, drafted responses, and consulted ledgers. Messages poured non-stop out of a row of industrial grade LINE terminals, unbroken stretches of paper that were wound onto spools for later examination. File cabinets thudded open and closed with regularity, adding a rhythmic percussion to the rest of the clicking and chattering.

Mell, isolated from the bustle by the thick glass of his office, watched the goings on with interest. If this was how busy the office was on a normal day, just wait till he actually got started. Even though his name was on all the stationary, Mell was still viewed as too fresh to be required for anything other than an occasional sign-off. The other Lords had set up his political machine to defer or mirror their own governance, and Mell was loath to enact changes without fully understanding the ramifications. This is not to say that he hadn't been busy: he had carefully parceled out his limited time between attending council meetings, taking self-structured crash courses on Capathian Law, and interviewing new personnel. The latter task was particularly important as it would be useful to have some people here who might actually be loyal to him.

A gentle knock sounded against his office door, and Mell waved in one of his earliest hires, Cinizia, who had replaced Decienne as his assistant in all but official title. He would have fired the unhelpful old woman on day two if he could

have gotten away with it, but, for whatever reason, the post of First Assistant had ceremonial weight, and it would send the wrong message for turnover to happen so early on. Cinizia dropped some letters on his desk, and left without a word, already familiar enough with his routine to follow it without instruction. As a dropout with no political experience—and some minor arrests for sedition—Cinizia’s hire had caused some grumbling in the office. Mell ignored them. Cinizia was independent, learned with supernatural efficiency, and often anticipated his requests. At some point during their initial interview, Cinizia had turned the tables and asked Mell some tough questions, gauging if he was sincere in his intentions of improving governance. At the end of the strangest interview Mell had been party to, Cinizia had leaned forward. “Why do you need another assistant?” she’d finally asked indicating the fully staffed office behind her.

“This is my new home, and I intend to help it the best I can. Thus, I have lots of things I need to get done. Radical actions that the Council won’t necessarily approve of. And if I’m going to bat the basket, I need someone I can trust.” Mell had replied. “Why do you want to be my assistant?”

Cinizia’s face remained in the same aloof expression she’d worn for the whole interview, though Mell saw something feral in her slight change of posture.

“There is a nest I’d always wanted to try kicking.”

Mell examined the re-organized notes and set to work. Cinizia’s talent for seeing through false urgency vastly out-classed the established—and often misused—classifications of his office. With his official stamp poised, Mell worked his way down the stack, judging if the orders written on his behalf were acceptable and trying to divine the intent that

EMBEDDED HEART

had got them drafted in the first place. He had to assume that there were ulterior motives buried in every one and he wanted to know whose.

As the fog of the early morning receded, and was subsequently replaced with Capath's usual blanket of steam, Mell neared the trivial matters at the bottom of his pile. They could be safely put aside for later that afternoon. He reached for a worn Law book that had sprouted a forest of bookmarks during his studies and reviewed some of the procedures therein. Today's Council of the Sevenfold was a special one, the first of the handful he attended to include time for citizen's petitions. Mell had been ignored or bullied into votes by the Lords for a week, watching passively as the meetings happened around him. All of their conversations were likely the fiftieth they had on the subject, and, of course, there were no concessions made to bring him up to speed. A frustrating situation, yet Mell had been patient. He would catch up when new business got introduced, and today might be that chance.

Furthermore, since the petitions were open to the public, this would be Mell's first official appearance as part of the Sevenfold. Cinizia had told him that his celebrity status among the younger citizens of Capath would ensure a larger crowd than the dry proceedings usually amassed. Mell had to admit it was nice to be adored for a change, even if it was for his looks and exaggerated tales of his exploits.

It was time to head over to the Council chambers, and, at the precise moment Mell rose to his feet, Cinizia re-entered. She was dressed to leave, wrapped in a peat-coloured coat that offset her short raven-black hair well. Cinizia handed him his own coat as she readjusted a large bag on her shoulder. Mell knew that it contained everything he would need

for the meeting, from train tickets to reference papers to a flask of water.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are incredible?” said Mell, pulling on his outer garment.

Cinizia’s lips quirked upward. “All the time.”

They left the office together, stepping out of the noisy crowded space and into an overcast day.

Shifting in his excessively padded seat in the front-car of a steam train, Mell looked through the huge picture windows. Next to him, Cinizia was breathing deeply with her eyes closed. Normally Mell would have preferred to use the regular train cars—the awed attention of the masses was better than the judgemental glances of the elite—but Cinizia got train sick easily and the extra space helped her cope.

Capath crawled around them, the city’s overdesigned buildings reaching out to let gargoyles leer into the train as they slid past. Taking advantage of this moment of relative peace to untangle from work concerns, Mell’s thoughts turned again to the party. Last weekend’s grimy warehouse, eclectically dressed people, and bone vibrating music had been a salve to Mell’s stultified soul. He hadn’t been lying to Ediox when he said the event reminded him of an Ubran bapndap. It was just a shame it had ended on such a sour note between him and Kettec.

And, just like that, he was thinking about Kettec again.

It had been an intriguing surprise to find out that Ediox’s “air-headed” friend had in fact been the cute guy from the café accident. Mell’s estimation of Kettec had only been improved during their lengthy chat about the Palace. Far from being the dimwitted scatterbrain Ediox had made

EMBEDDED HEART

him out to be, Kettec was actually an interesting ball of introspection. Mell could tell that he had been thinking so far ahead into their conversation that he sometimes forgot it was happening right in front of him. It was also obvious that Kettec's passion for history and architecture ran deep, infused into his core in a way that made Mell envious. To have an incorruptible internal purpose was something Mell had to consistently work towards.

As a lovely bonus, Mell thought, all of those fascinating machinations and drives were occurring beneath a heart-breakingly shy smile and within a surprisingly lithe body. Mell couldn't help but be drawn back to the memory of the young man.

Unfortunately, Mell recognized that the same advanced thought processes that made Kettec interesting also worked against him. As had happened twice now, Kettec was quick to jump to conclusions—with the assumption that others saw the worst in him—and then flee melodramatically. Mell did not regret bringing up the oppression of his people, only that Kettec had thought he was the sole target of that anger. While Kettec was wrong to think that all the issues were in the past, Mell had certainly not started hating him permanently for it. He considered asking Ediox for Kettec's LINE to see about patching things up.

The train hissed, slowing into the station, and Mell offered Cinizia an arm to help her wobble off their conveyance. Through the crowded platform, and free from the cage-like station structure, they weaved through narrow footpaths, Cinizia acting as if her queasiness had never occurred. Clouds roiled overhead, darkening from ash to charcoal. Cinizia withdrew a portable umbrella from her bag, and tucked it under her arm with an expression on her

face that dared the sky to make her use it.

The domed Council building fronted a plaza, and Mell was surprised to see the usual assemblage of pigeons had been replaced with a decently sized crowd. A cheer broke out among those closest to him and swept back until everyone there was shouting and waving. Mell, in mind of the parade, fixed a smile on his face and passed through the mob, shaking hands and acknowledging a myriad of requests without promising anything. Their slow progress forward threatened to stop all together until the Council guards marched forward and made a path.

Inside the palatial entrance hall, shaking himself out of his coat, Mell leaned over to Cinizia.

“How long does this last?” he asked.

She shrugged, casual in his presence as always. “Couple weeks maybe. Then they will probably blame you for every poor decision the Sevenfold makes, regardless of how you voted.” She handed him a bundle of papers. “Pretty soon it’ll be either disinterest or vitriol.”

“Looking forward to it.”

The hearing chamber was a large circular room. Along a third of the bottom circumference was a raised dais, holding seven ceremonial thrones for the Lords. Narrow pews curved around the rest of the area, leaving space for an aisle that led to a small circle of marble in the center. Above was a large dome, painted with an outdated map of the Capathian Nation. Mell had bristled when he first saw the words *Ubran Colonies* stencilled on the familiar blotch of his homeland.

As with their usual sessions, the room was still mostly empty, seating only a few aides and a stenographer. It felt

EMBEDDED HEART

wasteful to have everyone travel across the City and be welcomed into a stadium by a ceremonial guard just for a routine operational meeting. Mell couldn't get upset at every ornamental excess of the government, as he would have perished from an apoplectic attack soon after arriving.

Nodding to the three Lords already gathered, Mell took a seat behind his second nametag—the first had been misspelled, probably intentionally as some sort of petty power play. As if it was hard to get an eight letter name right. Lord Germana arrived next and took her seat, dragging a cloud of overbearing perfume behind her. A firm hand came down on his shoulder and gripped hard, a parody of a friendly gesture. Mell looked up into the sharp eyes of Lord Vespian.

“Good morning,” said Mell.

“Yes,” said Vespian, “Now, I trust you have familiarized yourself with all the materials and your limited role in the proceedings?”

“I'd say so.”

“Wonderful. Just vote with me and everything should advance smoothly.”

“Sure.” *Whatever.*

Vespian, nodded, withdrew his hand, and took his seat next to Mell. At least the aging Lord's unsubtle attempts to get Mell to fall in line with him were brief. Unlike Lord Nosizwe, who had just arrived and was preening his wispy white hair ineffectually as an aide held a hand mirror. He had no doubt prepared another hours long entreaty on some personally enriching issue.

Mell suddenly felt odd, as if he was being shaken slightly. A deep bass rumbling coursed through the quieted building, accompanied by a high pitched tinkling of light fixtures and window panes. Mell shot to his feet, unsteady

as the floor seemed to pulse under him. There was some scattered laughter among the other Lords, and Mell looked around wildly. He was the only one standing and the only one alarmed.

“Sit down Lord Wess,” Vespian said, “It’s merely a tremor. They happen every few weeks.”

Mell quickly took his seat, not wanting to make a further scene. Even if he felt that the very earth shuddering was an event that merited some kind of reaction.

The tremor quieted down soon enough, and with all the Lords seated and ready, guards hauled the large wooden doors open, allowing people to filter into the gallery. The front rows were reserved for those with petitions, and the other curved benches filled quickly. The high ceilings and stern gazes of the Lords instilled a sense of decorum in the previously raucous crowd, and the portly Head Speaker only needed to raise his voice slightly to begin the proceedings. One by one, those scheduled to speak stood in the center of the room and addressed the Sevenfold Lords. Each petition had to pass two steps to make it past this trial. First the citizen would present a quick outline of their issue, indicating why it affected Capath at large and was deserving of their attention. Then the Lords were offered a moment to vouch for the petitioner. If all seven of them chose to pass, then the matter would be relegated to smaller courts. If only one or two of the Lords vouched, then the full petition was heard, and the citizen, or the citizen’s accompanying barrister, would explain in greater detail. After that, a vote was held, and if a simple majority was reached then the issue would be brought forward for further deliberation at a later date.

EMBEDDED HEART

Most of the petitions seemed off to Mell, as if they were not the actual day-to-day problems of regular people and merely another avenue for access to the Lords by the usual band of ruling companies. As it was, he stayed passive in the early proceedings, listening carefully to the problems and watching for which of his associates vouched and voted. Mell did not vouch for any of his own, and he voted according to his own readings on the matter or else based on the enthusiasm of the crowd. A week of paying close attention had revealed where the rifts were in the Sevenfold. Vespian led a faction of what Mell considered traditionalists: they were resistant to progress, or what they called unnecessary change, and they worked hard to ensure that things remained the same as they always had been. On the other side, Lord Luvonor, the youngest Lord aside from himself, led the progressives, who had championed modern technology like the LINE. These sides, although not set in stone for private debates, were drawn in stark relief by the simple voting structure of the petitions. If a progressive vouched, then the progressives voted and vice versa. It was less about considering the proposals and more about trying to score “wins” in front of a crowd. As there were three on each side, at least for these petitions, it meant that Mell always served as the tiebreaker. He was the deciding man, which meant that he was also the man to bribe. And that was, he knew now, how his imbecilic predecessor had become such a wealthy man.

Mell tried not to let his precarious position affect his voting. After casting, he paid close attention to the other Lords, trying to get a sense of the greater political picture. Vespian was embarrassingly easy to read, nodding in satisfaction whenever their votes aligned and grinding his

teeth whenever they didn't. Luvivor was a blank slate in comparison. Thinking of Vespian's transparent attempts to harass Mell over to his side, Mell wondered why he hadn't also been contacted by Luvivor or the opposition. Did they have something brewing? Preoccupied by his observations of the other Lords, the petitions passed quickly. Few of the ones presented to them didn't make it to a vote, since it was only the absurd or the unclear that none of the seven would vouch for.

At last the final petitioner shuffled forward. Unlike the polished demeanour and presentable clothes of the preceding people, this man wore a threadbare tunic and scuffed shoes. They looked like they were the only presentable clothes he owned. A perfect caricature of a working man.

"Uh, M'lords. This is about my water," he said, "My farms dryin' out n' I need irrigation. It's important on the account that my farms will feed a whole whack-a people."

The man's accent was absurd to Mell but that might just be what Capathian farmers sounded like. Mell rifled through his papers, finding the simply worded proposal. The farm was rated to supply a huge number of lentils, and the petitioner was ready to provide them to the city at cost until the investment in irrigation was paid back. It seemed a reasonable petition to Mell, and he remembered an earlier debate about the rising cost of food. This man's plan could offset some of that stress. Looking to the assembled Lords, Mell predicted that Luvivor would probably vouch, and he decided to vote with the other Lord and the progressives to put it through to the next stage. Luvivor didn't move, however, and silence filled the hall. What was wrong, Mell wondered, was he missing something? The farmer stared at his feet, looking dismayed. Mell decided that there was

EMBEDDED HEART

no harm in pulling this to a vote, if only to see why no one wanted to back it. Just before the speaker dismissed the man, Mell stood up.

“I, Lord Mell Wess, vouch for this man. The rising cost of food is a known issue and if another subsidized farm will help offset that, then I am for it.”

His group of fans, diminished much by the reality of the boring proceedings, began clapping loudly, causing the Speaker to quiet them down before proceeding. The farmer seemed stunned when he was given the floor again.

“Well, ahem” he cleared his throat, “There ain’t much more to it. I’ll give y’all the plants, and for sure your salads will be cheaper,” The farmer said, stepping back.

The speaker, who had just eased himself back down, was taken aback by the brevity of the full proposal. He levered himself back to his feet and called for the vote.

Mell was surprised to find that only his hand was in the air. The gallery jeered at the other Lords, and there were cries about how the food cost didn’t affect them and how it was sad that it took a shared-ruler to care about the city’s common people. The speaker, red-faced, called for order and closed out the meeting. Mell wondered what he had missed to be the only one to vote.

After gathering together his things, Mell met with Cinizia in the entrance hallway and prepared to leave. Mulling over the strange final petition, he was just about to ask her about it, when Lord Vespian, face tight, swept over to him. The old man’s cane positively slammed down onto the marble.

“Would you please excuse us,” Vespian said, looking right at Mell though clearly referencing Cinizia. She did not move, pursing her lips in disgust at the command. Vespian

continued to stare straight ahead, silently refusing to continue until his demands were met.

“Hey, I’ll meet you outside, okay?” said Mell.

Cinzia gave him a cross look but didn’t say anything further before leaving.

Alone, Vespian shout-whispered at Mell, “What do you think you are doing?”

“I followed protocol,” said Mell. A weak defence even if it was true.

“This isn’t about protocol! Why did you give that swindler your vouch?”

“Swindler? His proposal looked sound to me, if simplistic.”

“He’s a phoney! He bought some desert for a song, and wants us to do all the work making it valuable. The nearest river is miles away.”

“How was I supposed to know that?” Mell asked.

“Didn’t you read the supplements?”

Supplements? Was there something he missed during his reviews. Or Cinzia?

“Supplements!” Vespian’s hands choked his cane, “You know, the vetting we do on the proposals? The ones we send straight to your First Assistant!”

Mell immediately regretted not officially firing Decienne. She had been miffed about her replacement and now it was coming back to bite him.

“No, I didn’t make it to them.” Mell said, “And the vote failed anyway.”

“Yes, but now all those people in there are all riled up against us! And that con artist can take the fact that he got a Lord’s vouch to the lower courts. If you didn’t read everything, don’t stick your nose in! Like I asked!” Vespian

turned and stormed off, long coat billowing behind him.

Mell sighed. At least that was one mystery solved, and another knock against his already prejudiced reputation among the Lords. That and his earlier surprise at the tremor were certainly making him out to be a bumpkin from the “colonies.”

“Don’t worry about him,” said a gentle voice at Mell’s side. Startled, Mell turned to see Luvivor had silently sidled up to him. The man had lavender eyes and soft blonde hair. “He doesn’t understand what it’s like to be new at this.”

“Sure,” said Mell. “Thanks.”

“By the by,” Luvivor crooned, “I heard that you were at quite the party, recently.” The slight man produced some tickets from within his cloak, and pressed them into Mell’s hand. “You might want to check out the Grey Orlotan, if you haven’t been. Here’s some extra VIP passes if you’d like. Anyway, I’ve got a train to catch. Tata for now!” Luvivor whisked away.

Mell looked glumly at the tickets in his hand. Luvivor clearly had been waiting to see what kind of person Mell was, and then planning his approach accordingly. Judging from the blatant offer, Luvivor had finally decided that Mell was just another easily fooled Ubran idiot, and that he would be as simple to buy as his predecessor. Even after all of Mell’s preparation and careful observation, they all just thought he was as naive and stupid as his age suggested. Mell jammed the tickets into his pocket and headed out to meet Cinizia. If he wasn’t going to be able to make an intelligent impression, Mell mused, then perhaps being disregarded as a buffoon was almost as good.

Maybe even better.

VIII

Seeing only by the sickly green light of the ghostrock lamp, Marshal Dianth Absollo finished penning his journal entry. He was acutely aware that it could very well be his last one. To blot the wet ink, he pinched a bit of ubiquitous grey sand from beneath the makeshift table and sprinkled it over his words. After the parchment was dry and returned to its case, Absollo looked over what remained of his company.

Thirty-seven men huddled together in the near darkness of their subterranean barracks, tired, filthy, and poorly bandaged. They squatted in groups of threes and fours, sleeping on their haunches or playing cards with dirty, incomplete, decks. Genrer, once the brightest of them, babbled, hobbling back and forth on the stump of his recently amputated foot. The boy had erected a wooden barricade to cover the entranceway, although the planks were as haphazard and as ready to collapse as his mind. Absollo would have pitied him for what he'd lost but who was he to judge a man's sanity, especially when a winged shadow slavered in the back of his own head, there and not there. It's dark truth spilled from blackened lips, pooling in every corner of Absollo's soul.

Absollo was removed from his thoughts by a gentle hand on his shoulder. Captain Arrenbar's once beautiful face twisted around a gash, settling into his new approximation of a smile.

"When do we move," he asked, whispering. As if everyone in that tomb of a room couldn't hear him.

EMBEDDED HEART

Absollo looked at the man's ruined visage, spent for nothing, just like the sixty-three soldiers that lay in the tunnels behind them. "We don't," replied Absollo. "Let us make our stand here. Genrer has faith in his wall. Why shouldn't we?"

Arrenbar pursed his lips and reached for Absollo's hand. Absollo brushed it away. "Not here."

"As if they care. As if they don't already know," hissed Arrenbar. "And we still have an exit. We still have time. Don't you remember your own words? Fight in the tunnel where their numbers don't matter, beat them back and move on! Our reinforcements must be close."

"Reinforcements?! What reinforcements?"

"Shh!"

"No! There is no one coming."

"Please Dian."

Absollo stood up, shouting down at Arrenbar. "The king meant for us to die! He sent us down here with the artefacts of rule, not to protect them, but to deliver them to the enemy, as a sacrifice to lend credence to his own cowardice!" There was no great outcry at his treason. The soldiers remained silent, studied the ground, and idly sharpened notched blades.

Arrenbar was not cowed and his voice was even. "Then don't do it for him."

They locked eyes, and the shadow pulled away, shrinking back from a flame. Absollo was reminded of who he was, all the things he believed in, and who his resolve was for.

Absollo reached for Arrenbar. "I'm sorry. You're right. Let's go."

Gathered together in a ragged column, Absollo's company shuffled into the leftmost exit of the room. Men carried wooden crates between them, suspended on poles. Most were filled with moulding food and stale water but one held the sceptre, the crown, and the signet. They were the trinity of rule and the representation of power that held sway over their great land. Leading the way, Absollo held up the ghostrock lamp. That the King had given them the one-of-a-kind treasure had—at first—signified to Absollo trust and the importance of their mission. Now the artefact was just a glowing rock, and it only served to light their way. They did not sing marching songs, or even talk, as they followed the hand-hewn corridor. The only sounds were the clanking of armour, the scrape of boot on stone, and an occasional muffled yelp from Genrer. Now that he had said it aloud, Absollo was sure they had been betrayed. The king could not claim legitimacy for long without the trinity, and they had been gone now for nearly a month. He must have made some deal with the invaders, some guarantee of safety while they subsumed the rest of his empire.

The shadow in Absollo wanted him to destroy the trinity, to strike back at the one who would cast him off. With his free hand, Absollo rubbed the pendant around his neck. Such treachery was unthinkable. The goddess had signalled her favour for a millennium through those golden hunks of metal and they were bigger than any one ruler.

Genrer buckled and fell, shivering and pale. After the company ground to a halt in an uneven wave, their deputized field-medec removed the bandages from Genrer's limb. An overpowering stench of rotting flesh filled the tunnel. Not bothering to re-wrap the infected leg, two soldiers draped Genrer's arms over their shoulders and began

EMBEDDED HEART

dragging him along as their procession started back up. Absollo's purpose faded again. What were they going to do once they got to the end of the carved pathways? What did they hope to accomplish by prolonging their end like this? He looked at Arrenbar, walking next to him. The goddess had gifted Absollo with his position, with his love, he knew that, and it was her right to take it away. He just wished it wouldn't happen down here, so far away from her light and her water.

With abrupt force, a deafening boom rolled down the cave. There was a thunderous screeching of rock scraping against rock. Absollo clapped his hands over his ears, but that did nothing to stop the impact. The ground shook beneath his feet, and he collapsed, bones rattling as the world heaved around him. He was a pebble in an avalanche, tossed against the unyielding walls of the tunnel with such force as to dent his armour. On his hands and knees he tried to steady himself as the ground leaped and bucked. He smashed his chin into the stone floor and tasted copper among the dust. There was nothing to do but lay there and try to cling onto what was once solid. Absollo could summon no thought, no fear, no shadow. The vibrations were so violent that his brain was shaken clean, wrung out like the wash.

After all of time had passed through his bones, there was quiet. As quickly as there had been noise, silence slammed back. Then, there were the familiar sounds of coughing and moaning. Absollo pushed himself to his feet, spitting out dust and blood. The lantern around the ghostrock had shattered, and Absollo fished the fist-sized stone out of its twisted cradle. Holding it up, he tried to peer through the dust, blinking away spots. Three steps ahead of him, the

earth had opened up, a great grinning maw where before there had been chiselled path. Absollo fell to his knees. He knew this was the goddess. She'd heard him and had opened a way.

Three men, including the already weakened Genrer, had died in the violence of the goddess' blessing, and many more had been injured, mostly with broken digits and smashed jaws. Absollo, one of the few unharmed along with Arrenbar, helped where he could, making splints and wrapping cuts. Despite the carnage, he was filled with a fizzy elation. They had been dead before, choosing only where to lie down, and now another path had been given to them. Absollo, with a clear and steady voice, gave commands. Crates of climbing equipment were opened, and they drove pitons into the freshly exposed stone. The unfortunate dead would not be left in these accursed tunnels, but be brought down into the caves, laid to rest in the body of the goddess. With the preparations for descent finished, they stopped to eat a meal of double rations. Absollo ate quickly as he scratched another message in his journal.

Squeezing his way up the line, Arrenbar sat next to Absollo. The Marshall took his Captain's hand in a calloused paw.

"The shadow is gone. The path is open," said Absollo.

Arrenbar looked unsure of what to say to that. "I'm glad. How do you know the cleft will go anywhere?"

"Didn't you hear her? How could you not! She cleared the way for us. All the way under Capath and straight to the Palace."

"The Palace? What are we going to do at the Palace?"

Absollo looked at Arrenbar, manic energy dancing

EMBEDDED HEART

along his face. “Give the King what he deserves.”

IX

Curled up in the dirt, Kettec tried to remain very still. Every mouthful of air was accompanied by a white-hot barrage of pain in his chest, like a cannonball ricocheting against the inside of his ribs. He'd had the presence of mind to tuck his head in between his arms during his unintentionally speedy descent, which saved him from being knocked out by the abrupt landing. Although being rendered insensate might have been preferable to hearing the dry-twig snapping of his bones, and of now being fully aware of every shallow, shuddering breath. Kettec had been waiting for the deep hurt to lessen, or to grow accustomed to it, but he'd been coiled in the foetal position for what felt like hours with no relief. This was his new normal, like it or not. Kettec opened his eyes for the first time since landing, and was greeted by absolute darkness. With the arm that wasn't currently cradling his injured side, Kettec brought his hand up to his headlamp, feeling for the familiar egg-like shape of the light. His fingers were met with something closer to a jagged metallic pancake.

The lamp had been his single most expensive tool. The miniature steam reactors that made up battery cores were expensive, and devices that could handle the explosive energy were more so. Kettec felt more disappointment to find that the lamp had been broken than he did his own ribs. Almost more disappointment, he amended, recovering from a painfully aborted attempt at a sigh. Gathering up all his nerve, Kettec waited for the brief period in-between

EMBEDDED HEART

his almost involuntary gasps and pushed himself upright. He saw green and yellow stars dance across the perfect dark. The worst part was that he couldn't even scream. Jaw clenched, Kettec slowly worked his bag off his shoulders, uninjured left side first, and placed it in front of him. Working a toggle open by muscle memory, he retrieved a little leather pouch. Inside was a wadge of dried petals, collected from the yearly flower of his Thornike plant. The small purple blossom was known for its powerful numbing properties, and the pouch represented many years of careful collection. Kettec dumped the whole thing into his mouth without hesitation and worked the bitter pieces of plant into a gummy bundle. He swallowed, grimacing at the taste.

Before long, what had been a debilitating hurt receded into a distant prickle. Kettec still felt trepidation before a breath, and woozy afterword, but he could move now. Again fishing blindly around in his bag, Kettec took out some sticks of wood as long as his forearm and struck one against the rough cave floor. It burst into flame and light filled the cavern. Walls ballooned outward from the crack he had fallen through and Kettec was dwarfed by the gigantic space. Huge, naturally formed columns of stone arced downward from the spiky ceiling making the place look more like a cathedral than a cave. Flowstone decorated the walls looking like frozen water drapery. Amidst the colossal grandeur of the cave, three oblong piles of rubble grabbed Kettec's attention. Pushing himself to his feet, Kettec wobbled over to the collections of loose stone. Eight feet in length and equidistant to each other, the piles were clearly man-assembled. A prickle climbed up the back of his neck as he leaned closer. Placed at the head of each heap was a

small figurine—a carving of a woman. Kettec recognized the visage from the woman in the fountain of Sheppeth Court, who endlessly poured water from her hands.

These heaps of rock were graves. They were the graves of Absollo's men, left behind as Absollo passed through here hundreds of years earlier on his way to the Palace. Kettec was standing where Absollo once stood, looking down on his fallen men, on the resting place of young Genrer. Kettec's pains were momentarily forgotten, pushed away by the momentous find. He stood there, in awe until his match singed his fingers. Kettec winced and dropped the nub.

With a fresh light, Kettec turned to look at the cave again, calling to mind snippets of Absollo's increasingly esoteric writing. Absollo had thought he had entered the body of a god, and Kettec could hardly blame him. There was a feeling of permanence in the thick pillars that made even the ancient Capath feel young by comparison. The far side of the space receded into darkness, beckoning Kettec forward along a path leading straight to the Palace. It was also the way to understand Absollo's final journey.

Kettec almost fell for the temptation to keep exploring ahead, but the reality of his injuries was too strong to ignore. He was already beginning to feel less of the prickly numbness that was insulating him from the worst of the pain, and he had a long way to backtrack. First though, he had to tackle the climb. Craning his neck back, Kettec could just see the end of his rope, still gently swaying. As if broken ribs were not enough of a handicap, Kettec also had to work by matchlight alone. He stuffed some of the unlit sticks through the leg of his harness and clenched a lit one in his teeth. Before his body could protest, he gripped a rocky protrusion and pulled himself up the wall. Every

EMBEDDED HEART

movement of his right arm caused a little firework of agony and he couldn't use the limb to support any weight. As a result, his ascent was slow, every upward inch a battle. Kettec was sure he'd lost all fear of heights long ago, but the thought of another fall caused his stomach to seize up. Halfway up the wall to his rope, the lit sliver of wood burned too close to his face, and Kettec spat it down into the cave. Holding onto the rock face with his legs, and a quickly tiring left arm, Kettec pulled out a replacement matchstick with his right hand, and slid it against the wall. His fingers let out a spasm, responding to the force and he dropped the stick just as it lit.

Clinging onto a nearly vertical drop with no safety net, Kettec watched as the bauble of light tumbled back down and burst into sparks as it struck ground. That could have easily been his head, all because of one moment of impatience.

Trying again, Kettec lit another match, successfully kept hold of it, and stuck it between his teeth. How had he ever got along without his headlamp? Arms shaking, Kettec surged upward. His injured body screamed in protest, and Kettec abused his left hand, ramming it into finger holds with desperate intensity. The last few feet were the hardest, but Kettec finally reached his rope, fumbling with his harness as his limbs juddered in exhaustion. He clipped the rope home just as his feet gave way, experiencing another terrifying moment of freefall before jerking to halt. Gasping from exertion and pain, Kettec let himself swing in the dark for some time.

The rest of his egress from the underground, if gruelling, was at least uneventful. Kettec finally tumbled out into the dried

up aqueduct and was surprised to be greeted by a rising sun. Squinting in the orange brilliance, Kettec realized he'd been underground all night. He lay on the warm stone, his adrenaline finally running out. Fatigue slammed into him, and he almost wanted to fall asleep right there. Instead, he hauled himself to his feet and limped towards home. Every time he closed his eyes, he was back in the cave, standing under the bones of god and next to the bones of men. After practically crawling up the stairs of his apartment building, Kettec heaved his body into the shower, keeping his hurt side away from the torrent of blessedly hot water. Naked in the steam-wreathed bathroom, Kettec looked himself over. He had a radial pattern of tiny cuts on his forehead, where the lamp had shattered, and his whole right side was purple from the armpit to the hip. Add all of this to the general collection of scrapes and cuts on his fingers and arms, and Kettec wasn't quite sure what excuse he was going to give to the doctor or, more worryingly, to his mother.

One thing he did know is that a visit to the clinic would have to wait until he had some sleep. Emerging from the bathroom, Kettec pulled on a pair of loose trousers and eased himself into his bed. Looking at his LINE, Kettec was dully aware that he had received no messages in his long absence, which was strange since he messaged Fenna before he left. A long rambling message apologizing again for the café meeting as well as unloading his problems about the Palace and the party. His final thought before passing out was one of concern: no matter what estrangement there might be between them, Fenna was always fastidious in replying to LINE messages.

EMBEDDED HEART

A familiar chattering sound rose Kettec from his sleep. Gulping and swallowing a dry mouth away, Kettec opened crusty eyes. He could tell from the length of the shadows on his wall that it was late afternoon. Thanks to his exertion and the Thornike flowers, he'd slept the day away. While it still hurt to breathe, it was more of a throbbing soreness. Kettec sourly realized that his exploration would be brought to a halt while he healed. His mind returned to those wonderful caverns. Their asymmetrical sinuous beauty.

Startling him out of his reverie, the LINE on the end table rattled out another message, a reminder of what had woken him up in the first place. Kettec gingerly reached over, expecting a response from Fenna. What he got instead was from Ediox.

~K HAVE U HERD FROM FENNA? Was the first fully capitalized message.

~I MESD UP AN SHES GONE N ITFS MY FAULT

A sense of dread that had been building up in Kettec's subconscious tipped over into a fully realized worry: something was wrong with Fenna. He quickly banged out a message.

~She hasn't responded to me since the party. What do you mean gone? He sent.

The answer came after only a moment.

~I WNET TO HER PLAC AND SHED GONE SHE LEFT

Some part of Kettec wondered why Fenna had told Ediox where she lived. Were they really that close?

~Okay, so just wait there, she'll be back.

~NO!!!!1 LIK GONE FR GOOD MOVED OUT LANDLORD SIAD SHES JUST LEFT

Kettec wasn't sure what to say to this. Would Fenna change apartments without telling anyone? He thought

back to when they first met years ago. Fenna had arrived in Capath with no family and no job, and with every one of her possessions in a battered yellow trunk. She never spoke about where she had lived before and never about what she had left behind. Kettec had forgotten this strangeness over the years as they made enough new memories together. Would Fenna skip town without telling anyone?

~Meet me at Sheppeth, sent Kettec.

He pushed himself out of bed, grunting against the pain. Winding a length of bandage around his chest seemed to help, and, after pulling the fabric tight, Kettec shrugged on a loose fitting shirt. He hoped they were overreacting. Maybe Ediox was just misreading whatever had happened between the two of them, and Fenna was just looking for some space. It was an ugly realization to make, however, that he really didn't know Fenna well enough to tell even after all those years of closeness. Despite the agony it caused, Kettec took the stairs two at a time.

Arriving at Sheppeth Courtyard out of breath, Kettec saw Ediox pacing by the fountain. Her long hair was piled into a functional bun and she was dressed plainly, which, when compared Ediox's usual standard of dress, looked like unspeakable disarray. Catching sight of him, Ediox marched over and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"What do I do Kay? She's not answering her LINE! How am I supposed to apologize? I didn't mean...Why did she move on her own?" Noticing at last Kettec's cuts and the pained look on his face as she shook him, Ediox took a step back. "And what happened to you?"

"Never mind that. What did you do?" asked Kettec, staying focused on Fenna's disappearance. Ediox twisted her

EMBEDDED HEART

hands against one another, and studied her feet, uncharacteristically reticent to speak.

“I asked her out,” said Ediox almost under her breath. Kettec tried not to look too surprised. Although, on reflection, it explained a lot of things. The attention and invisible tension that had been strung between them. Kettec also remembered a red-faced Fenna in the Quiet Waters, had she told him about it?

“And what did she say?” he asked.

“She needed to think about it.” Ediox stared hard at Kettec. “I told her I didn’t want things to be weird, and to just say no or whatever she was thinking. Where do you think she went?”

“I think she’s leaving. Leaving everything behind.”

“What!” shouted Ediox, bringing renewed tears to her puffy eyes. “I never meant to...I just wanted her to be happy!”

Kettec, confronted with a rare side of Ediox, put an arm around her shoulders. “It’s not your fault at all,” he said. “I think she’s done something like this before though. Like, when she first got here.” He remembered the time limit of his earlier plan and changed topics. “You said the landlord mentioned she left today, right?”

Ediox nodded and sobbed out something incoherent.

“Okay, so that means she’ll be heading to one of the Ring stations. There are two roughly the same distance away. We just need to get there.”

“You think she hasn’t left yet?”

“Outbound trains are on uneven hours, since it’s a weekend. So, probably. You head to Twofon and I’ll go to Central. We’ll use the station link to LINE each other if, when, we find her, okay?”

Given a mission and a chance to direct her energy, Ediox composed herself quickly. She wiped her eyes and took a few last snuffles. Turning to leave, she stepped back to say something.

“Thanks Kay. Why don’t you have your shit together like this all the time?” She flashed him a bittersweet smile and ran off before he could think of a response. He wasn’t sure what she meant since all he had done is come up with a basic plan. Kettec shook his head and loped off towards central, wincing at every footfall and breath.

With a hand pressed against his side, Kettec pushed himself to keep moving quickly down the pathways. He didn’t know what he was going to say to Fenna if he found her, but he was sure that something needed to be said. Even if she still decided to leave, Kettec wanted her at least to know how important she was to him. She should know that he valued her helpfulness, and how much he had taken advantage of her powerful calm.

More than just pain, Kettec felt frustration at his injuries. He knew of so many shortcuts towards the station but they all required him to be able to climb with some efficacy. The same dizzying winding construction that always awed him was now hampering him. Kettec was forced to take an indirect path through the ancient metropolis. Block after block of tall grey and beige stone buildings inched past, gargoyles sneering down on his uneven gait. He chastised himself: if only he paid attention at the café, if only he found her at the party, if only he packed another blasted length of rope!

Central Station, which wasn’t Capath’s largest or most centrally located station despite the name, finally burst into

EMBEDDED HEART

view across from the pathway Kettec was currently on. The latticed glass enclosure twinkled, illuminated with a thousand dazzling pinpricks by the setting sun. Though the station was almost at eyelevel, it was still a ways away by conventional travel. The road dipped down sharply and then took its time looping around a few blocks of buildings to ascend back the right height. Taking a moment to catch his breath, Kettec peered at the concrete platform. His blood cooled. Though only a smudge at this distance, Kettec could just make out a blond figure. A woman wearing all grey, with a splotch of yellow beside her. It was Fenna. She was leaving them as abruptly as she had come.

Kettec started to run down the incline, ignoring his body's insistence to do the opposite. Fenna was right there. He heard a sustained blast of a horn. Looking back up at the tracks, Kettec saw a large out-of-town engine on approach, cotton balls of white smoke pouring out of its gold stacks. He didn't have enough time to get all the way around the loop. He wasn't going to make it.

X

He wasn't going to make it unless he climbed. A relatively squat, six-storey building crouched under the overpass, identified as a Tinker's by a weather-beaten, hand-painted sign. Its scalloped stonework and broad exterior window-sills made it an ideal candidate for a vertical shortcut. Kettec moved towards the workshop, leaving himself no time for an internal debate over the dangers of scaling injured. Already out of breath, Kettec leapt onto a shuttered food cart to boost him to the second storey. The wooden cart creaked and wobbled underfoot so Kettec waited a moment for his weight to settle. Someone at street level shouted obscenities and demands at him, which he ignored. Kettec visualized his climbing route and hooked a leg on the first level's awning frame. He pulled himself up with his thighs and stood upright, balancing on the thin metal rod. Every inhalation was accompanied by a stab of pain to the ribs, and it hurt to even use his right arm for balance.

A standing jump took him from the bottom of the awning to the top, and Kettec reached for a second level windowsill, ascending to the next floor with a single arm and brute strength. His mouth filled with bile, and spots decorated the edge of his vision. He did the same to reach floor three. Half-way up to floor four, and attempting the same manoeuvre, his overworked left limb gave out. Instinctively, Kettec swung his right arm around and upward, gripping the window ledge and transferring weight. A star exploded behind his ribs, and he gaped at

the pain, unable to even take the shallow breaths he had been subsisting on. Hanging by a quickly deadening arm, Kettec kicked with his feet, flailing against the stone for any sort of purchase. A toe of his ill-suited shoes stuck in a carved fold, and Kettec heaved himself upward. He lay on the broad sill of the fourth-floor window, trying not to vomit. Inside, a woman stared at him, wide-eyed in surprise. Evidently there were apartments above the Tinker's workshop. The woman screamed as Kettec struggled to his feet. He had two more floors to go. He wiped his hands on his pants, and mustered all his remaining energy, which, considering he couldn't remember offhand the last time he ate, wasn't all that much. Delirious and exhausted, Kettec finally reached the uppermost railing and flopped over it. He was on the same road he'd left below, just much further along its twisting route. Both hands pressed to his burning side, Kettec hobbled along the worn cobbled road, and up the final flight of stairs towards the Ring station. The glass enclosure loomed over him like a gigantic gleaming egg. Kettec arrived at the station just as the train was squealing to a halt.

The platform had filled out with people, and steam billowed out from under the train, obscuring the view even further. Kettec pushed rudely past, unable to spare a breath for apologies, and worked his way over to where he had first seen Fenna. She was still there, standing all the way on the far side of the platform, mostly alone, right up against a carriage entrance. The train doors hissed open, steam pouring out of actuators. Wearing a grey dress over black tights, Fenna lifted her yellow trunk and took a step towards the train. Kettec lurched forward and croaked out her name. "Fenna!"

She turned and looked around, wearing her surprise nakedly when she caught sight of him. “Kettec? What are you—Are you okay?”

Unprepared to actually be facing his friend, words spilled out of Kettec unfiltered and without his usual obsessive forethought.

“Listen,” he panted, “I’m not here to stop you. If you need to go, okay. But I just...There are things that I want to say. How much you’ve helped me over the years. You got me through school, and were probably the only thing that kept me from having a total meltdown every week after. You were there when my father...and everything!” Kettec didn’t have time to read her expression. People on the platform were staring at the sudden drama, edging past them, and Kettec just barrelled on. “But I’ve been a bad friend. I got so caught up in my own stuff like always. I was so used to relying on you, and when you needed me once, I wasn’t even listening. Fenna, I really wanted to help. You are so important to me!”

Kettec wheezed, words pouring out almost as involuntary coughs. “And I don’t know why you have to leave, if it’s something important or if it’s because you’re running.” Kettec was reminded of every situation he’d ducked away from, starting with yesterday’s party and working backward to his first day of school. “I know what it’s like. And I’ll be here for you either way.”

He ran out of words, and breath, and looked at Fenna, not sure what to expect. She was wearing a mask, a carefully neutral expression that he’d seen only a few times before. She had her armour on. Fenna half-turned towards the open door of the train, not facing him or the aperture. She looked out to the tracks, out past Capath. Time stretched

EMBEDDED HEART

on, a thousand hours of uncertainty. Kettec forced himself to stay standing, and waited for her to say something or to leave. What would he tell Ediox? Regret and fear filtered past his soreness. How many times could he have asked Fenna about her past, could he have tried to reciprocate her assistance? Frozen in that terrible moment, Kettec tried not to think about what a life without Fenna would be like. She stood there, apparently caught between escape and confrontation. At last, the engine let out another whistle. The doors hissed shut and the train let out its first powerful chuff, repeating it at increasingly shorter intervals. Fenna turned back to Kettec, her mask broken. Tears poured over her cheeks and she sat down hard on her trunk.

“I almost did it, Ket. I almost left again,” she said. Kettec collapsed down next to her, and took her hand. She was still real, still next to him.

They sat together on a bench, looking over the empty platform at the tracks. Kettec’s side was a nexus of hurt but he was nevertheless relieved. After some time of mutually silent recovery, Fenna opened her mouth, closed it, and looked at Kettec.

“I’m here,” he said.

She nodded, and spoke slowly, trying not to stutter. “I used to live in Racherith. I was an unplanned child of infidelity and was not well liked by either parent. I had no friends, and had only had a choice between being a nanny or maid for work. When I left, everyone was probably pleased.”

Fenna smoothed out the pleats of her dress, and folded her hands together. “I decided that I was never going to get caught like my parents. Stuck in a situation. I would be free.

And I thought to myself that I was being a burden to you. Another thing to worry about. And I didn't know what to say to Ediox. I'm scared. So I thought it was a good time to move on."

Kettec watched her face in profile, a strand of her flaxen hair drifted away in the breeze.

"Well, first," said Kettec, "You aren't a burden. And even if you were, you have like seven years of my encumbrance to balance out. And second, uh, what do you think of Ediox?"

Fenna's pale cheeks flushed. "She's great! She's so dynamic, and she knows just what she wants, and what she likes. And she's so pretty. But I just don't know how to say any of that to her. And I've never had a relationship before.

"Well the first part of that is already done," said a third voice. Ediox plopped down on the bench next to Fenna and smiled from ear to ear. "And we can figure out the second bit together."

Kettec and Fenna both goggled at the sudden arrival of Ediox.

Fenna recovered first. "I'm so sorry Edi! I didn't know what to do and I was feeling trapped and..." Tears sprung again from her eyes.

Ediox also started crying and wiped her face on a sleeve. "Dang it, you're ruining my cool entrance! But it's okay. We're good. I'm sorry too. I didn't—and don't—mean to pressure you."

Fenna nodded. A soft smile tugged at her lips. "Okay then."

"Perfect! Also, Hi Kay. I figured you must have got to her when I didn't get a LINE."

"Oh yeah." Kettec had entirely forgotten that he was supposed to send a message to Ediox at Twoson.

EMBEDDED HEART

“Dummy!”

Ediox regaled them with the lengths she'd gone to track Fenna down, and how she'd crossed the city in such a hurry, twice. Kettec was relieved to see Fenna smiling again, and sensed that there was much to be said between the two women without him there. He lurched to his feet, trying not to groan audibly.

“I'd better go,” he said.

“Are you okay?” asked Fenna.

“Yeah, just tired.” Ediox and Fenna shared a knowing look that Kettec couldn't quite decipher.

“I'll LINE you later.”

“Sure. Bye, you two.”

“Kettec?” Fenna said as he turned to leave.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

“Yeah Kay,” said Ediox, “Thanks...for everything.”

Dipping his head in acknowledgement, Kettec walked to the station exit, feeling every step reverberate in his chest.

“Bye, airhead!” Ediox called after him.

Limping up the last few steps, Kettec finally arrived at his apartment. He felt like he'd been drowned, wrung out, broken down into little pieces, and poorly taped back together. On his way into his bedroom, Kettec grabbed the remainder of a loaf of bread. It took the very last of his vigour to lower himself carefully onto his mattress. If it didn't hurt so much to breathe, he would have let out a sustained, exhausted sigh. Everything had turned out okay, but why did so much have to pile into one day? The mystery

of Ediox's LINE message from the day he'd been fired had been solved and he hadn't lost his closest friend.

Eating was painful, but at this point it would be easier to list the things that weren't, so Kettec forced the slightly over-hard bread down. He reflected again on the night before: he had passed through the maze of the barracks and made the exhilarating discovery of the gravesites of Absollo's men. And he located a magnificent—and Palace headed—cave structure. Although wonderful, these discoveries came at the cost of his well-being. It would be some time before he would be in spelunking condition, which was supremely irritating. Kettec poked further at his self-inflicted annoyance by worrying if the cache might be destroyed before he could get to it because of his own impatience. Perhaps it wasn't all bad news though. He was forced to focus on the petition now, to slog through the paperwork without the underground to call him down.

As sleep bore Kettec away from his contemplation, and physical ache, he had a final thought. It was something he had been suppressing from embarrassment, a memory that now, after all he'd recently been through, didn't seem so embarrassing. A vivid image of smooth skin and blue eyes that reflected flashing multi-coloured lights came into his mind. He fell asleep remembering the young Lord right next to him, leaning in to hear more.

XI

Grabbing onto the dusty protrusion of the bathroom's door-frame, Kettec attempted a chin-up. His newly healed ribs twinged as he made it all the way up and held the position. The rolls of muscle in his back burned, stressed, but up to the challenge. Kettec was nearly ready. The long weeks of recovery had been difficult, and the separation he felt from the underground had been unbearable. Unable to retreat to the embrace of his stone cocoon or dig into his new discovery, he might have gone mad if it weren't for the progress he made on the citizen's petition.

Three distinct sets of laughter called him back from his lavatory hideout: his mother's familiar dry chuckle, Fenna's ethereal titter, and—the loudest—Ediox's braying. Kettec washed his hands again and re-entered the apartment's living room. Seated on the floor around the low main table were the three women, still amused by whatever had been said in his absence. Despite the fact that they were ostensibly all there to assist him in his final petition preparations, Kettec felt outnumbered somehow.

"What'd I miss?" he asked, taking his seat among piles of note-strewn paper.

"Oh, nothing," replied Ediox in the least convincing manner possible. "What took you so long though? Didja fall in?"

Kettec shot her a look. Though they'd known each other for years, Kettec had never considered Ediox a close enough friend to warrant access to his home. However, since he'd

been invited to her and Fenna's newly shared place, reciprocation was only polite.

Fenna handed him another piece of paper. "Here Ket. A quiz that Mrs.—"

"A-bup-bup!" interrupted Kettec's Mom.

Fenna corrected herself. "That *Roszalij* and I made."

Kettec scanned the sheet, seeing that he was tasked to list the seven Lords, a brief history, and what aspect of his pitch corresponded with their specific interests.

"Why does this matter as long as I've memorized my speeches?" asked Kettec.

His mother, now on a first name basis with his friends, replied. "Because, if you get asked a question by one, how are you going to know which of their personal concerns to bend your answer to?"

"I can bring in my notes," muttered Kettec. He retrieved a pencil and began to write "Lord Vespian" in the first box. Roszalij plucked the paper away before he finished the second word.

"Actually you're right. I think you should answer orally. It would be no good to get up there only to have your nose buried in a stack of paper the whole time."

Kettec groaned, and was thankful yet again that Mom had been too busy to homeschool him as was planned before his father passed.

"Lord Vespian," Kettec began, remembering his mnemonic. "Longest serving on the Sevenfold. His family owns the ring stations, and he is normally occupied with protecting the traditions of Capath. He is empowered to control the Military if a majority council cannot be called during wartime or disaster."

"And how are you going to appeal to him?" asked Fenna.

“Uh, I’ll link the Palace to the history of his own family tree, and point out the heritage the building holds. And could hide.”

“Close enough!” yelled Ediox. “Next!”

Kettec bristled. As if she could do any better. He went on.

“Lord Nosizwe...”

Working through the next five lords and specific appeals without major incident—only getting Lord Germana and Lord Gerain momentarily mixed up—Kettec reached the youngest and latest addition.

“Mell—uh, Lord Wess. He’s from the Ubran Republic and is the other outsider ruler. Has only been here for a few weeks, so, yeah.”

Fenna and Ediox shared a look, already fluent in the facial communication so common to couples.

“And for his vote?” prompted Roszaliij.

“I, um, he’s just a ‘No’ okay? The Palace was built with Ubran resources. Stolen. He doesn’t see it in the same way I do. He’s right to do so but...” Kettec pushed himself back from the table. “Whatever. I’m done now.”

Thankfully no one pressed him further on his scattered answer.

“Fine,” said Roszaliij, “Then recite your proposal and vote speeches.” Before he could say anything more, she added. “And it’s all for your own good, right?” Ediox and Fenna nodded. Kettec acquiesced and rattled off the speeches, receiving the occasional correction from Ediox, who was far too excited to catch him out. As he finished the closing line of his second monologue, Kettec was suddenly aware of the attention from the other three and felt a twinge of self-consciousness. That feeling ballooned out when he

thought about how many more people he would be in front of tomorrow.

Fenna started clapping and elbowed Ediox until she followed suit.

Roszalij nodded. "Well, I guess you're as ready as you'll ever be. How did you ever make it through school?"

Ediox slapped him on the back. "I let 'im cheat off my page!"

"Oh, really?" purred Roszalij.

"No!"

Ediox went on. "Yup, for everything but history. For that he did my homework."

Gentle laughter emanated again from Fenna. As much as Kettec was loathe to have his scholarly indiscretions paraded in front of his mother, he was at least happy to see Fenna enjoying herself. He welcomed anything to avoid another emergency visit to the train station.

Fenna got to her feet and smoothed out the front of her white lace dress. "Well if that's everything, we'd better get going. Thank you for having us, Roszalij."

Checking the time via a button on the work LINE she had next to her, Roszalij shook her head. "It's gotten late. Why don't you two stay for dinner?"

"Thank you, but we really should go. Ket has his big day and I wouldn't want us to outstay our welcome."

"Nonsense. Just think of it as thanks for helping out my son."

Still seated, Ediox reached up and linked hands with Fenna. "Free food, Fenna!"

Wafting back down gracefully, Fenna leaned against Ediox. "Okay then."

"Great!" said Roszalij. She jotted some things down on

EMBEDDED HEART

a piece of scrap paper and handed it across to Kettec, along with a stack of coins. "Go and pick up that stuff please."

Kettec looked at the food listed on the note and got to his feet. A walk alone would be just what he needed to clear his head.

Ediox leapt up. "Actually, I'll go too! Just to make sure he doesn't get lost."

Ignoring Kettec's protests, Ediox whispered something to Fenna, received a nod in return, and then ushered him over to the door.

"Be back soon!" she called to the other room.

Together they walked along the worn stone street. Ediox was babbling about why the market closest to his building wasn't good enough and why a farther one was worth the extra effort. She said something about the order of daily deliveries and the pride of the shop owners but Kettec wasn't fully paying attention. He looked at the old city around him, taking in the crumbling brickwork and fresh steel. It was cold enough for every tendril of steam to be visible as it leaked from pipes. The streams of white air were considered an acceptable loss as the pressured gas was ferried from the many giant steam-cores into homes and businesses. He was glad Ediox could carry a conversation on her own as he wouldn't know what to talk about if given that burden. He was happy for Fenna and Ediox's burgeoning relationship as the two of them complimented one another well. They had quickly grown into an inseparable force. However, he was still trying to understand the new dynamic brought to their friendship. Occasionally, usually while waiting for them to finish whispering about something, Kettec felt extraneous. Jealous too, if he was honest with himself. Fenna had been

his closest friend and now he had to share her? Kettec tried to force the ugly possessive thoughts from his head. If she was happier this way, then he was too.

“Hey airhead,” said Ediox, bumping shoulders with him, “We’re here.”

They divided the shopping, although Ediox, more familiar with the stalls, finished first, and came back to help Kettec with the few items he had left. Kettec could tell from the ingredients that his mother would be making adenfa, a potato bread covered in a thick creamy sauce sided with vegetables. A complicated recipe that his father had excelled at making.

Laden with paper bags, they walked back to Kettec’s apartment. He should have been mentally preparing for tomorrow but he was tired of going over the same rote actions. Plus, the nervousness at speaking in public and, perhaps more notably, in front of Mell Wess, was enough to cause him to shy away from thinking about his impending meeting. So it was back to the topic of Ediox and Fenna.

“So, uh,” said Kettec, in a break of Ediox’s diatribe on substandard produce, “How are you two doing? You and Fenna, I mean.” He instantly regretted opening his mouth.

Ediox regarded him with something nearing surprise. Then laughed. “Oh, wouldn’t you like to know, you dog! Thinkin’ of us flouncing around in nighties and having pillowfights and kissing each other’s—”

“That’s not what I meant!” interrupted Kettec.

“Sure. So what did you mean?” Ediox’s perpetual grin was suddenly feral. Baring of teeth.

“Just, like, be careful with her okay?”

“What are you, her big brother all of a sudden? Fenna

can take care of herself.”

“Yeah I just...sorry. Sorry!”

Ediox laughed again, relieving the sudden pressure. “You big dope. Anyway, where was I. Oh yeah, the issue with food supply...”

Arriving back inside, Ediox and Kettec found Fenna and Roszaliy practically rolling on the ground in laughter. Roszaliy cleared a tear from her eye and bade Kettec to put the bags in the kitchen.

“What’s funny?” asked Ediox, smiling in anticipation of the joke.

“Don’t worry about it!” said Fenna, drawing another snort from Kettec’s mother.

Ediox mock pouted. “Hmm, so that’s what that feels like.”

The four of them prepared dinner together, which meant that there was no single person to blame when it turned out poorly. They salvaged what they could into a serviceable meal, flavour enhanced by the camaraderie that went into its tortured creation. Kettec found that the raucous dinner was actually quite enjoyable, even if he often found himself being teamed up on by his Mother and Ediox. It was possible he had been missing out on something by never having his friends over like this. Still, he was exhausted by the time they left and everything was cleaned up. He collapsed onto his bed with only enough energy to obsess over tomorrow for a short while. It was possible that all his problems would be solved, and that the demolition would be delayed. All he needed was those four little votes. Kettec wondered what Mell might think seeing him again? Maybe the Lord would have forgotten him given how many people someone like

that meets in a day. There was no way he would remember some weirdo from a party a month ago, right?

Time wasn't passing correctly for Kettec. The morning had swished by in the blink of an eye. He'd barely had enough time to eat and dress before needing to dash for the ring station and catch his train. That train ride had lasted an eternity, penning Kettec within a mass of jostling people while he panicked about his speech. Then, sitting under the ancient dome of the Council building, the petitions scheduled to be heard before Kettec's whizzed by. He was up soon. Too soon!

Kettec took a deep breath and tuned out the conversation currently happening between a petitioner and the speaker. He closed his eyes and tried to think of the cool stone that lay beneath them. If all else failed, he still had the underground option now that he was healed and he knew where to go. The peaceful moment did not last long. The petitioner's bench in the front row was hard and uncomfortable, and the person next to him jittered constantly, shaking their leg and shifting from side to side. Consciously avoiding making any sort of eye contact with the Lords—especially Mell—Kettec looked up at the painted roof. A map of what used to be the Capathian Nation was emblazoned on the tiles, picked out in gold from the dark marble background. Kettec followed the whorls of the coast, down towards the Laughing Ocean and farther to the continent of Slenner's Spear. He noted the last was incorrectly mapped. The map's landmass was far too pointy compared to reality, which is why it was called the "Spear" instead of the

EMBEDDED HEART

perhaps better fitting “Club.” Then the words being spoken sunk in.

“...petitioner Kettec Florino....Mr. Florino?”

The speaker was calling his name. Kettec lurched to his feet and approached the lectern that had been placed in the center of the grand room. From his worn and dusty bag, normally used for holding exploring equipment, Kettec withdrew his notes for the session. He was instantly grateful for the repeated grilling his mother had given him on procedure and prepared to deliver his initial proposal speech. During this entire period, Kettec had not looked up from his feet or the papers that were now scattered atop the lectern.

The heavy voice of the speaker sounded again over the restless crowd. “Petitioner, your opening statement please.”

Kettec nodded. He cleared his throat, reminding himself to stick to the script, and that he only needed one Lord to vouch for this part. He gulped down a deep breath and looked up, ready to deliver the words he practiced to the men and women he studied. Seven faces loomed above him, looking down from their gilded thrones. Familiar from tiny black and white photos and unfamiliar in their size and proximity; unfamiliar except for one.

The blue eyes of Mell Wess watched him intently, some concern drawing down the man’s brow. What was wrong, was he still angry, Kettec worried. His carefully rehearsed words died in his throat. He sputtered. Under the gaze of the Sevenfold, in front of a crowd, in this place of history, and with Mell Wess watching him, Kettec couldn’t do anything but make pathetic little choking noises.

XII

Official First Assistant Cinizia entered Mell's office with a gift basket under one arm and a folder of paper under another. Without comment Cinizia placed Luvonor's daily bribe near a chair that was buried under a raft of similarly lavish unopened gifts and took a seat next to Mell at his overburdened desk. Covered in reams of paper, bundles of scrolls with crumbling wax seals, and spools of LINE print-outs, Mell's desk looked like an open air trashcan. There was a byzantine organization to the mass of information, although it was not a system Mell could fully internalize himself. Only by combining his knowledge of events with Cinizia's meticulous recollection of position could his current desktop monstrosity be wrangled. He would have preferred something cleaner of course, but there were just too many competing interests and sign-offs and memos that needed to be accessible or cross-referenced at a moment's notice for anything else to work.

Cinizia placed the folder down in the pressing concerns area, and tapped it with a black lacquered fingernail.

"There is a petition later this morning," she said.

Mell flipped open the folder and saw that it contained the supplementary documents for the Citizens' Petitions. He'd had them for a few days but hadn't bothered to read them yet. The petition voting was a foregone conclusion now that Luvonor had secured a consistent majority. Lord Isellel, the other outsider Lord, had sided with Vespian for years, but as of last week she'd upset the normal balance

EMBEDDED HEART

of power and started voting against him. Maybe Luvivor's bribes had finally gotten to her or the slimy Lord had found some other weak point to press. Flipping the folder shut, Mell pushed it farther to the side, where it joined some of the other less important documents.

"There's no point," he said.

Cinzia pursed her lips. "It's nice to know our democratic traditions are so easily pushed aside."

"I'm working on it!" Mell handed her the unrelated note he'd just finished writing and then rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Could you stamp this and send it to the Resources Department?"

Cinzia nodded and sashayed out of his office.

Mell had been working, rather fruitlessly, on a plan to undo Luvivor. The man was so blatantly corrupt that it should have been easy. He wielded wealth and promises of power indiscriminately, buying his way into ever more advantageous positions. Unfortunately, Luvivor was as careful as he was amoral and ensured that everything he did was covered under some rarely used legislative provision. He had been at this for some time now, and had set up a network of plausible deniability. Of course, making a case to take down a Lord was only one of Mell's duties. He also had to run his district, attend the hearings, and make votes, all while pretending to be an oblivious and populist outsider. The dunce defence was useful for investigation even if it hadn't won him any allies among the rest of the Sevenfold. Vespian in particular loathed him.

Mell's office door rattled open and Cinzia re-entered bearing two steaming cups of solidly black coffee. Together they tended to the duties of the day.

A commotion shook them out of their intense work, and Mell looked up to see Luvinor and three others striding across his headquarters.

“Speak of the demon,” whispered Mell.

Luvinor’s burly men barrelled through his stunned workforce and a particularly nasty looking “aide” slammed Mell’s office door open. Luvinor, pale eyes ablaze, strode up to the desk.

“Ah, Lord Luvinor. How can I help you?”

Luvinor made a terse hand motion, and his large assistant closed the door and lowered the blinds of the wall-length, inward-facing window. Cinizia reached for a portable emergency LINE, wired under his desk, but Mell caught her hand with his own. *Let this play out*, he tried to tell her with his eyes.

“Cut the shit,” hissed Luvinor.

Mell gave him a clueless look. “Sorry?”

“That wide-eye act won’t play anymore, so don’t bother. All I’ve ever been is good to you, and I don’t expect much in return.” Luvinor’s eyes flicked from Mell to the gift laden chair. His brows knit even further. “I see the sugar didn’t work. Well here’s the salt.” Luvinor motioned to another of his men, who dumped a bag out onto Mell’s desk. Silvery bits of broken glass and crushed gemstones spilled across the pages of his work, tinkling as they settled. Mell recognized it as pieces of his excessively ostentatious inherited mirror.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” said Luvinor, inspecting a well-manicured fingernail, “But it looks like someone broke into your apartment and worked over the place. Shame. Anyway, stop looking into my accounts.

Understand?”

Luvonor made a little twirly gesture and his guard opened Mell’s office door.

“Stay safe,” said the Lord, and the four interlopers stomped out. Silence filled the normally cacophonous room. Moments after Mell heard the final slam of the stairwell door, he broke out into sustained belly laughter.

“What a jester-assed idiot!” said Mell.

“Care to let me in on the joke?” asked Cinizia. It was only because he knew her so well that Mell could tell she was shaken.

“Well, dear assistant, it’s positively adorable that he thinks I care at all about any of the junk in my apartment. I changed continents with only a suitcase. And second, now we know that there is definitely something he doesn’t want us to know about in his accounts. That narrows my queries down so much!”

Cinizia glanced down at the mess covering his desk and looked unconvinced.

“I knew he was bad,” she said, “But all this, in your office? In broad daylight?”

Mell got up, and shook a shard of mirrored glass off of his suit. “Listen, I’ve received worse threats from scarier people. This just means we’re on the right track. Okay?”

She nodded.

“Okay. Let’s go get some stuff to clean this up.” They exited his office, closing the door behind them. Mell looked at his still immobilized staff and was reminded again just how young and inexperienced they all were, one downside to wanting uncorrupted talent. Mell clapped his hands twice. “Nothing to see here. Back to work!” The spell broke and slowly the usual bustle returned with the sounds of

chattering LINES and shuffling papers. They left the office blinds closed and went to the downstairs supply closet. Mell didn't want anyone else to feel afraid to do their job.

Returning with a bag, bucket, and brush, Mell re-crossed the headquarters floor. He opened his office door and looked at the mess, waiting for an equally burdened Cinizia to catch up with him. Morning sunlight peeked through a window, lighting up the bits of sharp glass and causing them to cast otherworldly shapes on the rest of his paper drudgery.

A crimson letter lay on the center of his desk. On top of the glass. A chill ran up his spine with instant recognition and subsequent fear.

He heard Cinizia step up behind him and Mell turned in the doorway.

"Actually, can you grab a wet cloth too?" he asked, taking the supplies she'd been carrying in his free hand. Cinizia nodded and turned to go back downstairs. Mell shut the door, dumped the cleaning stuff down, and crossed over to the letter. He opened it with a shaking hand. There was enough time to read the perfectly formed words precisely twice before the ink faded from exposure to the light.

Remember where your loyalties lay Mell Leera Wess. Ensure construction proceeds on the Flowing Island.

It was unsigned but the deep red paper spoke clearly enough—it was from the Ubran Republic's Assassin Brigade. Still holding the scarlet missive, Mell confirmed that all the windows were still closed and locked. His staff would have stopped anybody from entering, so in the short time he'd been downstairs someone had gotten in and out of a locked room without being heard or seen. Now *that*

EMBEDDED HEART

was how you delivered a threat, Mell thought.

Cinizia re-entered. "Love letter?" she asked seeing the deep red hue.

Mell stuffed it into his pocket. "Ah, yeah. You know."

A corner of her lip quirked. "Yeah. I do."

It was quite difficult to clean up Luvonor's mess since they had to be careful to pick up all the dangerous little pieces and not disturb the order of the papers too much. Mell worked in silence, trying to remember where the Flowing Island was and what exactly was being asked of him. He didn't recognize the name and he didn't even know how much time he had. A knot grew in his stomach as he worried of things he had thought were behind him. Of course the Republic would pressure him into acting in their interest. Even though they tried to be as thorough as possible, and wiped down every exposed surface, Mell was sure he was going to be finding little shards of mirror for a while. Come to think of it, he realized, his apartment would be trashed as well. It was a bad day all in all.

"We have to get to the council building," said Cinizia, wiping her hands clean. "The meeting is going to start soon."

They packed and headed for the train. Mell sighed, to think he used to hate boring days.

While he wasn't late, Mell was the last Lord to arrive. The room had already been filled with the petitioners and the public crowd. The murmur of many voices filled the domed room, and Mell started to lay his information papers out in front of him. A single shaving of mirror lay in the center of his partitioned area. Mell looked up to see Luvonor grinning ghoulishly at him. The blonde Lord wiggled his fingers in

a sarcastic little wave. Mell had lost patience with Luvinor's asinine game, so he merely brushed the shard aside and busied himself with his notes. While there was nothing he could do to sway the result of these sessions, Mell was still interested in the problems that were being brought to their attention. If something struck him as important, he would consider reaching out to the person, to see if something could be arranged using his regular political powers.

Scanning the front bench below his raised seat, Mell looked over the petitioners, reciting things under their breaths and flipping through well-worn notes. They all thought they were bringing their concerns in front of the full Sevenfold for consideration, when really all the decision making lay with one man. Mell looked across at Luvinor, who was whispering something to Isellel. Correction, Mell thought, one idiot. Waiting for the session to start, Mell continued to survey the gathered people. A bowed head caught his eye. Shaggy brown-blond hair, and loose fitting, neutrally coloured clothes.

Kettec! Mell recognized him immediately. What was he doing here? Mell felt a quick pang of nostalgia for the night they shared in what felt like ages ago and some regret over the subsequent cessation of contact. He had just been so busy. Mell flipped through his previously ignored supplements until he found the familiar name.

Kettec Florino – A Proposal On A Stay Of Demolition For The Benefit Of Cultural Interest.

Mell was frustrated at not looking at the dossier sooner. It was about the demolition of the Palace, the very thing they talked about. Why hadn't Kettec contacted him? He might have been able to figure out what the obstacles were, find a way to get enough votes. Their florid speaker began

the meeting, but Mell paid little attention to the other petitions. He scoured Kettec's remarkably well assembled proposal and examined the supplemental writings, as if the secret to getting a pass would be inside. Mell knew there was nothing he could do so late. It was all up to Luvonor whether this went through or not—and the statement “up to Luvonor” did not fill him with confidence. Forced to wait, Mell watched Kettec closely. He looked nervous and was currently staring up at the dome. His lips were moving, eyes unfocused. Mell recognized the look. Kettec was in his own world having some debate, probably over the accuracy of the map.

The speaker's voice rang out. “I now call forward to deliver a proposal to the honoured Sevenfold Lords, petitioner Kettec Florino.”

Kettec remained motionless, still looking up. Mell had to bite his tongue to keep from calling out.

“Mr. Florino?” said the speaker again, after a moment.

As if shaken from a trance, Kettec jumped up and dragged his bag to the lectern. Mell watched closely as Kettec set out his papers and took a deep preparatory breath. There was no way this didn't end in disaster. Kettec looked up, locked eyes with Mell and sputtered out a few words of gibberish. Some members of the gallery tittered, and Mell felt the awkward discomfort of shared embarrassment. He tried to smile and look supportive. Just remember how you talked to me, he tried to communicate with his expression. Remember your infectious and unselfconscious enthusiasm for those old artefacts, Mell sent out silently to Kettec. Looking on the verge of breaking down, Kettec swallowed audibly and started again. He spoke, if slightly too fast, clearly about why the cache mattered to

history, and that all he was asking for was a few weeks of access to explore. At the end of this introductory speech, Kettec waited with his head down, knuckles white as they gripped the corners of the lectern. The speaker called out the vouching period and Mell watched Luvonor closely. He made no sign of movement or interest.

Shit, Mell cursed to himself. It was dead.

The moment stretched and Kettec stared down at the lectern, heartbreakingly disappointed at the turn of events, looking like a kicked puppy. Mell stood up.

“I, Lord Mell Wess, vouch for this petitioner. There is compelling evidence here and if all Mr. Florino is asking for is some time, then I fail to see what we lose by denying it.”

Kettec looked up at him eyes wide with surprise and hope. It was even more painful to Mell than the disappointment he saw moments ago. Maybe Mell should have let it go, since there was no way Luvonor would give them the votes, and now he was going to have to watch Kettec’s proposal die again.

XIII

Kettec wished that his thoughts weren't entirely beholden to each of his rapidly oscillating emotions. He had known that this was going to be a long shot, yet the despair he felt at not getting vouched had been debilitating. Similarly, the surprise and relief that flooded his chest after Mell's support had been dizzyingly potent, almost euphoric, leaving him doubly unprepared for the second half of his speech. He resisted the impulse to try and figure out why Mell had helped him after the party disaster or what it meant that the Lord had looked so grim doing so. The Lords were waiting for him to go on. Kettec swallowed, feeling an apple sized lump in his throat. The well attended council room was as silent as it could be, a hush save for the scuff of a shoe, an errant cough, or the creak of someone shifting on their wooden seat. Kettec was acutely aware of the constant clicking sound emanating from the stenographer, an aged woman sitting behind a specially adapted LINE, tapping out who knows what. Kettec wondered if, given his silence, she was recording his actions, entering his awkwardness into the eternal records: *Shaking, and sweaty faced, Mr. Florino stood silent behind his lectern, clearly unprepared for this hallowed chamber. Perhaps unfit for any social interaction altogether.*

"Mr. Florino?" prompted the Speaker, "Your detailed proposal speech?"

Drilled over and over by Ediox and his mother, Kettec launched into his prepared statement, hardly even

registering the words as they tumbled out of his mouth. Though he had no idea if what he was saying was in any way coherent, he still tried to make eye contact with each Lord during the portion of his speech tailored to their interests. Even as he rambled on, Kettec saw disinterest among majority of the aged men and women. When it came to Lord Wess, Kettec just stared at the other man's gently creased forehead and tried not to think about anything extraneous.

"...and, as I've hopefully communicated, this is a low impact project with the potential for far reaching benefits. And so..." The end of his oration came as a surprise. "...so, yeah?" ended Kettec, wincing.

A restless din returned as the Lords deliberated. Kettec hadn't expected applause but some indication that he'd been heard would've been nice. The Speaker mopped at his head with a handkerchief and turned to the Sevenfold. "Are there any further questions, or shall I proceed to the Vote?"

A pale, blonde man stood up from his throne, who Kettec identified as Lord Luvonor. "Actually, I have some points for clarification," said Luvonor. His soft voice cut through the ambient noise of the chamber. Superficially similar to Fenna's quiet tone, Luvonor's sound was instead cold and smooth, a snake sliding through wet grass.

"Mr. Florino," continued the Lord, "As a member of the Sevenfold, let me first commend you for your concern over our nation's illustrious history. However, while your proposed link between the underground passages and the disgraced Marshall Absollo's writings is interesting, I think it is nothing more than a coincidence. His incoherent scribbles lend themselves well to being twisted to serve any

purpose, and we should be wary of trusting an interpretation,” Luvinor paused, “no matter how well meaning. Do you have anything more concrete to indicate a connection?”

“Yes!” blurted Kettec, “I’ve been—” he bit down on his tongue, hard, clipping off his next words painfully. Kettec shouted internally: I’ve seen it! I’ve been down there! I’ve seen the graves, and matched the words and followed the steps. He still couldn’t give the underground up. To expose it before all these people. Luvinor had clearly already decided that Absollo was a nut and that Kettec should be dismissed.

Lord Luvinor ignored the partial interruption and adopted a serious look. “Actually, I heard you were recently terminated from your position at the Office of Records? Would you mind explaining to us the reason why?”

There was a murmur from the crowd, and Kettec stood stunned. He felt all those pairs of eyes on his back, all those people whispering about him and wondering what he had done.

“What does this have to do with the proposal?” boomed an irascible voice. Mell, who had also risen from his seat, stared down on the proceedings. “Mr. Speaker, please ask Lord Luvinor to retract his absurd question.”

“I assure you, this is relevant,” hissed Luvinor. “Let it stand, Mr. Speaker.”

The portly man looked between the two standing Lords and tugged at the collar of his ceremonial tunic. “Please be brief Lord Luvinor,” said the speaker. Mell exhaled angrily and sunk back into his seat. Kettec wondered if this was all some bad dream.

“Well,” continued Luvinor, “According to the petitioner’s former employer, he became obsessed with this traitor’s writings and was even driven to break into the Palace. Did

you find anything there, Mr. Florino?”

“What? No! I—”

“No? How unfortunate. It seems to me like this young man has simply been taken in by a flight of fancy. The petitioner was fired from his job for being fanatical, and while I wish him all the best in recovery, his delusions should not be entertained by this Council. Now, the vote Mr. Speaker?”

“Right! Yes. Of course.” The Speaker cleared his throat and said the ceremonial words. Kettec only heard the ringing of his ears and the thudding of his heart. He had practiced all those sample questions and never once expected his embarrassing mistakes would be publicly aired. The tap-tap of the stenographer reminded him just how permanent this all was. Kettec grabbed onto his lectern, trying to suppress welling tears. After another moment, he saw a single raised hand. One lonely vote out of seven—from Lord Mell Wess. Kettec swiped his papers into his bag and stumbled from the council room, overwhelmed and struggling to breathe.

Hunched on a bench in an out-of-the-way corner of the Council chambers, Kettec tried to piece himself back together. He wanted nothing more than to be back home, or better yet, underground, but this building was far outside of his usual stomping grounds and the last thing he needed was to get lost in an unfamiliar part of town. Head in his hands, Kettec tried to convince himself that everything was okay. Sure, his proposal had failed, though that just left him where he had been before. He needed to focus on the underground exploration and move on. Still, while

he might have been prepared to lose, he hadn't expected it to be a massacre. How had Lord Luvonor known so much about him? Why couldn't he just have voted no instead of bringing Kettec's past employment record into it? He asked his mother, Ediox, and Fenna not to attend in person, and now he wondered what he was going to say to them.

Kettec's bench creaked as another person lowered themselves down. Kettec didn't look up at the new arrival, but glanced at their feet. A hemmed pant leg and soft shoes, with umber skin peeking out between the two. Kettec raised his head and saw he was sharing a bench with Mell Wess.

"How did you find me?"

Mell held up a few crumpled pages and smiled. "You left a paper trail."

Grabbing his bag, Kettec saw that it indeed was still open, and his sheaf of now useless proposal papers was greatly diminished. Kettec stared into the slack fabric container, not sure what to say to the Lord. He was dimly aware of their last conversation and of his offense, but running away again seemed far too silly. Besides, he was already so exhausted.

"Um, thanks. I guess. For the vote," tried Kettec, aware how shaky his voice was. "And I'm sorry about the party. About Ubran. I was wrong and..."

Mell shifted next to him. "Forget it. I wanted to apologize actually. Luvonor is out of control. He's got power over most of the other Seven, and now the Speaker too. I knew your proposal probably wasn't going to pass, but I didn't realize Luvonor was going to make such a show of it."

Faced with an opportunity to learn about the circumstances of his failure, Kettec momentarily forgot his layered shame and the intimidating presence of Mell.

“Do you know why he said all that?” asked Kettec.

Mell cupped his chin and leaned forward. “Yes. Well, I have a guess. Whoever owns the land under the Palace is probably paying Luvonor to expedite the demolition. He just needed a good excuse to refute what is an eminently reasonable proposal. Character assassination probably just seemed easiest.”

Kettec nodded. He felt numb. Everything had been so surreal today, starting from his time-dilated morning all the way through to again sharing a seat with Mell. He thought back to Luvonor looking down on him with a perfect pitying face and saying “delusions.”

“Listen, about Luvonor,” said Mell, as if reading his mind, “He’s an asshole and everyone knows it. The crowd doesn’t care about what he said about you, and if anything they just hate him more for it. Believe me, everyone there is always on the petitioner’s side. Easier said than done, but don’t get too caught up worrying about it, okay?” Mell rested a hand on Kettec’s shoulder.

The words were nice but it was the minor contact that was immensely reassuring to Kettec. He looked at Mell, and, instead of seeing someone he’d made embarrassing mistakes with or one of the most powerful men in Capath, or even a stranger, he saw someone who genuinely wanted to console him.

Stranger still, it was working.

Kettec blew out a long breath. “Okay,” he said. Smiling brilliantly, Mell took his hand back.

“Okay! Now I don’t know about you, but I’m famished. Care to join me for some lunch?”

Now Kettec was sure that today was some sort of delusion. He might as well go along with it.

It was wonderful to be out of the stuffy council chambers and back in Capath. The air was crisp and cold, counterbalanced by the sun's dazzling rays. Kettec walked next to Mell and tried not to stare, peeling his gaze away to occasionally examine his surroundings. As usual, some well-trained part of his brain was actively remembering climbing routes and possible hideaways.

"Back when I first arrived," said Mell, "Ediox gave me this huge list of the all the best places to eat at. And I've been working my way through it ever since. Whenever I get a spare moment at least." Mell chuckled. "Free time is mythical for me now." Mell took out a note-book, flipped it open and handed it to Kettec. "Do you see anything that catches your eye?" asked Mell.

All sorts of restaurants and cafés and specialty shops were listed in rows of neat handwriting, next to the applicable addresses. Some were crossed out and others had checkmarks next to them, though most remained untouched. Kettec noticed that *The Quiet Waters* had a little star next to it and wondered what the significance was. While he wasn't really picky about food, Kettec saw an uncrossed and unchecked place a few streets over that he vaguely remembered Ediox being especially effusive about.

"What about the Salt & Locket?"

"Sure! Where is it?"

"Just a few blocks over," replied Kettec. "I think. I'm not too familiar with this part of town." He handed back the notebook.

Mell laughed. "It's nice to see a Capath native unsure about directions for once. I was beginning to think everyone here was just a supernaturally gifted orienteer."

“That’s actually taught at school. Finding your way in Capath, I mean.”

“Do they have classes for adults? Because I’ve been here for a month now and I still get lost in my own dang stairwell!” Mell joked.

Kettec smiled back, looking away quickly to hide what he knew was a goofy grin. “No but it’s mostly just understanding history. Remembering which families ruled over what quadrants, and the names of infrastructurally minded Lords. It’s like...also something I’m pretty interested in.”

“Oh, yeah? Enlighten me!” Mell pointed to a weathered street sign. “So who was Rethella and why did they deserve an avenue?”

“That’s a good one! It all started with the deity schism early on in the cities founding, back then...”

By the time they were seated at the Salt & Locket and served food, their conversation had morphed from recounting the conflict that shaped the street-names of modern Capath, into a freewheeling comparison over the similarities and differences of their two home cities. Kettec got so caught up discussing theories for certain cultural oddities, and how they might be related back to architecture, that he didn’t spare any attention for his meal. Mell was just so wonderful to converse with, and Kettec noticed that when he disappeared into his own head to assemble his next point, Mell was always waiting patiently for him to come back out.

“Uh, sorry,” said Kettec after another one of his lapses, suddenly aware of just how long had passed without either of them saying anything. Mell might be patient but it was still embarrassing.

“How about we make a deal,” said Mell, eyes filled with

a mirthful glimmer. “You don’t have to apologize for disappearing to think interesting thoughts; you just have to share them with me when you’re done.”

“Isn’t that a little too personal?”

Another of Mell’s easily earned laughs tinkled through the room. “You Capathians have no idea how prudish you are. Just like that thing you have about knowing where one another lives. In Ubran, everyone knows all that. Sometimes strangers even live together in long houses!”

Kettec blushed, stopping just short of shushing Mell. “Can we talk about something, anything, else?”

“Normally, I wouldn’t allow it. However, I actually have a different question.”

“Yeah?”

Mell looked hesitant, which Kettec realized was something exceedingly rare for the socially graceful man.

“Well, I hate to bring it up now that we’re having such a nice time, but it’s about your proposal.”

Kettec had improbably forgotten all about the trials of his morning. He found that memory’s return, if not unwelcome, was at least unpleasant. He nodded for Mell to continue.

“Okay. So when Lord Luv-a-butt—”

Kettec choked on his tea and began laughing.

Mell winked at him. “A truly suitable pseudonym. Anyway, when he asked you about a concrete connection between Absollo’s notes and the Palace’s treasure, you started to say something. I have to admit that I’m a bit curious about what else you know.”

Kettec swallowed thinking about the underground, his oasis, and, now, his only plan.

“To be honest,” said Mell, “I looked into Absollo a bit

after our last chat, and I think he's part of the reason the Ubran Republic was allowed to separate at all. I think you're probably right about some of the kinder interpretations of his actions."

There was no doubt about the interpretations.

"I've..." Kettec clamped down again, trying to decide whether now was the time to reveal this.

He wasn't sure why, but he wanted to tell Mell all about his subterranean discoveries. Maybe it was the desire to share them with someone else for once or maybe it was because he was finding out he quite liked Mell. Was he really going to tell a person he had only met two or three times something he kept back from his friends, from his mother?

Looking up, Kettec saw Mell watching him, waiting for a decision without pressuring him one way or another. He was, perhaps, too beatific to be human.

"I've seen it firsthand. I found a way under the Cap—deep underground—and I've been following the path Absollo took hundreds of years before. Towards the Palace. Just before he killed the king."

The words hung in the air, and Kettec wasn't sure how to feel now that he said them. Mell's eyebrows were raised, and he stared intently at Kettec.

"Can you show me?" he asked.

Kettec shook his head. "It's dangerous."

"I can handle myself. And I'm a quick study."

"No, I shouldn't have said anything. It's just some caves. Nothing special."

"It's clear that they are special."

Kettec shook his head again. Mell leaned forward and put a hand gently on Kettec's arm. He smelled of spice and

EMBEDDED HEART

soap.

“Kettec, I know it’s important to you. It’s your choice in the end, but know you can trust me,” he said, almost whispering.

Looking at Mell and feeling the warm hand on his arm, Kettec felt hot blood ramming through his chest and heard his pulse in his ears. He believed Mell.

Unable to speak, Kettec nodded. They would go into the underground—together.

XIV

After they had worked out where to meet later that day, Mell paid for their meal, said his goodbyes and bustled off toward the Council chambers. A meandering dazed walk brought Kettec back to his apartment, still trying to remember if he said anything too weird during lunch. He was surprised he had the energy to worry. The failure of his proposal and subsequent public embarrassment should have left him inconsolable. Normally, such a blow would have been ample cause for a lengthy retreat from the world, obsessing over every barbed word and stuttered sentence. Furthermore, even on his best day, he would have been sent into fits by the impending task of welcoming an intruder into his underground haven. Yet, as he gathered together gear for both himself and Mell, Kettec was a little nervous, a little excited, and not much else. Was Mell responsible for this relative calm? The rest of the afternoon passed quickly as Kettec lost hours in contemplation, probing his new feelings and thinking of Mell.

It was time to leave before he had been able to sort anything out. Not wanting to be late, Kettec headed to Sheppeth Court to meet Mell at their agreed upon landmark; the fountain of the lost Goddess.

Sitting on the ledge of the fountain's basin with his over-full bag tucked beneath his legs, Kettec listened to the sounds swirling around him. Water falling from the stone woman's hands bubbled gently, providing an undercurrent to the

EMBEDDED HEART

well-heeled throng filling the cobbled courtyard. Clattering from the nearby LINE station provided a staccato punctuation to the flowing noises of crowd and liquid. Still in awe at his mental calm, it wasn't long before a jogging figure across the plaza caught his eye. It was Mell, wearing tight fitting exercise gear and waving at him. Kettec gave a slight wave back.

"Hey," panted Mell, "Sorry I'm late. Cinizia was less than pleased to find out what I'd been up to all day."

"It's no problem, and, uh, who's Cinizia?"

"Oh, she's my First Assistant. Well, second First Assistant if you count Decienne, that hateful old bat. But Cinizia is a wonderful woman. You'd like her, I think." Mell pointed at the statue behind Kettec. "Though she usually looks a bit like that."

Kettec twisted around to look at the smooth face of the Goddess. He lost a second trying to imagine a suited version of the statue delivering coffee to Mell. The absurd juxtaposition was more entertaining to Kettec than it perhaps had any right to be. Mell had his head cocked when Kettec turned back around.

"It's nothing," said Kettec.

Mell smiled. "Liar. So you ready to do this?"

Kettec nodded.

Hoisting up his bag, Kettec led Mell through the courtyard and into one of the nearby alleys. Exiting the narrow space, they arrived at the dried up aqueduct's bridge. Kettec hopped over the banister without thinking about it, landing easily on the stones below. He looked up and saw Mell peering over the edge at him.

"You sure you aren't part feline?" asked Mell from above.

"Oh, sorry. I have a rope if you want to—" Mell cut him

off by vaulting over the stone balustrade and sticking his own landing.

Mell winked at Kettec. "I'm very competitive you know." They continued down the stone channel.

At the fake door, Kettec wrenched the wood planks aside and held them out of the way for Mell. The other man peered down the narrow drainage tunnel wearing a look of trepidation. Before Kettec could say anything, Mell scuttled in. Kettec closed the make-shift door behind them, and they crawled onward together. Neither of them spoke during their traversal down the lengthy tube, and Kettec was surprised at how strange it was to hear the sounds of another scuffling presence in his usually solitary entrance.

Kettec slid into the pitch-black cave behind Mell and crawled forward with his hands out to find the lantern.

"One sec. Let me just get the—" Kettec's waving hands met fabric, soft and slightly yielding.

Mell laughed, "I'll just get my butt out of the way then—literally."

Heat poured into Kettec's face. "Sorry! Sorry! There's a lantern around here somewhere, and I was just—I should've got the headlamp out first and—"

"It's fine Kettec! It's fine, you don't have to apologize again. Remember that their abundance has rendered them less effectual anyway?"

While Mell was speaking, Kettec found the lantern and cranked the ignition screw, filling the cave with a flickering yellow light. Mell looked around the area in awe. He ran a hand along a polished wall, tracing the smooth water-carved ripples.

"Wow," Mell whispered. Kettec, who had perhaps grown over familiar with what he now considered merely a staging

area, was reminded of his own first arrival. He saw the place anew through Mell's wonder. The cave surrounded them completely and the bends of the walls looked more like the curves of a fine wooden instrument than random protuberances of rock. The undulating floor looked as soft as a quilted blanket despite being as solid as stone could be.

After some time admiring the naturally sculpted cavern, Mell came back over to Kettec.

"This is incredible," he said.

Kettec dipped his head in assent. "And just wait till we get past the throat."

"It's better than this?"

"This isn't even close."

"Then what are we waiting for!"

Using the things from his backpack and the stuff he had left in the cave, Kettec assembled two gear bags. Each was filled with ropes, climbing gadgets, water, and a medical kit.

"I only have one head-lamp so you can use it for now. Just twist it here to turn it on." Kettec had bought this replacement second-hand, meaning it was well-worn and much bulkier than his crushed one. Mell pulled the ragged elastic over his head and wiggled it a bit to get it in place.

"How do I look?" he asked.

Kettec appraised Mell, crouching next to him in the lamplight. He looked incongruous and well matched at the same time; the strangeness of a Lord squatting in a cave being balanced out by Mell's natural grace. His form fitting workout clothes were cut off at the thigh and shoulder, revealing long stretches of dark skin over toned muscles.

"Good," said Kettec, unsure of how much time had passed since the innocuous question had been asked.

“Great!”

Packed up, Kettec guided them towards the crevasse that led to the bottom of the old well. Mell pointed to the sleeping bag as they passed.

“You sleep here?”

“Not so much anymore. But I used to, yeah. All the time.”

“How come?”

Kettec wasn't sure how to answer that succinctly.

The light bobbed on in front of him, revealing Mell in silhouette. “I don't mean to pry—well I do—but not into anything unpleasant,” he said.

Kettec shook his head and then realized Mell couldn't see him. He spoke up. “No, it's okay. Well, when my father passed away, everything felt like it was changing. Like I was adrift in a desert, the dunes crashing, spraying sand and blinding me. And when I found this place it felt solid. Calm. It reminded me of him somehow. I don't know if that makes sense.”

“Yes,” Mell touched the walls again. “I think it does.”

After climbing up the well together, they moved through the excavated bunkers, Kettec calling out which entrance to take. When he wasn't giving directions, Kettec shared the occasional anecdote about the history of the Hundred Years Siege or about Absollo. Mell was like an information sponge and knew exactly what to ask to keep Kettec talking.

They stopped to take a drink, sitting down on the dusty ground to suck in some more of the thin air. Mell looked down at the hand-chiselled floor.

“Everything is just so old here,” he said, sounding far away. “I love Ubran City but it's only like a century old.”

EMBEDDED HEART

A century is nothing here in Capath. All that time makes things feel heavier. More real.”

Kettec, who had been aware of his conversational domination for a while, saw an opportunity to reciprocate.

“You said you love Ubran. So why did you leave?” he asked.

Mell leaned back and blew out a long puff of air.

“I think I dodged that same question once already, at the party. Although it wouldn’t be very fair to hold back after all this, would it.” Mell took a sip from his canteen. “The long story-short is that I played the game of politics and lost. I was the youngest recruit of a task force designed to root out corruption. Hired as an errand-boy really, but I kept working on the side, showing off and getting promotions. The thing is, the whole unit was just supposed to be plausible deniability for the same crooked people I was causing trouble for.”

Mell sat up and stretched, casting long shadows as his arms passed in front of the headlamp. “So they conspired to get rid of me,” he continued. “I’d set things up so murdering me would only—”

“Murdering you?”

Mell laughed. “Yeah. High stakes over there. Although that seems to have followed me too.”

“What?” Kettec asked, startled.

“Joking” Mell said quickly. Kettec wasn’t fully convinced and Mell went on. “Anyway, they couldn’t kill me, but they found a way to set it up so I only had two choices. To accept the shared-ruler position or to take the rap for a bunch of things I didn’t do.”

He spread his hands, weighing an invisible choice. “Exile or jail. If I chose jail, I might have been able to prove

my way out of it, but the idea of all my work being called into question and my name in all the papers for things I didn't do...well, here I am." He smiled. "A Lord. And the worst part of it was that I could have stopped the trap. I just was too caught up trying to prove I could do everything myself, and so I ended up disregarding lots of good advice."

Kettec wasn't sure how to respond, surprised at how Mell's story had put his problems into perspective. He wasn't up to anything that would cause someone to frame him, let alone come after his life.

Mell clapped his hands together and got to his feet. "So! Shall we?"

Kettec nodded, and they moved on.

They arrived at the deep ravine that Absollo had described as the throat of the Goddess. Kettec stood on the edge—Mell conspicuously farther back—and explained the method and tools used for their descent.

In harness and linked by a rope, they rappelled down into the cave below, making slow progress. Kettec made sure to stay constantly aware of their current slack. It would not do to have a repeat of his last descent, this time with a Lord falling too.

"What made this crack?" asked Mell, dangling above Kettec.

"Earthquake. Absollo actually described it in his journal."

"Earthquake? Is there any chance of that happening with us down here?"

"No. Well, at least I don't think so. None have happened in the hundreds of years since, so I think it's settled for good."

EMBEDDED HEART

They touched down without any misadventure and Mell kept the head-lamp pointed at their feet as they disentangled themselves from their ropes. Finished first, Kettec stepped back and waited for Mell to untie his own rope and see where they were. At last Mell stepped out of his harness and swung the light around the gigantic cave. Kettec watched closely as naked surprise and awe passed over Mell's striking face. Kettec was smiling. Mell's shaking head-lamp revealed the expansive area's huge pillars, flitting over intricate flowstone sculptures that covered the walls and worked their way up stalagmites. Perfectly still pools of dark water refracted the single light scattering it into an all-encompassing glow. Farther in, huge shafts of white gypsum crystal burst from the floor, scattered haphazardly and looking like toppled pillars of pure marble. The walls were not merely gray stone, like the endless carved bunkers they had just passed through, but were layered with colours. Stratified levels of everything from earthy orange to an unnatural looking blue, stacked and striped from floor to ceiling.

Kettec, who had only seen the place once before by the flickering light of a match while in some intense pain, was also enraptured by the dazzling display. It was like the scale of the world had changed around them, and they were suddenly the size of mice. In this place, it felt as if they were two insignificant specks scurrying around a place designed for giants, or, for Gods.

"Kettec," said Mell, whispering so as not to disturb the sanctity of the stone monuments. "This is too much!"

"Yeah."

"And Absollo passed through here?"

"Mhmm." Kettec rifled through his bag, bringing out

the journal with his copy of Absollo's writing. "Here, bring the light."

Mell came over and stood next to Kettec, leaning over to shine light down on the open book. Trying to ignore the subtle pressure of their joined shoulders, Kettec read a few passages of Absollo's logs, recounting his battered company's arrival into the hallowed space.

"No one who has seen this can call him mad," said Mell, looking around again. "Or deny your connection."

"It's more than just writing, look there." Kettec guided Mell over to the three graves he'd discovered before, and the three tiny Goddesses looking over each one. "Those are the men who died in the earthquake."

They stared at the resting place solemnly for a few moments. Then Kettec gestured to the far wall of the cavern and to the continuing tunnel.

"And that way is where the rest of them went. Towards the basement of the Palace."

Mell turned his blue gaze towards the distant exit and then back to Kettec, blinding him both with the headlamp and the intensity of the stare.

"I want to help. I want to know what really happened."

Kettec looked at Mell, hearing the zeal behind the words. Feeling his own passion enhanced and mirrored back at him. Mell understood.

"Sure. We don't have much time left though. And your schedule seems, uh, busy."

"I'll make time."

"Okay," said Kettec.

Mell put his hands on Kettec's shoulders and stared at him. Kettec felt like the Lord was looking right into him, and it made his pulse race and caused warmth to prickle

his cheeks.

“Okay.”

They burst from the entrance tunnel and into the dry aqueduct, discovering that the sun was fully down.

“Whoop,” breathed Mell flopping down onto the ground, “And I thought the outside part of Capath was complicated.”

Kettec sat down next to him, looking up at the stars and sucking down great lungfuls of fresh air. Today had truly been one of the strangest days of his life, and he never would have thought that by the end of it he'd be in some sort of exploratory pact with Lord Mell Wess. Kettec re-ran the whole thing in his head, trying to point out all the little mistakes and embarrassments he made along the way, and found that, somehow, he still felt good. Sure some awkward things had happened—like when he grabbed Mell's rear, and how he talked too much—though Mell was so easy-going and understanding about it all that Kettec found he wasn't obsessing over any of it.

Looking down Kettec realized that Mell was still supine on the ground, watching him think.

“So? Instead of apologizing...” said Mell, reminding Kettec of their other supposed agreement.

“I was just... Thank you, Mell. For everything. For today.”

Mell's moonlit smile flashed back at him. “You too, Kettec.”

“What did I do?”

“Be you. Be yourself where I could see it.”

“What?”

Mell pushed himself to his feet, chuckling gently. “Don't worry about it. Can I borrow a pen?”

Without needing to look, Kettec reached into his

backpack and took out his fountain pen, handing it over to Mell. Mell took the pen in his left hand, bit off the cap, and grabbed Kettec's hand with his right. Mell's hands were warm and smooth, gentle and insistent. Kettec's heart tried to escape from his chest.

Careful not to press too hard, Mell traced an ink number along the palm of Kettec's hand.

"My LINE number," he said.

Kettec looked down at the neat digits and took three full breaths.

"I do have a notebook, you know" he managed at last.

Mell's grin was mischievous. "Yeah, I know. But it was more fun this way. LINE me your number, and I'll see about fighting some more free time away from Cinizia." Mell backed up slightly. "I'll see you later, Kettec."

With that, Mell skipped off into the night, leaving Kettec to see about slowly re-assembling his wits.

XV

Is that all for the Flowing Island?” asked Cinizia. Mell startled out of his chair slightly, and resisted the urge to cover up the parchments scattered over his desk. He had not heard his First Assistant enter.

“Yeah. We’re voting on the construction permits this afternoon.”

She leaned in to take a closer look. “What’s the lay?”

Mell took a moment to gather his thoughts and to figure out what to say and what to hide.

It wasn’t that Cinizia didn’t have his complete confidence, it was just that Mell didn’t want her mixed up in the increasingly dangerous topic of the island. The red letter burned in his mind, its ephemeral warning fading in the light. The Assassins were watching him.

Remember your loyalties... Ensure construction proceeds...

Mell suppressed a shudder. He wanted nothing more than to move on from the topic completely, but any attempt to change the subject from their usual pre-meeting review would only draw Cinizia’s attention further. He would just have to try and remain nonchalant.

“Well, how much do you know about it?”

“Other than that you’ve been obsessed with it for a week? Nothing,” she said.

Mell winced internally. Apparently he’d not been as discreet as he’d thought.

“It’s a bit of a diplomatic situation,” he began, “The Island is a little sliver of land, almost exactly between Capath

and the Ubran Republic, and for years both Nations have claimed sovereignty.”

“For the sea route rights?”

“Exactly. Whoever owns it can claim tariffs on trade passing through surrounding waters. We both don’t want to go to war over it, but neither do we want to give it up. So it has been a sort of no-man’s land.”

Cinzia’s eyes flitted over the documents, reading as she spoke. “So the construction proposal says that if we build on the land then Capath could claim it fully. But the armistice might break. What’re the votes?”

“Vespian and Nosizwe don’t want to rock the boat as usual, and Iselle is against ceding so much power to Capath, so she’s finally going against Luvonor again.”

“Leaving Luvonor and his cronies to champion it.” Cinzia clicked her tongue. “That’ll be the Mason’s Guild buying him off again.”

“Right.” Mell tried to change the subject. “I don’t suppose we’re any closer to anything actionable on the corruption front?”

Cinzia sighed and tucked a stray strand of black hair behind her ear. “No. It’s the same as always. Lots of dirt, but Luvonor needs to say or do something publicly for us to have a reason to have collected it in the first place.” She turned back to the documents. “Anyway, it’s three versus three again for the proposal. You’re just going to vote it down, right?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it? It’s Luvonor.”

“Not everything he does is evil,” said Mell.

“Pfft. Mell, his toothbrush is totally made of plucked baby eyelashes, and he has to kill a small animal every three

hours or his corporeal form will revert back to jelly. You really want to risk a war to get him a few extra coins?”

Mell looked down at his cluttered desk. It was clear that someone high up in the Ubran government was itching for Capath to make the first move and justify a fight, which explained the scarlet letter. If he voted this proposal through then there would be another war. If he didn't, then he would die, get replaced by a more subservient shared-ruler, and Ubran would force a conflict anyway. He knew first hand that Ubran was confident in their new battleships and was itching for a chance to put them to use. The Ubran government very much wanted to show Capath who the new superpower was.

Of course Mell wanted to stop a war, but he had to be alive to do so.

“Are you alright?” asked Cinizia. He had waited too long.

“Yes. Just tired.”

“That wouldn't have anything to do with where you've been sneaking off to, would it?”

“Cinizia,” warned Mell.

“I don't care who she is, but—”

“She?”

“He. They. Whoever. You can't just run off every night without telling me where you are. I'm responsible for your safety.”

Mell sat back and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd been spending his days stuck in dreadful negotiations and his nights escaping with Kettec in the caves. He was having a wonderful time learning about climbing and exploring, and talking for hours about everything and nothing. Mell looked forward to his nights of unravelling the mysteries of

the underground, and also those of Kettec.

“I’d better get going,” said Mell after some time. “Could you go get my coat, please?” He used his official delegation voice and immediately felt bad about pulling rank on Cinizia in order to dodge a conversation. She stared daggers at him but dipped her head and left the office. Mell gathered his things, still undecided about how he was going to vote on the Flowing Island. If it came down to it, he had found a provision that could delay the final verdict, allow him some extra time to try and nail Luvinor or figure out a resolution that didn’t end in a battle. And, hopefully, he could stay the axe of his executioner.

Not for the first time that day, he wished he was underground with Kettec. Tonight, he said under his breath, and steeled himself for the meeting.

The assembly proceeded exactly as Mell had thought it would. Vespian barked on about prudence and responsibility and Luvinor hissed back, talking up displaying strength and seizing opportunities. Everyone else fell in line and voted accordingly, three and three. Silence filled the stiflingly appointed room as six pairs of eyes turned to Mell.

“Lord Wess, your Aye or Nay,” commanded Vespian.

Mell sighed. Luvinor tapped his fingers on their round meeting table, drumming out his impatience. He almost wished Luvinor had gotten to Isellel and saved him from having the burden of tie-breaker. Such responsibility shirking, he thought, asking himself what happened to the resolutions of his second day, to fixing everything and helping everyone? Well, whatever he was going to do, it wasn’t

going to happen today. He couldn't allow Luvinor to win or let himself be assassinated.

Mell leaned forward. "Pursuant to the Parthenon Addendums—specifically articles forty through sixty—I am abstaining in the name of further research. This is a sensitive issue and my independent surveys have not yet been completed." Mell did not mention that he'd sent out his independent surveys on the slowest boat possible taking the most circuitous route to the island.

"This is outrageous!" Luvinor sputtered, "It's clear that Lord Wess is just stalling so his real homeland can take what's rightfully ours! This won't do. I won't allow such blatant obstruction."

Vespian brought his hand down on the solid table, rattling saucers and quieting Luvinor. "Lord Wess has invoked the Addendums correctly. This topic is in recess for a week and will be re-evaluated in our public Council session. Will that serve, Lord Wess?"

Mell nodded, not wanting to jeopardize Vespian's rare support by opening his mouth.

"Surely you can't be serious," snapped Luvinor, "We have to act now to ensure our prosperity!"

"Our rules are binding for everyone," said Vespian. "And if you will allow me to be frank, it is becoming quite bothersome that all of your projects need to be completed with the utmost speed. One wonders about undue influence. Now if you will allow me to continue."

Luvinor seethed but kept his mouth shut. Although Mell would normally have been overjoyed to see the serpentine Lord put in his place, he was too worried about the consequences of his postponed vote. Would Ubran's chartered assassins see it as defiance?

During his long journey home, Mell had to consciously keep himself from looking over his shoulder. The Brigade's record for success was flawless and he knew he'd never see his death coming. One second he'd be walking alone and the next he'd be gone from the world, lying in a pool of his own blood with a stiletto sticking out of his heart.

Mell's macabre fears also brought with them a kind of brutal honesty. He realized now just how skewed his view of the world had been. He had always seen the Ubran Republic as the underdog. Sure he knew they weren't perfect but he had always had the impression that his birth nation was home to a better class of people. They made hard decisions for the good of their own citizens and in pursuit of a secure future. Everyone knew about the brutal efficiency of the Assassins, but they were only deployed to stop the worst-of-the-worst. They were considered a necessary evil to forestall even more unpalatable actions. Similarly, it had been without question that Capath was a place filled only with profiteers and oppressors, and that they were universally morally corrupt. Now that he'd spent some time on the other side of an ocean, it was clear that Capath was no worse than Ubran in most respects—sordid history aside. Even their corruption was somehow quainter, missing the cutthroat brutality of Ubran power mongering. And far from being the put upon underdog, Ubran was a dangerous new element, unafraid to bare its teeth and leap into battle. Plus, Mell admitted, being on the other side of a scarlet letter was a good way to remove delusions about Ubran's supposedly noble purposes.

A hand came down on his shoulder and, with his mind full of assassins and daggers, Mell jumped fully six inches

straight into the air. He whirled around only to see the smiling face of Ediox.

Laughing she stepped back. "Sorry man! I saw you goin' by and I just wanted to say hi!"

"Ediox!" he said, putting a hand over his fluttering heart. "Nice to see you. I was just thinking about work. How are things going?"

"Actually pretty friggin excellent! I got a bump up at the factory, so now I only get shit on by three levels of management, you know? Oh, I guess you wouldn't, being at the top and all!" Another peal of laughter. "Anyway I was thinking it's probably time for another party, so I'm pokin' round for somewhere cool to have it. I want something dramatic. Have to top the last one right? You're invited of course." Mell nodded along, amused as always at Ediox's train-of-thought conversing. "What else. Oh, you know Fenna? Blonde? Quiet? Maybe you met her at the party? Well, we're going out now, so that's pretty rad."

"Congratulations! I heard it was a dramatic beginning."

"Yeah! Thanks! She was at—" Something occurred to Ediox and she shifted topics in mid-sentence, changing her tone and demeanour just as fast. There was a canny look in her eye. "Have you been talking to Kettec?"

Mell wasn't sure how much to let on. "Yes. We met up after his proposal."

"After, huh. And he's doin' okay?"

"Yeah?"

"Interesting."

"What is?"

Ediox reaffixed her usually jovial demeanour. "Ah, never mind, just cool to see two separate friends become mutual ones, y'know? Anyway I'd better scoot. I'll hit you up about

that party, yeah? Toodles!” Ediox waved and danced away.

Mell wondered if he let slip something he wasn't supposed to. He would have to ask Kettec about it tonight. He knew Kettec felt conflicted about Ediox and Fenna. Hurrying home, Mell put all his thoughts about the Island, the Assassins, Luvonor and Vespian, Capath and Ubran, and even Cinizia's concerns aside. They could all wait until tomorrow. This evening was for Kettec and the caves.

When Luvonor's goons had broken into Mell's apartment a week ago, they left the place in a state of disarray. Everything that could break was broken, and even the wallpaper had been stripped off the walls. They were very thorough. Mell, not wanting to antagonize Luvonor unnecessarily, hadn't reported the crime and had proceeded to clean the place up himself. After all was said and done, he was actually quite pleased with his freshly unadorned residence. It was a good excuse to go shopping for an entirely new wardrobe as well.

After a quick shower, Mell changed into his climbing outfit and gathered together his gear. Most of it had been purchased at Kettec's recommendation, but Mell was starting to be knowledgeable enough to acquire his own accessories. He hadn't needed any guidance to buy them both new head lamps. Mell checked that the ornate device had a fresh steam core and smiled, remembering Kettec's open mouth goggling when Mell had presented him the matching pair. Packed and ready to leave, Mell plugged in his LINE to send a message to Kettec. Unfortunately, he had to wait for a bunch of work-related messages to spool out before he could send his own. Watching the slip of paper jerk out of the device, Mell wondered if it wasn't time to get

EMBEDDED HEART

a personal LINE. Having two, however, just felt so wasteful, and a bit clandestine, so he decided to think on it a bit longer.

Tearing off the lengthy strip without reading it, Mell tapped out a message to Kettec.

~Hey K, just getting ready to head over now. See you soon!

Before he hit send there was a knock on his door. Mell set down his LINE and headed into the other room, unsure of who would be at his apartment. Cinizia probably? Everyone else would be too hung up on the usual Capathian taboo to visit, right?

There was another knock, harder.

“Just a second!” called out Mell.

The third knock could hardly be called something so benign. It was a great boom, causing the wood to creak and little splinters of wood to pop out around the lock. The fourth, if possible, was even more powerful, bowing the door inward for a moment.

Someone was breaking in.

XVI

Whistling a meandering tune, Kettec packed together his climbing gear. The last week had been one of the best in his life as he had spent nearly every moment either underground alone or with Mell. His two favourite things to do as it turned out. Together, he and Mell were making great progress, and though the natural caves were harder to navigate when compared to man-made tunnels, Mell had proved to be an excellent spelunking partner. It was hard to tell but Kettec thought they would make it to the Palace before much longer. Certainly before the estimate of the structure's destruction, he hoped. He did have some small worry about what he would do after he found the cache. Get a job? And what would Mell move on to? Kettec ignored the niggling thoughts, pulled his shoelaces tight, and headed for the apartment's exit. He swung the thick wooden door open and was startled to see someone standing in the hallway.

His mother, key out, looked equally surprised.

"Leaving again?" she asked.

Unable to slip around her, Kettec nodded. "Yeah. I, uh, have a thing."

"Kettec, if you don't want to tell me what you've been up to then don't. But stop feeding me your weak little non answers, okay?"

"Okay. Sorry."

"And while it's nice to see you unambiguously happy for once—even after your proposal—just remember you have

EMBEDDED HEART

to get another job and...Ugh, listen to me. I'm too tired to make any sense. Never mind." She stood aside. "Off you go."

Kettec looked down at his mom, at the heavy bags under her eyes and the slight stoop in her shoulders. He had been avoiding her again, but faced with this confrontation, it was impossible to justify any reason to himself. It had just been his habit because it was easier that way.

"Are you free tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Morning off."

"Okay. I've got to go meet someone now, but I'll tell you everything first thing in the morning. Everything."

Mom did that thing where she stared deep into Kettec, analyzing his intentions with frightening accuracy. Suitably mollified, she nodded.

"I think that will be a wonderfully novel change. Now I'm off to bed."

With his free arm, Kettec hugged her. "Goodnight."

Although Kettec normally met Mell in Sheppeth Court, he decided to head straight for the cave. He wanted to get a head start on re-organizing their gear, and Mell would know to come down if Kettec wasn't by the fountain. Kettec passed through the courtyard, head filled with competing sets of thoughts. He was actually relieved to finally be letting his mother in on what he had been going through. In hindsight, it felt a little silly how much he feared having an open conversation with her about the underground. Maybe it was all the time he had been spending with Mell. Some of the Lord's confidence was rubbing off on him.

Thinking of Mell was a multifaceted subject and dangerously addictive. Kettec was interested in so many aspects of the other man, his history in Ubran, his drive to change

Capath for the better, and there was, of course, his broad chest and long limbs to consider. Kettec was even beginning to be able to guess some of Mell's underlying emotions, something he had only ever been able to accomplish with Fenna. Kettec could tell that something had been bothering Mell recently, something above the normal stresses of his job.

On the thick stone bridge, Kettec dropped into the dried-up canal and continued along the slight curve to his camouflaged entrance. Before heading down, Kettec stopped to get out his head lamp—taking only a moment to admire the gift—and re-tie a shoelace. He heard the thump of another person landing on the stones below the bridge. Had Mell been just behind him all along?

“Mell?” he called out, leaving his bag and walking back around the bend.

It was not Mell.

“Hi, Kay,” said Ediox, smiling.

Kettec sputtered, taken aback by the unexpected presence. “What? How?” he eventually managed.

“Oh, well, I was coming over to visit, but when I saw you dashing off—sensing hijinks of the highest order—I followed. Not too hard to stay hidden from an air-head!” She laughed, but none of her usual mirth was present.

“You stalked me?” he said, still incredulous.

“Mmhmm, yeah. Keep up! So how've you been?”

“What?”

“How've you been, Kay?” her smile looked pasted on.

Kettec shuddered. He realized Ediox was angry. Angry like he had only seen her a few times before. Once early on in school, when, after spurning Braiden's attentions, he had called her a dyke and then bragged about sleeping with her

anyway. Another time at her factory when she'd found out the men there had put together a ranking system for the female employees' attractiveness.

"Kettec!" snapped Ediox. "Stay with me here. Where were you headed anyway?" Ediox stomped ahead, walking around the bend.

"Wait! Stop!" She did not pause. He ran after her, trying to think of what he'd done to earn her earnest ire.

Ediox was looking at his bag and the wooden planks blocking off the cave entrance. She reached out to touch the faux-barricade.

"What did I do?" Kettec yelled, coming up behind her.

She whirled around to face him, eyes blazing. "When were you going to tell Fenna you were okay?"

"I did already!"

"Shit you did. Some dinky little LINE about how your petition thingy failed but whatever. That doesn't count! She's been worried sick about you. She's been waiting for you to ask her to the Waters. Giving you space, she said."

"I've been busy."

"Oh, I'll bet. All wrapped up with Mell, huh?" She poked him in the chest to emphasize Mell's name.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything!" Ediox loomed over him. "You've got your cool new buddy so now you don't need her? Us? Fenna will always be around for later problems, right? Just leave us wondering if you're okay as you gallivant around with Mr. Good-teeth."

Kettec's stomach clenched, and he felt his cheeks and forehead burning. "Sorry then!" he shouted. "Sorry!"

"Not to me, to her!"

"Why do you even care?" spat Kettec.

“Why? Because I care about Fenna!”

“Sure.”

Ediox got even closer to Kettec, right up in his face. He could feel her hot breath on his forehead. “What do you mean ‘Sure.’”

His mouth was moving before he could think to stop it. “Well, you know how fast you go through girlfriends.”

Ediox’s face went tight, her jaw clenched. Before Kettec could apologize, she shoved him, knocking him onto his rear.

“As if you’re any better a match for a *Lord*,” she said. Tears blurred Kettec’s vision. He hadn’t meant to say that about Ediox, just as he hadn’t meant to avoid Fenna.

Ediox turned her back on him. “Let’s just see what you two’ve been getting up to behind the curtain.” She wrenched Kettec’s cover aside, revealing the long drainage tube. “Huh.”

“No! Edi, I’m sorry! Don’t go in—”

Without looking back, Ediox slid into the tunnel and was lost from sight in a moment. Kettec lay stunned, unsure where to even start processing what had just happened. Then he scrambled after her.

Kettec couldn’t see Ediox, but he could hear her ahead of him, echoes of hands and feet slapping on stone. He moved down after her.

“Please,” he called out, “I didn’t mean that. I just wanted the best for Fenna too. You were right!”

No response came back up from the tunnel. Kettec crawled on, chasing Ediox, constantly wiping his eyes. He was overwhelmed. He was upset at what he had said and what had been said to him. And, most of all, Kettec felt like something close to him was being intruded on. Why had

EMBEDDED HEART

she decided to leap in here?

He heard a clanging echo from below and then moments later the darkness was banished by the flickering glow of his lantern. Kettec lunged down the last length of the narrow passage, striking his head painfully on the low roof. Emerging into the lit cave, Kettec saw Ediox standing there, lantern in hand, marvelling at the cave. It looked wrong. She wasn't supposed to be there.

"Ediox!" whispered Kettec, barely holding it together.

She turned to him and with a wicked grin, said, "I think I just found where my next party is."

"What?"

"Yeah. I'll put a stage over there, and the bar over along that wall."

"No! This is...it's not yours!"

"It's perfect! String up some lights and call it the world's deepest jam!"

All those people, all in his underground. The idea crushed Kettec, and it got hard to breathe. He felt an icy hand close around his lungs and crumpled down to the stone floor.

Sometime later, Kettec couldn't be sure how long, he regained his faculties enough to clear his eyes and look around again. He felt light headed, his eyes stung and his throat was raw. Sitting next to him, cross-legged, was Ediox, lit from the side by the gas lamp. She looked worried and was rubbing his back with a hand. Kettec felt like this was all unreal, like he was sitting next to himself, watching it happen.

"Kay," said Ediox, seeing he was up, "Are you okay? Goddess. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. Well I did,

but not like that.”

“What happened?” croaked Kettec.

“You freaked out I guess?”

“Huh.”

Ediox laughed, and Kettec could see a glimmer of light reflecting off her damp cheeks. “Huh, he says.”

They were silent for a while, and Kettec focused on the sound of his breathing in the cave.

“I think,” began Ediox, “We both got a tad worked up there. Understatement of the year. But...we’re both on the same side though? The Fenna-is-the-best side?”

Kettec nodded. “I’m sorry too.”

“Yeah, mad apologies all around. I was just freaked after Fenna tried to leave. I’m actually happy for you. Like, if you and Mell are an item.”

Kettec bolted upright, “Mell! Is he here yet?”

“What? No, should he be?”

“Uh, yeah. We’ve been...well, short story is that these caves lead to the Palace, and we have been exploring them together.”

“No shit? You gotta spill on the long story sometime.”

“Yeah. I owe you and Fenna that. I got caught up I guess.”

“One track mind is nothing new,” said Ediox, smiling.

Kettec struggled to his feet. “But why isn’t he here yet?”

Ediox got up too, watching Kettec’s balance closely. “Prolly just got roped into some Lord stuff, right?”

“No, well, he will normally LINE me if that’s going to happen.”

“Let’s get outta this pit and to a station then!”

“Yeah...Edi?”

“Yes, Kay?”

“Are we cool?”

EMBEDDED HEART

She mussed his hair, “Yeah.”

“Okay. Good.”

“Right. C’mon air-head!”

They crawled out of the cave, and Kettec retrieved his bag from where it lay by the entrance. He was still feeling a bit woozy and relied on Ediox for support to get out of the aqueduct and up to the regular street level. As they walked towards the courtyard an awkward silence passed between them, heightened in strangeness since Ediox and silence were normally incompatible. Whatever amends they said they had made, that had still been their biggest-ever fight. Ediox had been mostly right too and Kettec was going to make sure to meet up with Fenna, maybe tomorrow. If he still planned on spilling everything to his mother, then tomorrow was looking to be an emotionally draining day. As if this one wasn’t already, he thought. Kettec was learning the hard way that avoiding things tended just to make them more difficult instead of go away.

Together they entered the courtyard and headed over to the packed LINE link-up station. As they waited for a spot to open, Kettec really wished that Mell would turn the corner, all smiles and ready to say just the right thing. It was a little surprising how much he had come to rely on Mell in the span of a week.

Someone finally finished their typing and Kettec practically dove into the freshly opened seat. He already had his LINE out of his bag and plugged it in immediately. The button studded device whirred to life and spat out a message from Mell. Kettec read it as it came out, sighing with relief until the end printed.

~Hey K, just getting ready to head over now. See you

JESS SEBASTIAN

soon!ggzYHELP

XVII

The door burst open, showering the entrance hall with shards of wood. A stocky figure pushed their way through the ruined aperture, a disturbing presence which finally shocked Mell's surprise-stalled faculties back into operation. He ran back into the main room, diving for his LINE. Multiple sets of heavy-boots tromped after him. With shaking hands, Mell hammered out an addition to his previously composed message and jammed the send button. Only after he'd yanked out the retractable cord and hastily slid the device under a nearby cabinet did he stop to question his actions. Did he really want Kettec mixed up with whatever was going to happen next? What could Kettec even do? Mell did not have time to ponder for long. Three large people entered his sparse living area, each wearing densely woven combat gear.

"Hellos to ya, Mell," said a brutish looking woman, clearly the leader of the three. Her accent was thick and familiar. Ubran.

Despite the dire situation, Mell let out a laugh of relief. "Oh, thank everything! For a moment I thought you were from the Assassins Guild!"

The woman's brow wrinkled in consternation. Laughter was clearly not the response she'd been expecting. "Who's to say we 'aint?" she asked.

"Really? If you were A.G. I'd be dead three times over by now. Nice to know that Ubran doesn't think I'm worth the full expense at least."

Moving almost faster than Mell's eye could follow, the woman pulled a square club from a sheath on her leg and swung it at his head. It hit home with a sickening crunch and stars exploded behind his eyes.

Mell struggled out of darkness and into blinding pain. He was tied to a chair, arms twisted painfully behind him. Blood leaked out of a gash on his face and he could taste it in the left side of his mouth. The woman stood across from him wiping her bloodied implement on his bed sheets. The other two men were positioned on either side of him, resting ham-hock hands on his shoulders.

"We mayn't be Guild, but that doesn't mean we're no doffos neither," she said.

Mell had to admit that she had a compelling point. His head felt like it was filled with a colony of angry bees. Underneath all the buzzing, he realized just how bad a situation this had turned into. A sharp needle of fear pricked his heart, and he struggled to remain calm and in control. No one would be able to hear screaming from his penthouse floor anyway.

"Okay," said Mell, "Apologies. I didn't mean to impugn your competency. How can I help you?"

Again moving with a quickness that belied her size, the woman swung the bat, hitting Mell in the gut. All the air in his lungs burst out his mouth, followed by the acid tingle of bile. Mell choked back vomit and tried to gasp in another breath through clenched teeth. He was kept from doubling over in pain by the unyielding hands of the other men.

"Firstly, you can keep that highfalutin gob shut till I say so. Yeah?"

Mell nodded.

EMBEDDED HEART

“Great. And nextwise, I’ve got a question and an answer from the Ubran Council.” She leaned in and Mell smelled her sour breath even through the metallic tang of his own blood. “Question. Is construction gonna happen on the Flowing Island?” She paused. “Answer. Yes ma’am! Okay let’s try.” She pointed at the man on Mell’s right with a blunt finger. “Denpa, question.”

With a voice like rocks rubbing together, the man spoke. “Is construction going to happen on the Flowing Island?”

The woman then pointed to Mell.

“Yes, ma’am,” croaked Mell.

“Got it first go! Smarty. Okays, since you already voted squiggly once we’re gonna hafta make sure that sticks. Gerr where’s my toy-bag?”

On Mell’s left, Gerr looked around for a second, then shrugged.

The woman sighed. “Well you were grabbin it when we were outside. Right?”

A nod from Gerr.

“So whered it get to then?”

Another shrug.

“The hallway?” said Denpa.

“Stay outta this,” said the woman. “Gerr, unless you want another break in your nose, go find my bag!”

Gerr shuffled from the room.

“Dump-ass,” said the woman, turning back to Mell, “Don’t go nowhere, I’ve got a lot in store for ya.” She cackled.

Mell tried to think of a way out of this situation, or, failing that, how he could have avoided it. He knew Ubran was keyed up to see Capath overstep their bounds, but he never expected they would be in such a hurry. Clearly they wanted this deal closed, and his vote postponing had been taken

as funny business. Mel had spent too much time exploring with Kettec and now he was paying the price. He had no ideas on how to turn this around either as he was too busy wondering what horrors lay in the “toy-bag.” Sweat trickled down the back of his shirt, and he could feel his pulse in his bruised face and stomach.

“Listen,” said Mell, “I’ve got the message. Really. You don’t need to—” The woman thwacked him in the leg with her club, stopping Mell up short. He grit his teeth against the pain.

“Hush! Or you’ll end up like the last guy here.”

Mell’s eyes widened. Noticing, the woman grinned.

“Oh, you didn’t know? Yeah, we did him in a while back. Too chummy with these Capathies was all.”

He’d always assumed his predecessor’s death was the result of some untoward involvement, but getting direct confirmation—and from the killer herself—was something else.

“They said I could kill ya too if I want, but you’re bein’ so co-operatin’,” she leaned in to breathe in his ear. “So far.”

There was some commotion from the hallway, a loud clang and then a thud.

“What’s all that Gerr!?” shouted the woman. She turned just in time to catch a flying kick in the face from—to Mell’s wonderment and relief—Kettec!

The woman was bowled over backwards and Kettec landed on the ground in a crouch. Mell, invigorated by the surprise appearance, thrust his chair back at Denpa, catching the big man in the groin with the chairback. Denpa crumpled to the ground, and Kettec dashed over to Mell, working his hands and legs free from the ropes.

EMBEDDED HEART

“Are you okay?” asked Kettec, breathless.

“Kettec! Yes! Wow!” Mell had thoughts that were both too numerous and too powerful to easily articulate.

“Can you walk? We’ve gotta go,” Kettec stood Mell up and helped him limp out of the room. They passed over the prone body of Gerr and into the apartment’s entrance hallway.

A shrill screech emanated from the other room. “After them! Kill him!”

“Up,” said Kettec, guiding Mell to the roof access stairwell rather than towards the descending one. Though he had a thousand questions, it took much of Mell’s concentration just to continue moving along with Kettec. His numerous hurts flared with each step, fire lancing up his leg into his gut and through to his head. They climbed the final staircase, and Kettec shouldered the access door open. They hobbled out onto the grey stone roof. Capath glittered in sunset, peeking through rising columns of steam. Kettec guided him over to the edge of the building and pointed at a nearby roof, lower down.

“Sorry, but we’re going to have to climb. They’d catch us if we tried to go down the stairs. Can you manage?”

Mell nodded. “My arms are okay.” He was surprised at how sure Kettec sounded about everything. None of the usual hesitation. He had seen some of that assertiveness when they were underground but Kettec had taken just out two goons! They slid over the lip of the roof together and worked down towards the lower building. Mell gripped the decorative moulding of the stone wall and tried to think of Kettec’s climbing instructions. The process was made significantly harder under duress of being chased and also since he had no harness to catch him if he fell. Kettec

reached the lower level first and pulled Mell across the gap. As soon as they got back to their feet a face appeared on the roof above, features broad and chiselled like yet another gargoyle.

“The roof!” bellowed Denpa.

Unperturbed, Kettec took Mell by the hand and led him to the opposite edge. A high level access way was just next to this roof.

“Okay,” said Kettec, “Once we get down on that road, I know a good hiding spot. Alright?”

Mell nodded and he must have looked as weak as he felt. Kettec dug through his bag for something. On the wall above, Denpa was working his way towards them, gripping the stone with his gigantic mitts.

“Forget him,” said Kettec. “We’re faster. Now eat this.” Kettec handed him some dried petals and Mell stuck them into his mouth. His tongue thrashed, trying to avoid the extreme bitterness, but Mell managed to swallow. Within moments he could feel a numbness prickling at his limbs, dulling his pain.

Mell made it down to the next level without dying, and they ran along the pathway. Kettec led the way, guiding them through a dizzying array of alleys and accesses and staircases. There were few people around, and Kettec always had another route to pass by groups without getting too close. Just when Mell felt like his rubberized legs were going to give out, Kettec hauled them both into a narrow gap between two buildings. Inside was a little alcove, a hidden place between the structures that was open to the sky. Mell slumped onto their stone platform, and gulped down air, pressing both hands against his sides. He could

feel adrenaline being replaced with exhaustion and relief.

“We should be safe here,” said Kettec, digging through his climbing bag “Let me just get a bandage.”

“Kettec!” whisper-shouted Mell.

Kettec stopped what he was doing and looked up. “Uh, yeah?”

“That was amazing! Thank you!” Mell beamed. “How did you do all that? All the kicks and the climbing and this hideout?”

“Oh. I’ve had some experience getting away from bullies.”

“And how did you know how to find me?”

At this Kettec blushed, ears and cheeks turning a fetching shade of pink. “Apparently you told Ediox, where you are and I guessed it was the penthouse and...”

Mell laughed, even though it hurt to do so. The taboo! Despite what just happened, Kettec was adorably flustered by the Capathian taboo on knowing where someone lived.

Kettec recovered, and looked at Mell intently. “I have questions too. Who were those people? Why were they torturing you?”

Mell sighed. “It’s complicated. And dangerous. I don’t know if you should get involved.”

Kettec frowned and Mell read the expression easily.

“I suppose you think that’s unfair considering you had pretty much the same concerns over bringing me into the underground?”

“Mmhmm.”

“You’re probably right. And I guess it’s a good idea to stay in here a bit longer anyway. It started with a red letter, which—” Mell noticed Kettec leaning forward, wanting to say something and not interrupt at the same time. “What is

it?” Mell asked.

“Let me bandage you first.”

Mell brought his hand to his cheek and it came back slick with blood. “Right.”

With his climbing first-aid kit spread out on the ground between them, Kettec began work. He cleaned the blood off Mell’s face and gently pressed disinfectant into the still oozing wound. Mell remained under the numbing effects of whatever plant he had eaten, but Kettec was so careful with all of his actions that Mell was sure he’d have felt almost nothing even without the petals. Finally, Kettec stuck a bandage on Mell’s face and taped it down. During this, his calloused fingertips brushed against Mell’s cheek, tickling slightly.

These steps were repeated for his bleeding leg, and Mell silently mourned his ruined climbing pants.

“Um, anywhere else?” asked Kettec.

Mell nodded and lifted his shirt, where the sharp edges of the club had left some minor cuts. The bottom of his ribs were heavily bruised, purple on his dark skin, but luckily nothing felt broken. Kettec applied the salve without comment, though Mell noticed that Kettec’s face was flushed with blood again. He was just so cute! Though, if Mell was being honest with himself, all the closeness and gentle touches were starting to get to him as well.

All too soon, Kettec was finished, and he sat back wiping his hands on his pants. He packed up the first-aid kit and looked at Mell expectantly, worry still written clearly on his face. Mell took a deep breath, and gazed up at the sliver of sky visible far above them.

He wasn’t sure what he was going to do about the day’s

EMBEDDED HEART

events yet. He felt he had enemies on all sides: back home and here in Capath. The Council and the Sevenfold all wanted him to both stay out of their way and do what they say. There was no room for his own plans. And no one he could trust, save Cinizia and Kettec.

“First, I want to say thank you again,” said Mell at last. He looked down at Kettec. “I don’t know how that would’ve ended up there, and I’m happy I won’t have to find out. You’re really capable in a crisis like that, you know?”

“Well, I just...”

Mell smiled feeling his face bandage twist slightly. “You don’t have to sell yourself short for *everything*.”

Kettec, bashful as ever, merely nodded.

“Okay, my turn to dish.”

XVIII

Mell's voice was melodious and measured in equal parts, his lyrical accent sanding off the sharper sounds of the language. Kettec pinched himself surreptitiously and tried to focus on the words being said rather than on their cadence or on the lips they were coming out of. Mell's mouth was merely a hand's breadth away from him, as they were pressed close by the limited space of the nook they huddled in. The Lord he'd just saved.

Pinch.

Mell had started from the top, covering what receiving a Red Letter meant and how it was connected to the Assassin's guild. He went on to explain how a small, otherwise insignificant island could be the spark that started another full-blown international conflict, and who the people were that stood to gain on either side. Mell set out how he was stuck in the middle of a divided council, and how his only options seemed to be to capitulate—let Luvonor have his building contract and Ubran their war—or resist, get murdered, replaced, and have the former proceed anyway.

“So,” asked Kettec after Mell had finished, “Those people up there were from Ubran?”

Mell nodded.

“Why would your own birthplace attack you like that?”

“Easiest way to get what they want. Loyalty by fear is relatively cheap when compared to bribery. Especially when you use budget goons.”

EMBEDDED HEART

Though Mell had said the words in a light-hearted fashion, Kettec still shuddered. The image of Mell, helpless, bleeding, and wriggling against his chair-bonds was a deeply unpleasant one. Silence passed between them as Kettec absorbed what he had been told. He struggled to see a way out of the seemingly intractable impasse. If all he knew about the situation was what Mell told him, how could he think of something that Mell hadn't already considered?

Kettec looked upward. Long stretches of stone pressed in on them from either side, leaving a narrow gap for the sky, a sliver of infinity that divided the two buildings. As night approached, the sky continued to darken, turning the same grey as the walls, trapping them once and for all.

"I'm sorry," said Kettec, "I can't...I don't know how to help you."

"Kettec, you already have."

"No, I mean with the vote and all that."

"I know." Mell shifted, repositioning himself and wincing as he moved. The Thornike must be starting to wear off. Kettec knew firsthand that Mell would soon begin to feel debilitating exhaustion if he wasn't already. "It's frustrating," admitted Mell. "I'm so close on so many things. I've got Vespian mostly figured out, and my staff is finally working for me instead of against. The reorganization of my agriculture bill is moving along even if my tax changes aren't, and I'm *this* close to nailing Luvonor on corruption. And then this island garbage comes along! I thought I'd had a new start and all the time in the world, but it's all happening again. I'm getting buried under the machinations of the powerful."

"That's a lot," said Kettec, belatedly cognizant of how

unhelpful that sounded.

“It sure is! That’s why exploring the caves with you has been so wonderful. To have a tangible goal and measurable progress for once.”

“That’s exactly how I feel about it,” said Kettec. “It’s a chance to be in control. Although, well, all of your problems are so much more real than mine. And everything I have to deal with is sort of my own fault in the first place. Like this thing with Ediox and—” Kettec clipped his mouth shut and reopened it quickly to apologize. “Sorry! You’ve just been beat up, and everything else, we need to focus on solving that!”

Mell smiled in the dark, bright teeth poking out from his hardly visible face. “Actually, if given the option, I’d rather set it all aside for a bit.”

“Are you sure? What are you going to do about your postponed vote?”

“Well, if I’m still alive in a week.”

“Mell!”

Mell’s quick burst of laughter turned into a groan. “Ah, that hurts. But yes, I apologize. I’ll figure something out. Something that doesn’t involve my untimely demise.”

“Okay...”

“So, what happened between you and Ediox? Oh! That reminds me. I had a strange run-in with her on my way home from the Council. She seemed interested in knowing how you were doing, and I may have let on that we met up recently. Would that have anything to do with it?”

Kettec nodded. “Yeah. I guess that’s how she found out.”

“Found out what?”

“I was waiting at the fountain and I figured you were tied up with something, so—”

“Interesting choice of words,” interrupted Mell, his sly grin clearly audible.

“With work! With work!”

Another grunting, pain-laugh. “Sure, sure.”

“Anyway, I went to the cave entrance, and it turned out that Ediox secretly followed me.”

“Sneaky.”

“Well, she sort of had a reason beyond being nosey at least. Since my proposal failed, I’ve been busy with the cave and...I guess they were worried about me. Or Fenna was. And I hadn’t talked to either of them for a while. So we argued about stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Like about her and Fenna, and me and, uh, you? Not to say that we’re, you know, or anything and just, sort of, like...” Kettec stopped himself from further incoherent rambling, and was glad darkness now hid his face.

Mell’s voice seemed unperturbed by Kettec’s fumbling insinuations. “Was it a bad argument?”

“Yeah. It was. We said some things that I don’t think we actually believe. And she ended up finding the cave and,” Kettec’s voice hitched, “Then said that that’s where her next party was going to be. It’s really dumb but I couldn’t handle the idea. All those people down there.”

Kettec felt a hand on his knee.

“It’s not dumb,” said Mell gently, “The cave is like a part of you.”

“I guess.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“About the cave? I don’t know. Ediox was right to be angry with me. I should’ve met up with them, just to say I was okay at least. But I was...I still didn’t know how to

feel about them going out. Or I didn't..." Kettec blew out air from between pursed lips. Mell gave him time to think and continue.

"So, to start, I need to go apologize to her and Fenna. Let things settle into a new normal for the three of us."

"New normal?"

"Yeah. Like, things are different, and I can't go back to the way they were, but that doesn't have to mean worse. At least that's what I tell myself."

"New normal," repeated Mell, sounding lost in thought. Kettec realized it was his turn to stay quiet and allow space for thought.

"I think I know what to do," said Mell voice enlivened by excitement. "I think I know how to fix the Flowing Island!"

"What?"

"Yeah! This whole time I've been assuming that I had to pick from one of two unavoidable outcomes, and trying to dodge them by finding a way to put everything back as it was. Deadlocked and stable. However, if I abandon the old standoff as a lost cause, and try and manufacture a new one, it'll be just like you said: a 'New Normal!'" There was a scuffling noise as Mell sat up. "Instead of trying to kill the construction order, I just need to make it the new battleground. Hypothetical battleground I mean. Political. Just do something like adding a provision for Ubran input and watch as it stalls out all on its own. Brilliant, Kettec!"

"I didn't really do anything."

"Nonsense! You were Kettec just when I needed it."

Kettec did not know what to say to that, though his body's response was unambiguous. He felt his cheeks heat up and his chest somehow expand and tighten all at once. Mell went on to describe just how he was going

EMBEDDED HEART

to accomplish his latest idea, the obscure precedents he could use, and the probable reactions from the others in the Sevenfold. Kettec tried to keep up, but couldn't help but become lulled by the voice in the dark. It was like they were the only two people in existence, sailing through the universe in a little stone ball.

Kettec woke with a start, at first unsure of where he was. The moon had risen and the sky cleared, letting silver light shine down on Mell's somnambulant form across from him. Kettec shifted, realizing all of his limbs had gone numb and cold. He suppressed a groan as feeling came flooding back, bringing along a million pinpricks. Curled up and still wiggling his sparkler filled toes, Kettec watched the other man sleep. Even injured, dirty, unconscious, and crammed into this crevasse, Mell somehow looked graceful. Had he practiced sleeping with poise somehow?

Insulated by the stone, he could only hear the whistle of wind passing over the gap above them and the regular inhale and exhale of Mell. Kettec let his mind wander, mulling over his argument with Ediox and then improbable rescue of Mell. He went over his week spent exploring, and his promise to his mother to explain the underground. Given the slightest excuse, Kettec mentally crawled into his subterranean retreat, tracing its pathways in his thoughts: the entrance tunnel, the cave, the well, the bunkers, the throat, and Absollo's path. He imagined himself following the ancient Marshall, retracing calcified steps and entering the sealed off treasure chamber. Through all of this, Kettec did not think of himself as proceeding alone, as he normally would. Mell was with him in this daydream. It was as if Mell's rhythmic breathing now followed him wherever

he went.

Kettec traced his way back into reality and consciously re-entered his hideaway. He was being watched by two azure eyes, sparkling in moonlight.

“Sorry for falling asleep,” whispered Kettec, not wanting to disturb the peace of the night.

“No problem,” Mell whispered back, “I think I started repeating myself pretty early on anyway. And then I fell asleep too, after all.”

“The Thornike makes you tired. As an after-effect.”

“Ah, so that was your plan all along, huh? Drug me and watch me sleep.”

“Oh, very funny. Maybe next time I’ll save it for someone less sarcastic,” said Kettec. They shared a smile.

“Kettec?”

“Yeah.”

“About your cave. Bear with me, but I think it might be a good idea to let Ediox have a party in there.”

“Oh yeah?” Kettec squeaked.

Mell looked concerned and spoke quickly. “Listen, I’m not on any side but yours, and whatever you want, I’ll help you with. If that means keeping it secret, I’ll fight her off personally, okay?”

Kettec nodded.

“But just think about this. It’s an important place for you. For us. And we could share that. Ediox is pretty amazing in her own way, and I think if given the chance, she wouldn’t let you down. Just like how she’s taking care of Fenna. And if the cave becomes important to more people, then more people might want to protect it. Now I could be wrong, and it could just get messed up, so I understand if it’s just too risky for you.”

EMBEDDED HEART

Kettec thought for a long time. Telling Mell about the cave had turned out to be one of the best things for him. He'd already agreed to reveal it to his mother and Fenna would probably be finding out from Ediox soon anyway. Kettec had gotten into so much trouble for closing himself off, so perhaps Mell was right. Would it be that bad to let Ediox have a gathering? He felt his chest seize.

"I'll think about it," he said at last.

"Okay," said Mell.

As if responding to some unspoken agreement, they both looked up, watching the stars above through the narrow space. Rather than being constrained, Kettec felt that the sky was made more expansive by his only being able to see a slice. Like it was wrapped completely around them, and extended in every direction, continuing forever just outside of his view. A majestically infinite studded carpet. It was almost dizzying.

Mell's stomach grumbled, piercing the moment with its watery gurgling.

Kettec tried hard not to giggle, failed, and soon they were both laughing. Mell alternated between bouts of laughter and gasps of pain, holding his hands over his injured—and clearly empty—stomach. Kettec dug out some hard tack and bits of dried fruit from his climbing bag and they shared an impromptu meal, taking turns sipping water from a dented canteen.

"Y'know," said Mell, around a mouthful of biscuit, "Don't tell Ediox, but this is the best meal I've had since I arrived."

"I'm sure."

"I'm serious! Home—Ubran—was simple meals like this all the time. In Capath, even the bread has herbs and

honey and who knows what else baked in. Bits of fish one time!”

Kettec stuck out his tongue. “Blech, yeah piskaloaf. I don’t know a single person who can stomach it, but it’s in every bakery.”

“Maybe you’re just all too polite to say otherwise. Generations of angler-bakers perfecting an art, and it could have been stopped if only someone said, ‘Hey, guy, your fish-bread is salty and gross!’”

They laughed and ate, taking turns describing the plight of the first angler-baker, trying to find a home for his latest culinary invention. Their rejoinders grew quieter and, sated, they faded back into sleep.

Again Kettec awoke, stiff and sore. This time the sky was bright, the blue light of pre-dawn. His shifting and groaning woke Mell.

“It’s probably safe to go,” said Kettec.

Mell yawned and nodded. “Yeah, I think it’s been safe for a while now.”

They squeezed out of the hiding spot and into the alley, stretching and stamping their feet. It was a clear morning and dew still lay on most surfaces, twinkling as the sun ascended.

“Uh, Mell,” began Kettec, feeling exposed and timid again.

“Yes?”

“I think it might be good for you to consider...since your apartment isn’t safe anymore...” Kettec took a breath. “Maybe for now you should come with me. We have a spare room.”

The skin around Mell’s eyes crinkled. “Are you asking if

EMBEDDED HEART

I think it would be a good idea to lay low at your apartment for a while?”

Kettec, ears aflame, nodded. He wondered if he had gone too far. It was true that Mell shouldn't go back to the trashed apartment, but surely a Lord had some other protocol to follow in the event of something like this happening. It was stupid of him to have asked at all. It was weird!

“I think that would be swell. It's only fair, since you know where I live after all,” Mell smiled, and clapped him lightly on the back. “Lead on. I'd pay a king's ransom for a shower right now.”

Still shaky Kettec blew out the breath he'd been holding. “Sure. It's not far.”

They walked together through the dawn, tired, ragged, and in Mell's case, limping slightly. Despite all that, Kettec was wrapped in awe. Their long night together and talking out problems had helped Kettec immensely. More improbably, it seemed to have helped Mell too. Kettec looked up at Mell and received a wink back.

If it weren't for his exhaustion and their surreal escape, he might not have said anything. He might have just enjoyed walking together under the dawn. As it was, Kettec, almost disconnected from himself, said, “Mell, how do you feel about me?”

Mell stopped in his tracks and peered down at him, looking pleasantly surprised. Kettec stopped too and looked up, unsure where to even begin questioning himself for such a strange statement. Piercing blue eyes, bearing no evidence of the fatigue they had moments ago, bored deep into Kettec, causing him to shiver, though this time he didn't look away.

“Kettec. I am quite fond of you,” said Mell at last. “You

see something in me that feels like something I want to see in myself too. You have such passion, and it is infectious.” Mell stood a little taller, looking as regal as the first time Kettec had seen him at the parade. “Kettec, would you like to entangle our destinies?”

The ground trembled under Kettec, his heart pressed against the inside of his ribs and his throat closed up. This couldn't be actually happening, he thought.

It took everything in him to nod.

Mell smiled, wider and more brilliantly than any of the many Kettec had already seen. Mell moved in close and took Kettec's hand, interlacing their fingers. Mell's hand was warm and soft. No further words passed between them, though Kettec felt like none were needed. Matching gait, they turned, and—still hand-in-hand—continued down the street. Together.

XIX

It was late afternoon and the world was wrapped in a thick layer of gauze. Muted sounds and dimmed light leaked through drawn blinds of the small room. Recently awoken, Kettec floated on his bed, sequestered from reality by his disbelieving recollections of that morning, by the unlikely revelation that someone had seen all of his faults and decided that they were still interested in him. He couldn't keep himself from grinning.

The click-click-whirr of his LINE brought him back into sharp focus. A message from Fenna: they were on their way over. Kettec pushed himself upright and rubbed sleep from his eyes. Careful to dodge the squeakiest floorboards, Kettec entered the hallway and proceeded towards the kitchen. He passed in front of the closed door to the spare room, and though the plank of wood showed no outward change, he could feel a sort of pressure coming from behind it. Mell was asleep in there.

Padding barefoot into the main area of his shared apartment, Kettec saw his mother sitting at their table, half-filled bowl of cut fruit by her left hand and open book by her right. He remembered that yesterday he promised her an explanation of the underground. But yesterday seemed like ages ago, and everything was more complicated now, both in good and bad ways.

“Good morning, mom,” he said.

“Afternoon, actually,” she responded, not looking up from her book

“Oh, yeah.”

“Who’s our visitor?”

“Uh, Lord Mell Wess?”

That got her to look up, though her face was still a placid mask. Kettec could not tell if she was annoyed or surprised.

“And why is a Lord gracing us with a visit?”

“Some people are trying to kill him. And I guess we’re dating now too.”

The mask fell away. Her mouth popped open, then closed, and her brow furrowed, then unfurrowed to raise her eyebrows in surprise, finally wrinkling again. It had been a long time since Kettec had seen her truly taken aback by something. She was just about to regain her powers of speech when the hallway door opened. Mell came out, clad only in his undergarments, and held up his bloodstained and torn shirt.

“Hey, Ket do you have a—Oh! Good afternoon, Mrs. Florino.”

“Roszali, please.” said mom, automatically.

“Of course,” Mell, completely unselfconscious despite his state of undress, approached and extended a hand. “Mell. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Mom, moving stiffly, reached out and completed the greeting.

“Mell!” Kettec whispered sharply. Overcoming his sympathetic embarrassment, Kettec leapt to his feet, and hauled Mell out by an arm. After pulling Mell down the hall, he closed his bedroom door behind them. “What are you doing?” asked Kettec.

“Being polite?”

“No! I mean why you are meeting my Mom for the first time in your underwear?”

EMBEDDED HEART

“Well, I couldn’t put this wretched thing back on could I?” Mell shook his ruined garment.

“Okay but—” Kettec realized by the other man’s roguish look that he was being teased. “Oh.”

Seeing that the game was up, Mell smiled. “Sorry, I didn’t know she’d be there,” he said. “So can I borrow some clothes?”

Kettec nodded and pointed to his wardrobe. “Just grab whatever you’d like.” Getting up to leave, Kettec’s hopefully not-too-obviously wandering eye saw the bruises and bandages on Mell.

“Are you feeling any better?” asked Kettec.

Mell paused at his rummaging and turned to look back at Kettec. “I’ve been worse. And anyway, I’m more worried about everything else happening than I am some bruises. Are you going to be alright? With everyone coming over?”

“Yeah. It’s for the best that everyone is on the same page I think. Could have avoided some problems, maybe, if I had done this earlier. Actually Fenna just LINEed me to say they were on their way here.”

“Great. I’ll only be a moment.”

Forced to go back to the kitchen, Kettec was surprised to find that his mother was smiling at him.

“He seems nice,” she said.

“Uh...yeah.”

Her usually intense gaze quickly replaced the geniality. “But what was that about people wanting to kill him?”

“I’ll explain it when everyone gets here in a bit, okay?”

“I look forward to it.”

Mell re-emerged—having somehow constructed a stylish outfit from the motley collection of well-worn clothes.

Kettec's assembly-line-made dun trousers became a kind of breezy capri, and his usually over-large shirt came to life with someone of the right size to fill it out. Mell sat down at the table. Ravenous, Kettec lit the stove and prepared them both some food, listening in awe as his mother and Mell danced through a potentially dangerous conversation. Mell skilfully avoided Roszali's equally tactful interrogations, keeping the subject light. It was clear that they both were well versed in political manoeuvring.

Just as they finished eating, a knock sounded at the door. Kettec moved quickly to answer it, only belatedly realizing that he should have checked the peephole. Who knows who was still out to get Mell. Instead of assassins, three women stood in the entrance hallway. Fenna, Ediox, and a third with jet black hair and a stiffly set jaw. Kettec immediately saw the resemblance to Sheppeth Court's statue and assumed that this was Mell's Cinizia.

"Hey Kay!" Ediox clapped him on the shoulder and pushed past, "What's the big news?"

Before Kettec could answer, Cinizia also slipped past him. She called into the other room, "Mell! Are you in there?"

Kettec and Fenna, now alone in the entranceway, looked at each other and communicated initially through the eye contact. Fenna was dressed in her usual greys but had a red ribbon tied around her neck, clearly a signifier for something. She looked happy to see him and apologetic at the same time.

"No, I'm sorry," said Kettec, "I should've talked to you about Edi right away. And my proposal failing."

"It's okay," she replied. "I know what it's like to let things go unsaid for too long. After a while it's easier to keep trying

to forget about it.”

“Yeah. Still. I still feel bad about it.”

“I know that feeling too.”

They shared another silent moment. They were both re-learning the importance of communication and relying on one another. It was nice to have someone to lean on, outside of any romantic relationship craziness.

Fenna hoisted a woven basket and smiled, pushing them past the introspective moment. “I brought choco-squares!”

Kettec smiled back, “Perfect. Let’s get inside and—” Sounds of shouting cut him off. Sharing a quizzical glance, they followed it inside and to the main room. Cinizia was standing right in Mell’s face, wagging a finger at him as she dressed him down. At the table Ediox and Roszali were spectating, clearly enjoying the drama. Ediox in particular looked like she was going to start chanting “fight, fight, fight.”

“—and nothing but a piddly, two-line message to go on! I had to keep the whole office together by myself today you know!” Cinizia shouted.

“Yes, I’m very sorry about that,” said Mell, looking the picture of a contrite man.

“And what happened to your face!?”

Mell brought a hand to his bruised and gashed cheek, “Ah, well—” Mell saw that Fenna and Kettec had arrived, “Actually since we’re all here, we should be ready to begin.”

With practiced grace, Mell made sure everyone was properly introduced and comfortably seated at the table. Kettec wondered what his mom was thinking to see the apartment suddenly filled with such an interesting collection of people, but as usual, he couldn’t read her. She looked a little pleased, he thought, or perhaps amused. Fenna

handed out choco-squares which, after seeing how carefully they had been decorated, even Cinizia did not refuse.

“Okay,” said Mell, drawing everyone’s attention with his official business voice, “A lot of things have happened recently, and it’s important to Kettec and I, that we get the people close to us on the same page.”

“And why is this a joint endeavour?” asked Cinizia, sounding like she already knew the answer.

“Yes, well—” Mell looked at Kettec, seeking permission and confirming solidarity. Kettec gave a slight nod and gripped his knees under the table. This was all a bit weird, come to think of it, laying everything out like this. But Mell had said it would help so he was on board as much as he could be.

Mell went on, still speaking matter-of-factly. “It’s because Kettec and I are in a relationship.”

It was entirely possible that, out of all those in attendance, Kettec was still somehow the most surprised to hear Mell’s statement. His mother scrutinized Mell, Fenna’s eyes twinkled, and Ediox laughed, slapping both their backs.

“Called it right away! Didn’t I, Fenna?” Ediox shouted, sounding genuinely happy to be proven right. Kettec remembered her uglier tone in the dried up canal.

“What a wonderfully Ubran announcement,” said Cinizia dryly, “And even meeting a parent after how long?”

“Officially?” Mell made a show of looking at the height of the sun, “Maybe ten hours?” Ediox was now fully cackling. “However!” continued Mell, “We have spent a lot of time together recently, which leads to our next point. Kettec?”

Swallowing, Kettec tried to blurt everything out at once. “Um, yeah. After my proposal didn’t go well, and before that, I got fired earlier, so because of that, at first I guess. Actually

EMBEDDED HEART

since—” Kettec’s thoughts were in danger of unravelling, which was not helped by the realization that he was the center of attention. Mell put his hand over Kettec’s, giving him wordless support that felt boundless and patient.

Kettec took a breath and tried again. “A few years ago I found a way under the cap. Into a network of caves and old bunkers. They became important to me, a place I could escape to, and trace Absollo’s journey first hand. It turns out they are also a way to get to the treasure under the Palace before it is destroyed. Recently, Mell has been helping me explore.”

“And that’s where you’ve been running off to all this time?” asked his mother.

“Yeah.”

“And your injuries over the years—broken ribs, and broken leg, and broken arm—were not from ‘tripping’ or ‘sports’?”

Kettec didn’t feel like he had to answer that one. In hindsight it was probably obvious that something was up. “Sorry.” Roszaliij nodded, but it was clear that there would be further words on this. He moved on. “Also Ediox? I think it would be okay if you had a party there.”

“Really? Score!” Ediox received a look from Fenna, “I mean, are you sure you’re okay with that?”

Kettec nodded. “It’s not like it’s not important to me anymore. Same with figuring out Absollo’s cache. Just now it’s not the only thing I have?” Kettec unintentionally looked at where Mell’s hand covered his own.

“D’aw,” cooed Ediox, perhaps a bit facetiously.

“Yes, yes,” said Cinizia, “Now can we get to the actual Lord’s-life-in-peril crisis please!”

“Of course dear assistant, but only because that was

next on the docket anyway!” said Mell, getting to his feet to pace. “As a result of a diplomatic conflict over the Flowing Island—and my abstained vote on the matter—some lunk-headed goons tried to beat me into choosing a favourable vote. Threatened to kill me, in fact. And I would prefer they didn’t.”

Fenna leaned over whispered into Kettec’s ear, “He has a talent for understatement, doesn’t he?”

“Sure does. He says it’s an Ubran thing,” Kettec whispered back, “But I’m starting to think that’s just his excuse.”

“Luvonor has gone too far!” said Cinizia, seething, “Where’s your LINE connection? I’m going to have him arrested!”

Mell raised a hand. “While it would no doubt benefit him, Luvonor is not behind the order. Ubran was. They want to start a war over the island.” Roszaliij leaned in at this, but remained silent.

“Then this is an attack from a foreign power?!” Cinizia was incredulous, “Then we really need to—”

“No,” interrupted Mell. “We can’t afford to have this turn into a conflict. Kettec and I have worked out a solution, and I’m going to hide out here until we can implement it at the vote next week. With Roszaliij’s permission of course.”

She nodded slowly. “That’s fine. Also, I’m not entirely caught up on the current situation, but I’m familiar with the Island. I assume your solution is to try and tie that new bill up, rather than fight it outright?”

Mell looked at her in surprise. “That’s exactly it! I was figuring we could use the Dorthonez Provision.”

Cinizia spoke, obviously thinking as she did. “And with that you could insert a clause for Ubran input!”

“Exactly!” said Mell again, “And then Luvonor’s bloc

would have to...”

And just like that the three of them were lost in a conversation more technical than Kettec could understand. It hardly even sounded like the same language. Ediox snuck away from the table, Fenna and Kettec following her. They made their way to the entrance hallway.

“That’s all well above my head,” said Ediox, “And below my interest threshold, to be honest. Me and Fenna should prolly bounce.”

“Okay. Yeah. Thanks for coming,” replied Kettec, “It’s nice to have everyone knowing everything. Probably. There’s enough going on without us keeping stuff from each other.”

“You got that right! Lil’ Ket all of a sudden has a hot as hell boyfriend, who’s also a Lord, and who’s also under attack and, meanwhile, Baby Kay is also-also uncovering ancient secrets in a cool-ass cave *and* is letting me party in said cave!” Ediox said, everything contained in a single, improbable, breath.

Fenna giggled, “That’s about right! But, ” she looked intently at Kettec, “let us know if there is anything we can do to help, okay Ket?”

“Sure, yeah. Thanks for everything. And the choco-squares.”

“Anytime.”

“Bye air-head! I’m gonna go sell the Lord’s new gossip to every rag I can find!” Fenna elbowed Ediox. “Ow, just kidding!”

Kettec watched as Ediox draped an arm over Fenna and they proceeded down the hallway. He really was glad to have friends like them, even if they did exhaust him sometimes. Returning to the kitchen table, Kettec decided that

his mother, Mell, and Cinizia had not noticed his departure and return. Cinizia had taken some books and papers out of her gigantic purse and they were organizing them on the table. After a while of trying, and failing, to follow along, Kettec got up again.

“I’m just going to go for a quick walk,” he said, quietly. Mell stopped mid-sentence and looked at Kettec, realizing for the first time in a while where he was.

“Oh, sorry,” said Mell, “You okay? This may have gotten out of hand.”

Kettec shook his head. “It’s fine. It’s important.”

Mell came around the table, focusing all his attention on Kettec. “Okay.” With a gentle insistence, Mell pulled Kettec into an embrace and Kettec melted into his arms before he knew what was happening. The entire world disappeared. It was like they were back in his hide-out or below in the caves. “Catch up later, yeah?” said Mell into Kettec’s ear.

Kettec shivered. “Yeah.”

Outside, night was falling and the air was cool. Kettec walked along the city streets, seeing his breath puff out before him, a miniature recreation of the plumes floating out of pipes and manholes. He realized—walking the streets of Capath—how nice it was being alone for once. He treasured time spent with Mell, but every second seemed so full, packed to the brim with feelings and thoughts. Even Mell’s careful attention could be wearying in such a large dose. Ediox was right: so much had changed in such a short amount of time, from losing his job onward. The architecture of the city was the same as always, with its detailed carvings, leering lizard-bats, and stolid saviours of long forgotten causes perched on landings. Capath reached for the sky

EMBEDDED HEART

with stone and glass fingers, upward movement measured in centuries. Kettec entered an alley and began to ascend one of the cities' square digits, climbing and paying close attention only to his next handholds. Arm length by arm length, Kettec pulled himself up the exterior of the building, revelling in the singular purpose of his exertion and focus. At the apex and only slightly winded, Kettec looked over his home, watched as the last light of the day receded.

He was alone but not lonely.

XX

And now,” said the florid speaker of the council, “Let us conclude the vote on the Flowing Island proposal, suspended last week in the interest of allowing for further research.”

Nestled in the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of interested parties and reporters, Kettec sat up. He had been lost in contemplating the historic Council building, a place he never intended to return to after his disastrous petition and public humiliation. From his raised seat, Mell located Kettec amongst the gathered mass, locked eyes for a moment, and then turned, his visage morphing into a mask of solemnity. Tracing the frankly intimidating look across the semi-circular dais, Kettec saw Luvivor glaring right back. The blonde lord seemed to have only two expressions, sneer and smug. It would be good to see him lose.

“Lord Wess,” continued the speaker, “Your vote please, for the record.”

Mell stood, unfolding himself slowly. “After careful consideration of the situation, I have decided to invoke the Dorthonez Provision and add a clause to the agreement.”

There was murmuring from the crowd, the few politically versed explaining to their neighbours. Luvivor spoke out, sounding perturbed rather than hysteric. Well, at least, so far, thought Kettec.

“Are we really going to replay this farce? Lord Wess is clearly trying to undermine our sovereignty. Speaker, we can’t just allow this outsider to dig up and misrepresent all these archaic laws to justify his traitorous actions.”

EMBEDDED HEART

“ I trust that Lord Luvonor will find that every one of my invocations, is, one, in the spirit of their intent, and, two, in the best interest of Capath,” fired back Mell.

What followed was a dizzying array of claims and counter claims from Luvonor, Mell, the speaker, and, occasionally interrupting to bring an end to a standstill, Vespian. Kettec’s meagre, second-hand knowledge of Capath’s laws and Council procedure were almost immediately insufficient to follow the argument but he was enraptured all the same. Above him, Mell was fierce and unyielding, never wavering in his statements or taken aback by Luvonor’s snide rejoinders.

Up until now, Kettec had got the impression that Mell was being overly dismissive of Luvonor’s bullying tactics. That the bribery and threatening and property destruction were nothing but petty concerns in the face of larger problems. He saw that Mell was actually just saving his energy and his fury, unleashing it all when it would actually matter. There was also the realization that if Mell had really wanted to, he could have won every single one of their minor arguments or historical disagreements. He’d been keeping his gem-handling gloves on. Kettec might have felt patronized, but observing Mell’s current intensity just left him relieved. He was not looking forward to the day they disagreed on something of substance.

Soon, the dust settled and Luvonor was cornered into silence. Mell was allowed to present his addition to the Island proposal, though it was nearly as complicated as the initial provision. Essentially, Capath would be allowed to build on the island, but the plots used and the facility blueprints would have to be vetted by Ubran first.

“This is postposterous!” shouted Luvonor, grandstanding

to the crowd and the other members of the Sevenfold. “This completely invalidates the entire benefit of the proposal. You can’t expect my vote to still stand for this.”

“Indeed we can’t,” said Mell. “The revote if you would, Mr. Jordenner.”

The speaker patted his shiny head with a handkerchief, “Of course.”

Luvonor’s expression flipped back over to haughty. He expected to win handily. “In the interest of expediency—and assuming there are no further additions,” Luvonor peered at his colleagues, who volunteered no interruptions, “why don’t we forgo the individual vote and justification and just go at once. Starting with the Nay’s.”

“That seems reasonable,” squeaked the speaker, who clearly did not enjoy being the mediator in such a heated situation. Kettec wondered why he had been appointed to the post. “Assembled Sevenfold Lords of Capath, we will now re-cast our votes for the revised Flowing Island proposal. Please raise your hands for Nay.”

Luvonor thrust his hand up in the air, and jutted his chin out, leading the charge.

He was the only one.

Gaping openly at the other lords, Luvonor’s ram-rod straight arm wilted slowly back down to his side. The domed chamber was filled with a sudden chatter, hundreds of voices reacting to the shocking turnaround. Kettec let out a quick burst of laughter and worked hard to stifle further chuckling. Typical Mell, thought Kettec. He mentioned that he was working on deals to ensure the changed proposal would pass, but rather than just get the three votes for a majority he went out and got them all. It was apparent that Mell had worked with every other member for the

sole reason of humiliating Luvinor. Now the snooty Lord's mouth popped open and closed repeatedly as he turned a deep, angry crimson. Kettec, still giddy at the victory, looked up at Mell, and they again met each other's gaze. Probably in the interest of decorum, Mell had not changed his resolute face, but his eyes were twinkling, the telltale creases of mirth present at their corners.

"What about our deals?" screeched Luvinor, apoplectic, "What about my island! Put your hand up, Lord Germana. You have to listen to me or I'll—" The Lord, finally realizing that he was shouting in a public setting, stopped up short. Silence had filled the room, everyone was enraptured by his outburst.

"Or you'll what?" asked Vespian, eyes narrowed.

Luvinor swallowed visibly, taking a moment to recollect himself. Only with partial successfulness in Kettec's estimation.

"Nothing. We should take this discussion out of an open setting."

"Actually," said Mell, shifting from happiness to focused intensity with abrupt force, "I'd like to ask what you meant about 'your' island?"

Luvinor stiffened then shrugged, "A slip of the tongue. I meant our island. The people of Capath's," he waved his arm magnanimously out to the crowd. No one made a sound.

"Are you sure?" purred Mell, simple words dripping with hostility. "Because I think it might have something to do with a construction guild you own. One that would stand to benefit. The same one you said you divested yourself of."

"And I did. Of course I did!"

"Then you wouldn't mind an audit to confirm that?"

Even Kettec could see that the trap had closed.

“Well, that’s not necessary,” tried Luvivor weakly. He turned to look down at the speaker. “The vote is over. The bill passes. Let’s move on!”

Vespian thumped the table with his hand. “Hold, Mr. Speaker. Lord Luvivor, your conduct is questionable enough to warrant an examination. We will appoint a cleric to review your files immediately.”

“You can’t,” moaned Luvivor.

Mell’s grin was predatory. “Yes. We can.”

The Council meeting limped on, working around a mostly catatonic Luvivor. Kettec slipped out, feeling fatigued from the drama and the press of people. He walked the marble floored halls of the building, waiting for Mell to finish. Kettec was jubilant for Mell, since not only had he navigated a way through his Island dilemma, it looked like Luvivor had finally given him what he needed to make a case for a full corruption investigation. It was not easy to depose a Lord, but if anyone could figure it out, it would be Mell.

The walls of the current hallway were covered in large oil paintings, each ensconced in a thick frame of burnished copper. The paintings depicted moments of triumph and trial in the storied history of Capath, from the mystical circumstances surrounding the founding to the relatively recent re-creation of their constitution. Each image was idyllic in the extreme, full of men pointing at a golden horizon, or doing battle with perfectly porcelain skin and flowing locks of hair. Kettec couldn’t help but seek out the painting for Absollo’s insurrection and he saw that it was not as intimate or as sanitized as the others. It was a view of Capath, set from a vantage point above the courtyard of the

Palace. Thick columns of grey smoke obscured most of the surrounding buildings, and the ground was cracked open in places, swallowing siege structures. The Palace itself, while rendered accurately, was given a sinister feeling, splashed red by the setting sun and the fires of the city around it. It was a piece that spoke to monumental defeat, to destruction. Kettec felt a burning lance of expectation arc through his belly. During his breaks from helping Mell, Kettec had continued to progress with the caves. The subterranean network was a lot longer than he'd expected though, and it was slow going over the uneven ground. Even more time had been lost to clearing rubble blockages. He was beginning to worry that he would never reach the cache, no matter how much time he had. He was no longer certain he would succeed before the destruction of the Palace, or, rather, looking at the painting, it's re-destruction. Kettec was thrust out of his contemplation by a gigantic hug, scooping him off his feet. Kettec let out a surprised squeak, drawing a laugh from Mell, who put him down.

"Did you see the look on Luvivor's face? We've got him!" said Mell like an excitable child.

Kettec forced himself to shift gears, moving from contemplation to congratulation. "Yeah! And the Island provision passed. Unanimously!"

"Turns out loyalty bought with trinkets or coerced with fear isn't all that loyal after all. But I could have told him that, the two-bit thug. If he'd seen how Ubran ministers weaved webs of dependency and alliance, well *there's* how you create a dynasty."

"Is that patriotism for corruption?"

Mell laughed. "Absolutely! Ubran does most everything better, including being evil."

Kettec looked up at the beaming Mell and was reminded of their traumatic escape a week ago.

“And does this mean that no one is after your life now?”

Mell bit his lip. “Not anymore. Not until the next crisis at least. I didn’t do as I was threatened to sure, but I also secured lucrative Ubran trading routes, so it’s likely that those who stand to benefit financially will keep the more warlike in check. And since I’ll be helping to investigate Luvonor, that will translate into better security too. Cinizia won’t have to be the only staffer I trust...speaking of,” Mell turned toward the clicking of Cinizia’s shoes and gave her a “one moment” finger. Mell focused back on Kettec, capturing him with his attention.

“Listen Ket, I want to celebrate! I have to wrap up some stuff here, but it should only take a bit. After, would you join me for dinner?”

“Yes!” Kettec agreed instantly. “What about the party though?” In an unfortunate confluence of high stress events, Ediox’s party in the cave had ended up being the same day as Mell’s council meeting. Kettec had been working with her to oversee the setup of the place and the safety precautions, but now that the day had come he wasn’t sure he wanted to attend at all.

“Oh the party!” remembered Mell, “Well, we can be a bit late, right? I feel like I haven’t seen you in a week, and we’ve been just across rooms from one each other!” Mell paused to read Kettec thoroughly, “But I know this is a big step for you, so if you want to be there early, we can make that work too.”

“Showing up late is what cool people do, right?”

“You bet,” said Mell, smiling, “Gimme half an hour.”

Kettec looked at Cinizia’s impatient foot tapping.

EMBEDDED HEART

“Maybe make it an hour.”

Mell followed his gaze. “Ah, I think that would indeed be prudent.”

After an hour and a half, Kettec and Mell were seated together at a rooftop restaurant, an exquisitely appointed affair that Kettec had only heard of in hushed tones from Ediox. He suspected that this was not a place you could usually just show up to unannounced. Their table was probably one of the perks of being a Lord. The whole dining area was nothing but few tables clustered together, and the kitchen and entranceway were all on the level below, leaving diners surrounded by a breathtaking panoramic view of Capath. Wait staff in tailored uniforms, flitted from seat to seat, filling up drinks and ensuring everything was to taste. Kettec would normally have felt overly self-conscious in such a fancy place but Mell knew exactly what to do to set him at ease, making corny jokes and helping him navigate a menu filled with unfamiliar terms. At this point Kettec was entirely familiar with the thought that Mell was perhaps too perfect to be real.

“But enough about Luv-a-butt for now,” said Mell, “I want to hear about your week. You had a job interview yesterday right? How did that go?”

Kettec winced.

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t good. I mixed up the guy’s name, and then spilled water everywhere? And they said I wasn’t qualified too.”

“Pfft, their loss. Who cares about little things like

hand-eye coordination or memory?”

“Thanks.”

“I mean it!” said Mell, “All that stuff pales next to a proper analytical mind and real dedication. You sure I can’t hire you?”

“No way! You couldn’t be my boss and my, uh, boyfriend.”

Mell laughed. “You say that like it’s a dirty word! I’ve said this before but—” A waiter approached and slid a cloth-covered basket onto their table.

“Apologies for the interruption, sirs. Your complementary appetizer.”

“Thank you,” said Mell. The waiter dipped his head and shuffled off. “What have we here,” Mell raised the cloth. Nestled in the basket were two freshly baked loaves of piskaloaf. Mell gasped and dropped into the voice of their hypothetical angler-baker. “My innovation!” They both broke out into sustained laughter.

Time slid by easily, and Kettec would have been hard pressed to describe his meal. Conversation with Mell flowed so well, moving from entertaining to enrapturing and back. Kettec felt like he could talk for hours, and he didn’t regret a single word, didn’t dwell on his slip ups. They paused to watch a magnificent sunset, better in Kettec’s opinion than the ones in the Council chamber’s paintings, and continued by candle light. The city glowed beneath them, gas lanterns creating daubs of yellow to compete with the silvery moonlight glinting off windows.

They sat together, sated and silent, looking out over the city.

“So,” said Mell.

“So,” replied Kettec.

“I have a present for you,” Mell took out an envelope

and slid it across the table.

“What? Why?”

“Just open it.”

Kettec did as he was told and slid the document out from the envelope. He had to read it twice for it to sink in. It was a delay order on the Palace’s destruction along with a permit to explore the lower levels.

“Mell! This is! I...how?”

“During all my deals for the Island, I had time to slip this in. And now that Luvivor is out, it should go unchallenged.”

Kettec’s chest felt full enough to burst. Even during his frenzied, life-or-death negotiations, Mell had been thinking of him.

“Mell. I don’t know what to say,” tears blurred Kettec’s vision. “I don’t know what I did to deserve all this. Not just this but you are always helping me and, just, everything!”

Mell put his hand on Kettec’s. “Kettec, you saved my life. And not just from those goons. If it weren’t for you, I don’t think I’d have figured out the Island thing. I’d have done it like I did before. Uncompromising. Kettec, you help too. You just do it automatically. You do it and don’t notice. There is no one I’d rather have my back. No one I’d rather be with.”

Mell’s face was only half lit by candlelight but Kettec could see him clearly. Mell was using his full intensity stare. Words failed Kettec, but it looked like Mell understood. They moved closer, Mell sliding his chair neatly around to be next to Kettec’s. Kettec’s pulse hammered through his body, and the scent of Mell filled his nose. They moved closer still, and Kettec was sure he couldn’t survive this. Their noses touched, and an electric spark arced between them. Mell tilted his head slightly and Kettec closed his

JESS SEBASTIAN

eyes.

Then the ground shook beneath them.

XXI

When Kettec jerked back, Mell's first thought was not on the disconcerting trembling of their rooftop restaurant but that he felt cheated. Couldn't whatever this was wait until after they had their intimate moment? Then Kettec said something that sounded an awful lot like "earthquake" and Mell was properly concerned. Another tremor slammed into their building causing it to judder and sway. There was an awful nauseating motion that caused cutlery to slide off thick tablecloths and clatter onto polished tiles. Delicacy laden plates followed, shattering in cascades of discordant melodies. The sound of glass breaking persisted after all dishes had been destroyed. Mell realized that the building's windows were giving out, exploding as the frames around them rocked from square to trapezoidal and back. It was silent again for a moment, save for distant tinkling noises as shards struck the streets below. People slowly began to talk again, in hushed and worried tones.

"Was that it?" asked Mell.

"No," said Kettec, grimly. "I think it hasn't even started."

"What do we do?"

"Hold on."

Mell grasped Kettec's hand, and after another moment the shaking started again. It made the first few vibrations seem like gentle taps. A noise like thunder rumbled up from the ground below them. The drumbeat of giants, pounding to a crescendo and then continuing on anyway. Mell's teeth rattled in his head even as he clenched them. The

building bucked again, slanting farther than Mell would have thought possible. The cityscape of Capath wobbled and tilted as if it was a vast stone ocean. The table pitched over and they tumbled out of their chairs, still trying to cling to one another. Mell struck the ground and squeezed his eyes shut. He lay prone and foetal while the world erupted around him. He could hear masonry crumbling all around, more glass breaking and the screech of metal twisting in ways it was never designed to. Someone screamed, an insensate howl almost entirely drowned out by the noises of destruction. Dust blew over him, a chalky mist that made breathing even harder. Mell was bumped around until he was no longer Lord Mell Wess at all. He was tossed by such powerful forces that he was forced to accept that he was nothing but a speck in the wind, a bug under the heel of the earth. He could feel strong arms around him and all he could do was hold on.

The cessation of the tremors was heralded with a thunderclap of silence. A few moments of utter quiet after the incredible violence. Slowly Mell's hearing grew re-accustomed to volume at a human scale, and he was surprised to find it wasn't anywhere near noiseless. Steam whistled out of broken pipes, accompanying the hiss and crackle of fire. There was shouting and crying, and unsettling creaks emanating from weakened stonework. Mell felt a hand on his shoulder, gentle but insistent.

"Mell? Mell? Can you hear me? Are you okay?"

Opening his eyes at last, Mell saw that Kettec was crouched over him, face etched with concern. A deep looking cut traversed Kettec's chin. Mell tried to reply, but found that his lips were coated in dust and ended up coughing

EMBEDDED HEART

and spitting out grey mud. He had intended to say “yes” automatically, though he used the extra time spent finding his voice to confirm that. He was bruised and sore all over. There was nothing individually as bad as the wallops he’d received from the Ubran goons last week, but the ubiquity of his pains made it altogether worse. There was nothing broken though.

“Yes,” said Mell at last, hoarse. “Are you?”

Kettec nodded, which told Mell little, since Kettec would likely insist that he was alright even with every bone broken in his body. Still, Kettec seemed to be moving fine and helped Mell upright. They clung to one another for a moment, taking solace in the fact that they could still do so. Eventually Mell released Kettec and looked around him. People in dust covered finery groaned and moved slowly calling out for one another. Looking up to see Capath, Mell gasped. Lit by a powerfully full moon and various blazes, the city looked like a warzone. Smoke and steam obscured huge swaths of the skyline. Pockmarked buildings listed, still occasionally shedding some of their decorative stone work. Across the road from them, one structure had broken loose and started to topple over entirely, only to be arrested in its descent by its neighbour. Bridges that once arced gracefully between walkways, now jutted out like broken bones, jagged and incomplete. The metal lattice of a ring station had partially collapsed, looking like someone had pressed their thumb down on the enclosure. Huge sinkholes had opened up in the road, collapsing in on underground levels.

Next to him, Kettec also surveyed the damage. If it looked this bad to Mell, what must Kettec think?

“Kettec, are—”

“The party,” interrupted Kettec, turning to face Mell

with eyes shaking in fear. “Fenna, Ediox. Everyone. They’re all underground.”

There is no way they survived, thought Mell. The entrance would have collapsed. They were all dead. It was something far too awful to say out loud. Kettec rubbed his eyes in the crook of his arm and then took Mell by the hand.

“We need to go. We have to help them.”

Mell couldn’t do anything but follow.

The descending staircase was packed with people, an injured and staggering mass swirling slowly downward. As they had been on the top floor, it took quite a while just to make it to the ground level, and Kettec looked like he wanted to bowl everyone over. Mell was realizing in a distant sort of fashion that he felt separated from himself, insulated from what he was seeing and hearing. From the crying and bursts of crimson as people held filthy rags to grievous looking scalp wounds. They shuffled down the steps, one at a time, pressed in on every side by suffering.

Out on the street it was no better. Crowds of people milled around piles of rubble, unsure of what to do or where to go. If it weren’t for Kettec dragging him along, Mell would have been one of those directionless souls. They passed by the tilted building, where someone had made a rope out of curtains and bed-sheets and dropped it out of one of the lower windows, helping others to descend. They marched onward, heading towards the cave entrance as quickly as they could. When a pathway was blocked by debris or unmoving throngs of dazed people, Kettec would double back, finding another passage right away. Mell wanted to say something to him, to reassure him, but he couldn’t think of anything that would help. He could not

EMBEDDED HEART

remember another time it had been so hard to find words.

A man staggered out onto the road in front of them, trying to get people's attention and lurching toward them, hysterical.

"My wife!" he cried, "Help!" Most just goggled and pressed past, filled with familial concerns of their own. Kettec stopped to hear the man out, coaxing out what had happened. The man pointed to where a slab of stone had fallen onto a cart, and indicated that his wife was trapped underneath. Kettec moved to help the man lift the stone, while Mell watched, lost in a fog of unrelated thoughts. It was too heavy for the both of them, and the man collapsed, scratching futilely at the rock.

"Mell," said Kettec, having come back over at some point. "Mell, I think you are in shock."

Mell nodded. "Sure."

"I understand it's not something you are doing on purpose. And I get it. This is a lot. I need your help, okay? Just to lift this rock?"

"Yeah."

Kettec convinced another burly looking bystander to help, and the four of them were able to shift the hunk of stone up. It wasn't a lot of space but just enough for the woman to crawl out. The man clutched his wife and thanked Kettec and the other men profusely, calling them saints and saviours. Kettec merely dipped his head, grabbed Mell's hand, and guided them towards the next street.

Sheppeth court looked relatively undamaged, although it was deserted. The fountain statue was even still working, water burbling from her hands. Kettec stopped them long enough to splash water over their heads, cleaning his cut

and washing away some of the dust that coated them both. He thanked the goddess and they went down the alley that led to the canal.

“Before,” said Kettec as they walked, “in Absollo’s time, there was an earthquake too. That’s what opened up the pathway after the bunker. There was an earthquake and most of the caves stayed intact. So maybe everyone is okay.”

They emerged from the alleyway to where the stubby stone bridge arced over the dried canal. Or rather, to Kettec’s dismay, to where the canal had once been. Its retaining walls had given way, filling the trench with debris. There was nothing left but a shallow divot, still visible under the brilliant moonlight. Kettec dropped Mell’s hand as his own balled into fists. He dashed along the former bank towards the curve and where his drainage tunnel had been. There was no sign of it. The whole aqueduct had been packed with stone and dirt. Kettec fell to his knees and scooped out handfuls of gravel. It reminded Mell of the man they helped, scratching at solid rock. Every handful of earth Kettec threw away almost immediately refilled itself. Kettec, who until now had been filled with grim, reassuring, determination, began to break down. Tears streaked his face and he was mumbling “no” over and over. His digging grew frenetic.

It was horrible scene to watch. It was so acutely painful and personal that something shifted inside Mell. He wasn’t a bystander to his own body. He was Lord Mell Wess and the man he loved was hurting and scared. Finally, he could act. Approaching quietly, Mell firmly wrapped his arms around Kettec, pulling Kettec’s battered hands away from the dirt. Kettec did not try to shirk out of the embrace, though he didn’t stop mumbling or shaking with grief and fury. Mell, back in tune with his analytical side, studied

Kettec, gathering all the information he could from body language and actions.

“Kettec? I’m here Kettec. Okay?” said Mell, making sure he had Kettec’s full attention “Firstly, absolutely none of this is your fault. And that is such an immutable fact that I want you to say that back to me.”

“What? But if Ediox hadn’t found—”

“Did you plan an earthquake? No. ‘None of this is my fault.’ Say it,” Mell let his voice grow stern though he crucially did not remove Kettec from his hug.

“None of this is my fault,” whispered Kettec.

“Good. And it is a setback that the canal is filled, but the solution is not to dig your hands raw. Can you think of any other way to help them?”

Mell could plainly see the moment Kettec stopped thinking about his failures and started to think about other plans. There was a visible shift from consternation to concentration. Mell waited, taking time to collect his own thoughts. As a Lord, he had some responsibilities after this disaster. The Sevenfold would be convening an emergency session, helping to organize relief efforts. Mell was surprised that he just remembered that now. He had never felt so disconnected from himself before. If Kettec hadn’t been there to guide him, well, Mell shuddered from the thought of what would have been.

Kettec’s hand leapt to his chest pocket.

“The Palace!” Kettec withdrew the permit Mell had given him at dinner. “If it’s still standing then we can go backwards.”

“Backwards from Absollo’s cache to the cave?”

“Yeah.”

Mell wasn’t sure what the status of their subterranean

network would be. If there was this much destruction aboveground, what would centuries old tunnels look like? However it was a more plausible approach than excavating thousands of tonnes of rock from this side, and furthermore, it provided Kettec with a direction.

“Okay.”

“Let’s go then. I’ve got to get my gear from—” Mell watched as another realization hit Kettec, “Mom! Oh goddess, is she all right?”

They were in danger of losing the thread.

“Kettec!” barked Mell, “Roszali is one of the most competent persons I’ve ever met. Probably the only thing wrong with her right now is that she’s worried for you.”

Kettec blinked and nodded.

“So we go get your gear. Do you have enough pitons and ropes? Without access to the staging cave?”

“Yeah, I moved everything out for Ediox’s party.”

“Okay.” Mell paused to think of his other duties, “Actually, I need to go to the Council building first. Emergency procedures. And, come to think of it, we shouldn’t go down there alone. What if people are injured? Or we need more than the two of us to, like, lift something. What do you think about getting a small rescue team to come along?”

Kettec looked reluctant. He clearly did not want to delay their departure by waiting for the Council organization to sort out what to do. “I guess that might be smart,” he said eventually.

“Alright, a plan! I’ll go over to the Council, check in, and see about a team. You go get the gear and let Roszali know you’re okay. Then we’ll meet up at the Palace.”

Kettec was shaking his head. “I can’t after all that. I don’t want to split up. Not yet. Mell...”

EMBEDDED HEART

Mell squeezed Kettec even closer towards him, burying his face in Kettec's mussed hair.

"Then we'll go together"

XXII

Moving slowly, they picked their way back through the wounded city towards Kettec's apartment. It was an arduous trip as they were forced to circumvent collapsed walkways, dodge superheated jets of escaping steam, and push through choking clouds of dust and smoke. Occasionally they would pass another traveller, blackened by soot, and nod in solidarity, re-affirming to each other they were still alive despite their hellish surroundings. Dawn broke, and though it made traversal easier, there was little comfort to be found. Moonlight had softened the worst of the damage.

As they grew closer to their destination, Kettec only started to feel more out of place. The shattered masonry of his surroundings was violently at odds with his practised memory of the best climbing routes. Some part of his brain was overtaxed in trying to identify new vertical pathways among blown-out windows and gap-toothed eaves. The rest of his headspace was faring little better, stuck in a near panicked state. His friends were trapped underground, closed in the dark under a huge shelf of concrete and stone—and that was the best case scenario. Mell's presence against his side was the only thing keeping Kettec from shutting down completely and even that had complications. Mell had responsibilities of his own and Kettec did not want to be just another burden.

They turned the last corner and Kettec saw that his building was relatively unharmed. Aside from broken windows, it was upright and intact. Standing on an overturned

bookshelf with an arm in a sling, Roszaliy was directing the rest of the gathered tenants. She yelled at someone carrying a bucket of water and gestured pointedly with her good arm.

“Told ya,” whispered Mell. Kettec nodded as one of his great worries lifted off of him, taking most of his adrenaline with it. He was suddenly exhausted and thirsty, mouth dry from both exertion and the ash that accompanied every breath. Noticing their approach, Roszaliy hopped down from her perch and rushed at Kettec, sweeping him into a one-armed hug. Then, detaching herself, she did the same to Mell. Kettec was surprised—and pleased—to see such a rare gesture of affection extended to someone unrelated.

“I can’t tell you how relieved I am to see you both intact,” she said. Kettec was unable to tell if her voice was hoarse with emotion or if that was just the usual dust-resultant croak. “One moment,” turning back to a person Kettec recognized as their downstairs’ neighbour, Roszaliy rattled off a series of operational instructions. Looking around, Kettec realized that the action on the stoop of their building was actually all part of a plan. There was a triage station stocked with a motley collection of pilfered personal first-aid kits, and there were small groups of people helping to clear away debris. Other people were tasked with trying to get the burst steam pipes under control and to repair fallen LINE connections. A nearby table was stocked with containers of water and canned foods. There was none of the stunned inaction that they had seen in front of the restaurant, and Roszaliy was the unquestioned leader of this impromptu organization.

Kettec picked up two containers of water from the pile and handed one to Mell

“I already kind of knew this, but your mom is a badass!” said Mell, opening the top.

“Yeah.”

They drank deeply. The water was delicious even if it was lukewarm and metallic tasting.

Roszalij extracted herself from a meeting that had started around her, and came back over to them, watching Kettec closely. He was unable to keep himself from fidgeting and avoiding her gaze.

“What’s wrong?” she asked after only a moment, “Besides the obvious.”

“The cave party,” was all Kettec could manage.

“It was tonight. The entrance collapsed and now everyone is trapped underground,” clarified Mell.

Roszalij swore under her breath. “And you are the only ones who know about it.”

“Yes ma’am. We’re also—”

“Call me ma’am again. I dare you,” interrupted Roszalij.

“Ah, right. Roszalij.”

Roszalij, sighed. “Sorry,” she said, tucking a strand of errant hair behind her ear. “Habit.”

Mell waved the moment away with a graceful motion of his hand. “Not at all. Anyway, the Palace is probably still standing, so we’re going to use it to get access to the caves. Get to everyone.”

“You’re here to collect Kettec’s gear.”

“Yes, along with letting you know we’re okay.”

Kettec watched this back-and-forth silently, grateful for Mell acting as his voice. How had he gotten through this sort of thing before? It was an ugly realization that he hadn’t. He usually kept things to himself, acted on his own, or ran away.

“Aren’t you required at the council building for emergency operations?” asked Roszali, not accusatorily.

“We’re going there next. Only to check-in and get a proper team together though. I’m sure the other Lords are better experienced to handle something like this.”

Roszali let out a single, bitter laugh. “Don’t count on it.” There was a moment of silence as she paused to think. “It’s important that someone with a head square on their shoulders is at the council. However, the stairwell is a mess right now, and all that stuff will slow you down besides. You guys get a head start, and I’ll send someone behind you.”

“Yes ma’a—” Mell caught himself, barely, “Roszali!”

Roszali put her one good arm on her hip, and let a wisp of a smile tug at her lip. “Stay safe you two.”

It would have been a good hour’s walk to reach the Council building from Kettec’s apartment on a normal day. As it lay in the aftermath, their journey was a gruelling half-day slog. The collapse of a major walkway forced them to double back and it caused congestion along the normally less frequented roads. Though the paths were crowded, it was not the usual bustle of Capath. People were quiet and kept their heads down intent on getting to wherever it was they were going. The hush was unnerving, nothing but the patter of footsteps and the occasional moan from someone too injured to be cowed into silence. Mell pointed out a crew of rescue workers, dressed in ill-fitting jumpsuits. They were scattered between providing emergency care, trying to clear away rubble from in front of a door, and maintaining order.

“It’s not a good sign that that’s the only crew we’ve seen so far,” he whispered.

Kettec nodded.

Finally they arrived at the courtyard in front of the council building. Huge linen tents had been erected and there was a general air of chaos. People ran from post to post yelling about sectors or demanding updates or disputing plans. As they pushed through towards the building proper, Kettec noticed how irked Mell looked by such a display of disarray, shoulders stiff and jaw tight. Even to Kettec's untrained eye, it was a sharp contrast to the efficient organization his mother had wrought in front of their apartment. They took the broad stone steps in front of the entrance two at a time and were greeted by an armed guard in front of the door. The imposingly appointed woman hefted her long-gun and gave Mell a salute.

"Lord Wess," said the woman, "Glad to see you are uninjured. The emergency deliberations are in session. And First Assistant Cinizia is already inside."

"Oh that's a relief. Thanks, Thenniel," said Mell. "At ease. How are Brionner and the kids faring?"

"Shaken up, but none the worse for wear. Brie's mostly just upset that his good china got mulched." She hauled the door open for them. "In you go," Thenniel looked at Kettec for a second before saying, "both of you."

Mell clapped Thenniel on the shoulder as he passed, "Keep up the good work," he said. Thenniel stood at stiff attention.

"Yes sir!"

Kettec followed Mell, nodding at Thenniel as he crossed the threshold. He was surprised that he'd forgotten so completely that Mell was, in fact, one of the seven most powerful people in the city. That the same person he'd been spending so much time with was also a leader of people. They did

not make it far into the council foyer when another guard stepped in front of them, as large as Thenniel but nowhere near as friendly. The man put a huge paw on Kettec's shoulder, arresting his forward motion easily.

"FAs and SOs only," he said, "How'd you get past Thenniel?"

Kettec looked at Mell unsure what the big man meant. Mell had drawn himself up to his full height, eyes icy and indignant.

"Kettec is my significant other," hissed Mell, "And it would be the smartest thing you do today—or this month considering how low a bar that is—to remove your hand from him."

The man clicked his tongue and let his hand drop back to his side. Mell put an arm around Kettec and they went to move on. Mell's status usually kept them inoculated from most casual insensitivity, and thankfully his friends and family were superbly tolerant. Still, Kettec was not surprised to find that someone found the thought of them together disdainful. Dismayed, sickened, but never surprised. The guard muttered something under his breath, inaudible to Kettec at this distance, but evidently not to Mell. Mell whirled on his heel and shouted out towards the door. "Thenniel!"

The door burst open and Thenniel charged across the marble foyer, eyes wide with alarm. "What is it, Lord Wess!?"

Mell pointed at the guard. "This man has volunteered to ensure that the security of the council building's sewers has not been compromised after the quake. Please inform your commander of this wonderful suggestion."

"Hey!" said the guard, "I never—"

Thenniel cut him off with a violent look. “Yes sir!” she responded.

“Thank you, again.” Mell strode off taking Kettec with him. When they were far enough away, Mell leaned in and wrapped Kettec in a full embrace. Kettec felt the tension in Mell’s body. He didn’t think Mell had even been this angry when the goons had tried to kill him.

Kettec thought of one of the snippets of literature his dad had been so fond of quoting.

“The light of intelligence falls unevenly on the shaded forest of mankind,” he said.

Mell sighed, “That man wasn’t just in shade. He was covered entirely.” Mell held Kettec out at arm’s length, and stared directly at him, a blue gaze that Kettec had once found so intimidating.

“Kettec...”

Kettec nodded. “Yeah, I know. We have bigger problems for now. So...uh, let’s go get our friends back.”

“Yeah.”

They made it into the deliberation chamber without further incident, and the first thing that struck Kettec was how workmanlike the rectangular room was. The main feature was a sturdy, but worn, desk, around which a dozen people sat. Ink splatters and circular stains from cups criss-crossed across the slightly warped surface. The once-crimson carpet had faded to a grungy pink and was even bald in some places. Kettec had expected that, if anything, these private rooms would be even more opulent than the domed main hall that dominated the back half of the building. He also belatedly recognized that some of the people—currently arguing to be the loudest in a series of chaotic conversations—were

EMBEDDED HEART

Lords. The Sevenfold. They were almost unrecognizable to Kettec, divorced as they were from their usual finery. The others must be the First Assistants, and spouses. Kettec, thankfully, did not see Luvonor or Vespian. Still, he had an overwhelming urge to apologize and back out of the room, however Mell guided them in deeper with a gentle hand on his elbow.

They approached Cinizia who—as she was quarrelling in hushed tones with another assistant— had not noticed their arrival. Mell tapped her on the shoulder and stepped back, evidently hoping for a surprising dramatic reveal. Cinizia turned, appraised them both with a glance, and then handed Mell a thick sheaf of papers.

“You need to get these jokers on track,” she said, and then—probably as a concession to the agape assistant next to her—added, “Lord Wess.”

The corners of Mell’s eyes crinkled. “Happy to see you too, Cinizia. Where are we at?”

She tapped the densely worded bundle Mell was holding. “Those are the emergency provision instructions. Unimaginative and out-of-date, but still thorough. Thirty sections of step-by-step procedures for managing disaster. These *Lords* are still on section one.”

Already rifling through the thick document, Mell pursed his lips. “What’s the holdup?”

“Optics.”

“What?”

Cinizia shot an overtly displeased look around the room, noting that they were still being largely ignored by the other squabbling Lords. “They want to skip ahead and manage optics first.”

Mell’s brow furrowed and he fell deep into thought for

a few moments. Kettec and Cinizia watched him closely. “Ugh,” he said, “I don’t have time for both! The clock is ticking on everyone underground, but this is wrong.”

Mell’s uncharacteristic verbalization of distress caught Kettec’s attention. For most of this horrific day he’d been passively following Mell around, clinging onto Mell’s shirt-sleeve like a diffident child. Mell had calmed him down, got him moving, spoken with his mother, and guided them through a crumbling city. Even protected him from the guard. It was time for Kettec to step up again.

“Mell,” he said, “You stay here and get things moving. I’ll figure out who to see about getting a crew and head over to the Palace.”

“Are you sure?” asked Mell, fixing Kettec with a deeply incisive gaze. Kettec did his best to meet the powerfully blue eyes.

“Yeah.”

Another moment passed, as they each took the measure of the other. Then, Mell nodded.

“Okay. One sec.” Mell tore the cover page off the emergency document and flipped it over. Cinizia had filled his hand with a pen almost as soon as he’d extended it in her direction. Mell began scribbling quickly. Kettec tried to read over his shoulder, but could only make out a bunch of references to various protocols. Signing with a flourish, Mell approached the main table. He brought his hand down on it, silencing the room with the stationary rattling thump.

“Lords,” he said, voice steely, “I’m passing around an emergency order. Sign it.”

A woman—Lord Iselle—drew herself into an exaggerated position of indignation. “And why, Lord Wess, should we stop our important deliberations for this?”

EMBEDDED HEART

“Because,” snapped Mell, “Your ‘important deliberations’ are anything but. We’ll get to that. For now, there is something that needs to be handled. And unless you want a hundred dead kids directly on your conscience, you’ll take a moment to sign this. Now!” Mell slapped the piece of paper in front of Isellel and dared her to say anything further with his glare. She, in defiance, scanned the scribbled words carefully.

“This seems reasonable,” she proclaimed as if deciding it was a good idea independently of Mell’s demands and scratched on her name. The other four Lords followed suit without comment. Mell picked up the paper and handed it to Kettec.

“This provisions for three people—of any rank—to help get below the Palace. A good place to start will be with the interim head of rescue personnel. They will be outside in a tent somewhere,” Mell checked one of his other notes from Cinizia, “Find a...Mrs. Panossia.”

The name surprised Kettec.

“That’s my old boss,” he said.

Mell looked up from his notes, “Oh, so you’ll recognize her then. Good! I’ll send whoever Roszaliy sent with your gear on to the Palace. And see about meeting you there before you get too far in.” Then Mell put everything he was holding down on the table behind him and visibly set aside all of the other things he was thinking about. With focused intensity Mell clasped both of Kettec’s hands in his own. Volumes passed between them, and Kettec’s stomach performed flips and flutters.

“Good luck recruiting. You can do this.” said Mell, imbuing the words with absolute sincerity.

“Good luck herding cats,” whispered Kettec back.

JESS SEBASTIAN

Mell laughed and pulled Kettec into a quick embrace.

As he left, Kettec saw Mell reassemble his intent look, gather up his papers, and confirm something with Cinizia. He looked like he was going to war. Kettec closed the door behind him, just as he heard Mell's stern voice demand attention again. Heart buoyed by Mell, and ballasted by their separation, Kettec turned to face his own battle.

XXIII

Back outside, Kettec plunged into the chaos of Capath's pop-up disaster-relief headquarters. There were no signs among the haphazard collection of identical looking tents, so Kettec was forced to wade into the slowly moving mass of people without a clear direction. He peered into enclosures, trying to focus on finding Panossia's face and not on the fact that every passing moment meant his friends were less likely to be alive. Buffeted by the crowd and battered by the noise and smell, Kettec pushed on. In one tent, he saw a person dressed only in undergarments, shouting directions at people as they flipped through battered wads of paper. Kettec guessed that the booklets were the same protocols he'd glimpsed inside the council room. Further on, a pitiful field hospital barely contained all of its groaning injured. Each patient's "bed" was merely a short length of canvas placed on the cobblestones, overseen by doctors who looked nearly as beat-down as their patients. Another tent housed a single industrial LINE, juddering as it spewed out failed message after failed message. Its connective cord had been cannibalized from a nearby communication trunk and it snaked over the ground towards the council building. A swarthy man hammered away at the exposed interior of the machine, swearing in an unbroken stream of increasingly creative invective.

Kettec, lost in the scrambling efforts of so many, stopped and attempted to ask passersby of Panossia's whereabouts. He was ignored or brushed off as people dodged around

him. The rare responses he did receive were either too vague to be useful or full of contradicting information. After being bounced across the grounds twice, Kettec was considering just waving his missive around and recruiting the next three people he saw. Then, cutting through the babble of the crowd, he heard a chorus of “Yes, Mrs. Panossia!”

Kettec pointed himself towards the direction of the reply and charged forward, pushing people aside and squeezing through forcefully created gaps. Ignoring any cries of protest, he re-oriented himself as the chant sounded off again. Bursting through a final wall of people, Kettec was faced with rows of brightly garbed rescue workers, standing at stiff attention. At the head of these lines stood Mrs. Panossia, looking just as she had when she fired Kettec all those weeks ago.

“Last,” she said, her commanding voice easily cutting through the surrounding din, “Vonnnerut, you lead group four and clear out Redonneth road through to the Master’s Market. Overlap with group three and then return here. Clear?”

A row of people, evidently group four, shouted “Yes, Mrs. Panossia!”

“Okay. Off you go,” she ordered, and the assembled groups scattered to see to their missions. Kettec lurched forward, intent on seizing her moment of availability even if he was unable to fully dismiss the nervousness he felt at speaking to her again.

“Mrs. Panossia? Ma’am?” he said, sounding tremulous even to his own ears.

“Spit it out,” she responded, looking intently down at her documents. “I’m extremely—” Panossia stopped herself and spun around, brows raised. “Kettec?”

“Hi.”

Panossia tilted her head. “Well, I’m happy to see you’re unharmed, but what are you doing here?”

Kettec felt like he was melting under her gaze, like he was back in her office at Records, sitting across from her desk. Kettec cut himself off from falling any further into that thinking pattern. This was too important. He tried to imagine how Mell would conduct himself. “Ma’am,” he said, “I’m here to recruit three capable people for a rescue mission. To help a large group trapped underground.” Kettec gave her Mell’s hand written order.

Panossia scanned the document quickly, and whistled when she reached the bottom. “Signed by five Lords too. Friends in high places?”

“You could say that,” said Kettec feeling his cheeks heat up.

There was a long moment as Mrs. Panossia looked between Kettec and the document. “Kettec,” she began, weighing her words carefully, “I cannot deny this request, but for the sake of my team, I have to ask: do you think you can lead these people? To bear the responsibility of their safety as their interim commander?”

It was not a question he had been expecting. Kettec had just assumed someone else would take the lead and that he would be there as a guide. Of course, since in the provision he was the one recruiting, it made sense that he’d be the one in charge. It was terrifying though, to take on responsibility for others. It would be so much easier to just go on his own. He dropped his head to look down at the large and looping handwriting on the order and remembered who’d written those words. Mell had shown him how much better things could be. He also would have known this would have been

required of Kettec and had written the document without hesitation. His parting words rang in Kettec's ears: "You can do this."

Kettec met Panossia's eyes. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

Another lengthy moment of silence passed between them, and Kettec had the unpleasant feeling that he was being judged. He kept his back straight and his gaze unwavering. Finally, in a familiar gesture, Mrs. Panossia straightened her suit-jacket. "Okay," she said, "What's your plan?"

"The passage they used to get past the Cap has been cut off by rubble. So, we're going to use the Palace to get down there. From the other way? Establish a path and lead them back."

Kettec had expected Panossia to comment about the Palace being his focus once again or accuse him of using the tragedy of the quake to advance ulterior motives, but she continued on in a businesslike tone.

"Understood. You'll want a climber, some muscle, and a medic then, to cover all the bases."

"Sure?"

"I know the perfect trio for that. Innmea!" shouted Panossia. She crossed over to the other side of the tent and called out again. Kettec followed. "Innmea!" A severe looking woman materialized out of a side entrance, her lips drawn into a thin line.

"What?"

If Mrs. Panossia was irked at the less than respectful response, she did not show it. "You have climbing experience right?" Panossia asked rhetorically, "Some people are trapped underground and Kettec here is heading up a rescue op. Go with him and find Motek and Xedal. Then you're headed to the Palace of the Arms."

EMBEDDED HEART

“Fine,” said Innmea, turning and walking off, not waiting for Kettec in the slightest.

“You’d better hurry after her,” said Mrs. Panossia.

Kettec made to leave, pausing for a moment. “Thank you.”

Panossia looked like she was going to say something else but in the end just nodded. Kettec turned and pushed after Innmea.

Struggling to keep up, Kettec followed Innmea all the way back to the tent that had housed the large LINE machine. Innmea pointed at a surly bearded man who was wiping greasy fingers on greasier overalls.

“Is that Motek?” asked Kettec.

“Yup,” grunted Innmea. She put her arm down and made no further movement. It was up to Kettec. He approached the man.

“Motek?”

“What’s broke now?” he responded, exasperated.

“Oh, nothing. Mrs. Panossia has, uh, assigned you to me for a rescue mission.”

“You jokin’ kid?” Motek’s thick black eyebrows knitted together.

Kettec swallowed and shook his head. “No. Innmea is...” Kettec turned to see Innmea heading off again.

Motek laughed and slapped Kettec on the back, a wallop that staggered him. “That’s my Innie for ya! Change of pace’d be nice though, even if y’are lying. We’d better step to!” Motek hustled off after Innmea, and Kettec, bewildered, again followed. They caught up to Innmea just as she arrived at the medic’s tent.

“Fair Innie!” shouted Motek, “We’re on a team now!

Ain't that the sweetest?"

"Dunce," said Innmea, not acknowledging Motek's presence any further. She pointed at a short woman, currently busy wrapping a bandage around a bloodied leg. Kettec hurried over before Innmea could run off again.

"Would you be Xedal?"

"Why, yes." The woman smiled warmly, and offered her hand in greeting. Her friendliness was offset by the fact that she was soaked to the elbow in blood. Noticing Kettec's hesitation to reach out, Xedal looked down. "Oh! Terribly sorry. I'd lose my bottom if it wasn't fastened on, I swear. Come to think of it, losing a little bit off the back might be nice you know!" Xedal giggled and elbowed Kettec, leaving a red spot on his already filthy shirt. The man she'd been bandaging groaned in agony, too ill to speak. Xedal tutted and finished her ministrations with a steady hand. "Okay, let me just clean up."

At a wash station, Xedal scraped at her skin with a rough bit of sponge, allowing Kettec to again explain his mission and her reassignment.

"Oh my, what a shame!" cooed Xedal in response to hearing about the trapped party-goers. "Let me just gather my go-baggie, and we'll be off."

Outside the tent, Motek was dancing from side to side in front of Innmea, arms spread wide to block her from getting past. Xedal emerged, evidently thought of something extra to bring, and ducked back inside.

Motek called after her. "Xedal, Y'all better hurry!"

"Never rush a lady! Especially when she's a doctor," Xedal shouted back.

"Tell that to Innie!"

Innmea, stared at Motek so hard it looked like she was

trying to burn holes into him.

“Do you all know each other?” asked Kettec.

“Yes, we’re married,” said Xedal, re-appearing with a bulging bag slung over her back.

“The three of you?”

“Mmhhh,” Xedal watched Kettec closely, looking preemptively defensive.

“That’s great!” said Kettec, quickly.

“Hurry!” bellowed Motek, dodging Innmea’s attempts to knee him in the groin.

“Ready!” said Xedal. She winked at Kettec, and the four of them headed towards the camp’s exit.

With Innmea dictating the pace, Kettec found himself once again trudging along the battered roads of Capath. In lieu of trying to make sense of the destruction, Kettec passed the time by observing his new acquaintances, wondering if Panossia had assigned them as a group to make it easier on him somehow. He was still unsure of what the appropriate conduct was and had decided that keeping to himself was probably the safest bet. Anyway, Kettec was forced to admit that he was curious about the nature of the three’s relationship. Casually observed, it looked like they were nothing more than co-workers, and perhaps not even amiable ones at that. Innmea was aloof and silent, only speaking in monosyllabic insults, Motek seemed entirely lewd and boisterous, and Xedal chastised them both, often and loudly. But, over time, Kettec began to see that there was something underneath all the bickering. It was revealed in small moments, like when Innmea lent Xedal a hand to help cross over a pile of rubble, and then held on for longer than was necessary. Or how Motek had demanded they rotate

burdens, keeping a single person from being stuck with the heaviest satchel, and then—once he had surreptitiously collected the heaviest set of gear—never brought it up again. It was their confidence, Kettec realized. Each was wholly sure of their place with the others, so they did not worry about causing minor offence or make any attempt to modulate their disparate personalities. Kettec thought about the endless courtesies that Mell afforded him and wondered if that was for his benefit or because that was just in Mell's nature. Was there a difference? Would Mell grow tired of always having to step around Kettec's many neuroses, and was Kettec even capable of growing past them? Preoccupied by his questions, Kettec did not notice that Motek had stopped and ploughed into the other man. It was like hitting a solid wall.

"Sorry," said Kettec.

Motek dismissed it with a slight smile, mostly hidden by his enormously bushy beard. He reminded Kettec more of a large bear than a man. "Already forgotten. I was jus' wonderin' though, how'd you come to find out 'bout all those folks trapped underground?"

"It's a long story."

"We ain't got nothin' else but walkin' for a ways."

Kettec looked up at Motek, dusty, sweaty, and labouring under his load. It was the least he could do to tell him why. Editorializing heavily, Kettec told Motek about how he found the underground passages and how they connected to the palace. He explained Ediox's plan to hold a party in the gigantic and, according to her, acoustically brilliant entrance cave. Kettec ached at speaking about Ediox and Fenna and the others, without knowing their fate, but at the same time it was almost cathartic. At Motek's continued

prompting, Kettec recalled Fenna's almost-flight, and his and Ediox's rescue. He was not sure when, but Innmea and Xedal had also fallen back to listen. Kettec became suddenly aware of their tri-fold attention and sputtered to a halt, realizing how long he'd been talking and how personal things had gotten.

"Sorry, I've been blabbing on. I'm just worried about them," said Kettec, wishing he'd stayed silent.

Motek cuffed him on the back. "We'll be seein' 'em soon enough. And that all chaos reminds me of the circumstance 'round meetin' these two. It were twenty years ago now, but we—"

"Oh, must you drag all this up again!?" interrupted Xedal.

"I must! Or ya don't think I should?"

"Well..." Xedal looked at first like she was going to protest more out of habit. They picked their way through a rubble strewn pathway slowly, the creaking and rumbling sounds of settling stone all around them. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to hear again," she said. "If *only* for Kettec's sake."

"For Kettec's sake," Motek agreed with a wink.

Motek turned out to be an accomplished storyteller, and by the time his raucous tale of coincidence, misunderstanding, hijinks, and reconciliation was complete, Kettec was surprised to see that they had nearly arrived.

The Palace of the Arms loomed in front of them. Once the height of opulence, its copper dome had turned a sickly shade of green and its once brilliantly white walls were grey and pockmarked. The weight of history still clung about it though, its intricate carvings marking it as a place that deserved attention. It easily stood out from the

plain-looking modern buildings that were its neighbours, and more than usual too, since it lacked any unsettlingly large foundation cracks or dangerous looking leans. This was not the palace's first quake after all. This moment should have been monumental to Kettec. After all his time and effort and campaigning and exploring, he was going to step foot in the palace and get underneath it. However, Kettec was only dully cognizant of that once all-important goal. This passage was only a means to an end now. The front doors of the palace were made of solid metal, huge imposing slabs that were padlocked shut.

"Oh, just a mo', I've got a key," said Motek, reaching behind his back to rummage around in his kit. He withdrew a large mallet and brought it to bear, shattering the lock with a single mighty blow.

"His career as a locksmith was short lived," Xedal whispered to Kettec, drawing a laugh out of him.

"Brute," said Innmea, although the way she breathed it made it clear it was a compliment.

Motek hauled the doors open, ending with a flourish. "Lads n' Ladies."

The Palace of the Arms lay open before Kettec. He crossed the threshold.

XXIV

Stepping through the entranceway was like stepping into another world. Besides a layer of freshly distributed dust, the place looked entirely untouched by the catastrophe. Kettec had been so used to seeing broken masonry, upturned cobblestones, grey rubble, and broken glass that the smooth expanse of marble and was like an oasis in the desert. Across the foyer was a large wooden door that led to the main antechamber, and, in turn, the dance, dining, and throne rooms. The door was flanked by a dual staircase, spiralling up to the higher levels, floors that once housed the bedrooms, private chambers, and bath areas. Somewhere up there was the window Kettec had been caught squeezing through—though that felt like a lifetime ago. Everything was gilded and ornate, and they eye was instantly enraptured, wandering up flowing columns and across murals and over glittering furniture pieces. Motek whistled and ran a hand along one of the perfectly fitted stone walls.

“Today’s masons could learn a thing or three from all this,” he said.

Kettec tore himself away from the soothing shapes of the sculptured banisters and focused on remembering the layout. Gesturing for them to follow, he led the party down a side hallway towards the kitchen. Long wooden counters, roof mounted racks, and three oversized brick ovens filled the space. Kettec could easily imagine what the bustle and noise must have been like when the palace was fully staffed. He could practically hear the roar of fire, chopping

of knives, and clinking of metal pans. Across the room was a stairwell leading down to the cellar, which had access to the first basement level. Before they descended, Kettec turned to speak to the trio, and though he was now somewhat comfortable with them conversationally, issuing commands was something altogether different. "The entrance is hidden, so we'll need to search around for it a bit. I'm also expecting some climbing gear to arrive so maybe one of us should stay up top. Just to let us know when it gets here."

Xedal nodded. "Sure. Innmea?" Innmea turned back from peering down into the cellar and shook her head. Xedal laughed. "Oh watch out now, she's interested. Well, I suppose I can rest my tootsies for a spell while you all do whatever it is that needs doing."

"Really takin' one for the team, huh?" said Motek.

"You betcha," Xedal threw a mock salute and headed back into the foyer. Innmea had already started down the stairs, leaving Motek and Kettec to hurry after her.

They descended level after level, and the walls around them began to be constructed in a cruder fashion, from of lumpy mortar and fieldstone. The palace's history as a siege fortress was far more evident in the ruder material. Down through the dungeon they entered the catacombs. At this depth, the doors had not been maintained and were rusted shut or rotted husks, requiring a few thumps of Motek's "key" to allow them passage. Finally, lighting wall ensconced torches with a candle as they passed, they reached the lowest level. The rough walls were slick with moisture where they weren't sticky with moss. Their footsteps echoed and twisted back at them, the only sound aside from their belaboured breathing. Rows of depressions in the walls that had once housed the dead were cleared

out, leaving only rust stains and Kettec with the unpleasant sensation that they were surrounded by cavities. Innmea seemed to be in her element, however, as she peered around with wide-eyed awe and ran a hand delicately along the ancient stone.

“So what now?” asked Motek, clearly uneasy.

Kettec tried to think back to his notes. “This isn’t all of the catacombs. The other rooms have been sealed off, and we just need to find the blockage.”

“Hmm,” Motek scrubbed a hand through his beard. “I betcha it’ll sound different.”

“What?”

Motek dug through his bag for another pair of hammers, smaller than his mallet but just as sturdy. He handed one to Kettec.

“Jus’ tap-tap the walls, and s’long as it’s not been sealed up too thick, it’ll sound hollowy.”

Motek turned to Innmea, extending his arm to hand her a hammer. She eyed the tool warily for a moment before scooping it up and heading down one of the narrow hallways, tapping the wall as she went.

With a torch in one hand and a small hammer in the other, Kettec walked along the twisting underground hallways of the catacombs. Every other step he would tap the wall with the hammer and hear the same low ping of metal on stone. Every once in a while he would cross paths with Motek or Innmea, confirming that they had found nothing with a quick shake of the head and then continuing on. For the most part, it was a solitary and meditative time, step, step, ping, step, step, ping. Since the quake struck, Kettec had been filled with adrenaline and purpose, forcing himself

to continue onward for his friends' sake, but now the cool calm of the tunnels was stripping away his momentum. Even as he was aware of the importance of his task, he started to drift away. He would catch himself rounding a bend with no memory of traversing the hallway that led to it. Kettec would shake his head and retrace his steps. When was the last time he'd slept? He had not rested at all since the quake and the night before was spent in anticipation of Mell's council meeting. Was it really only yesterday that Mell had faced off against Luvivor?

Heaving his legs forward and struggling to keep his eyelids open, Kettec felt as if he was wilting, melting into a puddle. This wasn't going to be okay, was it? It wasn't all going to work out in the end.

A shout reverberated its way towards Kettec. "Here!" It was Innmea.

Startled back into his capacities, Kettec chased after the echo, coming into a circular junction point that linked two of the passageways. There was some sort of circular pattern carved into the floor, waves or wind. It had been too smoothed over to tell for certain. Kettec also had the impression that he had passed through this area once before but he couldn't be sure. Innmea was standing by a wall, hammer at the ready. Making eye contact with Kettec, she tapped it, and he heard that same ping he was so familiar with. Before he could say anything she'd reached over to another section and pounded against it. The noise was lower and Kettec had the impression that it was carried off somewhere else. It was a subtle difference but definitely there. Motek arrived in time to hear the second hit. He was beaming through his beard. Without a ceremony, or even a single word to either of them, he charged past and

slammed his mallet into the wall, shattering a chunk of the brittle stone. With determination, and perhaps a little extra enthusiasm, the big man singlehandedly demolished the wall, using two hands to make strike after strike. Flakes of yellowed mortar exploded out and collected in his beard. He did not even stop to clear away fallen debris, shoving stones and dirt aside with his feet.

Eventually Motek created a large enough depression that the entire section of wall fell inward, a cacophonous rumble as rocks hit rock. Waving away dust, Motek scooped up his discarded torch and thrust it into the hole. A narrow passageway stretched off into the dark. There were burial niches carved into the walls, however—unlike the thoroughly excavated places they had just been searching—these loculi contained corpses. Skeletons wrapped in petrified cloth, clutching swords and wearing oversized-looking helmets. Kettec boggled at the clean teeth of a man long dead.

“Hooee!” hooted Motek, wiping his sweaty brow with a forested arm, “I can’t say this’s the first find I’ve made with m’hammer, but it’s certainly the biggest!”

“This is it! We’ve found the hidden passage! Kettec stammered excitedly.

Innmea climbed through the gap and peered down at one of the bodies, reaching out to caress a dusty rib. Xedal’s harried sounding voice interrupted any further exploration.

“Guys? Guys? Oh my, I don’t quite like it down here. Motek? Innmea?”

“Over here!” hollered Motek. They heard some prim footsteps approach, heralding Xedal’s arrival. She had her arms crossed in front of her and was trying very hard not to touch any of the ickier sections of stone.

“There you are. Someone is here for Kettec, they—”

Kettec did not wait to hear the rest. He slipped past Xedal and dashed towards the tightly spiralling staircase. Taking the steps three at a time, his only thought was to see Mell again. To grab hold of him and share the discovery.

Making a dramatic sliding entrance on the marble, Kettec arrived in the foyer.

“Mell?” he shouted.

The person standing at the entrance was not Mell. It was Mr. Jenlynta, one of Kettec’s apartment neighbours.

“Oh, you,” said Kettec, crestfallen.

Jenlynta kicked at the large bags stacked on the polished floor and let out a grunt. ““Oh, you’ he says? I’ve humped this shit across the city twice, and all Roszali’s boy can say to me is ‘Oh, you?’”

“I mean, thank you!” rallied Kettec, “This stuff is important. It’ll help rescue—”

“Listen,” interrupted Jenlynta, “I didn’t do this for you. This was a favour for Roszali. She’s gone too long without a man in her life and this just goes to show that I can help with that.” As he said this, Jenlynta slicked his comb-over back into place. Kettec shuddered.

“I’ll be sure to tell her just how helpful you have been.”

Jenlynta squinted at Kettec, trying to see if he’d been slighted or not. Kettec got the impression that Jenlynta spent a lot of his time squinting just so.

“You do that. There’s some kind of official delegation just behind me too. They got some big cart slowing them down.”

Kettec’s heart leapt at the news. Jenlynta snorted.

“Well I can tell when I’m not needed,” he turned to leave, “You’re so very welcome.”

EMBEDDED HEART

Biting his tongue, Kettec nodded a disingenuous “farewell” at Jenlynta. Glad to see the back of the skeezy man, Kettec heard that the others had come up to see what was happening.

“Any of you climb before?” he asked, untying the toggles of his bag. Innmea, now wearing a tarnished necklace that Kettec hoped had not come from around the neck of a corpse, gave a slight nod.

Kettec demonstrated the functions of his various climbing gadgets to Motek and Xedal. He forced himself not to rush, despite his burning desire to get to his trapped friends, since the last time he’d taken a shortcut, he’d paid for it with his ribs. They had some familiarity with the basics, as they had attempted to join Innmea on one or two of her recreational climbs over the years, but, predictably, Innmea had only overtly explained the most fundamental instructions. Kettec had checked and re-packed everything by the time he heard the hiss of steam and the rumble of cart wheels filtering in from outside.

Kettec dropped the spring piton he’d been holding and rushed out of the palaces large doors. A group of intent looking people huddled around a rugged steam cart that had some sort of gigantic spool on top of it, examining the machinery. And no Mell, again.

An extremely aged man let himself down off the cart and shuffled over to Kettec.

“Might you be a Mr. Florino then?” his voice was a raspy whisper.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Excellent. Pleased to meet you, circumstances notwithstanding. I’m Dr. Ensar. As you can perhaps see, we

have brought along with us, at the behest of Lord Wess, a new type of—”

Whatever the wisp of a man said next was drowned out by an enthusiastic bellow from Motek.

“I knew they were up to summin neat!” Motek marched towards the cart, nearly bowling Dr. Ensar over as he passed. “Whatsit called? Can I take a peek at ‘er innards?” Motek addressed the questions generally, and did not wait for an answer as he set about prodding at the machinery.

Xedal, who had come out after Motek, stomped her foot, “Motek! Do control yourself!”

“But this is *new* Xeddy! I want to know *everything!*” he called back.

Dr. Ensar nodded genially. “It’s a miniaturized LINE communications hub,” he said. “Some of the more inventive members of my staff have taken to calling it a REEL. It’s been in development a while—as a tightly held secret before Lord Wess...commandeered it.” Dr. Ensar smiled at the probable understatement, and returned to the machine to explain to Motek how it all worked; demonstrating how the surprisingly small switch unit was connected to a kilometre-long cable. The cable was made of some thick, slick, material and contained a flexible steam conduit. Kettec tried to keep from being too dismayed at what the presence of the technological wonder meant. Mell would not be coming with him.

Hurried along by Motek’s enthusiastic prompting, the crew of the REEL soon had its steam core running, the hiss and purr of the machine sounding clean and familiar. Dr. Ensar inched back over, carrying the LINE unit connected with the sturdy cable to the larger machine. It was even smaller than Kettec’s was.

EMBEDDED HEART

“He’s on the other side,” Dr. Ensar said, “This is considered a test, so you can take it under the palace and remain in contact. I don’t need to see what comes out though, so long as it works.” He was giving Kettec some space to talk with Mell.

“Thank you,” Kettec said. Dr. Ensar nodded and hobbled back over to the cart, ensuring that his crew was giving the machine appropriate attention. Kettec looked down at the unit to see that the last printed message hadn’t been torn off.

~Thank you Dr. Could you pass me over to him?

Mell.

~Hello, he typed.

~Kettec? The answer printed slower than usual, likely due to the portable nature of the REEL.

~Yeah. There was a long pause before a lengthy message trickled out.

~I’m stuck, Kettec. There is no way I want to let you go down there without me. Roszaliy was right though. The council is useless. Maybe if Vespian was there, but nobody’s heard from him yet. These soft Lords have no experience with a real crisis, and are all just looking out for themselves. Optics! People might die if I’m not there to help, Kettec, but how can I leave you to go down alone?

Kettec could feel the intensity of Mell’s deliberations. He typed his answer quickly.

~Mell! It’s okay. This is something I’m good at, and you are needed there to do what you can. And I won’t be alone either. The three that Panossia set me up with are great. You save Capath and I’ll be back with Fenna, Ediox, and the rest.

That was perhaps slightly more confident than Kettec felt, but he wanted to set Mell’s worry at ease.

JESS SEBASTIAN

~Thank you, Kettec. One more thing though?

~Yeah?

~Hurry back. I want to finish what we started on that rooftop.

Kettec could feel his face heat up, and could so very easily imagine the sly smile Mell would be wearing.

~Me too, he typed. Kettec tore the message string off, rolled it up, and placed it in his shirt pocket.

XXV

Surrounded by decrepit corpses in the crumbling catacombs, Kettec and his rescue team headed further downward. Innmea led the way, setting the pace as she scraped a fingernail along the wall. Xedal and Kettec followed close behind, with Motek bringing up the rear, LINE tube attached to his belt, anchoring him to the REEL back above ground. The big man would stop at sharp corners to hammer a miniature pulley into place, helping the cord to glide along after them. Though Kettec was wearing his head lamp, he kept it off to conserve cores, instead using a pitch-dipped torch to light the way. The uneven, flickering illumination made the enclosed space even stranger, casting long, strange, shadows ahead and behind them. Occasionally they would pass a particularly gruesome skeleton, and Xedal would let out a high-pitched squeal, sustaining it for as long as the polished bones were in eyesight. She sounded like a terrified kettle.

“How are ya this squeamish?” asked Motek after one particularly lengthy screeching period. “You’ve been a surgeon of nearly thirty years for goddess’ sake.”

Xedal let out a huff. “And it’s been my proud duty to make sure everyone’s bones stay on the inside. Where they belong.”

“Teeth,” said Innmea.

“Not actually bones!” said Xedal, “No marrow.”

Motek grunted, “Hmph. I dunno if I believe that. Sure look like they’re parts of skulls to me.”

“Facts don’t change whether you believe in them or not,” Xedal responded.

“What ‘bout you Kettec?” asked Motek.

“What?”

“Are teeth bones or...well I don’t even know what else they’d be!”

“Enamel protrusions,” said Xedal. “Because, that’s what they are.”

“Pff. Anyway, bones or not, Kettec?”

“I can’t say I’ve given it any thought,” said Kettec deciding it was best not to take sides, even on something as trivial as this.

“He just doesn’t want to hurt your feelings, dearie!” crowed Xedal.

“Ah, yer all bone-heads anyway,” muttered Motek.

“Technically, you too,” said Innmea.

“Oh hush!” Motek exclaimed, “You’re the one that started all this anyway!”

Another skeleton-filled nook slipped into their sphere of torchlight, drawing a yelp from Xedal, laughter from Motek, and temporarily halting the argument. After bustling past, Xedal again tried to explain to Motek why she wasn’t afraid of teeth, eventually getting drawn into trying to explain away tusks, horns, antlers, spines and shells, by Innmea’s one word interjections. The whole thing soon devolved into chaos, insults, and laughter. Kettec was amazed that that the others were able to joke, given the disaster and their current surroundings. Although, he was thankful for their infectious ease, since his separation from Mell and worry about his friends might have subsumed him otherwise.

The tunnel constantly turned to the right and sloped down, leading them in a descending corkscrew. The area was far, far removed from any of the more luxurious aspects of the

EMBEDDED HEART

palace, and was clearly designed with utility and defence as its foremost considerations. Kettec was eerily reminded of the bunkers he explored on the other side of the city, of the uniformly cramped dimensions and rough-hewn surfaces. Absollo's notes had ceased before he'd exited the caves, so they would need to discover for themselves whatever method he had used to connect the Palace. That is, if Absollo's path hadn't been affected by the earthquake. The fact that the burrow was largely intact, save for some freshly sloughed rubble, did give Kettec some hope that everything had remained structurally sound, and that no-one currently trapped in the cave had been crushed.

Innmea, who hadn't ceased dragging her nail on the stones—although she had switched from index to middle—stopped abruptly, forcing Kettec and the others to halt as well.

“Motek,” she said, the name carrying through the narrow space. Motek pushed past Kettec and Xedal, still trailing the tube awkwardly, waiting for whatever Innmea had to say next. She pointed at the wall. “Break that.”

Motek did not need to be told twice. His hammer appeared in his hand as if he'd had it up his sleeve and before anyone could ask why, he was pounding away at the wall. It buckled after the fifth strike, falling inward to reveal a large channel in the stone. A vertical shaft that dropped straight down, farther than the light of the torch could reach.

Motek let out a whoop. “Two in one day!”

“You were listening,” Kettec said to Innmea, “with your nail!”

She nodded.

“Oh my,” said Xedal, “But I guess if there was one secret passage, there might be more.”

Kettec leaned in to look down the shaft and saw a little bulb of rusted metal poking out of the remains of Motek's handiwork. He pulled it loose and brought it towards the torch. It was a piton, the same kind he had found on the other side of the caves. Absollo had been here.

Since they only had a pair of climbing harnesses—and Motek's suggestions of trying to share with one of the women were ignored—they would have to take two trips down. Kettec volunteered to go first, and it was decided that Motek would be going down with him. They readied ropes and Kettec hopped over the lip backwards. He coached Motek through the descent, when to belay and when to let out slack. They progressed slowly. It was nearly pitch black at the bottom of the shaft, though they could see the pinprick of torchlight still above them. Motek shook their empty harnesses and hollered that they'd made it down safe. The ropes were pulled upward, leaving them alone with the REEL tube and darkness.

Tired of bothering with the torch, Kettec started up his headlamp. The cone of light flared into existence and Kettec gasped.

Motek turned, "What is—" He was also brought up short.

In front of them lay a trove of historical artefacts. Ancient weapons and suits of armour glinted as his light swept over them, stacked against the natural walls of a large cave. A wooden box had petrified and split open, spilling parchment cases across the stone floor. Another huge chest drew Kettec towards it, and he approached careful not to step on anything. He could feel his heart hammering away in his head, his breaths short and hurried. The chest's rusty hinges threatened to disintegrate, but Kettec was able to

EMBEDDED HEART

coax it open with shaking hands. A green glow emanated from the enclosure, competing with Kettec's artificial light. In the box lay a crown, a sceptre, a signet, and a green-beaming stone. The lost artefacts of rule. The ghostrock.

This was Absollo's cache. After all this time, Kettec had found it. His vision blurred, overwhelmed to be in the presence of these objects. Their existence was a vindication. After all he'd been through, he'd been proven right, almost by happenstance. And it wasn't even his goal. His mind returned quickly to the rescue, and he put his obsessive recollections of history to use, tracing Absollo's last steps backwards. They had climbed out of the caves, leaving everything but the essentials, and broke into the catacombs of the Palace.

"Hey! Over here!"

Kettec was shaken from his trance. At some point Motek had lit a torch and had crossed the room. Kettec followed.

"I found an exit to the caves," said Motek, pointing to a deep crack, "Isn't that great!"

Kettec laughed, a rueful chuckle that burst out of him unbidden. Of course it was great, of course the standout discovery was not the lost treasure of a slandered Marshall but a way forward to save his friends. That was why he was down here.

"Are you okay?" asked Motek.

Kettec tried to get himself together. "Uh, yeah. I've just been looking for this stuff for a long time."

While they waited for Innmea and Xedal to come down after them, which took a while since Innmea was a less than vociferous instructor and Xedal turned out to be as fearful of heights as she was of skeletons, Kettec examined what he could. Peeking into one of the scrolls revealed Absollo's

familiar looping handwriting, and sent a shiver down Kettec's spine. This was no reproduction or translation but the actual marks of the man himself.

Xedal and Innmea finally joined them.

"What's all this?" asked Xedal.

"Ancient history," said Kettec. "Motek, found a way through, so we keep going."

"Wonderful."

Pausing just long enough to stow away the harnesses, they moved on, squeezing through a crack in the cave wall. Kettec could not bring any of the scrolls with him, since they might be damaged as he walked. He had to leave his discovery entirely behind and trust that they could retrieve it later. Still, he would not leave empty handed, as he slipped the ghostrock stone into his pocket before they left. Kettec rubbed the supernaturally smooth surface of the stone with one of his hands, feeling a trill of excitement. Guilt quickly chased the other emotions away and he refocused on the rescue.

They were making good time through the caves as Innmea was incredibly intuitive when it came to deciding which tunnel would allow them to progress and which would lead to a dead end. Kettec did not recognize any landmarks or see any of the markings he made when exploring with Mell, but he figured it was only a matter of time. At Xedal's insistence, they stopped for a short breather, eating some of their rations. After the first bite, Kettec realized that he hadn't eaten in what felt like forever and wolfed down the rest of his portion. Then, looking at the cable that Motek had been trailing behind him, Kettec made to ease another of his building needs.

"Motek," said Kettec, "can I send a quick LINE?"

EMBEDDED HEART

“Ah, right. Prolly a good idea to bang out an update, since we’ve made it to the caves and all.”

Motek dug out a LINE unit and hooked it into the terminal, fiddling with some switches on both for a while. The unit spun up as normal, but it sounded beleaguered to Kettec, like it was barely chugging along.

“Best I can do,” said Motek as he handed the unit over, “It’ll take a bit to send ‘n receive, so keep it short if ya can.”

“Thanks,” replied Kettec. He thumbed out a message.

~M — IN CAVES — ALL OK — ALSO FOUND CACHE
-K

The LINE shuddered and clanked, but the message seemed to send okay. There was nothing for a long while, and just as Kettec had decided it wasn’t functional, a reply came oozing out of the little machine, one character at a time.

~Found cache? You mean THE cache!? Congratulations Kettec! Although I guess you had to move on as well. Once you rescue everyone we’ll go back together, okay? Thanks for checking in though. Luvivor and Vespian are back so it’s crazy as usual up here.

Moments later another missive printed.

~Told JUST NOW to keep short. Safe Travels -M

Kettec laughed and clutched both messages to his chest. He was just about to type a “message received” response when he suddenly felt a little off balance.

“Do you feel that?” asked Kettec.

Motek shot to his feet and cupped a hand to his ear. “Aftershock!” he shouted.

The off-balance sensation turned into shaking. Kettec had the presence of mind to type *AFTERSHOCK* into the LINE and slam the send button. Moments later they heard

JESS SEBASTIAN

a rumble and then a deafening boom. Xedal screamed, her voice soon drowned out by the crashing of the earth. Kettec squeezed his eyes shut and held onto Mell's paper words.

An impenetrable wall of dust swept over them.

XXVI

After leaving instructions to have the REEL messages routed into the Comms Office, Mell ducked out of the temporary communication tent, and headed back across the bustling square to the Council building proper. He could tell Kettec was trying on some extra confidence for his sake, and another dart of frustration hit him. The REEL was the only thing he could do to help Kettec at this point, since the council blowhards had been hemming and hawing about even the most basic of emergency procedures. They were too concerned about their appearances to do any real work without being herded by him. It's like he was asking them to pluck out their eye instead of helping to fix their own beleaguered city!

Like a storm cloud, Mell swept up the steps of the Council building. It registered that Thenniel was not out front to greet him, but Mell did not give the guard's absence much thought. Pulling the door open, it was then he saw Thenniel, and she was leading Cinizia away from the deliberation chambers, calloused hand keeping the irate woman in front of her. Cinizia's murderous gaze made Mell's displeasure look like a cheerful grin.

"What's all this?" he asked, trying not to sound too indignant with Thenniel.

"Luvivor!" spat Cinizia.

Thenniel stood at attention. "Lord Luvivor demanded First Assistant Cinizia be removed from the council building for the reason of her being 'disruptive.'" As an apology

Thenniel added, "It was a direct order, Lord Wess."

"He's got them back working on a press release!" Cinizia shouted, "A message to Capath and the other nations that everything is oh-so-hunky-dory. Meanwhile people are still out there dying!"

Mell rubbed the bridge of his nose. Hadn't he already dealt with Luvonor? This politicking was all he needed now.

"Thenniel," began Mell, "If I were to ask you to release Cinizia, what would be required of you?"

The large woman bit her lip, "Well, it would mean contradictory orders from two Lords, so it'd have to go through arbitration. One second, sir." Thenniel, still pulling Cinizia along by the shoulder, marched across the foyer and stepped outside. After a moment they re-entered, although this time with Cinizia walking under her own power. They again stood in front of Mell.

"Lord Wess," said Thenniel, "First Assistant Cinizia has been removed from the building as ordered. However, since Lord Luvonor did not specify a period that she be barred for, I have informed her of her right to come back in."

Thenniel's deadpan announcement broke through Mell's sour mood, causing him to crack a smile. "Why thank you!"

Thenniel saluted, adding a wry flourish. "Just doing my duty, sir."

Cinizia was already click-clacking her way back towards the deliberation chambers, so Mell thanked Thenniel again and hurried after her. Cinizia tersely briefed Mell on where the Lords had got to before Luvonor's interruption, and handed him an annotated copy of the emergency procedures.

"Once we oust Luvonor for good," said Mell, flipping through the impressively detailed notes as they walked,

“Have you considered running for his seat?”

With one hand on the chamber door, Cinizia paused. “Yes, but,” Mell could see a sliver of her enigmatic smile from the side, “what would you do without me?”

“I honestly have no idea.”

She pushed the door open, catching Luvivor mid-sentence.

“—project strength with a display of our—” Luvivor saw Cinizia and was stopped short. “What are you doing back in here?” he squawked. Mell stepped out from behind Cinizia.

Luvivor recovered quickly. “Hmph. Hello Lord Wess.”

“Glad to see you unharmed, Lord Luvivor.”

“Likewise, of course.”

“So what section of the provisions are we on? Three? Four?” asked Mell facetiously.

“Actually, we decided, as a group, that it was important to reassure the rest of the nation that everything was under control. And to make sure Ubran doesn’t get any ideas about our capability to defend ourselves,” replied Luvivor.

“I see. You know what’s best.”

“That’s right!” Luvivor preened. “The political environs are more complicated than this old document accounts for. Our sovereignty has never been more unstable and it’s—”

Mell had taken all he could take of this silly little game. “Enough!” he roared, lurching forward and leaning on the table. Lord Germania startled and knocked over her drink.

“I thought we already went over this! It is monumentally pointless to try and convince anyone that we are okay. We don’t even know how many people have died! We don’t have enough medicine or food or rescuers. The earthquake was an unavoidable disaster, and we can do nothing for

those that we've lost. However, there is a second disaster, and it is one borne of failed logistics. And therein is our burden! Every second we waste acting like children lets another of our citizens die." Mell took a breath and tried to unclench his fists. "Instead of trying to show 'power', we should be asking for help. From everyone. Look out a window. We need it."

A heavy silence fell upon the room, every eye on Mell. The other Lords and assistants were used to disagreements and civil little spats but Mell had just talked down to them all.

"Well," began Luvivor, "that's merely one concern but—"

Another voice thundered out from the back of the room, drowning out Luvivor's reedy reply. "Quiet, Lord Luvivor."

Lord Vespian was standing in the open door of the conference room, drawn up to his full height and looking imperious despite having one arm in a sling.

"Vespian?" choked Luvivor, "How wonderful for you to have arrived at last. Lord Wess has been disrupting our—"

"Silence!" Vespian strode over to the table and took a seat. Although he was trying hard to hide it, Mell noticed a limp. "I heard it all," said Vespian, "and Lord Wess has the right of it."

"You're going to side with an outsider? Again? You were the one who said we needed to 'control' him in the first place!"

Mell thought back to his first, uncomfortable, meeting with the stern Lord. He had not made a very good first impression on Mell, but over time Mell had come to understand him, even to respect him. Vespian was often terse and unyielding, yet underneath all of the iron and anger was someone who only wanted what was best for his people.

EMBEDDED HEART

“Yes, that was indeed my decision. And it was based on our interactions with Lord Wess’ departed predecessor. However,” Vespian met Mell’s eye, “I was wrong. And I apologize.” Mell tried to keep the full extent of his surprise from reaching his face. “Lord Wess has proven time and time again that he has taken his new duties to heart. In fact, Luvino, I’d say he is better qualified for his position than you are. Especially if what my investigators are telling me of your back dealings are true.” Luvino squirmed in his seat. “So!” Vespian clapped his free hand on the table, “Let us listen to our esteemed colleague and do what needs to be done. Lord Wess? What’s next?”

Taking only a moment to savour Luvino’s red face and twisted expression, Mell jumped right to briefing Vespian on their situation and getting them back on track with the outlined emergency procedures. The other Lords shuffled their papers and changed notebooks, continuing along without further argument.

With time set aside to take stock of their shortages, it quickly became clear that Mell had not been being hyperbolic. Food, water, and medicine were all going to become scarce within a few days, but the resource they were in most critical need of was able people. After tallying up those too injured to work, and those unaccounted for, they had assembled just under half of the minimum their document expected. That deficiency would lead to overwork for those that had reported in, and then in turn to further injuries. They could use volunteer civilians to help out in some areas, but there was no replacement for training and organizing on more intensive recovery projects. They needed more soldiers.

Mell stood up. "Do we have access to intercontinental LINES yet?" Everyone in the room looked at him with a blank expression.

"It was on the list," mumbled Lord Gerain.

Mell was forced to bite his tongue. The fools were drafting proclamations to the world and their LINE communications weren't even repaired.

"Comms Office would be most up to date," said Cinizia.

"Okay," said Mell, "I'm going to go contact Ubran. I think I can get us some bodies."

Luvonor, ever the slow learner, opened his mouth to protest and was promptly silenced by a flinty look from Vespian.

"By your leave," said the aged Lord.

Mell left the stuffy meeting room with Cinizia, marching towards the Communications Office. Opening the well-insulated door resulted in a cacophonous sound, a discordant rattle that caused all conversation to be conducted at shouting volume. Rows and rows of huge LINE machines filled the room, some monitored by an operator on a stool. Cinizia pulled Mell from where he was standing in the doorway, allowing the flow of people delivering messages to and from the tent city just outside to resume. She led him to the far wall, pointing at another corner as she did.

"That's the person monitoring messages from Kettec," she shouted into his ear. Mell looked over and saw a technician with thick glasses watching a smallish unit closely. He recognized her as someone who had briefed him on the REEL earlier. Mell nodded his appreciation to Cinizia for pointing them out. They reached the back of the room where two units loomed, kept physically separate from the

others. One for each of the other nations Mell presumed. Cinizia accosted the nearest tech and asked them if the machines were working.

“Well, sort of,” said the young man, pushing aside a fringe of chestnut hair. “Those direct links are down, but we can hopscotch. If we send the message to another hub, they’ll get it the rest of the way. And send the responses back.”

“Set that up. Lord Wess needs to contact the Ubran Republic,” yelled Cinizia.

The young man saw Mell and boggled, realizing for the first time just who had accompanied Cinizia.

“Just a second!” He turned to his machine and fiddled with some switches, eventually hammering out a message.

“Thanks Cinizia.” Mell shouted, “I can probably take it from here. Can you go and keep an eye on the others? I expect it’ll be fine with Vespien there but I’ll feel better with you there.”

Cinizia nodded and weaved her way out of the room without need for further words.

“It’s ready, sir. I mean, Lord, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Mell sat on the uncomfortable metal stool and typed out a missive. After composing messages with his thumbs on his small LINE, he found that using a full sized keyboard slowed him down considerably.

~Priority One. Lord Mell Wess requires communication with any Head of Council in the Ubran Republic.

Intercontinental messages took a long time to send, exacerbated by the fact that all missives and responses had to be retyped by an intermediary at a functioning station. As Mell waited, he wondered what time it was in Ubran.

He hoped it was late. Eventually a reply clattered out of the LINE.

~This is Councilman Luus. What is your business today, esteemed Lord Wess?

Crooked Luus, thought Mell, perfect. He was just stupid enough to make this work.

~Luus, Capath has experienced a disastrous earthquake and requires more personnel to aid in recovery efforts.

Mell waited for the send and reply, watching the other corner as he did so. He wondered what Kettec was up to, how far the crew had made it. His hope to see Ediox and Fenna unharmed battled with his pragmatic understanding that it was unlikely. Another message.

~ Unfortunate news. However, unless you can wait a few months, I'm unsure how us shipping people over would help.

Affected cluelessness was all part of the game, but Mell had little patience right now.

~Of course. That's why I'd like you to transfer the chain of command of your boots-on-the-ground-operatives over to the Capathian government.

Luus' message came back comparatively quickly *~What ever are you talking about? I assure you that the only commissioned Ubran in Capath is yourself.*

~I've got two big lugs here who say otherwise. Denpa and Gerr. I got to know them well after they tried to off me. Perhaps you'd prefer it if they went public with the fact that you personally ordered my predecessors death? I'm sure the Ubran Council would conduct a thorough investigation of your affairs to save face.

It was far from a subtle approach but Mell decided that it was as good a time as any to turn in his "knowledge of torturers" card. A response was not forthcoming, and Mell

worried he'd been too blunt, even for Luus. Before he could get too concerned, he got his reply.

~I do not take kindly to such ridiculous accusations. That said, I have been informed that we indeed have a detachment of people nearby.

Mell chortled. Idiot.

~Wonderful. Send them to the main Council Building.

He got up from the stool and stretched. Who knows how many spies Luus would cop to having, but it would surely be more than zero and every pair of hands would help. Mell also looked forward to coming up with dangerous assignments for his would-be torturers.

Mell was just about to head back to the debate room to report his success when the woman monitoring Kettec's machine jerked suddenly. A message was printing. Mell hurried across the room, arriving just as the technician tore off the message, probably instructed by Cinizia to rush it straight to him.

"I'll take that," said Mell over the sound of the rattling.

The woman blanched and yelped turning quickly on her heel. "Lord Wess! You arrived so quickly!"

Mell smiled. "Secret passage." He held out his hand. The woman gave him the slip of paper and craned her neck around to find a trapdoor or something. Mell quickly scanned the bold words.

*~M — IN CAVES — ALL OK — ALSO FOUND CACHE
-K*

He breathed a sigh of relief to know that Kettec was okay. At least for now. Then the content of sunk in. The cache! He'd found it? Before he could fully process the emotion, Mell sat down at the machine and had rattled out a reply. He mashed the send button and the LINE made a

chunking noise he'd never heard before.

"Uh, sir?" yelled the technician, adjusting her glasses, "I think the steam modulation of the connection is diminished over distance."

"What?"

"It'd be best to keep the messages brief?"

Mell sighed. "Now you tell me," he said, inaudibly. He sent another, shorter, one and waited for a response, tapping his foot impatiently.

Eventually another message juddered from the machine. A single word. *AFTERSHOCK*. Mell gawped at the message for a moment, hands trembling around the paper slip. Dread crept over him, but he stayed in control of the emotion and typed a short reply.

~Kettec, Status? -M. The horrible clunk of the LINE unit told him everything he needed to know. Still, he waited for a reply, hands stiff and digging into his kneecaps.

Another message slid out of the machine. Mell exhaled, a great whooshing relief, and gulped down air. That had been a really unpleasant few moments. He snatched the communication up.

~Lord Wess, this is the REEL monitor at the Palace. Felt minor shake. Confirmed LINE is cut.

He stared blankly at the words, reading them and re-reading them, staggered by a blow he hadn't been expecting. Mell lurched to his feet and stormed out of the hub, elbowing past people who cut their protestations short when they saw the rank of the person bowling them over. He was going to the Palace, and he would go into the caves himself. He stopped to a standstill in the foyer, crumpled LINE message still in his hand. And do what? Confront a wall of rubble? Mell knew just how shorthanded they were. There was no

way he could requisition an excavation force without making a mess of the rest of the councils' already precarious rescue plans. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think of a solution. Any solution. All he was met with was wall after wall, insurmountable obstacles that kept him from being able to do anything. There were not enough people, and not enough time. Mell tasted sourness in the back of his throat. He turned and hurried to the nearest washroom, bolting the door behind him. The one thought he'd been trying to keep back, to hold down like the bile rising in his throat, burst forth: Kettec was crushed, buried under a cities worth of rubble. And there was nothing Mell could do about it.

The world felt at arm's length. Silent as if someone had thrown a meter-thick curtain of velvet over everything. He was left only with ringing ears and the sound of his belaboured breathing and the pounding of his heartbeat. Underneath all the grief and rage, Mell was surprised at his physical reaction. Kettec had become so integral to his well-being. He'd never felt like this before. And now it was over. Numb, Mell stared at himself in the mirror. What was he supposed to do now? What was the point of all this work if he couldn't share the results with anyone? Mell could not say how long he stood there, hunched over the sink and staring into his own blue eyes. Eventually he unlocked the bathroom door and walked out into the hall. Mell did not head back to the conference room, or to the Palace, or the communications area. He wandered the halls, experiencing reality at a second's delay.

The side hallways of the Council chamber were filled with boxes of supplies and people hurrying to and fro. Mell floated up to the second floor and doddered along the hallway. Doors that lead into the large domed main chamber

studded the walls, interspersed with benches. It was largely deserted and Mell watched the ground as he walked, eyes tracing the newly created fissures of the marble floors.

He reached a row of paintings and felt his memory jogged. He'd been here yesterday. A thousand years ago. He'd been coming out of the showdown with Luvonor, looking for Kettec, and finding him in front of a painting. Mell looked up. It was a painting of the Palace after Absollo's insurrection. The ground split open and smoking, the large building surrounded by the reds of fire and sunset. The image of destruction felt familiar to Mell. He'd just been there. It looked just like this. It was not an ancient depiction of a historical event, it was now. It was as if he was standing in front of the building again. As if he was standing right in front of where Kettec was buried.

Another recent memory fired. Kettec's voice, filled with concern.

"Mell. Mell, I think you are in shock."

Mell nodded. "Sure."

"I need your help, okay? Just to lift this rock"

The recollection struck Mell in the heart, shattered the shell that had been growing over it. Tears that hadn't yet come, now burst from eyes. It was not yet time to give up. If Mell couldn't reach Kettec without first fixing the city, then he would just have to *fix the city*. He would fix the whole damn world if he had to. If it would get him back to Kettec.

XXVII

There was darkness and quiet. Dust slid out from some unseen crack and pooled against the ground, gently hissing like the sands of an hourglass. Eyes uselessly wide against the perfectly inky veil, Kettec pushed himself upright. Dirt fell off of him as he moved, and he found more had filled his mouth when he went to call out. He spat out the grit, now mud as it mixed with his saliva.

“Guys?” he called out into the dark, “Motek? Xedal?”

“Yeh, I’m here,” came a gruff voice off to Kettec’s left.

And in another moment Xedal also called back, from farther on in the cave. “Present,”

“Innmea?” the three of them said, almost exactly at the same time.

They got only a groan in return.

“Oh goddess,” said Xedal, “Innie? Where are you? Where is a light?”

Reaching up to turn his headlamp on, Kettec found that it had been shattered when he’d been bowled over. He spared only a moment to feel the spike of pain at the gift’s loss. Kettec pulled his bag off and rifled blindly for some matches. Some shuffling nearby told him that Motek was doing the same. The aftershock had shaken the bags contents up and, without sight, Kettec could not locate the flat box. Judging from the steady stream of invectives, Motek was having no more success.

“Innmea? Innmea?” shouted Xedal, sounding more harried with each repetition, “Where is my kit!? Innmea?”

Just before Kettec upended his entire bag into the dirt, he remembered his pilfered artefact. Reaching deep into his pocket, he removed the ghostrock. Green light flooded the cave, dazzling in comparison to the previous minutes of darkness. The caves looked mostly as they had before, save for some toppled stalactites and added dust. Motek looked up in surprise, but did not comment on the light.

“I’ve got the bag,” Motek shouted, scooping up Xedal’s kit as he ran towards the other side of the cave. Kettec followed, keeping the ghostrock above his head. Xedal was crouched over Innmea, her face tear-streaked but resolute. Motek handed her bag over and stepped back as she sprung into action. By the time Innmea stirred, she was already mostly bandaged up.

“What happened?” mumbled Innmea, as she tried to sit up.

Xedal pushed her back down, cupping a hand behind her head as she did. “You’ve hit your nog,” she said, “Or something else did. Just lay back for a moment.”

Innmea clicked her tongue.

“Don’t sass me when I’m trying to help you!” scolded Xedal, though smiling as she did so. Motek too looked relieved. With the pressing concerns of light and safety sorted, Kettec turned his thoughts toward taking stock and their next steps. They were still alive—always a nice surprise—and the dust had come from behind them, which meant that the collapsing should not impede further progress. Although could they still communicate to the above ground? He found the fallen LINE unit he’d been using moments before the miniature quake, and brushed dust from its casing. It did not look damaged, but it was no longer whirring. Reaching past the REEL terminal, he

EMBEDDED HEART

pulled on the cable that snaked back along the cave. It did not move. After a few more yanks Kettec decided to confirm his suspicion. Motek and Xedal were still fussing over Innmea, so Kettec used the ghostrock to find his matches—right at the bottom of his bag of course—and then set the green stone down. With the comparatively wan flame to light his way, Kettec followed the cord. He could not be sure whether Mell received his last message or not, but hoped it had gotten through. “*AFTERSHOCK*” and then nothing more was bad, though a sudden, unexplained, silence might have been worse.

Kettec arrived near the underground cliff that they had rappelled down from, but instead of seeing a tall rock wall, he was met with a shallow incline of rubble. The way they back was completely filled in. He wondered if Motek’s hammering had anything to do with the sudden instability, since this hadn’t happened after the first quake. The REEL cable disappeared into the base of the freshly disturbed stone and Kettec yanked at it. On the third try it came loose, leaving him holding on to its frayed, severed, end. Steam hissed out of the ragged aperture and an incredibly complicated series of hair-width chains dangled along with it. Holding his match closer, Kettec peered at the complicated machinery. If it was like this all the way along, then this must have been an incredibly—mind bogglingly—expensive gadget. Gathering the cord as he walked, Kettec returned to the cave. Innmea was sitting propped against the cave wall, and Motek was speaking with Xedal in hushed tones. He looked angry. As Kettec arrived with a bundle of cable looped in his arms, Motek understood the implication immediately.

“So we’re stuck, huh?” he rumbled.

Kettec shook his head. “It’s caved in at the cliff but the

way through should still be clear. So we're good to go on. How's Innmea?"

Motek brushed the question away, "Oh we can 'go on'? But you said yerself that there're only two ways under here, an one was blocked afore we came!" Motek was shouting now, drawing closer to Kettec. "So how're we supposed to rescue anyone now? We don't have the REEL? We don't have an exit! Innmea's hurt! We're trapped!"

Kettec stood his ground against the much larger man. He was underground still, and he had friends who needed him. He thought of Mell and of courage.

"Well," said Kettec, "We still have our mission. We still have food, water, and—most importantly—medical gear to deliver to those trapped. Nothing has changed, and we can figure out the rest once we've grouped up."

"Somethin' has changed. You aren't in charge no more," Motek poked Kettec in the chest. "I'm not listenin' to a whelp stutter his way to killing us all. My new plan is—"

"Motek!" Innmea shouted, cutting him off instantly with her commanding tone. "Meeting." Xedal, who had stayed silent during Motek's outburst—probably because she had agreed—pursed her lips. Motek, red faced in the green light, sputtered and turned away, gearing up to say more to Kettec. Innmea would have none of it. "Meeting. Now," she said, stressing every syllable. Motek sighed and stomped over. The three of them pressed their foreheads together and began muttering in hushed tones. Kettec looked on, surprised both at his ability to stand up to Motek, and at Innmea's capacity to control him. He had gotten the impression that Xedal and Motek were the ones who had to take care of her, but clearly things were more complicated between the three of them. Kettec took a breath, and

EMBEDDED HEART

tried to hold onto his focus. The small meeting concluded, and Innmea got to her feet, wobbling only for a moment. The bandages around her head displayed a large red spot, though Kettec knew scalp wounds usually bled more than their severity warranted. She waved over Kettec and he approached the three, trying to feel in command instead of outnumbered.

“Yes?” asked Kettec.

Motek opened his mouth, and then closed it, staring down at Kettec, eyes wide. After another moment, Innmea elbowed him in the ribs.

“Oof. Okay, okay.” Motek sighed, “I’m sorry Kettec. Ya can’t change the sitch, and it wasn’t your fault neither. But yer in charge, and we should head on like you said.”

“Uh, yeah. No problem,” said Kettec.

They packed up in silence, brushing dust off of their gear. Kettec gathered up the discarded REEL and wound the cord in great loops diagonally across his torso. It was added weight and was surely broken beyond use, but he couldn’t bring himself to leave the once-lifeline behind. With all of their gear and supplies miraculously accounted for, they headed deeper into the caves. At first Xedal tried to support Innmea as she walked, but Innmea slipped out of her grasp and forged ahead, leading the way as usual. Kettec followed behind Innmea, next in line only because he was the one who needed to hoist the ghostrock up for light. If he had his way he would be slinking in the back. By all accounts the argument had been brief, and had been solved nearly immediately, but it still made Kettec feel uncomfortable. He thought back to all of the times he would have ran away from a similar argument or started apologizing profusely.

Pushing his introspection away, Kettec focused on their route. Innmea's honed sense of direction had them heading the right way, but something was off. Kettec ran a hand along a wall, looking in particular at any exposed patches of striated rock. He recognized the patterns and colours and realized they were too high. This was some separate cave structure, probably above where they needed to be. At the next chasm, instead of skirting around it like they normally would, Kettec halted the party and asked them to wait while he climbed down to take a look. After pounding in a piton, Kettec attached a rope, and slid down into the darkness, Innmea holding the ghostrock over his descent. Walls of dense rock nipped at his sides and then drew back. Kettec had emerged through the roof into another huge cave. With a free hand he fumbled into his pocket and drew out a match. Lit by flickering light, he saw the familiar white bands and column sized pillars of the cavernous space.

He'd been here before. He knew the way, and he breathed in relief.

The others were lowered into the cave with expedience, and Kettec felt anxious to get going again. However, he got the impression that Innmea was more injured than she was letting on, so for her sake he allowed them to stop and catch their breath. Hoisting the ghostrock up, Kettec looked at their surroundings. This area was spectacular under normal lighting, but the green glow made it unearthly. Pools of sitting water looked like glittering portals, the piles of naturally carved rock and spiralling pillars looked more like foreign structures than cave features. The crevice they'd descended from looked like an insignificant crack from down here, and it was easy to see how he and Mell

EMBEDDED HEART

had bypassed it. How long would they have wandered this network before finding out they were on the wrong track or given up? Kettec thought it unlikely, since at some point their exploration had become less about the destination and more about spending time with one another.

Innmea signalled she was ready to go by getting up and heading off, and Kettec hurried after her. She might have an uncanny knack for finding the right vein, but Kettec had this place memorized. The four continued on, heavy silence hanging between them. At the far end of the cavern, they passed the three gravesites of Absollo's fallen men. Kettec did not stop to explain the three oblong lumps, and the others did not ask. He turned his gaze down to the glowing stone in his hand, forced to squint at its brilliance. The ghostrock, after hundreds of years, was retracing its subterranean path.

They ascended what Absollo had once called the throat, using the ropes Kettec and Mell had already set up, and proceeded into the irregularly carved tunnels of the bunker. As he led the others through the twists and turns of that ancient place, Kettec struggled to keep his emotions in check. It was such a strange feeling to be heading down this well-worn path with a completely alien goal. He was not returning from an evening of exploration and he was not returning triumphant after finding the lost artefacts. He was leading a rescue party and he did not know what he would find at his destination.

Motek was clearly fascinated by the construction of this area—running a hand along the walls or craning his neck to peer up at arch-stones—but, again, he did not say anything. Kettec could have spoken up to tell him some trivia but decided to stay quiet. Their easy conversation and

conviviality had been replaced by an invisible wall. Tracing through turn after turn, Kettec passed through the partially collapsed hallway he'd cleared weeks ago, back when he had just lost his job. Back when this was the only thing he had. And just like that, they were at the well, the last juncture into the entrance cave. Kettec peered down over the stone rim, at the dark descent. It was not solid black. Right at the bottom, a faint light was leaking in. It was the surest sign he had that everyone was still okay. That they hadn't all been flattened.

"We're here," he said, receiving three nods in return. They were ready to work. Kettec threw himself over the lip of the well and slid down the worn rope. He exited the narrow connecting crevasse and entered the cave. It was unrecognizable. People dressed in elaborate getups lay strewn about, giving no care for their expensive looking clothes. A woman in a once-white dress huddled in a corner, sleeping fitfully. Others lay on the ground, whispering to one another. The bar had been overturned and was surrounded by shards of shattered glass. Trash and more sleeping people littered the stage Ediox had constructed. Multi-coloured lights had been strung along the roof and still shone, casting vibrant colours onto the grim scene. Kettec's arrival out of the crack was either missed or ignored, and he stepped carefully farther into the cave. The water-smoothed floor undulated as it always had, but instead of looking graceful, it just made everything look even more off-kilter. Kettec caught sight of a fair-blond cascade of hair near the entrance cave and was unable to keep from calling out.

"Fenna!"

She turned and saw Kettec, tears springing instantly to her eyes. She ran over, barefoot under her flowing black

EMBEDDED HEART

dress. Fenna threw her arms around Kettec's neck, squeezing him tight.

"Oh, I knew you'd come," she whispered. Kettec held her back, feeling relief flood his every vein. Fenna smiled up at him, but it was gone in a moment.

"Ediox," she said, "She's hurt."

The words made Kettec's stomach drop.

"How bad?"

"She was at the entrance. The closest to it." Fenna wiped her face on a sleeve, not caring about the carefully tailored fabric, and led Kettec back towards the entrance. The bricks of the drainage tunnel had given way, toppling inward along with chunks of loosened rock. Laying near the rubble was a figure, covered from the waist down in an impromptu blanket of cast-off blazers. It was Ediox, so pale and sallow as to almost be unrecognizable. Kettec felt an unpleasantly visceral twisting in his guts. It was unnatural to see her as anything other than vibrant and active. Fenna crouched down and laid a hand gently on her forehead.

"Kettec is here," she said.

After a few moments, Ediox cracked open her sunken eyes and smiled weakly. "Hey Kay," she whispered, "Nice of you to make it."

"Yeah Ediox..." he trailed off.

"Not," her voice was quiet, a strange leaking of air coming from the normally bellowing woman, "not one of my better parties, huh," Ediox let out a rattling cough and winced in pain.

Fenna made a choking noise in her throat and clasped Ediox's hands in her own.

"I brought a medic," said Kettec, standing, "I'll go get her."

JESS SEBASTIAN

Before he left, Fenna spoke up again. “When are we leaving?”

Kettec failed to keep a grimace off his face. “We, uh,” Kettec looked down at the polished ground, “The way we came in collapsed behind us.”

Fenna’s eyes widened in concern and surprise and Ediox let out a single weak cackle.

“Some rescue.”

XXVIII

Kettec crossed the cave, weaving around toppled decorations and somnambulant partygoers. He moved quickly, seeing Ediox's sallow visage staring back at him after every blink. Near the entrance crack, the recruited trio had descended the well on their own and were already hard at work. Kettec felt a little sheepish at not staying back to help. Motek was distributing sealed baggies of dried rations and offering sips from a large container of water. The partygoers were lethargic, accepting the food and drink with dazed, thousand yard stares. Were they in shock or maybe just hung-over? On a rare expanse of roughly even ground, Xedal had laid out a tarp and was seeing to those who were injured. Innmea was close by, handing Xedal things from splayed out medical bags with one hand, and pressing the other to her own, injured, head. As hard as it was, Kettec waited for Xedal to finish with her latest patient before stepping forward.

"My friend Ediox is seriously hurt," he said, "And I don't think she can be moved."

"Understood," said Xedal with no trace of her usual joviality. She grabbed together her things—clean bandages, gloves, medicines—and placed them carefully into one of the bags. "Innmea, watch over things here, okay?"

Innmea started a nod, winced, then approximated her assent with wave of a hand.

"Where is she?" asked Xedal.

"By the entrance, on the other side of the cave," he led

the way.

“How long ago was she injured?” asked Xedal, still using her professional demeanour.

“Right when the quake happened,” said Kettec, “When else?”

Xedal’s lips thinned. “It looks like most of these people sustained injury not from the earthquake, but from the ensuing riot.”

“Riot?” said Kettec, overloud. The word echoed off the walls, drawing attention to him. Kettec felt his cheeks burn. Xedal did not have to say any more merely pointing the overturned and emptied bar as they passed. It was easy for Kettec to picture what had happened. People would have been scared, trapped, and more than a little drunk. There would have been a rush to grab up whatever drinks and food remained, a mad panic as the reality of the situation set in. He shuddered, imagining the sounds of screaming in the enclosed place. He also thought it a little profane for such violence to happen in these caves. They arrived where Ediox lay with Fenna crouched beside her. Xedal set right to work, moving in without bothering to introduce herself. Fenna reluctantly stepped back and hovered next to Kettec.

“This is Xedal. Xedal, Fenna,” said Kettec, somewhat pointlessly.

“Mmm,” mumbled Xedal. She had drawn back the blazers that had been covering Ediox, revealing a purpled torso and a crushed leg, red and taut with infection. Kettec gasped and looked away, though Fenna next to him did not budge or make a sound. Xedal’s hands darted back and forth from her bag, administering a topical salve, setting a splint, bandaging cuts. Kettec, who was no stranger to wounds having accumulated many of his own during his explorations, felt

nonetheless queasy, and sat down on the smoothed floor. Moments later he felt all of his postponed fatigue slam into him. He was sore from being banged around, thirsty, hungry, tired from climbing and from lack of sleep. And he was scared. Having done all she could with her limited toolset, Xedal gave some instructions for care to Fenna, and moved on, hefting her bag with her. Ediox, who had been silent—or unconscious—for all of Xedal’s prodding, finally let out a groan, and Fenna cradled her head. She whispered into Ediox’s ear, a song or something lyrical, that Kettec couldn’t quite hear. His eyelids felt as heavy as stone, sliding inevitably closed.

“What now?” asked Fenna.

Kettec, with great effort, re-opened his eyes to look at her. Fenna was staring at him intently, brow creased. Kettec wanted to comfort her. To say everything would be alright but he just didn’t have the energy.

“Yeah, Kettec, what’re we ta get to next?” said a gruff voice. Kettec turned to see Motek had finished traversing the room with his rations. The bearded man tossed three packets at their feet. “I’ve only got enough for one more round. So whatever yer gonna cook up, best be done before folks get hungry again,” Motek did not wait for a response, turning and heading back towards Innmea.

Kettec watched him leave. “I don’t know what we’re going to do Fenna. Mell knows we’re here at least.” Kettec stared at his dirt covered shoes, “I’m sorry.”

Fenna looked up at the multicolour-lit ceiling for a second, and then blew out a long breath. She scooped up the packets and offered one to Kettec.

“Well, Xedal says Ediox is stable now. And you brought dinner. So it’s already not nothing.”

Kettec stared at Fenna's outstretched arm. She was supporting him even now, after all she had been through.

He took the baggie with leaden fingers and Fenna laid the remaining one next to Ediox's head.

"She'll eat, when she wakes up," said Fenna.

Kettec nodded. He looked down at the parchment bag in his hands. It had the crest of Capath stamped on it, along with the words "Emergency Ration" in block letters. Kettec fumbled the baggie open and tipped it over his hand. Strips of dried meat and fruit tumbled out, and Kettec wasted no time in stuffing them into his mouth. Despite being desiccated and heavily salted, they were the most delicious things he had ever eaten. Then Kettec, unable to fight it for even another second, fell asleep.

Startled back into consciousness, Kettec bolted upright, chest heaving as if he had just worked out. He wiped sweat from his eyes and looked around with crazed intensity. He was still in the cave. There was no way to tell time in here but consensus held it to be night. Most people were asleep, breathing deeply of their limited air. Next to him, Fenna snored softly, still holding onto the hand of a similarly unconscious Ediox. Kettec had been dreaming, floating through vignettes. He followed Absollo as they climbed up into the catacombs, returning to the palace at last, although without any accolades. He was with Mell, holding him close as the world crumbled around them and the very sky had shattered, blue shards crashing into the heaving ground like bits of glass. And then Mell had been torn away, leaving him alone.

Nothing real, said Kettec to himself, shaking off the dreams. More sleep was definitely out of the question. Kettec

EMBEDDED HEART

tried to think of some solution to their predicament or even some way to help Ediox or increase their survival. Perhaps influenced by his nightmares, he could summon nothing but apocalyptic predictions of failure. He turned his attention outward, to the cave, but found that was no better. It was deeply unsettling to see the place so transformed. Hard to reconcile its current appearance with the memory of his first arrival, or Mell's expression of wonder, or even his fight with Ediox. In the end, she had transformed the place, somehow fit everything through the narrow entrance tube. The cheerful decorations were now a mockery of their situation. Kettec started to feel oppressed by the cave with the reverberating noises of all the people, the smell of portable lavatories filled at capacity, of stale air and sweat and blood.

Kettec pushed himself to his feet, moving quietly so as to not disturb anyone still in sleep's embrace. He had to leave. He tiptoed the length of the cave, heading for the crack that led to the bottom of the well. His self-rationalization was that he was going to see if the earthquake had opened up any new routes in the bunker. That it was a reconnaissance instead of a desperate escape from the cloying confines of the cave. Yesterday he would have given anything to materialize there, to help Fenna and Ediox, and today it was all he could do not to run away screaming. Pulling himself up the familiar stones of the well, Kettec felt almost immediately better. Alone in the bunker, lighting the way with his ghostrock, Kettec climbed and re-explored. He traversed the rough-hewn hallways and identified the excavated rooms by memory, linking them with passages from Absollo's text. It was deeply calming, as meditative as a priestess performing the thousand forms of the Goddess—and perhaps not any less holy, judging from where he ended

up: a small chamber surrounded him, the walls, roof, and floor, all stone as usual. But one wall had a large cylindrical lump in it, like a breadstick laid under a blanket. Kettec had been here before and dismissed the oddity as a necessity of construction, but now, forcibly curious about anything that wasn't his impending demise, Kettec approached. He ran his hand over the lump, bringing the ghostrock closer.

Previously viewed under the sodium glare of his headlamp, the protruding cylinder looked no different than the surrounding stone, grey and unremarkable. Now however, if he held the ghostrock at a certain angle, the lump glittered like it was only semi-opaque and had flecks of gold leaf embedded just below its surface. Kettec ran a hand across the area, and could feel no difference in texture and find no seam. He leaned closer, almost pressing his cheek against it. Faint enough to be inaudible if he moved so much as an inch away, Kettec could hear the rush of water. Water that was somehow heading upward. He remembered, for an instant, the flash of a fountain, the burble of water erupting from the hands of the statute. He was on the edge of a realization, on the tip of epiphany. Kettec tried to match his underground movements with the above-ground geography.

Picturing the city in his mind, Kettec realized that he was directly under Sheppeth Court, and behind this, whatever it was, was a pipe drawing water from a subterranean aquifer, carrying it up to pour out from the hands of the Goddess statue. It was a direct link between here and the surface. It was a lifeline. Kettec hurried back. He had an idea.

Arriving in the entrance cave, Kettec cast about in the

half-light of the party decorations for Motek. He found the burly man sleeping in a pile with Innmea and Xedal, the three intertwined on their overcoats. Kettec gently shook Motek awake. Motek grimaced, but he opened his eyes quietly and cast a questioning gaze at Kettec.

“I need you to break something,” whispered Kettec.

Motek smiled in the dark. “Certainly know how ta get on my good side,” he whispered back. Then, with a deftness that revealed fluency in such a chaotic sleeping arrangement, Motek extricated himself from the two women. They groaned and held one another closer but did not wake. Kettec left Motek to put his boots on, and went to grab his bag, also gathering up the coiled length of severed REEL cable. Wordlessly rejoining Motek, finding him at the ready, they headed up the well and into the bunker.

Though the need to be quiet had passed, neither spoke on the trip over. Kettec wanted to talk about his plan, but there was still some tension between them, which was something Kettec wasn’t sure how to treat. Eventually they made it back to the offshoot room under Sheppeth Court and Kettec motioned for Motek to join him next to the wall. He brought the ghostrock into position, lighting up the column.

“Shit!” exclaimed Motek, “What is that?”

“I think it’s some sort of building material. A housing for a pipe. An ancient water supply for a statue topside.”

“Huh,” Motek looked at the wall, then back to the coil of cable Kettec was carrying, putting the evidence together. “Wait, we’ve a way to talk to the surface with that!”

Kettec nodded.

“Yes!” Motek pumped his fist. His brow knitted after only a moment. “But, how will Lord Wess or whoever know

ta go to the statue though? To bust it open?”

Kettec looked upward, as if he could peer through the solid stone that separated them from the surface. He thought of their first trip underground, and all the subsequent ones, all commenced in front of that old, water-worn likeness of the Goddess. It was more than a landmark for their meeting, it was a signal that the two of them would then continue on together. He couldn't be sure of course, but he felt like Mell would know to meet him there again. “Mell and I have a history with it,” said Kettec.

Motek searched Kettec's face intently and nodded, “Let's open 'er up then.”

That turned out not to be such a simple task. Motek had, of course, started with his hammer, whaling away at the mysterious surface without effect. He then tried using a portable pickaxe bringing it overhand onto the wall without making a mark. Eventually the tool snapped and Motek cast it aside, cursing the wooden haft. He then stared at the bulge for a long while, hand on chin and deep in thought.

“Could this be,” he muttered, and then, “but...no.”

“What is it?” asked Kettec, unable to contain his curiosity.

“A fairy tale,” replied Motek. Then he took out a shovel—Kettec marvelled at Motek's ability to produce an endless supply of digging implements from his bag—and pressed it against the wall. He leaned on the handle, gently applying consistent pressure, and after a moment the spade sunk in, as if it were not solid stone but clay. Then, moving with deliberate effort, Motek pulled the handle sideways. Slowly, slowly, the wall bulged out, and then the spade re-appeared, separating a fist sized scoop of stone as it did. The chunk

clattered to the ground.

“Uh, what?” said Kettec, not believing his eyes.

Motek’s grin would have extended up to his ears if it had been able to. “Flowstone,” he said. “Impervious ta strikes, but soft as butter if it’s treated right.” Motek pointed to the glowing pebble in Kettec’s hand, “That’s not the only type of magic-like rock we’ve lost to history.”

Picking up the cast-off chunk, Kettec turned it over in his hand, marvelling at its sparkle in the light and how much it felt like regular stone.

“I guess this explains why the statue kept working, even after the quake ruined most everything else.”

Motek grunted in assent and continued scooping out rock. When he’d created a crater the depth of his forearm, Motek levered out one last shovel-full. Water burst forth as he did, gushing into the room as a solid, clear shaft of liquid. Motek let out a whoop, and Kettec, lost in the moment, joined in. They drank the dazzlingly fresh water, and stuck their heads under the stream, shaking out caked on dust and grime. When they had their fill, Kettec picked up the end of the cable, and together, inch after inch, they forced it up the pipe, water spraying onto their arms and chests as they did. Finally, they were able to push it up no more.

“Let’s go get the LINE, and I’ll set it up to receive,” said Motek, after standing back and admiring their handwork. Water still poured out of the hole, splattering onto the ground and leaking into cracks.

“Yeah,” replied Kettec. Before they left, he thought of Ediox and the others. “Did you bring any of those bottles? They might want some water.”

“That’s a bright twig,” said Motek, digging a pair of empty canteens out of his bag.

After filling the containers, and still cheered by the discovery of the pipe, they headed back to the cave.

“Lissen,” said Motek breaking the silence that had carried them from the pipe room to the tunnel, “About me bustin’ your hump earlier...I was just worried, ya know? It’s my and Innmea’s and Xedal’s duty and all, but I think I was rattled by the quake. And the idea of kickin’ it after all that... There’s none to blame so I sorta picked you.”

“It’s okay,” said Kettec, “I understand the feeling.”

“Still. I gotta do what a man’s gotta.” Motek walked up beside Kettec and looked him in the eye. Kettec tried not to instinctually glance away. “Sorry,” said Motek, “Really.”

They had arrived at the well, and Kettec stopped when he heard what sounded like shouting coming out of it. Kettec and Motek looked at one another, surprise and worry clear on their faces. Kettec ran at the well, climbing down in a moment. He hit the ground as Motek was still struggling over the lip, and pushed his way through the crack. The sound was even louder in the cave, shouting turned back on itself. A crowd had gathered around Xedal and Innmea, angry and gesticulating wildly. They were bombarding the women with questions and demands. Some asked what they were supposed to do now, how these four rescuers had gotten in, and when they were going to get the rest of them out. Other people were demanding more food and water.

“I know you’re holding out!” screamed one raggedy youth, “I’m dyin’ of thirst over here!”

Xedal tried to answer, but all her words were drowned out by the shouting, and Innmea, looking worse for wear, simply clung to the other woman. It was a boiling mass of people, trapped and afraid. Motek was on his way down and if he saw his wives in such a predicament, Kettec was

EMBEDDED HEART

sure he would fight his way through. This situation could easily spiral out of control into another riot with more injuries. He needed to put a stop to this. He needed to do something and fast.

XXIX

There was no way he could be louder than the clamour, nothing he could shout to get their attention. Kettec stood at the back of the crowd, looking over the mass of complaining people. He did not like being trapped in here with the unstable organism that was a mob of rightly scared people. There had to be some way to stop them, but it was hard to think over the noise, and harder still since every second he stood there was accompanied by the buzzing worry that it was a second closer to something he couldn't turn back. If Mell were here, he would have just waded to the front of the pack and silenced them all with an upraised hand and a glare. Kettec's attempt to do the same would just end in disaster, so he needed to find some other way. Looking around, he caught sight of a large enough disruption. He rushed over to the cave wall, hoping Motek was still held up in his decent. Kettec arrived at the bank of nearly-depleted steam cores that was keeping the lights going, the rows of batteries looking like eggs in a carton. The steam generated from the cores was pushed through a number of smaller tubes, splitting off to go where necessary, and Kettec identified the largest, most crucial steam conduit. He yanked the thick hose out, scalding his hand as steam billowed uselessly out.

The lights dimmed, and then cut out altogether, blanketing the cave in the absolute darkness of the underground. Silence accompanied this darkness, catching the crowd by surprise. Kettec knew he only had a moment before panic

would replace the stunned quiet, so he only paused for a single hurried breath before yanking the ghostrock out of his pocket and holding it above his head.

“Listen!” he boomed, in his closest approximation of Mell’s “not screwing around” voice. Everyone had turned, whipping around to see the source of the ethereal green glow and identify who had shouted. Kettec continued on before anyone could re-raise their protest.

“I understand that you are scared,” Kettec said, “But there is no need for it. We’ve made contact with the surface. They are coming to rescue us. Lord Wess is on his way, personally.”

A murmur of relief swept through the amassed people. “Furthermore,” continued Kettec, “They are supplying us with water, so the liquid ration will be lifted. Please stay calm and wait for further direction.” As he finished Kettec rammed the hose back into place, and the lights spun back up, slowly progressing through a dim brown to full illumination. Everyone squinted under the bright light, looking at their neighbours sheepishly.

“And don’t ya’ll feel pink now?” said Motek, pounding the point home. He’d arrived through the crack at some point, and now he gave a wink to Kettec. “Now come getch yer water,” he said, stepping forward, and brandishing his recently filled canteens. The crowd disintegrated, as if a spell had been broken, and what once was a mass of panicked unification dissolved into the usual pockets of people.

Kettec, given hardly a moment to catch his breath after the narrow avoidance of another tragedy, spent the next hour running back and forth to the water pipe, filling up Motek’s canteens as they emptied. Finally, everyone was satiated and everything had gone back to a sedate buzz.

People slept or talked quietly, laying on the cave floor, just as they had before, as if nothing had happened. Kettec was just about to go check on Ediox and Fenna, when Motek waved him over to where he, Innmea, and Xedal were huddled.

“Some quick thinkin’” said Motek, slapping him on the back, “But ya better hope yer boy comes through like you said, or we’ll have a worse problem on our hands the next time they get rowdy.”

Xedal looked between the two of them with alarm. “Wait, so you haven’t actually made contact?” she squeaked.

“Husha,” hissed Innmea, looking around to see if anyone had heard Xedal. There was no one nearby who looked disturbed.

Kettec looked down at his feet. “We have a way to contact people above, but we haven’t actually linked up. Yet.”

“Great,” Xedal slumped down. Then, after a moment, she reconstituted her ire in Motek’s direction. “Why didn’t you tell me right away, Mo?”

Motek squirmed under her attention.

“Lie saved us,” said Innmea, looking idly up at the lights.

Xedal sighed, picking at her nails. “I suppose. But Mo’s right, Lord Wess better still come through.”

Kettec nodded. As much as it had been a convenient fiction to tell everyone that Mell was coming for them, it was also something he believed deeply. It wasn’t confirmed but he had to believe it would happen. The alternative was too awful to contemplate.

“Speaking of,” said Motek, lifting up some gadgets, “I’ve got the LINE an’ REEL all set up. Jus plug the cable in here,” he pointed at the socket, “Flip this, and this, an’ you’ll be ready to receive. If they find the hangin’ end at all, that is.”

Kettec accepted the armful of gear. "I'll go set it up."

"Sure. An Kettec?"

"Yeah?"

Motek looked at Xedal and Innmea, working his lips under his beard in indecision. "I would've probably made a mess," he said at last. "So, thanks."

Kettec wasn't sure what to say.

"Softie," said Innmea, poking Motek. She then looked at Kettec and said "same." As surprising as receiving earnest gratitude from Motek was, Innmea's agreement was something else entirely. Kettec dipped his head and decided to leave before he could inadvertently find a way to ruin the moment.

Setting up the LINE was a pressing concern, but he wanted to check on Ediox first. Kettec stepped towards the one-time entrance of the cave, seeing that his friend was still supine with Fenna hovering above her. Fenna, taking advantage of the sudden abundance of fresh water, was towelling off Ediox's forehead with a damp cloth. She saw Kettec's approach and set the dripping towel aside. Thinking of his most recent conversation with Xedal, Kettec decided to lead with the truth,

"I should say that I haven't actually heard from Mell yet. But—"

Fenna's knowing look stopped him up short.

"I can tell when you're lying Kettec," she said. "But I also know you won't let us down."

Kettec shouldn't have been surprised at Fenna's ability to read him.

"How's Ediox?" he asked.

A croak emitted from Ediox. She coughed and tried

again, "I'm fighting fit, you air-head!"

"Oh yeah?"

"I'm swole Kay!" Ediox lifted her arm, in a rough approximation of a flex.

"Swoll-*en* maybe."

Ediox let out a breathy cackle, a dim shadow of her usual peal of laughter, "Good one, Kay. I'm gonna take a nap." Her words faded and she seemed to go slack again.

The short burst of banter had done nothing to assuage Kettec's fears. Ediox sounded weaker than before, and she hadn't bothered to open her eyes during the exchange. He shared a worried look with Fenna.

"It's the infection, Xedal says she needs more proper medicine."

A hollow fear dropped the bottom out of Kettec's gut. What if, after all that he's done, it wasn't enough? What if everyone walked away from this hole, except for Ediox? She could be frustrating, and he had even argued with her recently, but faced with the possibility of loss, Kettec realized just how important Ediox was to him.

"I have to go set up this LINE," said Kettec. "Mell will know where to contact me. I'm sure of it."

Fenna nodded. "Before you go, I just wanted to say," Fenna paused to look him straight in the eye, "Kettec, I'm proud of you. You've grown up so much lately."

The words washed over Kettec, and though his first instinct was to deny them, or reattribute it to Mell, he had to admit there was a kernel of truth to them. All of the drama and disasters he had been through recently had forced some of his old ways aside. Would the Kettec of the past have been able to give that speech to the riotous crowd? Would he have been able to patch things up with Motek?

EMBEDDED HEART

But first he had to get through this. If they died down here, what did any of that matter?

“And,” added Fenna, snatching back Kettec’s attention, “When we all get out, I’m going to make you the biggest batch of choco-squares you’ve ever seen.” She smiled at him, and Kettec smiled back. On the inside though, he was afraid, just at the edge of despondency. They were still in danger, and Ediox most of all. He got the impression that Fenna might feel exactly the same way too, that her smile had been as forced as his.

Water poured out of the hole in the wall in an even, unbroken, stream. It splattered onto the ground, darkening the rock with wetness. It coursed over uneven stone, pooling in indentations and sloshing over in multiple little rivulets. Eventually it disappeared into tiny cracks, headed for its inevitable return to the water table it was sourced from.

Kettec, hands on his knees, watched the procession of liquid, losing himself in the dynamic, yet predictable flow. He knew it was unreasonable to expect that the LINE would spit out a message as soon as he plugged it in, though he nevertheless was disappointed in its silence. Something like three days had passed—as far as he could tell—and Kettec wasn’t sure how much longer they would last. Motek had run out of his strictly rationed food packs, even after mandating that they all skipped meals and split packs between two people. There were simply too many down here to feed with what he’d brought. The water was a goddess-send though, and Kettec couldn’t imagine what things would have been like without it.

There were more than just the physical tolls though, and people were beginning to get stir-crazy. The cave reeked of sweat and excrement, and there was nothing to do but wallow in pungent idleness. Kettec had suggested they spread out into the bunker, but that was limited by the inexperience of the partygoers. After a particularly loud-mouthed man broke a leg ascending the well, the others had been loath to make the attempt. Some action had been made to clear out the rubble from the entrance, but any handfuls removed were immediately filled up by silt and gravel. It was like trying to dig a tunnel through a sand dune.

On top of all this, Ediox was not faring well at all. She was in an impenetrable sleep, and her skin was turning a sickly yellow. Xedal had done all she could and more, but had run up against a lack of supplies. Of all Kettec's problems, idleness was not one of them. He had been forced to divide his time, to switch between mediating arguments, exploring for another exit, spending time with Fenna, coordinating with the trio, and monitoring the LINE for a message. This last activity was perhaps the easiest to delegate, but Kettec still took on as many shifts as he could squeeze into his schedule. Time alone was suddenly a rare commodity, and more than that, he wanted to be the first to know if Mell had made contact. So here he sat. Hearing the splatter of water, and listening for the click-click-whirr of the LINE machine. He had hallucinated hearing it, dreamt of hearing it. He imagined over and over what he'd say, and what would happen as soon as the accursed little box started chugging away. When it actually started, then, it took him a few long seconds to realize that it wasn't all in his head. The machine was whirring.

EMBEDDED HEART

Kettec leapt to his feet, feeling excitement and relief prickle all throughout his body. He was at the edge of shouting, but didn't want to scare the moment away. With the ghostrock needed to illuminate the steam-core-depleted cave, Kettec had been left with a torch. By the time he'd lit it, the LINE had its inkbloc warmed up, and ground out a message. Kettec snatched it up and held it in trembling hands.

~Sorry for the wait. Status? -M

Kettec whooped and hollered, splashing around the cave. He reigned himself in, and crouched over the machine, hands poised to type. He wanted to hear more from Mell. Ached to tell Mell all the times he'd thought of him. He wanted to celebrate and to commiserate but he forced himself to remain terse. He needed to communicate the most important facts first, in-case the jerry-rigged connection failed.

~In entrance cave. No food, some injured. Path back to palace blocked. -K

A response returned nearly instantly. Mell must have been typing as fast as he could.

~Rescue plan. Move all to NW2LV1 and confirm arrival. Tug cable down to confirm if comms out. Demolition on NW2E1 ready.

By the flickering light of the torch, Kettec stared down at the message. The codes had come from his notebook, the first referring to a tunnel and the second a nearby room. Kettec closed his eyes and followed his internalized map of the bunkers. The tunnel was up close to the cap and not far away from where they currently were. If they were there then demolition of the room would mean that Mell's plan was to do a controlled cave in. Brilliant as always, Kettec

smiled to himself.

~Confirmed he typed back.

Another message started to print.

~Confirmed. Now! With that all aside, Kettec, I want to tell you h—

The LINE emitted a large clunk and stopped altogether, halting from printing the unfinished message. Whatever Mell had been about to say was stuck in those gears. Kettec got up, and took a deep breath. He would just have to hear it from Mell in person.

Racing back to the cave as fast as he could while still retaining some sense of caution—the screams of Mr. Broken-leg still echoing in his head—Kettec wasn't sure what to feel. He wanted to give in to unbridled relief, but the reality was that they were still stuck right up until they weren't. He wanted to revel in his short conversation with Mell even though it had been all business and cut short. Some newly analytical area of his mind was already working on sorting out the logistical problems. The main challenge would be moving everyone; some climbing would be required to reach the tunnel and not all were up to it.

Down the well and through the crack, Kettec approached the trio first, finding Xedal and Innmea cuddling together, and Motek fiddling with an off cast piece of the flowstone mortar. The ghostrock was suspended from the ceiling, casting them all in a green hue.

"We made contact!" Kettec blurted. In a rush he explained the plan he'd come up with. Since he, Innmea, and now Motek were all competent climbers and navigators, Kettec would take them along the route first. Then they would split up as guides, ferrying groups of people

EMBEDDED HEART

towards the tunnel in waves. Xedal would remain in the cave to keep order. There might have been more celebration two days before, or even yesterday, but as it was they accepted the news with only relief and determination.

“Get your climbing gear together, and I’ll be right back,” finished Kettec. Receiving three nods, Kettec pushed his way to the back of the cave. Fenna was crouched over Ediox’s gaunt figure, and Kettec placed a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him, her face permanently creased with worry ever since Ediox had stopped responding to stimuli.

“We’re leaving,” he said, “Mell has a plan.”

Fenna too was resolute in receiving the news. Kettec knew that for her—for both of them—the trial would not be over until Ediox woke up.

The initial journey to the indicated hallway was accomplished fairly easily for Kettec, Innmea, and Motek. They moved quickly through the ancient bunkers speaking only to confirm the next bearing. At junctions, Motek marked the passage with a quick swipe of chalk, a crude arrow that made it obvious which direction was the correct one. The most problematic section was where a spiralling staircase had collapsed, leaving only a sharp vertical ascent. It was an easy climb, with lots of handholds and even rest ledges, that Kettec felt comfortable enough to freeclimb it—as did Innmea. However, while the wall was no problem for climbers, it would act as a severe bottleneck for the exodus. They only had two harnesses.

After another series of gentle inclines, Kettec raised a hand, “This is it.” They moved forward along the hall, hemmed in by the usually low ceiling and irregular walls. At the end of the passage was a large room, a rough edged

place that looked like it was adapted from a naturally occurring pocket in the stone. The vaulted ceiling stretched above them, and Motek let out a low whistle of appreciation. Kettec craned his neck to look up at the stone roof. If everything went to plan they would be the last ones to see this area whole. Mell was going to cave it in on purpose.

Back in the tunnel they retreated away as far as they could from the room, and Motek drew a line on the ground in chalk. Alongside this he wrote "DANGERUS! DONT PASS" in large block letters. Only when he was done did Innmea point to the misspelled first word.

"Forgot 'O'" she said.

Motek momentarily furrowed his brow, then gave her a shrug. "Just bein' efficient."

"Efficient illiteracy," she responded, turning to head back. Kettec managed to keep his laugh under his breath and hurried to keep after her.

"Teach me to read then! Why don't we start with Ditherena's One-Under-Seventy Positions?" crooned Motek, unperturbed by Innmea's insults. Kettec hadn't heard of that book before, but from Motek's tone, it wasn't hard to guess at the nature of its contents. Mell would probably know all about it, thought Kettec, feeling his cheeks heat up. The trip back to the cave was faster than the departure, and they were greeted by Xedal's hoarse shouting and a jostling crowd roughly gathered into groups of four.

"This isn't an outing to the theatre!" croaked Xedal, "You don't get to complain about your partner!"

Motek pushed towards Xedal, Kettec and Innmea following in his considerable wake.

"What's all this then?" he asked.

Xedal put a hand to her brow, and with the other,

pointed at three young men, jaws set in belligerent grimaces. “Chucky, Plucky, and Ducky don’t—”

“Hey, those aren’t our names!” intoned “Plucky.” Xedal stared daggers through him and received no further protest.

“Chucky. Plucky. And Ducky,” she enunciated, pointing at each one, “don’t want to be grouped together. But neither does anyone want to be saddled with them. Though, frankly, I don’t blame them.”

Motek looked like he was set to spit fire, but Kettec beat him to the punch.

“Bad news guys. Not only are you in a group together, you are going to be in the first group with me. Helping to haul the others up.”

This time Chucky stepped up, using his height advantage to peer down at Kettec. He was sporting a nasty blackened eye.

“And who are you to say so?” asked Chucky.

“I am the one in charge,” Kettec growled in a voice unfamiliar to his own ears, “So let’s go.”

Chucky met Kettec’s gaze for only a moment, before he dipped his head. “Tch. Whatever.”

Kettec turned on his heel and strode back towards the crack. He heard the shuffle of feet as the three men followed him.

After this minor hiccup, things proceeded in an orderly fashion. Xedal grouped people together, and Innmea took them through the first stretch. Kettec and his press-ganged pulley-men hoisted them up in the harnesses, and Motek delivered them through the last stretch, also ensuring none strayed past his warning line. There were complaints and screams from those afraid of heights or unwilling to leave

the cave, but Xedal was usually able to lambaste them into submission. Kettec's arms burned, as he and Ducky pulled up person, after person. They rested only as long as it took to unhook one passenger, lower the harness, and attach the next. Eventually the steady stream of people dropped to a trickle. And then came those too sick or too injured to walk without assistance. Kettec, trusting that Ducky, Chucky, and Plucky could man the harnesses without him, mantled down the ruined staircase, heading to help ferry the weakest of them. He also wanted to carry Ediox personally.

"Okay," said Kettec, arriving at the cave entrance where Fenna still waited with the unconscious Ediox, "You two are the last batch."

Fenna nodded and gathered herself together, rising to her feet and smoothing out her soiled, blood-stained dress. Kettec, as gently as he could manage, pulled Ediox onto his shoulders, bearing her surprisingly light frame with ease. That Ediox did not even groan was cause for even greater concern. Together they walked along the familiar path, Fenna marvelling at the construction of the bunker when she wasn't fussing over Ediox.

Travelling in a significant-feeling silence, they arrived at the once-staircase. There were no more people waiting, and Motek, Innmea, and Xedal were manning the ropes. They indicated that everything was going to plan so far. Kettec hooked Ediox and Fenna in, and the trio pulled them up, moving at what must have been a muscle-burningly slow pace for Ediox's sake. Kettec guided from below, working the slack end of the rope to make sure she didn't bang against the wall. Finally, Kettec was the only one on the lower level.

"Are you okay, Fenna?" he called out from below. Her

EMBEDDED HEART

fair-haired head poked over the lip of the edge and nodded.

“Good.”

“Everyone else’s in position too,” shouted down Motek.

“Okay,” said Kettec. “I’m going to go pull the cable to let Mell know.”

“Righty. Take this with ya.” Motek pulled something out of his pocket, and cast it down towards Kettec. The brilliant glow gave it away as the ghostrock. Kettec caught the stone, squinting slightly as its illumination spilled out from between his fingers.

“Off ya go,” said Motek. Kettec waved and ran down the hall, headed, hopefully for the last time, to the water room.

Kettec loped through the bunker, feeling the strain of the last few hours and the fatigue of the last few days pull against his body. He was exhausted, at his limit in so many different directions. It seemed impossible for him to worry any more, to miss Mell any more, to believe that this was going to be the end of it. Ever since the earthquake his life had been in turmoil. Or maybe ever since he’d met Mell. Or been fired. Maybe that’s all life was, an endless series of upsets, throwing everything he thought he had known about the world and himself into question. Kettec was tired of endless questions, of wondering what he was going to do. Maybe it was time to start deciding for himself what he wanted, to finally steer his own destiny.

He arrived at the antechamber. Water poured out of the crack as always, splattering on the stone floor. The exposed flowstone glittered under the light of the ghostrock. Kettec wasted no time. He stepped up to the hole, plunged his arm into the frigid water and yanked on the ascending LINE cable. He heaved on it, feeling the same muscles he’d been

using to lift the others protest their mistreatment. The cable gave and slid out of the hole, lubricated by the water. Kettec wanted to make sure there was no mistaking the signal, so he kept on pulling, removing length after length of cable. It was longer than it had been when he and Motek had pushed it up, and Kettec's hands passed over a patch where the colour changed from uniformly black, to an exposed copper red.

Then he held the end in his hand, a proper looking connector, not the bundle of scraps he'd sent up. Just below this was tied a red length of fabric. A large, slightly waterlogged ink "K" was stamped on one of the loose ends. Kettec recognized the knot as one he'd taught Mell for climbing, and untied it. The spread out bit of cloth had a message.

Demo is one hour from now. See you up top. Love, Mell.

Kettec's heart swelled and tears sprung into his eyes. He wiped his face on his sleeve and stuffed the soggy cloth into his pants. Then he picked up the ghostrock and headed back to the rest of the group.

The tunnel was clogged with humanity. Tired, grimy, people crammed in from wall to wall, whispering to one another. Kettec pushed his way past, trying to look more in control of his feelings than he was. After three days of mediation and organization, he recognized some and was recognized by more. They parted as best they could, nodding as he passed. Soon Kettec was at the head of the line, and found Motek, Innmea, Xedal, Fenna, and Ediox there waiting for him. He didn't know what to say, so he simply nodded. They understood. Kettec, overwhelmed, collapsed down to the ground. Fenna put her arm around him, and Innmea did the same. Together they huddled there, waiting for the plan to set into motion. For the bombs to start going

EMBEDDED HEART

off. A falling rock sky was their last hope.

XXX

The Goddess statue of Sheppeth court had been in the same place for hundreds of years. Untold centuries passed as she watched over the inhabitants of Capath, perched at the exact center of the circular courtyard. Oceans' worth of water had passed through her hands, splashing into a worn stone basin at her feet. Time was not the same for something so enduring, and from her perspective the buildings that now crowded the perimeter of the courtyard must have shot up like bonegrass after rain. But now her hands were dry. And her world had changed.

She'd been moved six feet to the left.

Three days ago, after a difficult day of organizing rescue efforts and worrying about Kettec, Mell had traveled back to the statue. Capath's faith of the Goddess was not his own, and while he knew the histories of her miracles, he did not believe that they were all completely true. However, this representation had been the meeting point for all of Mell and Kettec's excursions, and he'd come to associate it with Kettec. If Mell stood there, perhaps Kettec would appear before him, smiling in his shy way.

Kettec had not appeared, but just as Mell was going to leave, the water pouring from the Goddess' hands had splattered and then stopped. Her liquid had issued continuously for hundreds of years—unceasing even after the earthquake—so Mell knew immediately that it was some sort of sign.

EMBEDDED HEART

What followed was a whirlwind of activity. There was an attempted, and failed, excavation of the goddess. Breakthrough research was performed from the fearsome pair of Cinizia and Mrs. Panossia, and they re-discovered the properties of flowstone, which led to a second, successful, attempt to move the statue, and the subsequent unearthing of a frayed end of the REEL tube. Finally, the watchmaker-delicate repair of the tube had been enacted and they had re-established contact. All of that work and he had gotten to read less than a dozen words from Kettec before the chain had snapped somewhere they couldn't reach to fix.

In the blue light of pre-dawn, Mell stood over the newly excavated center of Sheppeth court, inclining one foot on a piece of discarded stone. Before him the end of the REEL tube sprouted from the shallow indentation left by the removal of the statue, poking out of the water supply pipe and wrapped in his red handkerchief. Mell leaned on his raised knee and stared at his final, tactile, piece of communication to Kettec, feeling the anxiety of uncertainty pick away at the relief of their brief contact. It would take some time for Kettec to relocate the people to the safe-area, but Mell would not last long before starting to unduly worry. Mell counselled himself to patience, and pulled at the back of his shirt in irritation. It was sweat-stained and clinging to him uncomfortably. In fact, all of his clothes were filthy, not helping his mood in the slightest. Though they had made great strides at restoring order among the broken streets of Capath, laundry had not yet reached the top of the priority list. Mell brushed dirt from his trousers, succeeding only in dirtying his hand. More time passed, and Mell refused all offers to be relieved from his post. He wanted to be the first

to know that the plan had been set in motion. The latest petitioner was the guard Thenniel, probably put to the task by Cinizia.

“Sir, I promise to come straight—” Thenniel stopped mid-sentence and stared at the ground behind Mell. He turned in time to see the tip of the handkerchief disappearing into the pipe. They could hear the scraping as the end of the cable was pulled deeper into the ground. Adrenaline and relief flooded Mell as he stared at the now empty pipe. At the other end of it was Kettec and he was okay. Recovering his composure, Mell began to issue directions, though most everyone was already performing their assigned duty. LINE operators hammered out messages, telling the demolition crew to start final preparations and summoning medical crews to the blast site. Cinizia had led the organization of most of this operation, and when everything was over, Mell would make sure that the infinitely capable woman was canonized as a saint.

Thenniel gave Mell a salute and a smile. “Looks like we won’t need to change positions after all. I’ll escort you to the site, sir.”

Mell nodded, feeling another set of worries lay themselves heavily on his chest. This had all better bring Kettec back to him.

The demolition site was a few blocks away. A building had toppled over, exposing its basement foundation to the sky. Taking advantage of the unfortunate destruction, a crew had continued to dig down through the basement, eventually reaching the uppermost level of the concrete cap that ran under most of Capath. Mell surveyed as the final preparations were made, looking down on the crater. It was a hive

of activity, as wires and charges were checked and double checked. The plan was to blow a hole in the cap without starting a chain collapse. The difficulty of the task had been described to Mell as trying to use a cannon to turn off a light switch without knocking the whole house down. Of course they were trying to proceed using normal excavation methods in the Canal—using Mell’s brigade of Ubran spies to do the heavy digging—but from what Kettec had told him, that was not advancing fast enough. After three days, they were barely a quarter the way in, and the going would only get slower the deeper they got. The explosive way was the only way they would be able to rescue a hundred people instead of retrieving a hundred corpses.

The head foreman approached Mell and threw an approximation of a salute. “Everythin’ is ready ta go on schedule. Ya’ll should head back to the safe zone.”

“Thank you, Gerdono,” said Mell. The foreman dipped his head, evidently surprised Mell had remembered his name. Mell and Thenniel stepped back from the crater, and moved towards the demolition command center just down the street. Command was a large single-pole tent—exactly like the ones in front of the Council building—and had been erected right in the middle of the road. Ducking inside, Mell found Cinizia, shouting over the ambient noise of LINE machines as she gave the final instructions to the crews. All that was left was to wait. Mell stood tapping his foot, growing more worried by the second. There were so many things that could go wrong, so many ways that Kettec could be lost to him forever. Time oozed past, every moment filled with flashes of disaster, of unquenchable sorrow. Mell was sweating and breathing heavily, like he’d just finished exercising. It felt like his heart was going

to give out. Then, finally, it was time. An hour had passed since Kettec had pulled down the message.

“The countdown has started,” said Cinizia, looking out of the tent and down the street towards the site. Mell took a deep, shuddering breath, and counted down in his head. Just after he reached one, the charges went off. Mell had been expecting to hear a deafening blast and to see a pillar of flame, like war-mortars times a hundred. Instead there was a thump that he felt more than heard and a column of dust. A silent moment followed, neither Mell or the crews were allowed to move until it was confirmed to be safe. Mell’s fingernails dug deep into his palms. The foreman emerged from the cloud of dust, tendrils trailing behind him as he exited. He looked like a ghost, painted chalky white from head to toe. “We done it!” he shouted, waving a hand.

Mell surged forward, followed by the initial spelunking team and the medical crews.

The blast site looked wholly unfamiliar. Dust still filled the air, making it difficult to breathe without coughing. Where before there had been a crater, there was now a hole, and a rough sort of ramp of gravel descending into darkness and out of sight. The first climbing crew pounded pitons into place, rolling out parallel lines of fabric evenly spaced with slats to serve as footholds on the steep incline of loose stone. People buzzed around Mell, telling him that everything had gone as planned. The explosion had punched through the cap and knocked out the rooms of the bunker as planned, leaving the hallway exposed. Mell nodded through their explanations, staring down into the pit. He had been forced to agree that he would wait up top, but he was considering breaking that promise, sliding down with the others and calling out Kettec’s name.

EMBEDDED HEART

At last someone emerged, helped to ascend the slope by a rescuer. It was someone Mell did not recognize, a lanky youth dressed in soiled party-wear and squinting at the sunlight. He was welcomed by a round of applause and quickly ushered to the command center's medical area. Shortly, another pair emerged, squinting just the same, alternating between smiling and crying at the chance to breathe fresh air and see the sun after so long underground. Mell understood the relief, and his underground excursions had all been of voluntary length. A steady stream of people emerged, scrabbling up the gravel into the sun, and Mell grew more impatient. Every person was a life they had saved, but he wanted to see Kettec. He knew it was selfish, but that didn't stop the feeling.

Thirty-four people had been birthed from the ground, before a familiarly blonde head appeared, aimed down at the ground to take each step carefully. Mell teetered on the edge of the slope, heart full to bursting. It was Kettec. He was carrying someone on his back, a figure so slight and pallid that it took Mell a long time to identify them as Ediox. She did not appear well. Kettec looked up and they locked eyes. In that moment so much passed between them. An electric second as they saw each other for the first time in days. All the words in the world that they no longer needed communicated through that connection, a direct line to each of their hearts. Mell stared hard, burning Kettec into his mind. He looked the same yet different. His jaw was set in a way Mell had only seen once before, when he was being rescued. Something down there had changed Kettec.

The second passed and Kettec's resolve seemed to falter for an instant, causing him to nearly miss stepping to the next wooden rung. The person beside him, Fenna, kept

him stable, and Kettec resumed his upward march. Mell, released from the hold of Kettec's gaze, called for a path to be made clear. Kettec reached the lip of the slope and Mell rushed to his side, helping to support Ediox. Fenna did the same on Kettec's opposite side. The four, moving as one, entered the medical tent, and laid Ediox gently down on a cot. Within seconds she was surrounded by a full complement of doctors and nurses, stripping her of old bandages and pouring medicines down her throat. Fenna kept hold of one of Ediox's hands through all this. Mell watched Kettec watch Ediox, no word having yet passed between them. Finally, when it seemed that Kettec had accepted that Ediox was being properly cared for, Kettec turned to Mell and took his hand. They exited the tent together, quickly moving away from the noisy bustle of the recently rescued.

Kettec led them down the street and up a still-intact staircase to the roof of a stubby building that nonetheless afforded them a view of Capath. His assertiveness in their travel surprised Mell, but he still said nothing. At the edge of the roof they stopped, and, pulled together like gravity and ground, they embraced. Mell squeezed Kettec's solid form, pulling him as close as he could, burying his face in Kettec's dirty hair. They stood like that for some time, shuddering with the intensity of their unified emotion. Kettec turned his face up, only centimetres away from Mell's own.

"Mell," he whispered.

"Kettec," replied Mell.

Moving in tandem, closing that last little bit of space that separated them, they kissed. Mell closed his eyes and melted into it, feeling Kettec's soft lips against his own, their hot breath intermingling. There was absolutely nothing else in the entire world. It was just the two of them, together at

EMBEDDED HEART

last, and inseparable.

XXXI

Pushing away from the cramped desk, Kettec stretched out his aching back and shoulders, letting out an uncouth groan. He looked down at the papers scattered out before him and the ancient, crumbly scroll carefully pinned down on a side table. Eight hours of translating and hand transcribing and he was only halfway done. Kettec wiped his ink-stained hands absent-mindedly on his pants and continued unfolding his protesting body, pushing himself up from his work stool. Kettec stood and surveyed the Department of Antiquities in all its glory.

It was little more than a glorified broom-closet with four desks crammed into whatever space wasn't currently taken up by storage cases and filing cabinets. There were no windows and only one door, which exited into the sub-basement of the Office of Records. The air was musty, full of the prickly smell of mould. Despite the confined conditions and the drudgery of the day, Kettec felt jubilant. This was something he had accomplished on his own. Sure, his mother had helped prepare the proposal, and of course Mell had given him a guaranteed vouch and vote, but at the end of the day, Kettec had been the one to pull everything together. He created the newly titled Department of Antiquities, and, for now, was allowed to guide it in the retrieval and documentation of Absollo's cache. Mrs. Panossia was technically superior to him, but she kept herself to merely an advisory capacity, leaving him to oversee his coffin-sized domain.

EMBEDDED HEART

And it wasn't that cramped, really, especially since two of the desks were usually vacant. Motek and Innmea spent most of their time out in the field, down in the caves, overseeing excavation and exploration. Xedal too had been offered a position but she declined saying that she'd "got quite enough of those two at home." The fourth desk was also currently empty, belonging to Palavva, an excitable young woman who only worked part-time with them as part of her education. Her boundless enthusiasm and talent for non-stop chatter really livened the place up, even if it had made her mortal enemies with Innmea.

Kettec, finished for the day, gathered his things, and switched off the lights. The rest of the scroll would be waiting for him tomorrow, a daunting task that he nevertheless felt excited to tackle. He left through the narrow, battered door and locked it behind him.

Emerging into Capath, Kettec was surprised to find that the sun was setting. The days were growing shorter, and soon it would be possible for him to go to work in the darkness of night and return home in the same. It was all the more reason to take a moment and enjoy the sight of the orange orb casting its last rays over the city. Kettec had an urge to climb the nearest building and bask in the fading light, but he was expected elsewhere. He moved on, peeking back every once in a while to see the stunning view. Red and gold light splashing over old stone, reflecting off new glass.

Kettec arrived at the Quiet Waters only to find Ediox and Fenna already there waiting for him.

"Oooheyyo!" hollered Ediox, waving him over, even though he already clearly saw them. Kettec joined them at

the small circular table, receiving a slight smile from Fenna as a greeting.

“How was your day in the dungeon?” Ediox asked, grinning with a piece of her chocolate éclair hanging from the corner of her lip.

“Quite good, actually,” said Kettec, “I spent the day decoding one of Absollo’s—”

Ediox interrupted him with an exaggerated snore, pretending to nod off and almost fall into the remainder of her dessert. Fenna giggled.

“Do behave Edi,” said Fenna, her chastising tempered by the preceding laugh, “We listen to you go on about music and restaurants.”

“Those are important! Those matter!”

“Hey! Absollo matters,” said Kettec.

Ediox gave him a look. “Okay, well how important has all that old shit been to anyone but you?”

Kettec frowned. It was true that the historical community had not exactly been immediately transformed by the revelation that the Last King had been a despot as Kettec had always imagined they would. He was sure people would come around.

“Well, what about the ghostrock?”

“That only gets play because it’s a cool-ass glowy stone! Nothing to do with who had it last.”

The door chimed, cutting off their playful quarrel. Lord Mell Wess strode across the narrow café, a spring in his step. Kettec could feel an involuntary smile dominating his face.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Mell, taking a seat next to Kettec. Mell threw an arm around Kettec’s shoulders casually and greeted him with a peck on the cheek.

“Hey,” said Kettec, looking up at Mell, still excited by

their closeness.

“Well if it isn’t Capath’s *second* cutest couple,” chimed Ediox, mirroring Mell’s arm movement with Fenna.

Mell laughed, “Normally I’d take the bait on that, but I have some important news.”

“What is it?” asked Fenna.

“We’ve had some reports of an upset across the pond,” replied Mell. “A bit of a situation that Capath wants a delegate to settle in person. Probably complicated, maybe dangerous. Definitely interesting. So!” Mell clapped his free hand on his thigh and turned to face Kettec, brilliant blue eyes alight with the promise of so much to come. “Kettec?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you feel about a trip to the Ubran Republic?”

JESS SEBASTIAN

EMBEDDED HEART

JESS SEBASTIAN

