

Chimera

by Randy Baden

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To Carmichael, for giving me a reason to write.

To Ted, for his love, support, and all-around greatness.

To the Office of Letters and Light, for giving me a
motivating deadline.

And to Billy, the doctors, the nurses, and the scientists, for
making me the chimera I am today.

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Prologue

Ferelle

Ferelle, the young reporter filled with energy and passion. Your eagle eyes and wings have served you well in your profession, but when you see so much it is sometimes hard to avoid bias. With your simple brown hair and modest body, you can fool even the most careful of men into spilling their secrets.

Ferelle had been covering the case from start to finish. She was there when the first body was found, and today she would see the murderer hang. She wanted nothing more than to sit back with a stiff drink and enjoy the show, but her duties kept her busy. Today, she was responsible for reporting on the public reaction to the execution.

She had heard of public executions before, but she had never imagined that one could draw such a crowd in these modern times. Apparently the nature of the crimes had galvanized the young adults of Polonia for the first time since the student strike nine years ago. Citizens flocked to the arena at Polonia Mons from as far as thousands of kilometers away.

When it became clear that they would overwhelm the public transit system, Queen Rafnia called for volunteers to provide independent transportation. Nearly every chimera with a horse, elephant, albatross, or whale graft answered her call.

Then there was the arena itself. There was no way that it would support tens of thousands of spectators, but it

was the only venue that stood a chance. Again the Queen intervened to expand the arena to support the crowd. Among a host of architects and construction workers, she enlisted the help of Hogan. Hogan had made a name for himself with his remarkable performance at the recent Grand Tournament and his unique rhinoceros graft. How do you compete with impenetrable skin and a mercurial weapon made of stone? *Well*, Ferelle thought, *I guess at least someone found a way.*

Even from where she was, Ferelle could feel Hogan working his stone-craft in the upper tiers of the arena. That was her gift, as an eagle chimera. In the back of her mind, she could sense nearby chimera powers. She could tell when they were being used, and if she concentrated on someone she could tell what powers they possessed even if they didn't actively use them. As a reporter on sometimes dangerous cases, this talent saved her skin more than a few times. Today she would be using this talent more subtly. In her experience, people's perceptions are always skewed by their perspective. *There are two kinds of people*, she thought. *Those whose worldview decides which animals they choose as grafts, and those whose graft decides their worldview.* And as an afterthought, *Well, three kinds. There are also the old nuts who blame chimerism for all of the world's problems and refuse to get a graft at all.* Knowing the grafts that people chose gave Ferelle insight into their character, which obviously helped when interviewing them.

It was still well before dawn, and already the stadium was crowded. It wouldn't be hard to find opinions that she could use for her story with so many passionate

people about, but she felt drawn to one section of the stadium. Someone had serious power in that section. She had felt this power signature before on Polonia Mons, but she had never been able to pinpoint it. This was an opportunity she couldn't miss.

She leaped into the air and flapped her wings for all they were worth. Most people with bird grafts, other than the rare but mighty albatrosses, could barely fly, but as a petite woman Ferelle enjoyed the freedom of the skies that let her bypass the crowd and make her way to the other side of the stadium. Ferelle had to get a special blouse tailored to allow her wings to move freely, but with all of the unusual physical traits of chimeras in Polonia Mons, it wasn't hard to find a talented tailor.

She found a large group of people in high spirits, and squawked at the crowd until they made room for her to land.

"It's Ferelle Goldsmith!" exclaimed one of the crowd members. Her friends gasped, and Ferelle suddenly felt very self-conscious. She had never been recognized on sight before. She took pride in her reporting work, but she didn't have any illusions that she was a household name.

"It's thanks to you that we're here today! I was going to write you a letter to thank you, but I never would have guessed that I'd get to thank you in person."

The girl was dressed in a ridiculous blue silk unitard that showed off her plumage, complete with a pair of fake bunny ears. Ferelle of course could tell that with a peacock graft this outfit would only serve to enhance her power to influence the minds of men. If she weren't in what appeared

to be otherwise respectable company, Ferelle would have assumed the girl to be a lady of the night. But no, her companions made that unlikely. She studied them as the girl hugged her fiercely, and could tell that some of them were a bit uneasy about the girl's reaction.

“I didn't know I had such loyal fans,” Ferelle joked, nervously, as she gently pushed the girl away.

“Don't mind Scarlett,” said one of the girl's companions. This one was a crow, known universally and often hated for their supernatural skills of appraisal. Meeting one in person, Ferelle realized that the power had more nuance. A crow could determine the value of anything, not just merchandise as some frustrated consumers believed. “She's had a rough couple of days. Her brother was one of the killer's victims.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” Ferelle said sympathetically as she embraced Scarlett again.

“You don't have to be that sorry,” said one of the men while rolling his eyes. “I'm her brother.”

Ferelle looked him over, a bit perplexed. Then it clicked; this was the eye-witness that Queen Rafnia had identified! He was wrapped up tightly in a cheap silk cloak, but Ferelle could make out the scarred flesh that he was trying to conceal. Why hadn't his friend, the crocodile chimera, healed him? Inspecting the scarred man with her power let her fill in the gaps of the story.

“You were grafted to a dolphin, but by shedding your graft you were able to survive the killer's poison,” she marveled. It would be heartbreaking to reject a graft like that. A bond can only form if the host and graft are

sincerely compatible, so rejecting a graft would be like putting down a rabid pet. “What’s your name, and why haven’t you gone to the press yet?” Ferelle tapped her pen against her notepad anxiously, excited at the potential for an exclusive.

“Slow down, lady,” he replied. “The name’s Rush. They already caught the killer, so why should anyone care about my story?”

“Trust me, people care. Don’t you read the news?”

“Listen,” said the crow, “I know you have good intentions, but my people would prefer to be left out of this story.”

“I can make it worth your while,” Ferelle hinted, hoping to play off of the trademark greed of crows.

“Your naivety is both insulting and laughable,” the crow replied with a precise, eastern accent. “Insulting that you believe me to be so focused on money, and laughable that you think you can afford my rates.” Her beady black eyes focused intently on Ferelle, and Ferelle could tell that this woman was somehow the leader of the group.

Ferelle quickly took a different tack, “Then maybe you value the truth more? And, as someone who seems to possess it, maybe you would be inclined to share that truth with the people?”

After a few more unbearable moments of scrutiny, the crow smiled approvingly and said, “I like you. You may call me Manta.” She turned to her group. “Feel free to answer her questions openly, but in the interest of fairness, do not give her any information that she does not ask for. We all must work for a living, after all.”

Ferelle recognized a challenge when she saw one. This woman was testing her. This group of people *did* know something, and it was up to her to figure out what. Something about what Scarlett said at first tickled her mind, but her instincts pointed her elsewhere, to the man with incredible power that she had been trying to ignore.

“You there,” she pointed at the man, who would have been totally invisible if not for her eagle eye.

“Blast. Shouldn't have bothered trying to hide from another eagle,” he said, as he shimmered into view.

Upon closer inspection – which was somewhat difficult, since looking at him was like looking at the sun – Ferelle could see that it was true, he was part eagle. But he was much more than that.

Ferelle had met a few people with two grafts, and in her line of work she even did a story once on the Queen's bodyguard, Sir Reginald, one of the four publicly known people with three grafts. Multiple grafts were just tricky. Each new graft has to be compatible with all of the previous grafts, so most people were forced to choose their first and only graft carefully. The man standing before her, on the other hand, had to have at least seven grafts, some of which she had never even seen before. He hid his true appearance behind a mask; he would have to or everyone would realize how powerful he was.

Even though she could identify his powers, she could not identify several of the animals that granted them. Eagle, chameleon, octopus, and spider, she was nearly certain. Those would explain the ability to perceive other chimera powers, the ability to mask his true form and to

hide in plain sight, the ability to simultaneously handle a dozen independent tasks with ease (and, incidentally, the ability to squirt ink at his foes), and an acute awareness of his surroundings. She then considered that the combination of octopus and spider might explain his six arms, which also were hidden by his mask. She had seen octopi and spiders before, but none of them had six arms, which led her to believe that she had living proof to back up the theory of combination powers.

Then there were other powers she couldn't account for, that she had never seen before. The ability to expel flames from his hands and mouth? Most creatures granted a power that was at least somewhat related to some aspect of the creature, but she had no idea what creature might grant that. Incredible longevity and a resistance to hunger and disease? She might have thought he was part bat, but he didn't need to drink blood. Superhuman strength, speed, endurance, and mental acuity? She guessed that this was probably just a combination of the physical attributes of the creatures he had grafted onto himself. And still there were more.

But there was one more power that she recognized clear as day. The clarity of thought bestowed by a dolphin. At least three of the killer's victims had dolphin grafts, four if Rush was included.

“What's your name? Did the killer try to attack you, too?” she asked.

“Warren. You know as well as I do that the killer would have had to be crazy to attack me. Or at least crazier, I guess. No, I was kind of... off the grid.” he said, searching

for the right words.

Ferelle assumed this was because of his chameleon power. "I see. But you were the one who figured out who he was?"

"I wouldn't say that, exactly," Warren said, clearly uncomfortable with Ferelle's line of questioning.

"But you did capture him?" Ferelle waited for Warren's nod. "How?"

"I could tell you, but frankly it would be a waste of time and I'd prefer to just relax and enjoy the celebration with my new friends." He gave another of his companions, a man with a cow graft, a cryptic smile. Ferelle filed the expression away in her mind, but she lost her train of thought and forgot the question that she was going to ask next. She returned to Scarlett's comment that had been bugging her.

"When you said that it was because of me that we are here today, you really meant that. My reports helped you catch the killer."

Scarlett's face lit up with a gorgeous smile, "And it probably saved Rush's life, among others." Ferelle felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment for something she hadn't even realized she had done.

"Then I was right about the killer's motives?" Ferelle asked, expectantly. Most of the group seemed to be embarrassed for her, but Rush openly laughed at her.

"Lady, it was a good guess, but you couldn't have been further from the truth." Ferelle felt embarrassed for herself, now; she held the truth in very high esteem.

"What did the killer want, then?"

“Ask a weasel, if you can get your hands on one,”
Rush replied.

Ferelle considered the advice. She knew he was sincere, but she couldn't imagine how a weasel might know the answer to that question. In her experience, weasels were – in addition to being notoriously hard to interview – incredibly paranoid, and filled with conspiracy theories.

She studied the remaining members of the group, and took down their names and addresses in case she wanted to contact them later. It was then that she learned that most of them could be found at Arcane & Stable, a popular magic and chimera shop on Polonia Mons. Those in the group that she hadn't spoken to included Douglass, the cow with the ability to nourish others with a touch; Capella, a monkey with the ability to build and understand complex machinery; Samuel, the crocodile who regenerates himself and others; and Tori, a fly capable of snooping on conversations in the Hive.

Ferelle couldn't help but feel that there was a story to be told about this group, and she couldn't wait to uncover it. But today, at least, she had to continue probing the crowd for opinions, and she'd get to see the end of at least part of the story. *They say the truth will set you free*, Ferelle mused while thinking of the killer, *but I think that's only for people who deserve freedom.*

Chapter 1

Balk

Balk, the nervous innkeeper. Unlike most men your age, your interactions with your guests keep you on the forefront of the culture of Polonia Mons. Your inn is the most opulent in all of Polonia, and you dress in well-fitting finely-spun wool suits befitting the ambiance that your establishment offers.

Balk's inn, the Polonia Grand Hotel, was well-positioned on the main thoroughfare of Polonia Mons, about halfway up the mountain. The main thoroughfare was *the* place to conduct business on Polonia Mons, though there were a few pockets of commercial activity in a few other areas.

The road here was made of old cobblestone. Balk couldn't really be sure how long it had actually been there, but it must have been a long time. Over the years, builders had carved pieces out of the mountain to provide more space in this district, and the result was something of a plateau with an enormous square, surrounded by anything a person could want. And one of those things, Balk knew well, was temporary housing.

Travelers came to Polonia Mons all the time. It was something of a tourist trap, with its scenic views and legendary architecture. The Royal Palace was breathtaking, as was the Marble Road. And now they had a relatively new construction to wonder at: the Colosseum.

If you had told Balk two months ago that the Queen would announce a gladiatorial tournament, the Grand

Tournament, Balk would have scoffed at the suggestion. Where would they host it? When the tournament was announced, though, the Colosseum seemed to spring into existence in no time. You could say what you wanted to about the Queen, but she certainly knew how to get things done.

Balk, of course, welcomed the tournament. It was sure to drive his business through the roof. Not only would there be a decent market for spectators, but Balk knew that a lot of the combatants were coming from outside the city, and his inn was simply the best. He already had someone contact him to reserve six whole rooms! At first he thought she was going to be bringing her whole family, so he was a bit surprised when she showed up.

“Whoa, hold on there!” Balk said as the woman entered his lobby. “You can't bring your pets in here!”

“Oh, no, really? But I made the reservations already,” she said with dismay.

“Wait, are you Danika?” he asked.

“Yes, yes I am. Hadn't you heard of me? I thought I had something of a reputation. 'Danika the beastmistress', they like to call me.” Balk hadn't realized that this was that Danika. She was known for her sheepdog graft, which gave her an affinity for animals that she clearly took advantage of.

“I should have mentioned it when I contacted you, but I just assumed you'd know. Oh, this is just awful. Do you know some other place that will take us in?”

“Well,” Balk said, not eager to lose the business, “How well-behaved are they?”

“Are you kidding?” Danika asked. “Mira, shake hands.” One of the beasts walked calmly over to Balk and extended a paw to him. Balk took the beast's hand hesitantly.

“I guess I could let you stay here, still, but there's going to be a surcharge for the mess they're going to make.”

“Oh, thank you. I promise you, they won't make a mess, but I'll gladly pay the surcharge. I'm so excited! This is my first time in the city.” Balk liked her enthusiasm. He loved Polonia Mons, but as someone who lived there for most of his life, the novelty had worn off a long time ago. The excitement in Danika's voice made Balk wish that he had had a daughter in addition to his two boys.

Danika wasn't the only combatant staying at his inn. He also recognized Hogan, who had earned a lot of buzz as a serious contender for carrying the whole tournament. And then there were a few others, like that kid Jeremiah who couldn't be more than eighteen years old.

And then, Balk had other guests. That was what had troubled him the most, this morning. The maid found that one of his guests had been murdered during the night. The room was a mess of blood and gore, and Balk wasn't sure what to do. Polonia Mons was such a peaceful place, and he couldn't remember the last time there had been such a ghastly murder. This *would* be bad for business, Balk knew, even if he could keep it under wraps. Balk contacted the police, and it was difficult to not think of the dead body upstairs while he waited for them to send someone. He finished processing Danika's rooms and led her to them.

Several agonizing minutes later, the detective finally arrived.

“You just found her like this?” the detective – Detective Irvine by his badge – asked.

“Well, the maid did, yes,” Balk answered nervously.

“Did you see anything unusual? Was there anyone suspicious hanging around here last night?”

“I don't think so,” Balk said. “Look, I really don't know anything more about this than what you do, and I really just want it to go away before it upsets my other customers.”

“I understand. I'll have forensics come to collect the body as soon as possible. But please, if you think of anything that might be helpful, don't hesitate to contact me again.”

Balk paced nervously while he waited for someone to come collect the body. There was no way that any of his other guests would just stumble across the body, but he still wanted it out of his inn. Eventually the forensics team arrived, but they were also followed by someone who was clearly not an officer.

“Hello, sir, what's your name?” an eagle chimera asked him when he intercepted her.

“Balk, and yourself?”

“Ferelle. I'm a reporter for the Polonia Sun.” Balk immediately knew what was going on, but he didn't know how he could stop her. “Could you tell me why the forensics team is here? Did someone rob you?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that,” Balk said, trying to

think of some sort of lie that would be believable. “It's just, well, you know —” he stammered. Ferelle looked at him askance, and he tried to move to block her passage inconspicuously. Ferelle jumped over him, scraping her wings against the ceiling of the lobby before dashing up the stairs to follow the forensics team.

Balk tried to follow, but Ferelle was too fast for him. He didn't catch up to her until she had caught up to the team. From down the hall, Balk could see her drop her pad of paper to cover the scream that nearly left her mouth. Balk hurried over to her and wrapped her up in his arms, trying to shield her from the gruesome sight. He had been more concerned with his hotel's reputation than how profoundly this scene would affect this poor young girl.

“What in the world happened here?” she said angrily.

“I'm sorry, I don't know. That's why I called the police. No one has seen anything. I think her name was Verna. I guess she was a dolphin chimera, and a traveler? I don't really know anything more about her than that. She'd only been here a few days, and she kept to herself. She didn't even come down to the common room to eat.”

“Who could do something like this?” Ferelle asked. “Seriously. I'm going to find out, and I'm going to make sure he pays.”

“Good,” Balk said. “Someone should. But, do you think you could leave the name of my establishment out of your report?” Balk asked nervously.

“I'm sorry, but my duty is to the truth. How would you feel if I did that, and then someone else got attacked

here without knowing the risks?”

Balk sighed. “I guess you're right.”

“But I'll tell you what I'll do for you,” Ferelle offered. “Let me stay here for free over the next few days while I learn about what's going on, and I'll be sure to write a good review for you.”

“Deal,” Balk said. Hopefully he could make the best of this bad situation.

Chapter 2

Giovanni

Giovanni, a doting father with an eye for change. Your white smock is often smeared with bright greens and oranges as you do your business, but some day you will have something amazing to share with the world. Isn't that all that matters?

For the past twenty-five years, Giovanni spent every summer in this exact same spot. He began when he was twenty-two years old, fresh out of school. He had trouble finding work, at first. He had learned to paint, both in excruciatingly realistic detail and in broad, abstract, fantastical vistas. While he tried to find work, he decided that he would paint for himself.

He found a modest tree growing out of the side of the mountain, just outside the railing that protects pedestrians on the main thoroughfare from falling off the mountainside. The tree was situated directly adjacent to the main square of the city; Giovanni could see a number of historical buildings, such as the Polonia Grand Hotel and Cedric's Tailory. The buildings were simple, bleached stone structures with gently sloped roofs covered in orange, clay shingles. There wasn't a particular requirement that the buildings all look the same, but Giovanni suspected that the uniformity and the plain elegance of the area was what made the central square such an appealing place for shop owners and customers alike. The western exposure made sunsets on the central square seem almost magical.

To Giovanni, this place was art. The collection of

purpose that the buildings represented. The idea that so much of the queendom's money would change hands not more than fifty meters from him. The juxtaposition of the man-made structures with the ten-meter-in-diameter natural spring in the center of the square. The alternation between the buildings and thick, powerful oak trees that lined the edge of the square. From Giovanni's perch at the top of the tree he could see a beautiful sight that he couldn't help but paint.

The following year, Giovanni returned to the main square and, for the sake of nostalgia he decided to climb on top of that familiar tree again and take another look at things. That was when he saw him. A man, swimming in the spring in the center of the square. He had apparently drawn quite a crowd. Giovanni was unsurprised at the crowd; he worried that his own eyes were deceiving him. At first Giovanni thought the man was wearing some sort of special swimming attire, a sort of fish tail that allowed him to leap from the water to spectacular heights. Giovanni was sure that someone had plucked this creature directly from his imagination. This was the kind of thing Giovanni would have painted in his youth.

“People of Polonia,” the man called to the crowd. “Have you heard of the chimera pods? Go up to see Professor Yanovich at Polonia Mons University. He's created something amazing!” The man threw his hands up into the air, and geysers erupted from the spring all around him, eliciting a cheer from the onlookers.

“Have you ever wanted special powers, but you don't have the talent or the discipline to study totemic

magicks? Now you don't need to be a genius to be special; I was just a janitor at Polonia Mons University, and look at me now!" A series of geysers erupted one after another in a spiral around the man, and children from the crowd broke away from their parents to stand precariously on the edge of the spring and reach as far as they could into the spray.

"How does it work?" an old man asked, clearly unnerved by the scene this man was creating. Giovanni thought it was magnificent, and was perhaps more captivated than the children. He hoped the man would be here tomorrow, too. He could paint this scene again, amazed at how different it seemed one year later.

"It's simple. Find an animal, establish a connection to it, hop in a device that the Professor operates, and when you emerge, you and the creature will have fused together, and you unlock some secret magical power; some power encoded in the animal's very being." The man seemed to be selling the idea very well to most of the crowd. Giovanni suspected that this man was no mere janitor.

"How will I know what power I'll get?" the grumpy man asked.

"You don't! I admit it, it's a risky proposition, but I think it's worth it. For example," the man said while leaping into a flip three meters above the surface of the water, before landing on his tail and holding his torso above the level of the water with powerful strokes of his tail, "I lost my legs to my tuna graft, but look at what I've gained instead!"

"Aren't you stuck in that spring?" the old man asked.

“You might think so, but check it out,” he shouted, pointing to his gills. “I can breathe underwater. Let me tell you, this spring is connected to so many places on Polonia Mons, and beyond. There's this whole other world that I never even would have imagined. If I could choose to be a boring janitor on dry land, or an exciting half-fish half-man underwater adventurer – well, I think it's obvious which I choose.” The man sprayed streams of water at some of the children standing on the edges, who responded with a fit of giggles and innocent delight.

Giovanni understood the feeling. He was filled with a similar sense of amazement at this creature. He returned the following day with his painting supplies, and thankfully the man had also returned. People threw bronze and silver marks into the spring as the man put on a fantastic show with his fountains. Giovanni tried to capture the tableau on his canvas: the thrill of the crowd, the energy of the man, the mist shining in the sun, casting faint rainbows as it fell to the ground. He painted the man in great detail, especially the long, slimy fishtail that had replaced the man's lower body. Giovanni just could not believe the beauty of it.

The following year, the man was still there, performing his show. The crowd was no longer amazed, though some people would absentmindedly toss a few marks his way. The man had been joined by several other performers around the spring; more importantly, he was not the only chimera. Chimeras were still rare, but over the course of his day, Giovanni saw at least twenty chimeras amidst the foot traffic in addition to the four performers.

There was a fox, walking slightly hunched over, orange fur and alert ears the only signs of the graft. One woman was part snake, from the waist down, but it really seemed to add to her feminine allure, Giovanni thought. Then of course there was the squinty-eyed mole man who burrowed out of the side of the mountain.

Little did Giovanni expect that he would run into the snake woman again at a restaurant later on that evening. He still had his fresh painting with him.

“Is that – is that me?” she asked as she slithered up beside him, staring at the painting. “This is beautiful. You have a serious talent!” she exclaimed.

“Why, thank you,” Giovanni said, slightly embarrassed. “I merely paint what I see. If you think the scene is beautiful, it is because you make it so.” Giovanni felt a bit awkward; his English was not the best, but he hoped that this woman understood his compliment.

“Oh, my,” the woman said as she pulled out a small fan and fanned her face. “What a gentleman.” Giovanni became acutely aware of how expensive her clothes looked, and they would have to be tailored to specifically match her unique body. Plus, she could afford a graft: now that initial trials were over, the chimera pods had become a commercial success, and only the rich had any real chance to secure their place in line.

“My name is Palabra,” she said with a throaty laugh. “I do hope you will allow me to treat you to dinner tomorrow night?”

Giovanni nodded, dumbstruck, “Of course. It would be my pleasure.” And that was how Giovanni met his wife.

Palabra came from wealthy stock, so Giovanni never had to work again. She effectively became his financier, and Giovanni was free to paint whatever he wanted. Often, that was Palabra.

The following year, Giovanni was reflecting on his work, and he decided to continue with his yearly paintings of the main square. Palabra had just learned that she was pregnant, and Giovanni wanted to be able to show his son or daughter some day what life was like in Polonia when he or she was born.

There were plenty of chimeras at this point, especially among the youth. Legislators had passed laws that prohibited minors from getting grafts – after all, it was a big, permanent decision that a lot of children weren't mature enough to handle – but it became popular for children of age to beg their parents for a graft. Still, the older generation had already become content with their station in life; Giovanni, for instance, was happy as a painter, and didn't see the need to get a graft just because he could. Palabra would have paid for it happily.

Soon Giovanni's son, Lucio, was born into the world. There had been some concern about the viability of the pregnancy, since Lucio was the first child born of a chimera. The concern was unnecessary; Lucio was born a remarkably healthy – and fully human – baby boy.

Still years passed, and Giovanni painted chimera after chimera as the main square evolved. One year, insects became the new craze. You could often tell how old someone was based on which graft they chose, since certain

kinds of animals would become very popular, and all of the popular kids that year would have to have one. But Giovanni was happy to see that there was always a much more level-headed contingent that chose their grafts carefully, for function rather than form. As an artist, he found the relationship between form and function to be fascinating. It is what drove him to study this particular place and Polonian society in general.

Giovanni continued to paint the scene as his son grew up. When his son was thirteen, he painted a riot that took place in the main square as part of the student strike. It almost looked like a majestic battle, with fierce half-men on one side and calm, collected mages on the other. The strike seemed to end fairly abruptly with the dissolution of the University, Giovanni thought, but it lasted long enough to make for an exquisite piece.

At some point, reflecting on his past paintings, Giovanni noticed that a statue of the Queen had been erected in the center of the spring. He wasn't sure how he hadn't noticed that it wasn't always there, but it became a fixture in the scene for the years to come. The statue was made of glass and it scattered the midday sunlight across the spring's surface. It must have been made by a chimera, but Giovanni didn't know which kind could shape glass like that or how it managed not to be broken over the years. It seemed to have been erected by the year after the student strike, but Giovanni in retrospect found it odd that he didn't find its appearance remarkable when he painted it.

As the years passed, Giovanni saw shops fail and others thrive. One shop in particular, Arcane & Stable,

broke with the orange-shingled roof tradition in favor of establishing a fantastic menagerie on its roof. The menagerie grew each year, both in size and diversity, and the crowd of chimeras seemed to reflect that. The shop was clearly a success, and Giovanni enjoyed the opportunity he had to paint the changes to these businesses.

Then came the horses and the public transportation. Now the crowd was a mix of foot traffic and hoof traffic, and everything in between. The public transportation system thrived, and it was reflected in Giovanni's works. The queen's statue was a constant reminder of the Golden Age of Polonia Mons.

When Lucio turned fifteen, Giovanni finally showed the paintings to him.

“Really? No one had a graft back then?” he said. “That's so weird.” Giovanni was a bit depressed by Lucio's underwhelmed reaction. He expected his son to marvel at the transformation that the city had undergone, to look back wistfully at the times gone by, but that really wasn't his reaction at all. His reaction just seemed so matter-of-fact.

“That's right, son. I know it's strange that chimeras haven't always existed, but I grew up without them.”

“That's just so lame,” Lucio said. “I can't even imagine how boring life must have been back then.”

Giovanni didn't bother trying to make his son understand. He loved his son, but he began to realize that his work had been more for his own sake than for his son's, no matter his original intent. The nostalgia would be forever lost on his son, but Giovanni at least could appreciate his creations. He continued to paint every year,

chronicling the development of Polonia's capital city. He wondered what new sights this year would have in store.

Chapter 3

Spencer

Spencer, so desperate to please your parents. You chose a silkworm graft to help with the family business, and it surely has helped, but you are your own person. Do you really want to be a tailor's son for your entire life?

Spencer squirmed in his seat, struggling. He flexed and strained, his tail twitching and flicking. A small strand of silk slowly made its way out of the tail, fighting every centimeter of the way to be born into the world. Spencer was used to this by now; it was his job, after all.

This particular batch was a bright fuchsia. Not everyone in Polonia wore silk – especially not the wealthy and fashionable, at least not anymore – but it was very popular among the masses. Spencer was no small part of that trend. He could produce fine, durable silks practically for free. Dyeing it was easy too; Spencer just had to be careful what he ate. Naturally this led to a lot of smooth but subtle gradients in the fabric depending on how what he ate passed through his digestive system, but Spencer thought the coloring made his work somewhat unique. Yesterday, Spencer had gorged himself on a particularly bright bushel of beets in preparation for this fabric, and he was quite pleased with the result. His father's latest special client wanted something flashy, so Spencer was doing his best.

Spencer's father was the Cedric from the world-famous Cedric's Tailory. Cedric Jr., really. Spencer's grandfather, Cedric Sr., had created the business and made

a name for it by providing the finest quality garments to those who could afford to pay for it. Cedric carried on in his father's footsteps, but when the chimera revolution happened, Cedric had to change his business model. So many people now had such different measurements and physical needs that the old ways of mass-produced clothing of specific sizes had become antiquated.

Gradually, Cedric had little choice but to produce quality tailored outfits for hundreds of people daily. It was a lot of work, but the entire family pitched in to make it happen and keep the reputation of Cedric's Tailory alive and well. Spencer contributed the raw material, while his mother, Caitlin, wove the silk into a durable fabric with her spider graft. Cedric, meanwhile, with the keen eyes of a rabbit, was able to make extremely accurate measurements at a glance. Not only did this allow him to size up his clients in no time, but it also told him exactly where to cut the fabric. And little Minnie, Spencer's sister who was still too young for a graft, did her part to bring the entire ensemble together with her stitching.

They made plenty of money, and Spencer even felt pride in the work that he did, but it also sometimes felt like a burden. He wasn't forced into this life, exactly. Cedric would have understood if Spencer had fled the nest, and Spencer was sure Cedric would have found a way to make the business work without him. But Spencer couldn't help but feel a strong attachment to his parents for all that they had done for him, and he would never want to disappoint them. The silkworm graft was as much his decision as it was theirs.

But now it felt kind of like a chain around his neck. What could a silkworm really do other than make silk? Even worse, making silk is a very boring process, which left Spencer's mind with nothing else to do but brood over his destiny as a tailor. After several years of this work, Spencer decided that he needed to improve himself, somehow. He was going to see Douglass.

Douglass was the zookeeper at Arcane & Stable, and the man from whom Spencer got his silkworm graft. Spencer left work without telling his father so that he could get to Arcane & Stable before it closed, and he met Douglass up on the roof, where all of the animals were.

“Spencer, right?” Douglass asked. Douglass only let himself be distracted from his work for a few moments, before returning to brushing a llama's fur. His other hand rested on the llama's back; Spencer suspected that Douglass was using his cow graft's power to rejuvenate the llama. There was no glitzy effect like there was with some chimera powers, but there was clearly a connection there.

“Yeah, Douglass. You remember me? I only came in here twice, two years ago.”

“How could I forget?” Douglass blushed, patches of red further fragmenting his black-and-white spotted skin. Spencer didn't feel very memorable, so he didn't really understand Douglass's reaction. “I mean – er, uh – that is,” Douglass stammered in embarrassment, “It's not often that people come in with such a specific request.”

“Really? I would think that would be pretty common,” Spencer said. He felt like Douglass was making

excuses, but what he was trying to excuse himself from was beyond Spencer's comprehension. So what if Douglass remembered him? That just made things easier.

Douglass finally stood up from taking care of the llama and gave Spencer his full attention. "Hungry?" he asked, and put a hand on Spencer's shoulder.

"Oh, no, that's okay," Spencer said. "Thanks for the offer, though."

Douglass gave a gentle squeeze before removing his hand. "Well what can I do for you, then?"

"Well, I was hoping to get a second graft, maybe," Spencer said.

"Is there something wrong with the silkworm?" Douglass asked, slightly dismayed. He did seem to take pride in his work.

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that. I just feel like I need a change, you know?"

"Oh, well, I can definitely understand that," Douglass agreed. "Did you have anything specific in mind?"

"Not really. I thought you might just like to show me around and give me some suggestions."

Douglass chuckled and said, "Sure, I'd be happy to."

Douglass led Spencer through the aisles of his collection. He had added a lot of animals since Spencer's last visit. Spencer was grateful that the entire roof was one big natural environment; sometimes the cobblestone streets could agitate the bottom half of his body and unlike people with feet or even hooves, Spencer couldn't rely on shoes to

protect his lower limb. The soft grass on the roof of Arcane & Stable was soothing, as was the warm summer air. The herbs and flowers that Douglass grew – presumably to sell as magical ingredients – tickled Spencer's nose with pleasant aromas.

“Well, let's see. We need something that will be compatible with both you and your silkworm, right?” Douglass was carefully considering his options. “How about a nice spider?” he offered as he pulled a tarantula out of a small enclosure and balanced it delicately on one hand.

“Like my mom? No thanks.” Spencer said.

“Well, there's plenty of variety among spiders. Do you know what kind your mom is?”

“Uh, I'm not sure, actually. She's good at weaving, that's all I really know.”

“Well, a lot of spiders are. But this guy, for instance, he could make you quite the jumper.” Douglass paused to consider the lower half of Spencer's body. “On second thought, maybe that's not so useful for you.”

“Maybe not.” They continued down the aisles.

“Huh, well, there is this panda bear. He was not easy to get, let me tell you, and I'd love to find a second and breed them, but it's possible he could be compatible.”

“A panda bear?” Spencer looked at the thing, since he'd never seen one before. “He kind of reminds me of you, actually, with the black and white patches of fur,” he added with a laugh. Douglass seemed to take it as a compliment. “What power would he give me?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. I've never heard of a panda chimera before. Chances are that he would give you

strength and toughness, and some natural weapons like claws and fangs, like any other bear. But in my experience, the rarer or more exotic the animal, the more likely that it will grant some completely unpredictable power.”

“It's tempting, but I'd prefer to have a better idea of what I'm getting into.” Spencer glanced to the side and saw the aviary. “Maybe a bird?”

Douglass grimaced. “I don't know if a bird and a worm are going to get along. Maybe a penguin would work, since I don't think they generally eat worms, but I don't have any penguins here. The climate isn't really amenable to them. I could probably get one if you wanted one, but it would take some time.”

“No, that's alright. I'd want to be able to fly, anyway.” This whole process struck Spencer as being kind of strange. It reminded him of being back at Cedric's Tailory, with customers trying to pick out the right outfit for them. He supposed that grafts were the new source of fashion in Polonia, and that was something he was intimately familiar with as a tailor's son.

“Oh, neat, I remember the silkworms being in here,” Spencer said as he approached a box filled with soil.

“Well, they used to be there. I got those guys special for you. I've been breeding them since then; we've gone through several generations at this point. We've got three of them in cocoons right now.”

“Cocoons?” Spencer asked. He wasn't really aware of the life cycle of the silkworm, so he didn't realize that they could transform. “Do they become butterflies?”

“Moths, actually,” Douglass corrected. “Silkmoths.”

Spencer stood there trapped in thought. “Do you think I could transform like that?”

Douglass looked him up and down, and considered things carefully before answering. “I imagine it would take a while, but I don't see why not. Your graft will probably be able to guide you in doing it.”

“Really? Do you think I'd be able to fly then?”

“Probably. I don't know if you'd be able to produce any more silk after that, though.”

“Huh. Well, I'm going to have to think about this. I might just do that!”

“Well, let me know what you decide. I'd be very interested to see how it all turns out. Maybe when you make your decision, we could go out to dinner some time to talk about it,” Douglass offered.

“Oh, I guess maybe,” Spencer said, not really eager to commit to anything. Douglass was a nice guy, but he didn't really feel like hanging out with him in a personal setting. “We'll see what happens.” Douglass seemed a little disappointed, but Spencer wasn't sure what he expected. He wondered if Douglass realized how much it sounded like he was asking him on a date.

“Well, feel free to come back again any time,” Douglass said.

After telling his father about his decision and giving him some time to find a replacement source of silk, Spencer finally took the plunge. That night, in his room, he wrapped himself up in a silk cocoon and hibernated. He didn't emerge until weeks later, and for the first time in his

life he felt like a new man, completely independent of his father and his family. Spencer didn't know where he was going to go from here, but part of the fun would be finding out.

Chapter 4

Jeremiah

Poor Jeremiah, so lost for one so young. Your parents failed you, and the only thing that means anything to you is your brother, Jacob. Your dog graft is something of a mutt, and it bestowed upon you a furry blond tail to match your shaggy hair, a wet, pink dog nose for sniffing and tracking, and short, stubby paws that aren't good for much of anything.

Like so many of the people his age, Jeremiah wanted fame. Unlike most of his peers, it would be his undoing.

In the past decade, the Hive had drastically changed the world. The Hive came into being a few years after the advent of chimerism; philosophers held the belief that chimera powers were combining to construct an alternate dimension that encompassed the collective consciousness of the people of Polonia.

Jeremiah, however, was not a philosopher. He was barely more than a kid, and his grasp on the significance of the Hive was tenuous at best. Anyone could see that it had changed everyone's way of life, typically for the better, but Jeremiah had grown up with the Hive for most of his life so he didn't have an appreciation for what life was like before the Hive existed.

Any chimera could access the Hive. Most could only use it to communicate directly with other people at long distances. Some chimeras, mostly insects like bees and

wasps, could do amazing things in the Hive, but Jeremiah was not one of these chimeras. Jeremiah had trouble relating to animals, and in the end the only animal he managed to establish a relationship with was a dog. Domestic dogs are loyal, trusting, and more importantly, common, so a lot of people are grafted to dogs. To Jeremiah, though, dogs kind of suck. Who wants a supernatural sense of smell? Jeremiah was lucky that he managed to find a dog that wasn't put off by his resentment for his lot in life.

So with his pathetic abilities, he wouldn't build a famous site in the Hive like Fantasy Colosseum, nor would he be able to become a household name like Sir Reginald, or Hogan, or Silas, or Danika the beastmistress. He was just another generic youth on Polonia Mons with no way to make a name for himself.

"I'm going to do it," he decided, out loud. He was on the roof of his house, about twenty kilometers outside the city, with his younger brother, Jacob. They were staring at the stars, which got Jeremiah in an unusually thoughtful mood.

"Do what?" Jacob asked.

"I'm going to register for the tournament."

"Dude," Jacob said in awe, "that's so hardcore!" He thought about it for a minute as he stared at the stars. "But it's also insane. Those people are serious, and you don't stand a chance against them."

"I know. But think about it, I could really make a name for myself. People love to root for the underdog."

Jacob seemed skeptical, "You could also get

yourself killed. Sure, there are going to be medics there to save you, but you're so scrawny you might die and they might not be able to bring you back.”

“Shut your face,” Jeremiah said as he punched his brother playfully on the shoulder. “I'm way bigger than you.”

“Yeah, but you're also older than me. And way smaller than anyone else in the tournament.”

“I know. It's worth the chance though. I'd rather die in the public eye than live in obscurity in some suburban wasteland.” The look in Jeremiah's eye was one of determination, which was something Jacob wasn't used to seeing from his brother.

“Registration ends tomorrow,” Jacob said as the implications of that simple statement dawned on him.

“I guess this is goodbye, then,” Jeremiah said. They both knew that by trusting Jacob with his secret, Jacob was sure to get a beating from their father. Jeremiah couldn't leave without saying goodbye, though, and he knew Jacob wouldn't want him to. The stars continued their eternal watch over the land, and the brothers spent their last night together in awkward silence.

Days later, Jeremiah found himself in some shoddy leather armor with a short sword at his side. Actually standing in the Polonia Mons Colosseum made him realize that he was in over his head. Even without any Hive-crafting abilities, he would have stood the same chances of winning in Fantasy Colosseum without the suddenly very real threat of imminent death.

Of course, a lot of people played Fantasy Colosseum. It seemed to become hot overnight as soon as the actual tournament was announced. Anyone could play it, and since it all took place in the Hive, there wasn't any penalty for losing. Of course, if you weren't an insect your control over your environment in the Hive was somewhat limited, so chances were good that you wouldn't get very far. Jeremiah didn't even bother trying, and went straight for the Grand Tournament.

The tournament was single elimination with twenty-nine participants. The three gladiators seeded in the middle got byes in the first round so that there would be sixteen participants in the second round, eight in the third, four in the fourth, and two in the fifth and final round. Naturally, Jeremiah was seeded in last place. There was no requirement to wear your seed position on your armor, but Jeremiah was proud of it, so he found an octopus chimera to carefully ink "29" in large print on his armor. He figured at the very least, he could get the crowd's support. Unfortunately, Jeremiah knew that his seeding meant that he would be facing the number one seed, Sir Reginald, Mr. I'm-The-Queen's-Bodyguard himself. Standing there under the scrutiny of the crowd left him with his furry blond tail firmly tucked between his legs.

The bugle sounded to prompt the start of the battle. Neither combatant moved from their starting zone, which drew a bout of laughter from the crowd. It was plain to everyone that Jeremiah had no chance. Jeremiah could smell their amusement on the air; unfortunately this made him angry, and anger made Jeremiah stupid.

“Come on kid,” Sir Reginald called across the stadium grounds. “If you insist on fighting, I'll try to go easy on you.” This just made Jeremiah angrier.

He began his sprint, falling to all fours. Sir Reginald took a defensive stance with his longsword held above him and his shield angled downwards. Jeremiah knew that his only chance would be to catch Sir Reginald by surprise.

He dashed at full speed, stopping suddenly just outside of Sir Reginald's sword reach to turn around. He left his back exposed to Sir Reginald, counting on the fact that Sir Reginald would take it easy on him, and started digging as only a dog could. The soft sand of the arena floor flew into Sir Reginald's face, which stunned him momentarily as he raised his shield to cover his eyes. The crowd erupted in laughter as Jeremiah's antics made a fool of the most noble knight of the queendom.

As Sir Reginald raised his shield, Jeremiah turned again, as fast as he could, and went for the artery in Sir Reginald's thigh. Sir Reginald's skin was practically armor as it was, so he didn't bother wearing more than the royal livery. Jeremiah managed to land a solid bite on Sir Reginald's leg, which must have hurt him, though it didn't draw blood.

“You *filthy* curr! You have no honor!” Sir Reginald shouted as he simultaneously tried to clean his eyes and remove Jeremiah from his leg. Jeremiah, to his credit, locked his jaw tightly and wouldn't budge. Sir Reginald, in his disoriented state, brought his sword down hard, cleanly severing Jeremiah's head from his body.

Jeremiah enjoyed the gasps from the crowd as he

felt his life fade. *At least the crowd will remember me,* Jeremiah thought deliriously as Sir Reginald pried his jaw open. *At least Sir Reginald will be taken down a peg, the bigoted elitist scum.* He hoped Jacob was proud of him for trying, but it turned out that just wanting something – no matter how hard – wasn't nearly enough to make it happen.

Chapter 5

Scarlett

Scarlett, the peacock with a heart of gold. You care so much for your little brother, Rush, after your parents left you to raise him on your own. Everything you do is for him, even wearing that ridiculous outfit. You could be beautiful, with your silky brown hair, your full and ample form, and a face that beguiles men even more than your powers. If only you didn't spend most of your time covered in that gaudy outfit, with too much make-up covering your natural beauty.

Oh gods, he isn't breathing, she thought. She was having trouble with coherent thought. There was blood everywhere in the apartment they shared: on the walls, on the ceiling, a big puddle on the floor beneath his ragged, lifeless body. *No one could survive that,* she thought. It looked less like a struggle and more like a massacre.

Suddenly Rush's body sucked in a weak gasp, but he still lay motionless. *He's not dead!* she thought. *Samuel. Samuel can help him. I have to get him to Samuel.* She focused on those words, tried to keep them in mind instead of breaking down. She had just gotten off of work, but she left before Samuel so he might still be at the shop. She bent down and tried to drag Rush's body, but he was too heavy for her and she just covered her outfit in blood. She ran out into the hallway and knocked desperately on her neighbor's door.

A large man answered, for which Scarlett was

grateful. Scarlett would never describe herself as subtle – one look at her outfit would reveal that much – but she usually used a lighter touch than she used now in her panicked state. Her plumage sprang to attention, and so did the neighbor. She commanded him to help her move the body, and the man vacantly agreed. She hoped that she didn't do permanent mental damage with such a blunt effort, but she didn't have time to care about that.

As her neighbor began carrying the body to Arcane & Stable, Scarlett closed her eyes and tried to pull Samuel's consciousness to the Hive. The world melted away as the connection was established, and she found a ghostly version of herself – dressed normally, now – face to face with an apparition of Samuel.

“Scarlett, is that you?” he asked. Of course, he had never seen her in anything but her uniform. “What's wrong?” he asked, clearly worried. She imagined that her avatar was probably crying, the same way she was.

“Rush is hurt. I need your help, Samuel. Are you still at the shop?”

“I was just about to leave. I'll get things ready for you. Is it that bad?”

“I don't think he's going to make it,” she sobbed. “There was so much blood. So much.”

Samuel tried not to look worried. “Can you get him here?”

“We should be there in a minute or two.”

The neighbor hoisted Rush's body onto the bed that

Samuel had prepared. Scarlett dismissed him; she would deal with that problem later. Right now she was focused on Samuel as he put his scaly hands over Rush's body. She found it odd, sometimes, what physical characteristics people gleaned from their grafts. She only had her plumage, but she had known other peacocks unfortunate to end up with bird feet. Samuel had a long lizard tail and scaly hands, but other than that he looked like an average mid-sized man with brown eyes and brown hair. Some people would even find him cute, but Scarlett knew that his girlfriend made him happy, and she knew better than to antagonize a warrior woman. Or Samuel, for that matter, since he was in the process of saving her brother's life.

Samuel had gathered everyone who was still at work before Scarlett arrived. Capella hugged Scarlett sympathetically, while Manta kept her distance. Scarlett knew that Manta's aloofness wasn't because she didn't care, but Manta was the boss and that came with a certain role that she had to play in these situations; she had to be strong because she was in charge. But Manta would be freaking out too if something like this had happened to her husband, who was also present.

“Tyron, I want you to stay with him at all times over the next few days,” Manta said as she studied Rush with her creepy black eyes.

“I feel as bad about this as anyone, but does he really need my protection?”

Manta ignored the question. “Scarlett, I know this is hard, but can you tell us anything else about what happened?”

Scarlett didn't know what Manta expected of her. "I got home and found him like this. There was blood everywhere. Everywhere! I've never seen anything like it." She buried her face in Capella's shoulder, and Capella shot Manta an exasperated look.

Manta considered the situation for a moment. "I don't know what happened either, dear. What I do know is that he is valuable to the sum of ten thousand gold marks, so unless there's a bounty on him I'd say that there's a good chance he'll pull through this." Scarlett wasn't really comforted by her words. That kind of logic only comforted someone like Manta. How could she think about money when her brother was dying?

Samuel broke his reverie over the body, "Scarlett, I'm sorry to say this, but I don't know that I can save him. I've never seen anything like it. Usually, I can tap into a person's natural healing abilities and amplify them. But when I try to do that to Rush, I feel like I'm only making things worse. It doesn't make any sense to me." Samuel clasped his hands together in frustration, and Scarlett continued to cry.

"Samuel, you jerk. You must be able to do something," Capella said between Scarlett's sobs.

"This is beyond my ability. Maybe Matron Beauregard can help? Totemic magic works completely different from chimerism, so she may be able to heal him using something other than his own life force. I don't know why she would help us though," he added as an afterthought.

Scarlett understood the situation. She didn't attend

Polonia Mons University, but everyone else at Arcane & Stable had. They were there for the student strike that eventually made the University dissolve. Students demanded courses about chimerism, but the administration was convinced that chimerism was just a fad and that the old magicks were far more versatile even though they were more difficult to use. Suddenly, witnessing Samuel's failings, she could see their point.

"She'll help us," Scarlett said. "I can get her to understand."

"Scarlett, dear, your power only works on men. You know that," Manta said, concerned by Scarlett's certitude.

You condescending witch!, she thought, but she held her tongue. "I won't need my power. Some people actually have this thing called *compassion*, and a willingness to help others for something other than money." She stormed out of the room. She opened the shop door to leave, triggering the caw caw bird call that greets new customers. She walked no more than five steps before hearing the call again, and soon she found Capella beside her. She squeezed Capella's hand, grateful for her help as they made their way up the mountain to the repurposed University campus where Matron Beauregard lived.

Since Matron Beauregard was a purist, Scarlett couldn't announce her approach via the Hive like she would with a chimera. She settled for knocking on Matron Beauregard's door. The Matron literally looked like a witch, warts and all, which was a difficult look to pull off in modern society. It occurred to Scarlett that if the Matron

was such a good healer – she did teach the healing arts at the University, after all – she could have healed her warts if she wanted to. Scarlett felt uncomfortable with the idea that the cantankerous old woman in front of her made the conscious decision to be off-putting.

“What do you want?” she asked, her voice nearly as grating as her face.

“Please, Matron Beauregard, I need your help. My brother is hurt,” she pleaded.

She snorted in disgust as she noticed Scarlett's plumage and Capella's pitch black face framed by short white hair. “Don't you have some furry willing to help you. Or some *scaly*, I guess. Alligators, they're the healers, right?”

“Crocodiles,” Capella corrected, and Scarlett gave her a frustrated look. *We want her to help; there's no need to correct her!* Sometimes she wished there were a graft for reading minds, and right now she wished Capella had it.

“What's the difference?” she asked.

“Their physical characteristics are very similar, but crocodiles have long v-shaped snouts while –”

“Oh gods, spare me the lecture. I don't give a fig about the difference between a crocodile and an alligator,” the Matron interrupted.

“Please!” shouted Scarlett, a bit too loudly. “I took my brother to a crocodile, but he can't do anything for him.” The Matron raised an eyebrow. “I was hoping you might have more success.”

“Are you sure he isn't dead already? I've never heard of something a croc couldn't heal. The furries put me

out of business, first as an instructor, and then as a healer.”

“Samuel – that’s the name of the crocodile – specifically recommended you,” Scarlett said, unsure of what else to say. “Please, haven’t you ever lost someone close to you? You have to help me,” she begged.

“Samuel, eh?” she asked, and Scarlett worried that invoking Samuel’s name might have been a mistake. “He must be desperate, to send you to me.”

“He is. I am,” Scarlett’s tears were back.

“Fine, let me put together a few things, then take me to him. I haven’t practiced healing in years, so I probably don’t have all of the ingredients I’ll need.”

“That’s okay,” Capella said. “We’re going to a magic shop anyway. Who knows, when this is over you might find employment there if you’re interested.”

Matron Beauregard smiled for the first time in what must have been years, by Scarlett’s estimation.

The Matron studied Rush for several minutes. Rush’s condition hadn’t changed at all in the past hour, which in Scarlett’s mind was probably a good thing, but he still looked like he was in terrible shape. Even with healing, he would probably be a scarred mess when this was over.

Manta had recalled Douglass to the shop, and a *caw caw* signaled his return.

“You guys aren’t going to believe what happened,” he shouted from the main room as he made his way back to the infirmary. “Some idiotic mutt – I didn’t catch his name – thought he could compete in the tournament. He fought dirty, and the heavy-handed Sir Reginald accidentally

beheaded—” Douglass's play-by-play of the evening's events stopped short with his mouth wide open when he saw Rush. Scarlett was tempted to cry again, but she was starting to regain her composure now that Matron Beauregard was helping.

“Zookeeper,” the Matron said, “Make yourself useful. I need these ingredients.” Douglass blinked in shock, looking at Matron Beauregard, then at Rush, then at the list. Clearly Manta had not prepared him for what to expect when he got back to the shop.

“I've got most of these things, but I've never even heard of feral root.”

The Matron snorted, “I bet. It looks like a cat's paw, with five short leaves with sharp, stiff needles pointing out of the ends. The needles protect it from sewer predators, like crocodiles,” she added as innocently as her scratching voice would allow.

“That's just an urban legend,” Samuel protested, but Scarlett ignored him.

“Please, Douglass, you'll get the ingredient for me, won't you?”

Douglass looked into her eyes. “You know I will. But really, the sewer? You owe me for this.”

Scarlett slumped down hard on the couch in the corner of the room. “I owe you all,” she acknowledged, and an uncomfortable silence fell over the room as Matron Beauregard began her work.

Chapter 6

Caryn

Caryn, a single mother of two just trying to make ends meet. Your slumped shoulders and callused hands are mementos of a life of hard, manual labor. You want a better life for your children, and no job is too dirty if it helps you reach that goal.

Mr. Balk is not paying me enough for this, Caryn thought to herself as she took a break from her scrubbing to smooth back a stray hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. There was a time when Caryn would have just thought about her children when things got hard, and take solace in the joy that she would one day feel when Bucko, her oldest, came of age and she could afford to get him the graft he always wanted. That time had passed. Caryn's spirit of youthful idealism had been worn down over time, scoured away through years of hard work.

A scouring pad, she thought. *That would probably help.* She went back to her cart to get more supplies. These blood stains were the most obstinate stains Caryn had ever encountered, and they were absolutely everywhere. At least Balk agreed to burn the furniture; she didn't know what she would do if she had to clean all of that too. As it was, the bare room that once had eggshell-colored walls and baby blue carpeting was now just a splash of crimson with the original colors peeking through here and there. The patch of wall that Caryn had been working on for the two days since the attack was now an uneven brown. She didn't know why she was bothering to try.

Well, she did know. That was what Balk told her to do, and he was her boss even if he had given her an impossible task. *You can't get blood from a stone*, she thought, but reconsidered her words when she remembered that the walls in this room were made of stone and they had blood to spare.

Eventually Caryn gave up on working on the “blood room” as it had come to be known by the patrons of the Polonia Grand Hotel. There was quite a bit of curiosity about the room and the woman who was killed there. Usually Caryn worked silently in the background to keep the inn clean, but suddenly everyone wanted to pick her brain about Verna.

“You must know something about her,” asked Ferelle as Caryn made her way through her rounds. It sickened Caryn that anyone would be drawn in by such a tragedy. She just wanted it to go away, but those blasted stains weren't going anywhere and neither was the story of Verna, the dolphin murdered in suite 213 of Polonia Grand Hotel.

“Really, I don't know anything, ma'am,” Caryn said as politely as she could while she cleaned Ferelle's room. “She had only been here for four days. I cleaned her room each day, and she just sat in there quietly reading the whole time.”

“Did you empty her trash? Was there anything in it?” Anything in her trash? Caryn wasn't sure she could remember any of the trash she had emptied this morning, much less any of Verna's trash.

“Not that I can remember. I don't know what you're

expecting from me.” Ferelle had an unreadable look in her eagle eyes. Caryn couldn't afford a graft for herself, though she didn't particularly want one either. A graft might open up some job opportunities, but Caryn had grown accustomed to her life at the inn.

“Verna was a dolphin chimera, right?” Caryn nodded. She did at least know that much. That was possibly the only interesting feature of Verna.

“Yes, ma'am. Actually, now that you mention it, I don't think she had the graft when she started staying here. I didn't even think about it since it affected her appearance so slightly.” Caryn expected Ferelle to be a bit upset that she hadn't offered the information sooner, but she seemed to be mostly grateful.

“That's interesting,” she said, then sat in thought as Caryn went about cleaning the room. When Caryn finished the room, Ferelle finally said, “Thanks, you've been very helpful. Let me know if you learn anything more.” Caryn agreed noncommittally.

Caryn continued through her daily routine, stopping at Hogan's room. Even someone like Caryn who didn't care at all about sports or the tournament had heard of Hogan. Caryn secretly enjoyed cleaning his room, feeling some measure of excitement just from being connected to someone so famous. How great would it be if Buckco's graft earned him a reputation like Hogan's?

Caryn finally got to Danika's rooms. Danika hadn't been around very often, since she was spending her days touring the city and her evenings and nights at the tournament. Caryn opened the door to each room without

knocking, until she heard a gasp.

“Oh, miss Danika, I'm so sorry! I didn't think you were here,” she said, embarrassed. Danika was standing in front of the full-length mirror, holding a cream-colored dress in front of her body to try to hide her nakedness.

“Oh, no, it's okay. Caryn, right? You just startled me, that's all,” Danika said with a blush. She awkwardly slipped her leather vest and riding shorts on while keeping the dress in front of her. Caryn found Danika's sense of fashion to be strange and a bit mannish, but Caryn didn't really have room to criticize anyone; she just wore plain silk robes that were covered in stains from her duties. She would have to throw this robe out once she was done dealing with the blood room.

“I could come back later if that would be better, miss,” Caryn offered as she politely averted her eyes.

“Don't be silly, Caryn. Do whatever you need to do.”

“If I may say it, ma'am, that is a very pretty dress. It will look lovely on you.”

Danika looked at Caryn, then at the dress, before speaking. “I don't know. I'm sure it looks fine, but it doesn't feel right. I bought it to try to blend in a bit more as I tour the city, but actually seeing myself in it... I don't look like myself, you know?”

Caryn paused in cleaning the room to look at Danika in the eyes, “Is that necessarily bad?” she asked. “Don't you ever wish you could be someone else?”

Danika bit her lip as if she were considering her words carefully before responding. “No. Not ever. I love

my life. I love my friends, and my job, and I especially love my pets. I wouldn't trade this if I could be anyone else, even the queen. Is that how you feel, Caryn?" Caryn couldn't help but feel a bit foolish.

"Well, sometimes, I guess. Sometimes my life just seems so hard, while everyone else who passes through here just seems to be having a great time."

"Well, if you ask me, your life is what you make of it. If you want to be miserable, you can be, and if you want to be happy, you can be that too. Money and hardship have little to do with it. You've got kids, right?"

"Two. Bucko and Kiba. They mean everything to me, ma'am. I've been saving as much as I can from my wages, because Bucko's sixteenth birthday is in two days and I want to get him a graft." Danika gave a big, toothy grin, probably reflecting the cheer in Caryn's voice.

"See, there's plenty to be happy about, Caryn. Celebrate the good times, and deal with the bad times." She picked up the dress again and held it in front of herself as she looked in the mirror. "Maybe being someone else for a little while can be fun, too, though," she said as she gave Caryn a conspiratorial smile.

"Thank you very much for the advice, miss Danika," Caryn said. "I'll be sure to take good care of your pets. They're so well-behaved and so clean! You should really be proud of them."

"Oh, believe me, I am. Thanks for your hard work, Caryn. I know it might seem like your work goes unappreciated, sometimes, but I really mean it."

Caryn gave a few more rounds of thanks before

excusing herself to the hallway. Danika had cheered Caryn up enough to work on the blood room some more. She was pretty sure that it would take a new coat of paint, new carpeting, and new furniture to make the place habitable again. It practically wouldn't be the same room anymore. Convincing Balk to pay to redo the room would be a tough task, but it seemed easier than cleaning those stains.

Caryn would wait until she got her paycheck before making the suggestion, though. She couldn't wait to see the look on Bucko's face when she took him to get a graft. It gave her comfort to know that her hard work had meaning.

Chapter 7

Sharonda

Sharonda, a young girl who is hopelessly clueless about the world and hopelessly in love. The heart wants what it wants, but you are looking for love in all of the wrong places. Forbidden love is always sweetest, and your lips are drawn to it like a hummingbird to nectar. Your skin hums in anticipation of your first kiss, and your deep brown eyes threaten to swallow the object of your affection whole.

Sharonda had her eyes on Jason for two years now. She was popular among her classmates, but he was kind of a geek. He was smart, though, and she thought that was cool, no matter what the rest of the school thought. She was thirteen.

Jason was on Sharonda's school wagon. Chimeras with elephant grafts would pull large, wooden carts up and down Polonia Mons to get the students where they needed to be. The Queen believed strongly in education, so she really led the charge to get transportation for everyone. *No Child Left at Home* was the slogan. Sharonda didn't really care about the politics, she was just happy to have twenty minutes each morning and twenty minutes each evening to cast furtive glances in Jason's direction.

It didn't take Jason long to notice. Sharonda began to fill out and dress provocatively, if a bit garishly, for Jason's sake. Not that the other boys in her classes minded. Still Jason remained quiet and reserved, except when he

knew all of the answers in class, which in Sharonda's mind was basically always.

Unfortunately, Sharonda was unaware at the time that she had developed the worst crush possible. She was so embarrassed when she learned that fact.

“Jason,” she said nervously as they made their trek up Polonia Mons one morning. She tried to get as much privacy as she could in the open wagon. “Do you think, maybe – I mean, would you be willing to – I, uh, err – Will you go to the spring formal with me?”

“Sharonda!” Jason gasped despite himself. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, why wouldn't I be?” she asked, feeling her face warm. Her dark complexion thankfully hid the blush she felt from being so forward.

“Our parents would kill us!” Jason gaped. “Actually, that sounds kind of awesome.” Sharonda wasn't sure if this meant he liked her or not, and she was mostly confused.

Jason could see her confusion. “You mean you didn't know? My mom's maiden name is Beecher.” Sharonda felt a pit in her stomach, like she had fallen off the cart and was tumbling all the way down the slopes of Polonia Mons.

“*Helen* Beecher!?” Sharonda asked. No wonder Jason thought she wasn't serious. Helen Beecher led the student revolt at Polonia Mons University, and Sharonda's father, Marvin Johnson, was the University's Provost at the time. Their bitter rivalry was a matter of public record.

“So you didn't know?” Jason asked. Sharonda

shook her head. "So you really wanted to go to the dance with me? Gods, Sharonda. If you knew how often I thought about you you wouldn't be playing with me like this."

"I'm not playing, Jason," she said, hopeful.

Jason reached out and took her hand in his, intertwining his short, sweaty fingers with hers. "Then neither am I."

Their love burned hotly and secretly, as only young love can. A month later they showed up at the dance together, Jason in a woolen tuxedo, and Sharonda in a slinky almond dress that made the other girls jealous. The couple caused quite the stir among their teachers, many of whom were students at the University during the strike. Sharonda's father knew of the events by the following evening.

"I forbid you from seeing him again," Marvin said in his tone that brooked no argument.

"But daddy—" Sharonda started.

"No buts," he said. "What were you thinking, Sharonda? The men at work were laughing at me, telling me that I had no control over my own daughter, letting her mess around with the spawn of my sworn enemy."

"I hate you!" Sharonda cried. "I'm going to see Jason no matter what you do."

"You can hate me all you want, but you *will* stop seeing the boy. I'll arrange for different transportation to school for you, and I'll contact the principal to get your classes changed."

Sharonda ran to her room and cried. She loved her

father, but he was way too strict. If only she were sixteen, she could just get a graft and meet Jason in the Hive, where no one would bother them. But that was so many years away, and Sharonda loved Jason so much.

She resolved to see him, making up excuses to find a way to get time with him. "I'm staying over at Janice's house, tonight." "I've joined the martial arts club, and we have practice Monday, Wednesday, and Friday after school." "I'm not feeling well. You know, girl problems. You and mom should go to the theater without me." It wasn't hard to find excuses, but it didn't take long for someone else to catch them.

"That is *it*," Marvin roared at his daughter as he returned home from work one day, his exaggerated enunciation lending an air of authority to his words. "Thanks to you, daughter, our family is moving."

Sharonda never felt more despair. She was going to lose Jason forever, unless she did something. But what could she do? Her father couldn't be more stubborn if he were grafted to a mule.

Chapter 8

Manta

Manta, the owner and proprietress of Arcane & Stable. Your will and cunning turn your dreams into reality, and no one could possibly hope to stop you. Your beady black eyes see much, but it is your shrewd and capable mind that makes the world an open book for you. Yet even you let down your guard sometimes, especially for Tyron.

The following day, Manta felt bad for Scarlett and even worse for Rush, but she still had a business to run. She let Scarlett take paid leave to watch over her brother, but the others were hard at work as usual. She didn't have the heart to tell Scarlett that her crow abilities to discern value were in fact very precise; she could tell, for instance, that Rush only had a fifty percent chance of surviving his condition. To his credit, that prognosis seemed to be improving, she assumed as Matron Beauregard continued to work on her magicks.

Manta tried to put Rush's situation out of her mind, but couldn't. She couldn't imagine why the boy would literally be worth a Queen's ransom if he survived. She reflected on the fact that this would be more money than her shop had made in past nine years combined. With that much money, even split among her employees, she could retire comfortably and live a life of luxury.

But would she? The shop had been her dream, during the days of the strike. The older generation needed ingredients to fuel their spells, and the younger generation

needed a supply of animals for chimerism. Hence the name, Arcane & Stable. She felt that her idea was a brilliant way to try to heal the divide that separated the old and the young in the city.

She enlisted the best talent among her peers, aided in selection by her crow senses. Capella possessed a knack with complex systems even before her monkey graft, so she was the perfect person to operate the chimera pods. The chimera pods which she was now tinkering with.

“Boss, something's up,” Capella said to her. She liked to be called Boss, and Capella knew that. “Someone else was using this recently, I guess last night while we were locked up.”

“What? How is that possible?” Manta asked as she made her way deliberately across the room, scanning the merchandise. Nothing seemed to be missing.

Capella opened the front door. The caw caw of the front door produced a satisfying sensation in the tips of Manta's feathers, as if money were on its way. Manta's rational mind, of course, knew better.

“Yeah, they broke the lock here, but tried to make it look like they hadn't. I'll fix it.”

Manta considered the possibilities. If someone broke in to use the pods, they probably also stole an animal to graft. The animals were Douglass's responsibility. Manta had chosen him because he had a natural affinity with animals, and as a cow his power let him single-handedly run an entire zoo without the overhead of feeding the creatures. She wished she understood how a power like that worked; as with money in the economy, energy is

conserved, so how was Douglass this unlimited supply of energy? In the end she didn't really care how it worked, since the results had proven that it did.

Manta, though she was skilled at maintaining a current catalog of their inventory, did not often make it up to the menagerie on the roof of their building. Douglass had painstakingly grown their small seed of normal animals into an impressive display of exotic creatures from all over the world. She made her way down the path through the garden, marveling at how Douglass managed to keep so many creatures so happy in such limited space. Not that the building was small; there were just so *many* animals. She would expect the predators to eat the prey, but Douglass kept them so content and well-behaved that their instincts were in check at all times. There was a pervasive harmony about the menagerie that Manta found most agreeable.

Manta checked off animal after animal. "Three koala," she said as she patted one on the head and checked it off. "Two ostriches. Three lions. Two camels," she continued, though why anyone would want the power to store massive amounts of water was beyond Manta's power of imagination. "Three bobcats. One, two, three, four, five squirrels." She didn't mind Douglass's decisions, as long as the customers were happy, and her purse told her that the customers were very happy.

The garden also served as a source of ingredients for the old ways, such as Matron Beauregard's healing talents. "Four three-toed sloths." Manta's dream was to be able to serve the needs of both communities, but the older generation was even more distrustful of crows than the

modern youth. Manta supposed that as long as she was getting paid, it didn't matter, but she felt like she should be able to do more with her abilities.

Manta passed the aquarium. "Two dolphins. One manta ray," she smiled at her namesake, a rare find. She wondered what power it would bestow to some lucky customer. She rattled off a dozen more of the smaller aquatic animals, and she knew that Douglass kept the big stuff like sharks and whales in a farm on the coast. Figuring out the whale graft was a difficult challenge; how do you fit a whale in a chimera pod? Capella, actually, was a pioneer in this regard. It was possible to use newborn animals for a graft, if you could get them to imprint upon the host. Capella's ingenuity was responsible for the revolutionary public transit system that Olympus Mons enjoyed, with its elephants, albatrosses, and whales. Truly chimerism had improved the world in so many ways, and Capella was no small part of that.

Manta arrived at the insect section. *Well, I don't know how I would be able to tell if something were missing from here.* The underground section, with the prairie dogs and gophers and snakes and rabbits, got the same treatment. In the end, if something was missing from the menagerie, Manta couldn't find it. Of course, there were other (inferior) sources of animals in the city, and she was grateful not to have any of her merchandise stolen, but she had hoped to figure out who had broken her lock and abused her property. She took another fresh breath of the clean mountain air before descending back into the sales room, wondering if she could figure out who her intruder was

some other way.

If wishes were horses..., she thought as she spied a detective waiting for her in the main room. She hadn't heard him arrive since Capella had the door propped open as she fiddled with the lock.

“Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm Detective Irvine with the PMPD.” He flashed his badge. “Did you have some trouble here last night?” he asked.

“Why yes, officer. How did you know?”

“I could see your employee working on the lock.”

“I didn't mean – I mean, we just found out about the break-in ourselves. How did you hear about it?”

“Oh, no,” he stammered. “I'm here for something else entirely. I hear you have a girl who works here; she should be pretty easy to recognize. The man I spoke to described her as a, 'sexy tease with a blue leotard and bunny ears',” he read from a notepad. He put his hand over his eagle eyes and mockingly scoped out the shop, as if he might have missed her.

Manta imagined that an eagle graft would be handy for Detective Irvine. His turtle graft, she noticed from the shell hiding beneath his trench coat, would be useful too, since it would let him generate an invisible barrier to protect him against criminals' chimera powers. He was a rare breed, this man with two grafts.

She didn't bother to dodge the question; she could guess what this was about, but there wasn't much she could do for Scarlett than to let him see the situation. She escorted him to the infirmary.

Irvine did not seem surprised by the scene, Manta

suspected because he had seen the blood at the apartment. Scarlett was watching over Rush, who still hadn't regained consciousness. Matron Beauregard was furiously grinding herbs in a mortar as she monitored his condition. Tyron stood stoically by Rush's bedside, eyeing the detective warily until he realized his purpose. Samuel was at another bed, regrowing the mouth of a swordfish chimera who lost his match in the Grand Tournament last night.

“Scarlett Munroe? I'm Detective Irvine.”

Scarlett looked up at him from her seat. “Is this about yesterday?”

“I'm afraid so. Your neighbor has filed a formal complaint about your abuse of power.”

“But you know I had to do it. My brother was dying.”

“I know, ma'am. I appreciate your circumstances, but I still have to report this.”

“Are you sure about that, officer?” Scarlett asked innocently. Manta wanted to walk over to the girl and slap her in the face. She didn't pay her employees to be this stupid, not even Scarlett.

“You'll find your powers lost on me,” Irvine said as he rapped his knuckles against his shell. “But I'll still see what I can do for you, if you help me out.” He paused for a moment as he looked at his notepad. “What can you tell me about what happened to your brother?”

Scarlett looked confused. “I'm not sure what you're asking. I just found him like this. There was blood everywhere in our apartment. I don't really know anything more than that.”

“So he's been unconscious the entire time? He hasn't been able to identify his attacker?”

Manta cut Scarlett off before she could answer, “Detective, what makes you so sure that this was an attack?”

“Well, ma'am. I'm sorry to inform you that there may be a serial killer in Polonia Mons, and I think this case is related.” Manta and Scarlett gasped. Tyron stiffened, becoming wary again. Matron Beauregard didn't miss a beat in her grinding. “We tried to keep the first three murders out of the media, but it finally leaked in this morning's edition of the Polonia Sun.”

“That is horrible,” Manta said in disgust. “No one else has survived other than Rush? Are you sure these attacks are related?” She avoided the fact that Rush's survival was still very much in doubt, and was grateful that Irvine didn't remind Scarlett of that.

“I'm fairly certain, ma'am. I assume that Rush was a chimera?” he asked, though it was not really a question.

Scarlett nodded, “A dolphin. He had just finally settled on getting a dolphin a few weeks ago.”

“So he was – what? A writer? An accountant?”

“He considered himself to be a philosopher,” Manta answered, her voice thick with disapproval. “Personally I thought he just mooched off of his big sister.” Scarlett gave Manta the acidic look she gives when she's angry but afraid to stand up to her boss. Manta knew the look well. Scarlett's beauty and appeal were a staple of Arcane & Stable, but gods the girl could be difficult sometimes.

“Yes, well, all of the other victims were chimeras

also, and each one of them had their grafts forcibly removed. Forensics seems to think it's some kind of poison based on the old magicks that makes the graft turn on its host.”

Matron Beauregard let out a low whistle without stopping her work, “Clever. Wish I'd thought of it.” Irvine gave a brief smirk before making his face serious again.

Scarlett watched Rush's breathing carefully. “That's horrible. Who could do such a thing?”

“That's what I'm trying to find out. Let me know if you can think of anything else that might be relevant. I'll stop by the shop periodically over the next few days to see if there are any new developments, and to see how Rush is doing. I'll try to get some leniency for the other thing, since you're being so helpful on my main case.”

Manta realized that Irvine didn't care at all about the other case; he was just using it to get Scarlett to talk. Despite his cavalier demeanor, this detective was every bit as shrewd as Manta was herself. She didn't appreciate the deceit, but she was happy to have someone competent on the case.

“Thank you very much for your work, Detective. You're welcome to visit any time.” He pardoned himself and left the shop, with a caw caw indicating his departure. Capella had fixed the lock; that was one less problem to worry about.

She walked over to Tyron. His eyes stared back into hers as she leaned in close. No one but Tyron could stare into her eyes so steadily. He wrapped his arms around her, and whispered, “Don't worry, love. As long as I'm here,

you, Scarlett, Rush – you're all safe.”

She felt safe in his arms, but she still had a store to run. “You were here last night, right? Watching over Rush?”

“Of course.”

“But you didn't hear the door or the chimera pods when someone broke in last night?”

“I was back here with Rush the whole time, like you asked. I might have dozed off once or twice, but I was sitting against the door so that no one could have gotten in here without waking me.” Manta couldn't help but feel that something was off about his story, and wondered what would make her husband lie to her. *He must have his reasons*, she thought. She trusted him completely.

Chapter 9

Warren

Warren, the unlikely defender of the queendom. You haven't had the opportunity to make many choices in your life, and in many ways you're still just a child. But when you had to make a choice, you demonstrated honor, unparalleled.

Well, at least I've lived a full life, Warren mused. *I mean, up until now.* He fired stream after stream of sticky napalm at the oncoming horde from all seven of his mouths – one in the normal place and one each on the palms of his six hands. He never slowed down, never even stopped to look at the corpse of his father that was probably no more than a skeleton by now. The swarm of creatures before him had required his total concentration, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the past twelve years. Despite his intense concentration, he managed to find time for some hindsight.

His father, William, had invented the chimera pods, among other things. History, if there was a history after Warren's body gave out and the horde was unleashed on Polonia, would recognize Professor William Tacrolimus as a man who fundamentally changed the world. Warren, even as a child, was at times a lucky beneficiary of his father's discoveries. He was after all the very first Polonian to become a chimera; now that he was older, he realized that had his mother survived his birth, she probably would have never consented to allow his father to experiment on their ten-year-old son, but it all had worked out so Warren was

not too upset about his father's questionable ethics. Perhaps he should have been.

At least, as far as the chimera pods went. It was one of his father's other inventions that led to his untimely death, and Warren's current predicament. Many of William's inventions relied on the old magicks. From his simple observation that diviners could glimpse into other realities to see the impact that individual actions might have, it was a simple extension to be able to travel to those different realities. Warren mostly understood the device. Mostly. Of course, it had long ago burned under a pile of flaming insects.

It was through his journeys into alternate realities that Warren picked up several of his grafts. He seemed to have a knack for being compatible with any creature. He suspected that his father was involved somehow, but he had never been able to figure out how, and if his father did have the answers he had probably taken them – well, not to his grave, since at this rate he would never be buried, but he had taken them with him to the afterlife reserved for mad geniuses who experimented on their own children.

Before leaving Polonia Prime (his own personal name for his original reality, the one they had returned to in the present), Warren had already grafted an octopus, a spider, an eagle, and a chameleon. He wasn't entirely sure why he chose those, but to Warren they all just seemed so complementary in a vaguely aesthetic way. He couldn't say for sure whether he was beautiful, but he knew he was unique. And that was before the truly unusual grafts he picked up while jumping from reality to reality with his

eccentric father.

One world they found was inhabited by monstrous flying lizards called *dragons* that terrorized the countryside, pillaging it for gold just so they could hoard it and brag to each other about how big their pile was. Warren had managed to find the one noble dragon, Alunya, a scrappy red warrior, determined to free the people from their oppressors. Warren and his father slayed dragon after dragon in the name of Alunya. When she was the only dragon left in her world, she decided it was time to move on. She shrank to a more manageable size and joined Warren in a chimera pod. Warren inherited her shape-changing abilities, her fire breath, and, he hoped, her noble spirit.

Several worlds later found a magical place filled with nothing but happiness, rainbows, and spectacular creatures called unicorns. These creatures knew no fear, no pain, no negative emotion at all. Warren and William were tempted to stay in this world forever, but they could sense that they were intruders in this paradise. Still, they got nothing but hospitality from its denizens. Hospitality that Warren felt his father abused when he grafted a unicorn onto Warren.

At this point, Warren was feeling a bit overloaded by the consciousnesses of the creatures he had assimilated. They were always there in the back of your head; once you got a graft, you were never quite the same. Their personality or demeanor affected you. You were still human, and could think rationally and abstractly, but you forever afterward viewed the world through a certain lens.

Warren had stacked six lenses on top of each other, to the point that he could barely see through to the other side. He knew he needed something to get a handle on things, and his dad had just the thing: one final graft, a dolphin, to grant him the clarity of mind to compartmentalize the creatures he hosted in his head. When his father was right, he was right; the dolphin solved all of Warren's problems, and everything was right in the world, whichever world they were in that day.

In the end, Warren had picked up a number of physical characteristics. He had two mighty red dragon wings sprouting out of his back and a glimmering unicorn horn in the middle of his forehead that matched his glowing red eyes and hair. His six arms all ended with mouths, not that he needed to eat very often, but he could feel that those mouths were based on the suckers of the octopus he had grafted. The spider gave him tiny invisible hairs that he could use to cling to surfaces; not that it was particularly useful since he had wings, but he supposed it was better than getting the spider's mandibles or something. The chameleon left no visible physical trace, but he guessed he wasn't surprised at that. He felt like kind of a freak, but at least he was a freak from a world that was now filled with freaks.

Not every world was as friendly as the unicorn world, unfortunately, and that proved disastrous. William and Warren were stuck for several years in a world without magic; their transportation simply stopped working. An angry mob later, Warren decided to mask his appearance while William studied the "science" of that world. He was

eventually able to hack together a solution to get them out of there.

They next ended up in the most disturbing world of all. Evolution had clearly taken a wrong turn on this world at some point; the only creature that existed there was a voracious green insect the size of a dog or a cat. These creatures could derive energy directly from the sun, but they still felt hunger. As far as William could tell, they had eaten every other species out of existence, they burned with an insatiable hunger, and they were unable to die. They bred like rabbits, and the surface of the earth was literally covered with a layer of these creatures piled on top of each other in some grotesque orgiastic mockery of existence. Evolution had created a single creature most fit for survival, and it was miserable.

Warren held off the creatures with his chimera powers while William charged their transportation. Warren still doesn't know if the device was still messed up from the world without magic, if things worked unusually on this new world, or if William had just been a bit too hasty in activating the device, but the portal didn't close like it normally did. This unfortunately left Warren and William in their home reality, with a constant stream of terrifying insects surging through a tear in reality. Warren did what he could, but he couldn't kill all of the creatures and keep William safe, and he *had* to kill all of the creatures. If even two such creatures escaped this room, their reality was doomed to suffer the same fate as the terrible world they had just come from.

Years passed. Warren continued the fight without

rest. If it weren't for the unicorn graft, he would have had to give up after the first day, from thirst, or hunger, or exhaustion. But he held on as much as he could. He didn't even know where he was; it certainly wasn't anywhere he recognized, but he was certain it was home. Despite the unicorn, he was getting desperate. He couldn't go on forever like this, and he felt certain that since no one had found him in the past twelve years, no one would find him now.

Then a remarkable thing happened. He felt a presence behind him. He didn't dare turn around to see what it was. The presence was warm, and gentle. He felt a pair of hands reach onto his shoulders, and a gentle tingling sensation. He surged, renewed with strength and energy, as if he had just eaten a feast.

“You looked like you were tired,” a man said, pacifically, as if he were speaking to a doe that might bolt. “My name is Douglass.”

Chapter 10

Cristian

Cristian, a victim of the stigmas of a sometimes intolerant society. Your sharp fangs, pale skin, and leathery wings strike fear into the minds of mothers everywhere. You struggle to resist your baser instincts, but can you really deny who you are?

Cristian and his kind had earned a certain notoriety. Bat chimeras were well-known for their thirst for blood. Most people thought that only sadistic psychopaths would choose to bond with a bat, but Cristian was more rational. Drinking animal blood was no worse than eating animals, and everyone he knew did that. Except of course for the rare vegetarian who insisted that chimerism has bridged the gap between man and animal, so that animals now deserved equal rights too. The vegetarians were the only group of people that Cristian could think of that were more ostracized than the bats.

Why not bond with a bat? Cristian just didn't understand the perspective of those who were against bat chimeras. Bats offered fantastic powers: longevity, durability, and immunity to disease. Besides, Cristian couldn't change the fact that the only bond he was able to make was to a bat. After enjoying several years as a bat chimera, though, and getting personal insight into the bat lifestyle, Cristian came to the conclusion that even if he could have chosen to graft any creature he still would have chosen a bat. He felt good about himself. He felt complete.

That didn't stop him from wanting to improve his

people's reputation. That was, in part, why he signed up for the tournament. He wanted to prove that he wasn't some blood-thirsty degenerate, that he could fight like a civilized person in honorable combat. He had been training in the art of fencing with his grandfather for most of his life, and he would finally put those skills to use tonight.

There was just one thing that worried him. His opponent tonight was Silas, a vicious wolf chimera. Silas had earned a reputation as one of the few non-insects to seriously compete in Fantasy Colosseum. This was no small feat; most insect chimeras had more influence over the malleable world in the Hive, so to be able to compete with them on their home turf was a testament to his prowess. It wasn't Silas's skill that worried him, though. It was that the crowd wanted him to win.

Cristian had decided that in order to win the people's hearts, he had to throw the fight.

Cristian was feeling the weight of his decision now that he was actually on the battlefield, waiting for his fight to begin. It was the last match of the first round of the tournament, the last match of the second night of the tournament. The full moon glowed brightly overhead, illuminating the arena nearly as much as the firefly chimeras paid to shine their lights on the night matches. Cristian suspected that their fight was scheduled last precisely because the mood of the night would suit both combatants well.

The crowd gradually took up a chant, which Cristian was eventually able to pick up even from the field. *Silas! Silas!* He wasn't surprised, but the animosity toward

him was palpable. Cristian became very aware of the blood pumping through his veins. He could feel his neck throbbing, he could hear the blood as it rushed past his ears, and his vestigial wings were fluttering of their own accord, screaming instinctively for him to flee.

Instead, step by step, Cristian pushed himself onward as he left the starting zone. He and Silas approached each other to within five meters. Both held defensive positions, Cristian with his arm relaxed and pointing his grandfather's rapier toward Silas, and Silas on all fours with his hackles raised. Cristian wore simple leather armor, tailored to accommodate his wings, but Silas was unarmed and unarmored. Cristian knew better than to assume that he had the advantage.

Silas began to test Cristian's defenses with a series of feints, but Cristian's superior range gave him an edge initially. Cristian became keenly aware that because of his choice of weapons, Silas must fight people with longer reach all the time, and yet he won often. All Cristian had to do to throw the fight was to naively be overconfident in his reach like so many of Silas's other opponents. He knew he should do it, but now that he was in the middle of the fight he didn't want to throw it anymore. His body thrummed in time to the rhythm Silas generated with his probes. His body wanted to win, and to hell with the crowd.

Silas was in total control of the battle, Cristian realized, as they danced in circles around the battlefield. He had to do something to change that. Something unexpected.

Cristian quickly shifted his grip on his rapier and threw it directly at Silas. Silas was caught off guard by the

move, but he managed an awkward dodge. Before Silas could regain his footing, Cristian was on his back, his sinewy bat arms hooked around Silas's biceps, pulling Silas's arms behind his back. Cristian shoved Silas's face in the dirt as he held on firmly. Silas's legs struggled violently, but they found no purchase in the soft dirt. His tail wagged in futility. Cristian bit deep into Silas's neck, and began to suck him dry.

The cheering gave way to an uncomfortable silence. Cristian imagined that the crowd was terrified at the sight of someone murdering someone else in cold blood, but the blood tasted so good. He couldn't pull himself away. Silas went limp in his arms. The tournament organizers rushed onto the field. Some members of the city guard pulled Cristian off of Silas, his mouth wide open and smeared with red, his chest heaving as he drew in deep breaths. He thrust his arm into the air in victory despite himself.

To his surprise, when he threw his arm up, the arena erupted in cheers. *Cristian! Cristian!* He couldn't understand it. They turned on their hero Silas at the drop of a hat, since Cristian showed them he could be even more blood-thirsty?

The crocodile medic put his hands on Silas, and within moments he was conscious and snarling. Silas was in a blind rage, and before Cristian could react Silas had ripped out the medic's throat with his terrifying maw.

Cristian stumbled away and fell to the ground, and Silas turned his way and pounced. Cristian brought his grandfather's rapier up just in time to skewer Silas on it. It didn't stop him immediately – Silas managed to bite a few

chunks out of Cristian's shoulder as he struggled – but eventually he went down. Unfortunately, he had killed the only medic on the scene, so there was no one left to help him. Another, much smaller, cheer rose as Silas let out a final howl and let his lifeless body crumple to the soft floor of the arena.

The announcer dismissed the crowd, and Cristian's blood lust slowly began to subside. He couldn't believe that he had allowed himself to kill someone like that. Maybe his kind did deserve their reputation? Sickened with his actions, he told the tournament organizers that he was forfeiting the next match. He didn't bother to collect his grandfather's rapier from Silas's corpse; he didn't want to be reminded of what he had done.

A cadre of fans greeted him as he exited the arena. He just wanted to be left alone, but they all wanted his autograph. He eventually broke through the crowd and ran off into the night, never to be seen in Polonia Mons again.

Chapter 11

Remecca

Remecca, a peppy little thing from the Polonian suburbs. You knew how to take care of yourself even before your mother died and you were left with your busy father. While other girls your age were playing with dolls and dreaming of being princesses, you were cooking, cleaning, and studying hard to make yourself useful.

Remecca was excited for her first trip to Polonia Mons. Her father had been called to the city on business, and he couldn't very well leave an eleven year-old girl alone in their house for four days. Remecca knew that she could have taken care of herself easily, but she also wasn't going to pass up the chance to explore the city. She had read about the Royal Palace and the Marble Road in school, but she would finally get to see them first-hand!

Reserving an albatross to fly in to the city was more difficult than usual due to the Grand Tournament, but in Remecca's opinion it was well worth the hassle to be able to be in the city for the tournament. Not that kids were allowed at the tournament, but there was sure to be plenty of spectacle and pageantry to cater to the surge of tourists.

This was Remecca's first time flying, as well. She and her father had packed up their suitcases and were standing out beside the road at the scheduled time. Remecca used her hand to shield her eyes from the sun as she peered off into the distance, looking for a dark figure above the horizon. Even with the increased demand for

their services, their transportation was still punctual. Soon the speck against the clear blue sky resolved into the shape of a large woman with enormous white wings, gliding effortlessly through the air to land next to Remecca and her father.

“Good afternoon, sir. I hope I'm not too late,” she said with a slight nod of her head. Remecca remembered reading that the royal fleet of albatrosses were trained to be exceptionally courteous, but seeing it for herself really brought truth to the words. The woman's flying leathers were crisp and clean despite the journey, and she made an elaborate show of opening the basket for Remecca and her father to climb into. Remecca hurried in eagerly, ready to take to the skies. Her father mumbled some thanks to the albatross; Remecca was pretty sure that he was not looking forward to the trip at all.

Within moments, the albatross took to the sky. Remecca didn't understand how someone could fly at all, much less how she could carry so much weight. Most winged chimera could barely fly if they were lucky, but albatrosses somehow were masters of the skies. Remecca understood that different species of similar animals bestowed different powers – for instance, dogs, spiders, and birds were especially diverse – but she didn't really understand why. That bothered her. She wanted to know everything she could.

As the three made their journey to Polonia Mons, Remecca strained against her seat straps to peer over the edge of the basket at the countryside between her house and the mountain. She and her father lived in a suburban area

many kilometers from the capital, and there was a vast stretch of farmland that they had to pass over on their trip. From so high up, the workers on the farms looked like ants.

Some of them probably are ants, Remecca thought to herself as she tried to make out more detail. There was always plenty of farm work to go around, whether one had a graft or not, and plenty of animals would grant useful powers for helping out on a farm. A lot of the people in the more rural areas of Polonia were either too old or too poor to get a graft, but they worked hard and were good people. At least, that's how Remecca saw it. They provided a surplus of food; no one in Polonia went hungry, and the diverse selection of food had become Polonia's main export to the kingdoms of Ihren and Dhapandur. Even at her young age, Remecca was proud to be a Polonian citizen.

After a few hours of brisk travel, Remecca began to be able to make out the buildings on Polonia Mons. The view from the albatross's basket was fantastic. Remecca could see the Royal Palace and the Marble Road on the summit, along with the Colosseum which looked even bigger than Remecca had imagined. Not far below those landmarks was the gently sloped University of Polonia, obscured only slightly by some wisps of clouds due to its altitude. The buildings were all still there, and Remecca hoped that by the time she was old enough that someone would have restored the University to its former glory. Then of course there were the thousands of houses built on the side of the mountain, many of which were built directly into the mountainside, providing shelter and a home to so many of Polonia's citizens. The scale of the city took

Remecca's breath away.

Soon the albatross descended through some pacific winds for a gentle touchdown on the Polonia Mons skyport. She was not the only albatross landing at the time. Remecca stood in awe as albatross after albatross landed without interfering with each other. *They must be using the Hive somehow*, Remecca thought. Seeing these people in action made Remecca seriously consider becoming an albatross chimera when she got older.

She could see a smaller landing pad off to the side that was being used for instruction. Most of the students were albatrosses, but there were a few other birds and some insects too. She laughed gleefully as a silkmoth dove off the side of the mountain with a terrified look on his face that slowly replaced itself with a look of joy as his wings caught the air current and supported his body long enough to glide down to the practice mat below. Remecca didn't understand how the people around her weren't staring in open-mouthed amazement the way that she was. When she eventually lived in the city, would this all be mundane to her too?

There were several overpriced inns near the skyport, but Remecca's father had done his research ahead of time and knew that the Polonia Grand Hotel would be the appropriate place for them to stay. It was relatively inexpensive for the quality of the accommodations, and it was near her father's intended business. Remecca also knew it as a historically famous building, not that she thought that her father knew that or that he would have considered her interest in it even if he knew about it. They didn't have

a close relationship, ever since her mother died, but he was the only family that she had, and they did love each other. She didn't mind being on her own, and in fact she was looking forward to visiting the city's landmarks by herself.

She woke up early the following morning to start an exciting day of sight-seeing. Her father had apparently already left for his first meeting, so Remecca made her way to the common room to get some breakfast. Her father had given her plenty of money to enjoy herself while he was gone.

The common room was surprisingly not empty despite the early hour. Two women sat at a table, enjoying a breakfast of eggs and sausage as they chatted. One of them noticed Remecca entering the room and eyeing the breakfast buffet that had been provided for the guests at the inn.

“Are you lost?” the woman asked, concerned. Remecca immediately recognized her as an eagle chimera, and after her exciting trip yesterday she couldn't help but admire her.

“Oh, no, I'm just grabbing some food before going sight-seeing,” Remecca responded. The woman seemed aghast.

“But, but – where are your parents?” she asked, her voice filled with concern.

“I'm here in town with my dad, but he's busy. It's okay, I can take care of myself. He knows that I'm going to be sight-seeing.” At least, Remecca thought that he knew. She wouldn't be surprised if he had forgotten.

Remecca started loading her plate as she pretended not to hear the woman whisper to her friend, “What is going on here? How can someone be so irresponsible? I have work to do, but I can't just leave her on her own like this, especially with the k-i-l-l-e-r on the prowl.” Remecca thought that she could probably spell better than this woman, even though the woman did have a pad of paper in her pocket that Remecca guessed marked her as a reporter. Though this was the first Remecca had heard of a killer.

Remecca sat down next to the women with a plate of fruit and a muffin. “Hi, my name is Remecca. I hope you don't mind me sitting with you.”

“Not at all,” the sheepdog chimera said as she fed a strip of bacon to a small animal that Remecca thought might be a cross between an owl and a kangaroo. “I'm Danika, the beastmistress. You may have heard of me?” Remecca had, and she nodded. “This is Ferelle. She's a reporter for the Polonia Sun.”

“Wow!” Remecca exclaimed. “I read your articles all the time,” Remecca said. She was being completely genuine, but Ferelle and Danika laughed as if she had made a joke. Sometimes she hated it when people underestimated her, but she admired these two women too much to dislike them.

“You know,” Danika said, with a glance to Ferelle, “I'm new to the city also, so I was already planning on doing some sight-seeing today. Maybe we should go together.” Remecca saw through the offer; it wasn't the first time that an adult was concerned about her safety. Still, spending the day with Danika was as rare an experience as

visiting Polonia Mons, so Remecca was excited by the prospect.

“That would be wonderful,” Remecca agreed. “Your pet is adorable. What's her name?”

“It's a him, actually. His name is Sonic. Would you like to pet him?” Remecca gently stroked the soft feathers on the top of Sonic's head. “He's one of my more unusual pets. Care to take a guess at what he can do?”

Remecca looked Sonic over. His stature was mostly like an owl's, though his feathers were much shorter and more sparse than an owl's, with a layer of fur underneath. Remecca doubted that he could fly, but he was certainly hopping around excitedly. The hopping was a clue to the kangaroo graft, but it was really the pouch on Sonic's torso that made Remecca guess that he was grafted to a kangaroo.

“I really don't know,” Remecca admitted. “Would you give me a hint?”

“Well,” Danika said thoughtfully, “he's no fighter. I definitely wouldn't want to use him in the Grand Tournament. But he's useful enough that I had to bring him along with me to Polonia Mons.”

Remecca continued to think about what it might be as she nibbled on a slice of watermelon. “I'm sure it has something to do with his pouch,” she eventually said.

“What makes you think that?” Ferelle asked with a smile.

“Well, Danika is treating this like it's some big mystery, and personally I can't stop wondering what's inside that pouch.”

“That's some good intuition you have,” Ferelle said.

“Why don't you reach in and find out?” Danika offered.

“Can I?” Remecca asked. She tentatively reached into the pouch. It was warm and slimy, but that didn't really bother Remecca. She felt around, but eventually withdrew her empty hand in disappointment. “There's nothing there.”

“Isn't there?” Danika asked with a sly grin on her face. She reached in to the pouch all the way to her elbow, which seemed impossible from Remecca's perspective. Moments later her hand emerged with a pristine copy of today's print edition of the Polonia Sun. Sonic hooted and flapped his wings, clearly happy to be of service.

“Wow!” Remecca exclaimed. “How did you do that?”

“It wasn't me, it was all Sonic. He's a living repository of anything that's been written down, as long as you know what you're looking for when you go in.” Danika handed the newspaper to Remecca so that she could look at it. As amazed as Remecca was by Sonic, she had seen plenty of unusual chimera powers before and this was not the strangest of them. More importantly, a glance at the front page of the newspaper gave her the opening she had been looking for.

“Ferelle, this is your article. *Three Dead at Hands of Chimera Killer*. There's a killer on the loose?” Remecca asked, as if she hadn't heard Ferelle's comment earlier.

Ferelle blushed and tried to dodge the question, “Oh, Remecca, that's a terrible topic for breakfast.” Danika rolled her eyes.

“Come on, Ferelle. Remecca's old enough to explore Polonia Mons on her own. She's old enough to handle it.”

Remecca could tell that Ferelle did not agree, but Ferelle explained anyway. “Yes, Remecca, there's a serial killer in Polonia Mons right now. You don't have anything to worry about, though, I think. According to the forensics team, all of the victims had gotten grafts within the past week.” Remecca began to wonder if her father would be getting a graft while he was in the city as part of his business there.

“That's terrible,” Remecca said. “What else can you tell me about them? I should warn my father, in case he's thinking of getting a graft.”

“Well, the first victim, Verna, was a traveler and a scholar, and she apparently came to town to get a dolphin graft. She was discovered two days ago. The second victim was discovered yesterday morning by one of the water performers in the main thoroughfare. His name was Wesley, and he got far more of the physical properties of dolphins than most do, so he had been adjusting to his new life in the Polonia Mons underwater network before it was abruptly cut short. The third victim was found in the middle of the night last night. I was lucky that the group of people who found the body caused such a commotion. They woke me up a few hours ago, and I barely managed to get the story in today's print edition. All we really know about him is that his name is Jason and he had a graft, but it wasn't a dolphin graft or any other common graft. The forensics team wasn't able to narrow it down much further without more time,

and they weren't exactly forthcoming. His injuries were consistent with the other two victims, though, so I'm reasonably certain that it's the work of the same killer."

Remecca and Danika listened to all of the information attentively. *No wonder Ferelle's eagle eyes look so weary*, she thought. Remecca wished that she could think of something that would help Ferelle's investigation, but she had to admit that she was just as stumped as Ferelle. Maybe Ferelle had forgotten to mention some details that would help? Remecca wasn't sure how to politely suggest such a thing. Besides, as interesting as their breakfast conversation was, Remecca didn't feel that it was her responsibility to catch this killer.

"Thanks for all of the information," Remecca said as she fed the last of her muffin to Sonic. "It was a pleasure to meet you, and I wish you the best of luck in tracking the killer down. I'm sure you're busy, but you should really get some sleep. Sleeplessness can make you careless, and you might miss a vital clue if you aren't careful."

"That's quite good advice, Remecca. I wish I could take you up on it, but I've got too much to do today between following up on the leads on this case and the other stories my editor is expecting from me. I hope the two of you—" she paused as she considered Sonic, "I hope the three of you have fun today."

Remecca's day with Danika and Sonic was fun and educational, though the reality of Polonia Mons didn't quite live up to Remecca's fantasies. They started with a tour of the shops on the main thoroughfare. Danika took them to a

shop, Arcane & Stable, to try to meet with the beastmaster there, but he wasn't available and the shop owners didn't feel comfortable with letting Danika browse the menagerie on her own. Remecca was a little disappointed, but there was so much else to see that she soon forgot about that little setback.

They moved on from there to the abandoned University. Or at least, Remecca had thought that it would be abandoned. Apparently some people were still there studying totemic magicks in small, ad hoc groups, sometimes overseen by someone who Remecca guessed used to be a professor at the University. *Maybe the University will be up and running again fairly soon. Not everyone wants a graft, I guess*, she thought. Many of the students gave Danika uneasy looks, and Remecca breathed a little easier once they left.

The pair made their way up to the summit of Polonia Mons. They started at the Colosseum, but it was closed during the day in preparation for the evening's duels. *Yet another disappointment*, she thought. Remecca settled for the splendor of the Marble Road leading to the Royal Palace, but there really wasn't much to do other than see it first-hand. It looked exactly like the pictures. Somehow, she expected it to look different – grander, perhaps.

The palace too was disappointing. Most of the palace was off limits to visitors, and the tour guides didn't have anything more to say than what Remecca had read about the palace, which was surprisingly little. Remecca would have expected a much richer history for such an important piece of Polonian architecture, but the guides

didn't have much to say beyond the basic history and the renovations that Queen Rafnia had commissioned. She thought, for a moment, that she saw Queen Rafnia looking out a window in the upper reaches of the palace's central tower. The queen's face was almost unreadable, but Remecca felt like there was a hint of sadness in her features. She disappeared in moments, and Remecca knew that there was little hope of seeing her again.

After that last disappointment, Remecca returned to the Polonia Grand Hotel with Danika so that Danika could prepare for her match that evening. She reached into Sonic's pouch a few times to secure some novels to keep herself occupied for the rest of her trip.

"Thanks again for joining me," Remecca said. "I hope you win the tournament!"

"Thanks, Remecca. Let me know if you want to spend some more time together over the next few days. I should be in the common room for breakfast each day." Remecca didn't think she would take Danika up on the offer. She liked Danika enough, but the city was something of a disappointment. Remecca was pretty sure that she would spend the rest of her trip in and around the hotel, reading the new books. *I guess I just like fantasy more than reality*, she thought with a sigh.

Chapter 12

Jason

Jason, so lucky to find love so young. Your pasty white skin, unruly red hair, and too-large glasses contrast sharply with Sharonda's features, but you complement each other well. Your guile is admirable, but I worry that your maturity does not match your intelligence.

Sharonda would be leaving in less than a week because of their overbearing parents. Jason didn't know what he did to deserve her affection; he was a dork and he knew it. But she did love him, and he loved her all the more for it, and he knew one thing. He would not give Sharonda up.

His pet gave him the idea, actually. His family was rich and could even afford the chimerism fees for their pets: in Jason's case, a cat with rainbow-colored fur and wings from a parrot. If two animals could be brought together through chimerism, then surely two humans could be as well.

After days reading up on how chimerism worked, he was certain that it was possible. He and Sharonda would be the first double-human hybrid. They would be closer than any couple ever had. They would literally be in each other's head. He had no idea what power to expect from the combination, but first he would need to convince Sharonda of the idea.

“Ronnie,” he said affectionately, as they met in their secret spot behind a waterfall near the main commercial

thoroughfare of Polonia Mons. He bent to one knee. “Will you marry me?”

Sharonda let out an adorable squeal and managed to gasp an, “Of course,” as her eyes teared up. She shook her head as if shaking bad thoughts out of her mind. “But you know we can't. You know I'm leaving in two days.” Her tears that threatened to fall due to happiness were replaced by tears of sadness, but she managed not to let them fall.

“What if we could change that?” Jason asked, heart in his throat.

“What do you mean?”

“I know this sounds crazy, but,” he started, unsure of his words. “I think we could bond together as a chimera. Then no one can tear us apart.”

Sharonda's face lit up with a soft smile. “I love you, Jason. Of course I'll do it.”

They kissed each other with all of the passion that their youth allowed.

Of course, the actual process was not going to be easy. For starters, they would need a set of chimera pods. There were a few places that offered chimerism services nearby. He decided to pick a shop near to their secret spot so that they could hide there until late into the night. That night, around three in the morning, they would be breaking into Arcane & Stable.

Getting to the shop was not a problem. The night watch, composed mostly of cockroach chimeras, was not as omni-present as their patron insect. It amazed Jason that as reviled as some creatures were, there was always someone

who loved them enough to graft them. A paycheck is a paycheck, he figured.

As quietly as possible, Jason pulled Sharonda beside him as they hugged the front wall of the shop. This sturdy wooden door was the only entrance. He hoped that the two of them together, along with the crowbar he brought, would be enough to break the padlock. On three, they heaved with their combined strength, and heard a loud crack as the padlock came loose in its setting. Jason scanned the empty streets. The coast was clear.

Jason hesitantly opened the door, and was startled by a loud *caw caw* from a crow. He was sure that someone would hear, and come running, but he scanned the streets again and saw no one.

He hesitated as he entered the pitch-black shop. He pulled Sharonda in quickly behind him, and shut the door before pulling out a candle. His eyes quickly adjusted to the faint light as he looked around the room. There were shelves and shelves of plants, herbs, and miscellaneous items used as ingredients in old magicks. To one side of the room, about half-way in, was a set of chimera pods. The pods were a pair of large ovular chambers that radiated magickal energy.

As Jason approached, the pods seemed to emit a faint blue light. Sharonda whispered, "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Jason nodded.

"Really?" boomed a voice from the doorway of the back room. "Because from here, you look like a couple of amateur thieves."

The man was as big as a grizzly bear. As he shined

the candle at him, Jason realized the man actually was part grizzly bear, complete with thick brown fur and the promise of power in his upper body. Jason's hand started to shake, and he nearly dropped the candle. He had hoped it wouldn't come to this.

“Uncle Tyron!?” Sharonda said. “I didn't know you worked here.”

“That's right, I'm the private security here. This is your Aunt Manta's store, kiddo.” He frowned. “You're stealing from a place and you don't even know who owns it?”

“I knew who owned it,” Jason admitted. “I thought we might get caught, and I figured it would be better to be caught by someone you know than someone you don't. And we aren't stealing. Not really.”

“Oh? What's all this then?” Tyron asked as he gestured toward the chimera pods and the lock on the door. He then glanced back into the room that was behind him for a moment.

“Please, Uncle Tyron, we just want to use the chimera pods. It's *really* important,” Sharonda pleaded.

Jason really didn't understand Sharonda's relationship with her uncle, but he saw Tyron's face soften. He watched as Tyron considered his options.

“You're not going to steal any of the animals, are you?” Tyron asked. He must have assumed that they had an insect or something small that they were going to use. It was against the law for kids their age to get a graft, but a lot of people were opposed to government regulation of chimerism.

“No, I promise,” Jason said sincerely.

“In that case, I’m just going to be minding my business back in this room. And when you leave, there’s a trick to the door to prevent it from alerting me to your departure. I suggest you use it.” He muttered to himself about how he’d never hear the end of this as he shut the door to the back room.

Jason breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“Always,” Sharonda said, looking boldly into his eyes as she shook nervously. Sharonda climbed into her pod, the pod normally reserved for an animal. Jason had never heard of someone grafting a human onto an animal either, but he thought it should be possible too. He configured the machine appropriately, based on his understanding of how it worked. The machine would first test them to make sure they were compatible, and then it would bond them.

Jason climbed into his pod, a large, light blue ovaloid with cushions inside, and closed the lid. The machine started to hum quietly. Jason sat there nervously as he was bombarded with light. His skin felt a tingly sensation, and he wasn’t sure if it was an effect of the machine or if he was just imagining it. He found himself focusing on his love for Sharonda, certain that if he focused hard enough that they would be found to be compatible. He knew she would be doing the same.

The gentle *whirr* of the machine settled down, and then started up again with a rhythmic thumping sound. Jason knew that this meant they had passed the

compatibility test. He was wondering what it would feel like, if it would be gradual or sudden, when suddenly Sharonda was there with him, in his head.

For the first time in his life, he felt complete, and he knew intimately that Sharonda felt the same way. They couldn't even remember what desire felt like; they felt completely content and happy.

They opened the pod and climbed out. They looked down at their arms and legs. Their smooth skin now shined bright and silver. They found a mirror, and discovered that all of their features had changed. They now looked completely androgynous. They moved in concert as they relearned how to work their body.

Then the voice began. *Manta is going to kill me.* It was unlike any voice they had ever heard, as if it weren't a human speaking but instead it were a machine translating words on paper into synthetic speech. *I have to wake up.* The voice began to speak over itself, saying multiple things at the same time. *I shouldn't she needs I wish they did to know have let I could it those kids who it do that was protect them.* The gibberish became a bit overwhelming, so Jason and Sharonda worked together to silence it.

They made their way to the door, and figured out the mechanism to open the door without triggering the crow sounds. They stole out into the deep night, taking the crowbar with them, and made their way back to their secret spot. As they got further away from people, they let their guard drop, and for a time they sat in repose as they listened to the sounds of the waterfall splashing outside.

I think he went this way. Jason and Sharonda sat

alert and went to peer out of their watery hideaway. *Blast! He can hear me.* They scanned the nearby streets and the bridge, but didn't see anyone. There was silence for several minutes. Then, *I'll just rush him, I'm probably faster than he is anyway.*

Jason and Sharonda prepared for an assault from some unseen foe, but they didn't expect it to come from behind them. They were certain they would have heard it if the attacker had sneaked behind them. As a result, they never even saw their assailant.

They felt the sharp pain of a syringe being injected into their neck; then their world was thrown into chaos. In his head, Jason felt Sharonda slip from his consciousness. He felt painfully alone, until Sharonda was suddenly back, snarling and frothing like a rabid animal. In the world of his mind, she lunged at him, wrestling him to the ground, biting him all over his body. He couldn't understand what was happening, and he couldn't bring himself to fight back. He loved her no matter what happened.

His body gave out. Their body gave out. For a few short minutes, they knew the greatest love that humans could know. For a brief moment before he died, he felt Sharonda's love again, and he was left with an image in his mind of them dressed in wedding garb, standing before the Queen herself, as the light faded from their eyes.

Chapter 13

Douglass

Douglass, a lover of nature and life. You play such a vital role in the fabric of Polonian life by raising the animals that people need for chimerism. You give care when your animals need it, and you are a true and loyal friend. Your shaggy, short blonde hair nearly hides your two tiny horns, but you're universally recognized as a caregiver by your black-and-white patches of skin and hooves that clop noisily against the roof of Arcane & Stable during your daily routine.

Douglass was starting to think he'd been sent on a wild goose chase, except, he realized, as a beastmaster he'd probably be better equipped to handle an actual wild goose chase. Maybe the Matron hated him, and wanted to get him killed exploring the sewers of Polonia Mons. She probably assumed, like everyone else, that he chose a cow graft because he was a hick, and a hick wouldn't mind traipsing about the sewer for several days. But Douglass was a city boy through-and-through; he just really loved animals, and giving care to those who needed it, so his cow graft was perfect. That and he thought that the asymmetric black patches on his pure white skin made him look pretty cool.

Like most of the citizens of Polonia Mons, Douglass had no idea how the sewer system was laid out when he began his journey. The city was built on the side of a mountain, so the sewer system took advantage of gravity to feed the sewage down successive levels, inside the

mountain. The tunnels were enormous, and it must have taken hundreds of years to develop the sewer system to its current state. Maybe they used the old magicks. Douglass wasn't much for history or politics, but he wondered who would have ordered such a massive project. It must have been here before Queen Rafnia's reign, and he couldn't remember any further back than that. He supposed it didn't really matter, anyway. Knowing who built it wouldn't make his task any less difficult.

Had he understood the layout ahead of time, he would have taken public transportation to the top of the mountain and worked his way down. Instead, he naively started at the nearby manhole outside of Arcane & Stable and worked his way up, the first day. That was fruitless. He learned his lesson and started from the top on the second day, but still had no luck. That left the only viable location to be somewhere in the vast network of sewers near the base of the mountain, which would take an entire extra day to explore.

That meant that he would miss the rest of the first round of the tournament, the entire second round, and the quarter-finals. He had been hoping to see those matches, but at least he wouldn't miss the semi-finals. He was following the progress through the Hive, and as expected, it looked like it would be Hogan versus Sir Reginald in the semi-finals, and he wouldn't miss that for the world. He had personally raised the rhinoceros that Capella grafted to Hogan, so he wanted Hogan to do well, but he knew he had a tough fight ahead of him in Sir Reginald.

On the night of the quarter-finals, Douglass was lost

in the maze of sewer tunnels when he started to notice a thin trail of smoke. At first he thought that maybe Polonia Mons was a dormant volcano, but he realized that magma probably wouldn't cause smoke. The smoke smelled pungent and other-worldly, but it was actually a welcome change to the smell he had been smelling for the past few days. He decided to follow it, more out of curiosity than anything else.

And there it was! The feral root he had been looking for was right there in that very tunnel. Douglass plucked it and placed it in a vase he had brought; he figured he might as well try to clone the plant if Matron Beauregard didn't need the whole thing. Finally, he could bail out of this filthy place.

But first, his curiosity got the better of him. He kept following the trail of smoke. About a kilometer of winding path later, he emerged into an enormous room. This seemed to be the central egress point of the sewer system; pipes from various upper levels poured out here into a deep reservoir that flowed out of the base of the mountain. There was a large stone platform by the entrance, and it was clearly where the smoke was coming from.

It took some time for Douglass to understand the scene before him. The first thing that struck him was the mounds and mounds of burning ash and chitin strewn about the room. These took up the majority of the room and explained the smoke. A solitary figure stood at the entranceway to the room, with a semi-circle of cleared ground immediately in front of him. The steady stream of creatures, clawing their way through their dead neighbors'

remains, could not get past the wall of fire the man deftly weaved before them.

Behind the stream of creatures, Douglass could periodically see something shimmering. He didn't know what it was, but it looked like someone had carved a gaping hole in the world. If the creatures hadn't been so single-mindedly intent on getting to the man incinerating them, they could have escaped in all directions and made their way out of the sewer system through the main sluice. Douglass knew why they didn't though; as much as his power allowed him to nourish others by a touch, it also let him know when they needed nourishment. These creatures were in serious pain; by all accounts they should have starved to death, Douglass thought.

And then there was the man. He too, was starving, and thirsty, even though Douglass could tell that he usually had the potential to go for years without nourishment. How long had this man been here? He was, for lack of a better word, amazing. His beautiful red wings were unlike anything Douglass had ever heard of, and the deftness and precision of the streams of fire coming from his arms created a stunning pattern in the air before him. Despite his diligence, Douglass could see that his body sagged wearily. This majestic person needed his help.

He slowly walked up behind the man, as if he were stalking a dangerous predator. The man was aware of everything going on around him, Douglass was sure, but his concentration was starting to slip due to fatigue. Douglass certainly didn't want to startle him and get a blast of flame in his direction.

Finally, he gently maneuvered his hands over the man's wings to rest them on his broad shoulders. He let his power flow into the man. He felt like one of the pipes above, feeding a tiny trickle into what should have been a massive flow of natural energy. But the man was nearly dry. This was a temporary solution at best.

“You looked like you were tired,” Douglass said gently, as if he were talking to a spooked animal he had just captured. “My name is Douglass.”

“Warren,” he said, slowly. “Thank... you... You... just... saved... this... world... For... now.” Every word came out with deliberation, and each allowed one of the frightening creatures to advance into the semi-circle before being taken down by a gout of flame.

“Stop talking,” Douglass said, and Warren obeyed. “I understand what's happening, at least a little. I'll think of a way to save you, I promise. I'll be back tomorrow.” He stroked Warren's shoulder reassuringly before breaking contact. Douglass made his way back out of the sewer, using the trail of smoke to find the nearest exit, marking his way as he went so that he could find his way back. It was past one in the morning by the time he found fresh air, and he was exhausted from pouring himself into Warren, so he went directly home. Matron Beauregard could wait until he had slept, and he could wait to care for his animals in the morning.

He slept through the afternoon before going to Arcane & Stable. He made his delivery to Matron Beauregard, after snipping off a clipping to grow a second

feral root, should anyone ever need it again. His fellow employees were going on and on about the recent string of attacks; apparently they had become quite public while he was exploring the sewers.

Douglass thought about Warren's predicament all day. He wasn't sure why he wouldn't tell his coworkers about the problem, since he was sure Capella at least would have some clever solution to the problem. He just felt that his connection to Warren was special somehow. Secret. Mysterious. Precious. He blushed as he realized he was enamored with Warren. In a world of people who were more than human, Warren surpassed them all and became a force of nature. Douglass tempered his feelings, careful not to let his passion turn to worship. But the man was remarkable, he thought. His coworkers would understand his feelings, but that didn't mean he was eager to tell them. He could solve this problem on his own.

By the time work ended, he started getting ready to go to the arena when he realized that the solution to Warren's problem was in mortal peril. He ran to the infirmary.

“Samuel, we're going to the semi-finals together,” he commanded with a mischievous grin.

Chapter 14

Tori

Tori, the firebrand with a dangerous curiosity about how the world works. Competition and battle, these are the things you live and breathe. You seek to improve yourself, and in so doing, you try to improve the world. Your diaphanous fly wings give you freedom, and your multi-faceted eyes provide a feast for your curiosity, but it is your determination that makes you truly special.

Tori fired a volley of arrows at her opponent, whose buckler expanded to become a hulking tower shield. Tori charged forward to take advantage of her opponent's temporary blind spot, but she ran right into his trap: a pitfall just in front of the shield that dropped her into a bed of spikes. She felt her life bar empty like she had a million times before, and she thought she saw a silhouette of someone familiar as she was shunted out of Fantasy Colosseum.

She couldn't help but feel outclassed. These teenagers were on the Hive all day long, doing nothing but honing their skills for this one specific game. As an adult, Tori had to hold down a job, plus she had plenty of other interests in addition to Fantasy Colosseum. She constructed sites on the Hive for a living, plus she crafted a few sites of her own for the sake of art in her free time. But sometimes she just wanted to relax and hit people, and Fantasy Colosseum was perfect for that. Or it would be, if she were better at it.

Despite her frequent defeat, Tori was determined to improve her rank. *Practicing forms high quality*, she thought, unsure where she got the expression. She dove into another battle, this time faring a bit better, recovering the rank she had just lost. She had been hovering around rank 203, but the builder of Fantasy Colosseum was running a promotion right now. Everyone who was rank 200 or lower by the end of the Grand Tournament would be rewarded with a promotional in-game item, an autonomous dancing sword that assisted its owner in battle. Tori had dropped everything to try to crest that 200 mark, but it was proving more difficult than she had anticipated.

It didn't help that the Hive was glitching. She had lost more than one battle due to lag, where her Hive avatar stopped responding to her for a few crucial moments. This would happen when too many people were battling in Fantasy Colosseum at once, or when there were too many spectators. The glitching was beginning to get to her, though, and not just because it was ruining her rank.

“I think there's something weird going on with the Hive,” she said to Samuel as they lay in bed, trying to get to sleep.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” he asked, without rolling over or looking at her.

“Sammy, I'm serious. Are you awake?” He flopped his head over and opened one blood-shot eye to look at her.

“Can't this wait until morning? It's been a long day. All of the injuries at the tournament have really been stretching my limits, especially since the on-site medic was killed.” Tori had heard about that, obviously; everyone had

by now. But she really needed to talk.

“I keep seeing someone whenever I die in Fantasy Colosseum,” she said.

“Oh please,” Samuel laughed. “You sound like a weasel.”

“Sammy, you jerk, I'm being serious. I think I'm seeing the Queen.”

“The Queen? What does she have to do with Fantasy Colosseum?”

“I'm not sure, but tomorrow I'm going to take the day off to try to find out,” she confided. Samuel was snoring by the time she finished her sentence, so she just let him rest. He had been overworked.

When she woke up some time before noon, Samuel had already gone to work. Tori wasn't sure where to start, so she decided to procrastinate a bit and play a game of Fantasy Colosseum. This time she fought a pretty aggressive praying mantis. He had put all of his efforts into developing his scythe-like weapons, so Tori focused on disarming him. After dodging several furious swipes, she used one of her favorite techniques. She simultaneously conjured a wooden replica of herself while vanishing from sight. Her opponent, oblivious to her subterfuge, lodged his scythes in the replica long enough for Tori to deliver the coup-de-grace with her kukri.

Unfortunately, although this knocked her up to 201, the Hive didn't glitch so she didn't get any more information about what had been going on. She figured that there wasn't much load right now, since most people were

either at work or in school.

Tori had other tools at her disposal for figuring out what was going on. As a fly, she could lurk about the Hive totally unseen. She spied on a few Colosseum battles, focusing specifically on the moment when one of the combatants died. Each time, she felt a shiver in the fabric of the Hive as they were ejected. There must be something in that moment, some force protecting their real-world mind from the trauma of death.

She eavesdropped on another battle, intent on tracing that protection back to its source. She poised herself to slip into the dying player as he died to feel what he felt, as if she were a ghost possessing someone. After a rapid exchange of sword blows, the killing blow landed, and Tori grabbed on to that connection as if her life depended on it. She felt a slippery grasp on something, but worried she would lose it. As she focused on it, she began to see a silvery, gossamer rope extending from the fallen combatant's head. The rope went straight up, disappearing into the sky, surrounded by the ropes of hundreds or thousands of others just like it. Her hands slipped off of the first rope, but now that she knew what she was looking for, she could see her own.

She reached up above herself and started climbing. It was difficult at first, but as usual in the Hive her body naturally adapted to whatever task she attempted. Soon she was scampering up the rope without even using her legs. She seemed to climb forever. Periodically some ropes would retract very quickly and others would extend down to the ground, she assumed as people joined and left the

Hive. At first the ropes all seemed to be parallel to each other, but after some time she realized that they were getting closer and closer together; they must be very slightly angled, and their intersection must be very far away.

That suits me just fine, she thought. That just meant that it was unlikely that anyone else had ever tried this before. She was excited to discover something no one else had ever discovered before. That thought kept her determined as she slowly made her way higher and higher.

At some point, she no longer felt like she was getting higher; suddenly it seemed like she was getting closer and closer to the center of something. Gravity seemed to invert, and she (and her entire silvery rope) slowly began to fall towards something. She stretched out and grabbed onto someone else's rope; she hoped she didn't disturb them too much back on the ground but she didn't want to find out what would happen if she plummeted full speed to the bottom of this place.

Soon she had adjusted to the change, sliding down the rope very quickly, preventing rope-burn with a pair of chitinous gauntlets. A distant figure came into view. As she approached, she consciously slowed down. Her rope had fallen long before she had, so she was sure this figure knew she was coming. She recognized the silhouette as what she had been seeing when she died in the Hive. Every once in a while, she saw someone else die: their rope retracted in an instant, and they got a tiny glimpse of this place before they were forcibly removed from the Hive.

“You. You're responsible for the Hive,” she said.

“We knew someone would find us eventually,” the figure said. She looked something like a blur as she managed the ropes in her many hands.

Tori's mind was struggling to understand what was going on. Did the Hive exist before the Queen came in to power? Who had the Queen succeeded? She found herself incapable of understanding the situation, and the questions slipped out of her mind before she could even attempt to answer them.

“We're sorry, dear. You can ask your questions, but don't expect to hold on to the answers,” the Queen said as she did a million simultaneous tasks to control this hub that appeared to support the entire Hive.

“You're not just a bee chimera,” Tori said. “You're a queen bee chimera!”

“We are.”

“This is crazy!” Tori exclaimed. She had hoped to understand more about how the Hive worked, but she never expected to have this much success. “The entire Hive – that's your power?”

“Yes, child,” the Queen said. Tori felt odd being called a child by someone younger than herself. “That and more.”

“Then, this Golden Age we're living in is all because of you?” she asked.

“Not really,” the Queen replied, filled with humility while still maintaining her regal air. “Our subjects are responsible for the Golden Age. We merely bring them together.”

Tori considered the words for a moment. They

seemed so wise, yet they slipped so quickly from her grasp, like that first silver rope she held. “What was I saying?” she asked herself as much as she asked the Queen.

“It doesn't matter, dear. Tell me, do you like royal jelly?” She produced a small cup of syrup from nowhere, a conjuration that was perfectly normal in the world of the Hive. “We won't live forever, and you would make a good heir.”

When Tori finally made her way out of the Hive late that evening, she knew that she had discovered something important, but she couldn't remember what it was. She felt different, strange, and powerful. She went on to rapidly improve her rank in the next few days; by the deadline she made it to rank 83.

She got the idea in her head that in a month or two, after she saved up some money, she would go to Douglass to see if she could get a second graft. For some reason that she couldn't explain, she suddenly really wanted a bee graft to compliment her fly graft. *That would really give me some sway in the Hive*, she thought.

Chapter 15

Neil

Neil, trapped in a fantasy world. Sometimes I wonder if you belong in Polonia or if you would be better off in your fantasy. A bit old to be choosing a graft, but there is no shame in waiting to be sure of your decision. Your tattered maroon robe and your grungy, oily hair aren't going to attract a girlfriend, but at least you can always write one up for yourself.

The stack of delivery food was beginning to pile up, but Neil didn't even notice. He hadn't left his house in days, he was so wrapped up in his latest project. He sat at his cluttered desk, scribbling away furiously. He felt inspired.

The world he had created in his novel felt so real; in some ways it was more real than the real world. In the world he had created, there was no such thing as the old magicks, and there were no such things as chimeras, except in legends. Despite these handicaps, humanity faced a dangerous and inhospitable world with very little in the way of natural defenses. To adapt and survive, they took shelter in something called “science”, a systematic way of manipulating the world to produce predictable effects.

The distinction was subtle; Neil figured that a lot of his audience would just equate their notion of science to their understanding of magicks. But Neil had some talent with writing, and was able to tell a compelling story even if the distinction was lost on the audience.

One thing that fascinated Neil was the English

language. It was a fascinating thing that people must have created, but no one knew anything about its origin. He supposed someone very long ago must have developed it with their magicks, but who that was he couldn't guess. Did they create the other languages as well? He just couldn't answer these questions in the real world, so he had to turn to fantasy to answer them.

His story was about a “scientist” named Randy in a land called America. Randy had many talents, and among them was a passion for writing. This naturally led him to become curious about the origins of his own language. When he came across a word that he didn't recognize, or an expression that he understood but didn't know its origin, he could use science to find the answer. His fellow scientists collaborated to develop something called the Internet (a creation that Neil based on the Hive) which was basically a huge repository of information both new and old.

For example, in the course of a typical day's discourse, Randy wrote the following message to some of his friends:

Wow, this morning I busted the button on my workout shorts. Though it's tempting to think this is because I'm getting fat, I know that instead it's because I bought the shorts a size too small and I was playing fast and loose while unbuttoning.

Randy used the expression “fast and loose” because it was something he had heard before, but he didn't really know where it came from or what it really meant. He just

thought that it meant that he was hurrying too much and not being careful enough. But that didn't stop Randy from questioning the true meaning behind the things he said.

He turned to the Internet and discovered that it referred to a game that a con man might play to trick some unsuspecting victim out of some money. The con man pretended to wrap a belt around a stick in such a way that the two could not be separated, then bet the victim that he could separate them. The con involved the disparity between the con man's and the victim's grasp on science; the con man's understanding of something called "knot theory" allowed him to know precisely how to disentangle the belt and the stick, while the victim's lack of understanding made the problem seem difficult and unpredictable. Neil was very interested by the science aspects, but Randy found such details mundane and instead was interested in the language. Randy realized that in this expression, "fast" meant "fixed", not "quick". Then he realized that he had accidentally used the expression even more accurately than he had intended: the button was fast (affixed to the shorts), and then it was loose (as the thread tore).

Neil's writings were filled with these ideas; questions about English that he couldn't reconcile because there wasn't this strong notion of preserving information in the real world. Neil even created a land called England to give the name of the language itself an origin.

As he got further and further into his novel, Neil realized that he was really writing about himself, about his life. It was as if he had taken all of his life experiences,

wrote them down on slips of paper and put them in a hat, only to draw them out and structure them in some new configuration.

The amazing thing to him was that it actually seemed to *work*. He thought that he had a lot of interesting ideas and a compelling story. The only real challenge was to find a way to organize them. It was like he had this complicated knot in his head that he couldn't unravel, because he lacked the science for it.

Of course, he thought. *We don't have science, but we do have chimerism!*

Neil showered, shaved, and got dressed. Just because he had been a slob at home, it didn't mean that he needed to appear like a slob when he was out shopping. Besides, tidying up his appearance felt symbolic somehow. Neil supposed his mind probably just tended to work more symbolically than most people.

The sun was brighter than Neil remembered. He squinted as he made his way down to the main thoroughfare. There were a few shops here to choose from, and Neil was having trouble deciding which to patronize. Then he saw it: Arcane & Stable. Not only did the store look to be in extremely good repair, but he also felt drawn to the name. In his fantasy world, the scientists were at odds with people who believed in strange, non-scientific superstitions. He used this conflict to metaphorically explore the tension between those who practiced old magicks (the superstitionists) and the chimeras (the scientists). The name, Arcane & Stable, not only captured this conflict well, but it reminded him of one of the

superstitionists' stories about a pair of brothers named Cain and Abel.

He entered the store and was greeted by a caw caw from the door. There was a crow chimera behind the sales desk, and a monkey chimera across the desk from her. They seemed to be in the middle of an important discussion, but they put it on hold when he entered.

“Yes sir, can we help you?” the crow asked. She seemed a bit stiff, as if she were new to the job. “I see you don't have a graft. That's pretty unusual for someone your age. Perhaps you'd like a new graft? Or perhaps you're a practitioner of the old magicks, and would like some ingredients?”

“Thanks,” Neil said. “I've been putting this off for too long, but I think I've finally decided on the kind of chimera I want to be.”

“We'll do our best to accommodate you,” the crow said. “I'm afraid we're a bit short-staffed at the moment, but we can probably meet your needs.”

“Great!” Neil said. “I'm looking for something that can help me get my thoughts in order.”

“Oh, like a dolphin,” the monkey chimera suggested. The crow *tsked* audibly.

Neil wasn't sure what to make of the reaction. “How would that work?”

The monkey chimera continued despite the crow's reaction. “Dolphin grafts grant their hosts a complete clarity of mind. They can see connections between ideas very easily, and they become very introspective. Their keen awareness of self would, for instance, make them immune

to the charms of our normal clerk, Scarlett, a cute peacock chimera.”

Neil wondered where Scarlett was; she sounded nice. Not that the ladies serving him instead were unattractive by any means, but these girls seemed like the kind of girls you would marry, not the kind you'd just date for fun, and that was about all the relationship Neil would be able to handle right now.

“Now tell him why it's a terrible idea,” the crow said.

“Yeah, well, we were just discussing it before you came in. Did you read the news today? I know you can't access the Hive yet, but it was in the print versions too.”

“No,” Neil admitted. “I don't really follow current events.”

“You probably should,” the crow said. “Then you'd know that at least two people with new dolphin grafts were killed in the same way in the past week. It was the front page news today, and it seems to be causing a panic. There were a few other people killed too, and not all of their grafts could be identified, but at least two of them were dolphins. The article's writer seems to think that anyone with a new graft is a potential target. We've had our customers from the past week asking to have their grafts removed and to get a refund, but that's not something that we can do. Remove the graft, that is, not give them a refund.”

Neil thought about it. “Two points form a line, not a pattern,” he quoted from his novel. “People get grafts all the time. It's not like this killer is killing *everyone* who gets

a new graft. Statistically, I'm probably pretty safe.” He realized he was probably speaking gibberish to these people. He wondered what the origin of the word “gibberish” was.

“So you're sure, then?” the monkey asked. “You really want a dolphin graft?”

“We offer no guarantees and no refunds,” the crow added.

“I'm certain,” he said. Finally he could finish his novel.

Neil opened the door again to his dank house as a changed man. His skin had become gray and rubbery, and he felt a deep and inexplicable sense of peace, as if everything were right with the world. He sat down to write, and suddenly the pieces of his story fit together perfectly in his head, and he knew exactly how to structure it. He was working with such concentration that he didn't even hear the door open when his killer entered. His last thought was one of anger that the fountains of blood would ruin his manuscript.

Chapter 16

Cole

Cole, a fossil of a bygone era. You do your fellows honor by keeping their legacy alive. There is no shame and no sadness in how society has passed you by, but it makes sense that you would feel a need to prove yourself. Your dry, wrinkly skin and wiry frame is not much protection from violence, but the old magicks are strengthened by conviction, and that you have in spades.

Cole was nearly ninety years old. He was one of the few living veterans of the War of Succession. His memory had gotten so bad at this point that he couldn't even remember who they were fighting against, or for that matter who they were fighting for. But he could never forget his training. He was one of the few remaining battle mages.

Kids today were impressed with instant gratification, even if the end result wasn't very good quality. That was chimerism to him. Sure, anyone could do it, and even do it well, but it would always remain less versatile than the old magicks. Most magicks took a long time to cast, but Cole had been specially trained to produce effects quickly and with no ingredients. If he were ten years younger, he would be the perfect representative of the practitioners of the old ways in the tournament. As it stood, he was still the best they had, even if his body was pretty frail and his memory was a bit addled.

Cole's magicks were derived from Galundra, the fire totem. Most people Cole's age believed the totems to be

sentient gods, but there were a few who saw them as unintelligent forces of nature. Cole believed they were gods; why else would the magicks be so unpredictable? In the war, Cole's foes suffered heavy losses at his hands, because the gods favored him and his cause.

This was why Cole was so worried about his upcoming battle. The gods had spoken. The old magicks were weakening, and chimerism was on the rise. He expected that his magicks would fail him when he needed them most, but he had to have faith that the gods hadn't given up on him. A world without magicks would be a world where the gods no longer cared about the fate of its people, and Cole wanted to prove that that would not happen.

Cole had made it to the quarter-finals, on the fourth day of the tournament. He got one of the byes in the first round, and he faced a turtle chimera in the second round. He felt kind of bad for the girl. She would have done well in the tournament, he thought. Turtles could protect themselves from a variety of chimera powers, so all it took was superior fighting ability to defeat most foes. But turtles weren't immune to the old magicks, so Cole was exactly the worst possible foe for her to face.

Unfortunately, in this quarter-final match, Cole would be facing Hogan, the fourth seed combatant. Hogan was heavily favored, and many people thought that he should have been seeded even higher. In fact, Cole had placed a bet on Hogan to win the entire tournament. He didn't expect to win this fight, but he would try his best.

Before walking calmly out into his starting zone,

Cole offered a prayer to Galundra. Before the battle began, he prepared a spell that just might give him the edge he needed to survive. It had saved his tail in the war, and he hoped it would save his tail again, especially since the official medic was out of commission. But would it be enough to let him win?

Cole saw Hogan up close for the first time., taking in his rhinoceros features. The man had thick, dry skin where it was visible, and a small, sharp horn where his nose should be. His body was covered from head to toe in a thick layer of stone, yet he moved as fluidly as if he were in a silk robe. He held a massive piece of stone in the form of a great club. The man would be hard to hurt, and Cole was sure he could hit like a runaway elephant.

Cole by comparison was dressed in his military outfit, a simple cotton tunic that emphasized maneuverability. If he would be able to hurt Hogan, it would be through his magicks, so he didn't even bother with a weapon. His basic strategy was to keep Hogan at a distance long enough to wear him down.

The bugle sounded to start the battle, and Cole unleashed all of the magickal power he had been building in the form of a massive fireball. Hogan was slow and unable to dodge; the fireball slammed squarely into his chest, unleashing a wave of force that launched him flat on his back, ten meters from where he had started.

Without hesitating, Cole bent to his knees and offered his prayers to Galundra, hoping to gather enough power before Hogan could recover. Unfortunately, Hogan rose surprisingly quickly. Rather than get up one leg at a

time like a normal person, his armor quivered and extended a pole from his back to boost him directly up to his feet. Hogan started a lumbering dash to close the gap between himself and Cole.

Cole was expecting this, so he had a plan to counter it. He placed a wall of fire in a cylinder around himself, four meters tall and two meters in radius. Not only could Hogan not enter, but he couldn't even see what Cole was doing. It was time to recharge his power once again.

Cole had expected this move to buy him at least a minute, but within seconds the flames of the cylinder suddenly snuffed out. Cole found himself trapped in a slightly larger cylinder of stone, unable to breathe. He started to pass out as the cylinder quivered and retracted, and before he could fully regain his senses, he felt a terrible force slam into his stomach, launching his frail frame across the arena. His body couldn't withstand the trauma, and his corpse lay motionless.

Moments later, as Hogan held his great club aloft in triumph, Cole's body burst into white-hot flame. The flame consumed his flesh in an instant, but when it disappeared there his body lay, naked as the day he was born in a pile of ash. Hogan lowered his club and began to walk toward Cole.

"I forfeit!" Cole exclaimed before Hogan could begin another charge. "I know enough to know when I'm beat. Congratulations, Mr. Hogan. I hope you go on to win the tournament; I'm betting on you!"

Hogan's stone helmet shivered and retreated from his face, and he let a broad smile show. "Thanks for the

vote of confidence, old man. It's a pleasure to have battled a fellow of honor, and I admire your courage." Hogan reached down to shake Cole's hand, and his stone armor shifted and crawled across their arms to provide a thin sheet covering Cole's naked body.

Cole smiled as he rose. "I guess there's hope for you young whippersnappers yet," he admitted.

Chapter 17

Rush

Rush, a victim of circumstances you cannot possibly hope to understand. The pain is temporary, but it doesn't make it hurt any less. You were a young adonis, and could get by on your charms and good looks alone, but now your life will never be the same.

Oh gods, Rush thought, even though he didn't believe in them. *This hurts so much!*

Rush didn't even know what hit him. All he could tell was that his graft had turned on him and it was ravaging his body from the inside out. Rather than panic, he made the conscious decision to expel that dolphin from his mind. It hurt to do it; he loved that dolphin, and for the few weeks that he had it, it had really helped him peel back the curtain that kept life's mysteries concealed. But the creature had somehow turned on him, and he had no choice but to fight back.

It felt like an eternity before he woke up again, and even then, he was completely immobilized. He couldn't even open his eyes. For about a day or two, the only thing he could do was listen.

The entire time, there was this rhythmic thumping sound, accompanied by a sort of scratching. It sounded like someone was grinding something, though he couldn't imagine what it was. For a few minutes he wondered where he was, but he reasoned it out. He was attacked in his apartment. Scarlett would find him, and take him to Samuel

at her work. But then, why hadn't he healed? Why was he in such excruciating pain?

He tried to focus on the sounds he could hear, anything to distract him from the pain. The thumping and scraping seemed to grow louder; he pictured that as the ground on which other sounds could be built. Every once in a while, he heard what he thought was an old woman clearing her throat. He heard two women talking, but it was muffled and distant. A few times he heard the soft *caw caw* of a crow, which he recognized as the front door of the shop.

Then all of a sudden, he heard Scarlett's voice. "Thanks so much for watching over him," she said. "It really means a lot to me."

Someone Rush had never met responded, "Don't worry about it. This is my job anyway." He assumed that it was Manta's husband, Tyron.

"You'd help even if it weren't your job," she said. Rush felt like she was flirting. Flirting over his nearly dead body! The old lady snorted.

"Well, I mean, I wouldn't want to leave a friend in trouble," Tyron replied.

"I just wanted you to know that it really means a lot to me, and if I can ever repay you in any way, I'd be happy to."

Rush found himself struggling to stay awake. Before he fell asleep, he tried to reach out to Scarlett through the Hive. His mind recoiled as he tried. The feeling was familiar, like he was trying to stand on a sprained ankle. It's not that the ankle wasn't able to hold his weight,

but his body instinctively knew that in order for the ankle to heal he would need to stay off of it. He tried once more to grasp the Hive, but it was definitely out of his reach. Soon, the rhythmic thumping put him to sleep again.

Some time later, Rush woke again. He didn't hear any sounds around him, this time. He found himself adrift in a sea of agony. Apparently they hadn't yet been able to do anything for his pain. Rush felt overwhelmed at first, but he found that it helped to categorize the pain as much as possible, and to try to describe it. He started by thinking of it as fire all up and down his skin, but that seemed far too simplistic. Over time, his mental description evolved to incorporate ants climbing all over his skin, ants with sharp, tiny knives instead of feet.

Maybe they're chimera ants, he thought.

And that was just his skin. He could feel his internal organs, too. *It's funny how you don't feel them at all unless something is wrong,* he thought. Right now, it felt like someone had strung a guitar string up from his heart to his stomach, and they were playing the fastest song he'd ever heard. It wasn't painful, not like his skin, but there was a fundamental *wrongness* about it that bothered him.

Of course there was his head, too. This was what scared Rush the most. He loved his head. He got the dolphin graft specifically because he was a connoisseur of thought and philosophy. If his body was as ravaged as it felt, was his mind still intact? What would it mean if his mind wasn't the same as it used to be? Would he still be the same person? The questions kept piling up in Rush's head,

and it throbbed. He knew he couldn't answer the questions until he knew his fate, so he tried to put them out of his mind, but it was hard to do so when he had absolutely nothing else to do. Eventually, his pain wore him down, and he had no choice but to fall asleep again.

Rush wasn't sure how long it was before he woke up again, but it must have been a while. This time he was able to open his eyes just barely, and it elicited quite a reaction. Scarlett shouted, and the room became very crowded and there was a lot of talking. The excitement faded pretty quickly when they realized that he couldn't speak or move. but it seemed like everyone had taken it as a good sign.

There were a few faces that Rush didn't recognize, and a few that he did. *Oh no*, Rush thought. Suddenly he flashed back to his attack, and he realized who attacked him.

He started blinking as hard as he could. He didn't know how to communicate to them.

“He's trying to tell us something,” Capella said.

“Yeah, you're right!” Scarlett said. “What is it, Rush? Are you okay?”

Rush just blinked more and more. He didn't know what else to do. He felt himself slipping out of consciousness again. He tried to focus on the excruciating pain all over his body to stay awake, but it was no use. Soon he was out of it again.

When he woke the next time, Scarlett was the only person in the room, and she was asleep. He lay there for an

hour, unable to move, unable to even wake Scarlett up. Panic turned to boredom. He stared at the walls, and at the ceiling. He became intimately familiar with the grain and the grooves of the ceiling. He couldn't help but imagine that there were pictures in the patterns of the ceiling, like how clouds sometimes look like other things. He managed to distract himself from the pain, for a little while. He wished that Scarlett would go home, to take care of herself, instead of worrying about him when she couldn't do anything.

Then he heard a crack, and Scarlett woke up, looking around for the source of the noise. Then there was the familiar *caw caw*. Scarlett stood up nervously and looked at Rush. Rush watched in terror as the door to the infirmary opened, and his attacker entered to finish the job.

Chapter 18

Kilbourne

Kilbourne, a resourceful young man with a knack for building things. By day, you're a mild-mannered news editor, but by night, you secretly oversee your true passion, Fantasy Colosseum. And who can blame you? The Hive has opened up an exciting new world for you, and you have taken advantage of it more than most.

Kilbourne was beginning to get impatient. Ferelle hadn't checked in since her original story dropped two days ago. As the editor for the Polonia Sun, Kilbourne was expecting a juicy follow-up that would be both a public service and a sensational success. Getting the information to the people who need it; that was Kilbourne's job. As an ant chimera, he was particularly well-suited to running this organization. Why wasn't Ferelle being a team player?

She finally contacted Kilbourne on the morning of the fifth day of the Grand Tournament. That familiar tickle in his brain told him that she was trying to pull him into a conversation in the Hive, so he quickly finished what he was doing to meet with her.

“Finally, Ferelle! What took so long?”

“Sorry, sir. I've been following leads and watching the police, but there hasn't been a lot of action. They finally found a fourth victim this morning, another dolphin by the name of Neil,” she said. Kilbourne took her report from her and skimmed it quickly.

“Really, this is all you have? You weren't able to

find out anything about the other victims?”

“No, sir. Well, not other than the fact that the third victim, Jason, had a girlfriend who is now missing.”

“Missing? Could she be involved? Or another victim?”

“I can't say for sure. There seems to be a lot of mixed opinions about their relationship, and it's hard to separate the facts from the rumor. His family is accusing her family of murder and think that she has run away to avoid the law. It's a big mess, and I'm not sure I feel comfortable committing any of it to paper given how sketchy the sources are.”

Ferelle's scruples were sometimes a pain to work with, in Kilbourne's opinion. The facts were the facts; it was simple enough to report that there were rumors that Jason's girlfriend was a killer, and the readers could be trusted to decide whether rumor mattered or not. Besides, it would draw a crowd, and that would please advertisers. Kilbourne wanted to please his advertisers.

“Here,” he said as he handed the report back to Ferelle. “Rewrite this. You don't have to lie, but you should be able to spin the rumors to make them sound believable. People don't want facts, Ferelle. They want an exciting story. That's what will bring them back to our site.”

“Sir, with all due respect, I'm in the business of giving people the truth.”

“No, we are in the business of entertaining people. If the truth speaks for itself, great. If not, we just have to work a little harder to make the truth appealing.” Ferelle's idealism sometimes got in the way of a simple truth;

without the sensationalism, the site wouldn't attract as many visitors. With fewer visitors, Kilbourne would have to lay off reporters, and then he'd be hard-pressed to get the important stories out. Ninety percent of what Kilbourne published was fluff, but that fluff was necessary to make the other ten percent happen. That was how the world really worked, and Ferelle's naivety, though understandable, was an annoyance that Kilbourne reluctantly put up with since she was a talented reporter.

Ferelle gave a tired sigh; they had had this conversation before. "I'll see what I can do," she said as she winked out of the Hive.

Honestly, Kilbourne thought, the girl must be missing something. Why are all of the victims dolphin chimeras, except for the one who can't be identified? It just doesn't make much sense. Neither does the sudden demand for dolphin grafts, honestly. I never would have predicted that one. I'm usually able to see these trends. I must be off my game.

Kilbourne returned to what he was doing before Ferelle checked in with him. The load on Fantasy Colosseum was at an all-time high thanks to the Grand Tournament and Kilbourne's Dancing Sword promotion. Kilbourne was doing everything he could to expand the site to distribute the load, but these things took time, and he had other responsibilities.

Fantasy Colosseum had started as a quick way to make a few marks, but Kilbourne was unprepared for the success it would have. He knew that he should hire others to work on the site for him, but it was his creation and he

couldn't help but feel that by revealing himself as the creator and delegating responsibility for his creation to others, he wouldn't feel like it was really his anymore. That made him sad. Maybe he had a bit of idealist in himself, yet. Still, Kilbourne was overworked, and neither the Polonia Sun nor Fantasy Colosseum would run themselves. Maybe things would calm down after the Grand Tournament ended, and with any luck, the killer would soon be caught. Maybe then things would go back to normal.

Chapter 19

Samuel

Samuel, a healer with a practical leaning. Your patients are just patients; the less you attach yourself to them, the less you have to care if you can't save them. But Rush is something different; you've never met a challenge that you can't face and that actually matters for you. You'd do anything to save him, if only you knew how.

Samuel and Douglass were rushing to the arena. If they were lucky, they could get there before the semi-finals even started, and potentially Samuel's services wouldn't be necessary.

"Hogan is about to fight Sir Reginald, and there isn't a medic," Douglass had told him.

"So?" Samuel asked. "Hogan knows what he's getting into. Besides, he might actually be able to compete with Sir Reginald."

"I'm not willing to take that chance. I need Hogan's help," Douglass replied. "I'll explain on the way, just come on." Samuel gathered his things while Douglass went out into the main room.

"Manta, please, I need Tyron's help."

Through the door, Samuel could just barely see Capella's face. She and Manta must have shared a look or something, because Capella was shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Douglass, but I can't spare Tyron right now. You know he needs to protect Rush. I might consider letting him go to the finals, but Rush's safety is too important."

“But –” Douglass started.

“No buts. That's final. What do you need muscle for anyway?” Samuel finished getting ready and joined them in the main room.

“You can be really difficult to work with sometimes, Manta.” Douglass sighed, and the *caw caw* and a slam signaled his departure.

“Don't listen to him,” Samuel offered in conciliation even though he hadn't done anything wrong. “I don't know what has him so upset, but I'll find out.”

“No, it's okay. I probably deserve it. Take care of him. He, and now you, are mixed up in something really dangerous, but vital.”

“Did you see that with your power?”

“I don't need my power to see how important Douglass thinks it is, but my power is definitely telling me something. Just do what you can to help Douglass.” Manta seemed frustrated that she wasn't more help, which could only mean that she had weighed the odds and felt that her energy was better directed elsewhere.

“Take care while I'm gone. Both of you,” Samuel said to Manta and Capella. He exited the shop to the familiar and somewhat obnoxious *caw caw*, and found Douglass waiting outside.

“Let's hurry,” Douglass said as he signaled a horse chimera. Samuel and Douglass mounted his back.

“Where to?” the horse asked, with a thick mid-Eastern accent. Anyone in Polonia with a horse graft could find work in Polonia Mons, and they could make a decent living if they were hygienic. Douglass just picked the first

horse he saw.

“To the arena,” he said.

“Ah, that's a popular destination. Tonight's the semi-finals, right? Who do you want to win?”

“Sorry, ordinarily I'd humor you,” Douglass said, “but I'm not in the mood for small-talk tonight.”

“No sir, don't mind me,” he shouted back as he leaped into a gallop. Douglass wasn't kidding around. Samuel held onto his waist tightly as Douglass held onto the saddle. At least their ride was fast.

“What's this about, Douglass?”

“First, get Tori to meet us at the arena, and tell her to bring any weapons she might have.”

“Fine, but after that you're going to tell me what's going on.”

Samuel closed his eyes and let his consciousness drift to the Hive. He focused on Tori, trying to pull her into the Hive. She was already there, and preoccupied, so he waited a moment for her to show up. She was covered in sweat and as beautiful as the day he met her.

“What's up, honey?” Tori asked. Her face contorted and she laughed at something only she could understand. Tori was like that sometimes; it was part of what made her special. She was brave, and adventurous; this complemented Samuel's natural hesitation and shyness well. Tori had actually asked him out. A bully was pestering Samuel, and Tori stood up for him. She got hurt in the process, and he healed her. It was as good a way to meet as any. The rest, he guessed, was history.

“Are you busy?” he asked.

“Not really. I'm up to rank 165!”

“That's incredible!” Samuel knew how hard she'd been working to get under 200. “Your practice is really paying off.”

“Yeah, it must be,” she said sheepishly. It was an unusual look for her; she was usually so proud.

“So you don't mind taking a break to help us out?” Samuel asked.

“No, I can spare some time. What do you need?”

“Douglass wants you to meet us at the arena, and to bring weapons.” Tori's eyes shot up.

“Weapons!?”

“I don't know what's going on, but Douglass is freaking out and Manta says it's really important. I think Douglass is going to need all the help he can get.

“Well, let's see,” Tori thought. “I have my bow and arrows and my kukri.” Sometimes when Fantasy Colosseum went down for maintenance, she would practice with weapons outside of the Hive, too. “That'll cover two of us. Do either of you have anything?”

“No, I mean, why would we need them?”

“Good point. Well, hopefully we can find something at the arena. I'll meet you all there as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Tori. You're the best.”

“I know.”

By the time Samuel returned to his body, they were three-quarters of the way up the mountain. The summit of

Polonia Mons was home to three important landmarks: the Queen's royal palace, the Colosseum, and the magnificent Marble Road that joined them. Like Douglass, Tori, and Tyron, Samuel was a fan of sports, so he was excited that the Colosseum had replaced the University's worn-down arena.

“Okay Douglass. Tori is meeting us there. It's time for you to tell me what has you so agitated.”

“I don't even know where to start. Oh wait, yes I do. We're going to save the world,” Douglass said. Their ride *neighed* loudly at this, but Douglass ignored him.

“When I was looking for ingredients for Matron Beauregard, I found something disturbing in the sewers.”

“Yeah, no kidding. It's the sewers,” Samuel knew he wasn't very funny, but he tried anyway. Douglass wasn't amused.

“There was some kind of gateway there, to a place filled with hideous creatures. It was terrible. The creatures were filled with an insatiable hunger. I don't know why they weren't dead from hunger, and there were so many of them. If they were to get out, they'd devour Polonia Mons in no time. Not just the people; they'd eat all of the plants and all of the animals of Polonia. Then they'd make their way across the seas to Ihren and Dhapandur and Wesvalia and they'd ravage them too. I'm not sure there was an end to them; they might be breeding faster than they're dying.” Douglass's eyes had never looked so haunted. Samuel knew he loved animals, so he understood how this could pain Douglass; it must hurt to see creatures twisted and perverted so badly, and in such terrible pain.

“Okay,” Samuel said, not sure he'd totally understand until he saw it for himself. “If they're so dangerous, why aren't we dead yet?”

“There's someone there killing them as fast as they're emerging. He's been there for a long time, and he can't keep it up much longer. I promised him I'd be back for him, and that I'd bring help.”

“Douglass, we aren't fighters. We aren't even hunters. What help are we going to be?”

“We're just going to hold them off long enough for Hogan to fix the problem permanently.”

“And so I'm important why?”

“I told you, Hogan's going to fight Sir Reginald, and the tournament medic died two days ago. If we're too late to stop Hogan from fighting, I need you to save him if Sir Reginald hurts him.”

Samuel had heard crazier ideas. Besides, as a crocodile, it did feel like it was his duty to heal the wounded.

“Okay, Douglass. I hope you know what you're doing.”

When they reached the arena, Douglass ran ahead. Samuel reached into his pocket and paid the horse chimera, giving him a generous tip for getting them there so quickly.

“Oh, it's really not necessary, sir,” he said, but he took the money anyway. “I wish you the best of luck with your friend.”

Samuel ran to catch up to Douglass, and found him trying to bribe his way through the line to get in without

much luck.

“Relax, Douglass. The line isn't that long, and we're here with plenty of time to spare.” Douglass gave him a frustrated look, but there wasn't really anything they could do. Samuel waited patiently, and Douglass waited not-so-patiently, and they got into the arena just like everyone else. They ran to the front row and rushed around the circumference of the arena, pushing their way through the crowd. The crowd was growing; this was a semi-final match after all, and the arena would most likely be near capacity. He was sure Tori and Douglass would want to arrive early tomorrow to get good seats for the final match.

On their way to an area where they might find Hogan, Samuel heard a shout.

“Sammy!” It was Tori. “Sammy, over here!” Douglass kept pushing through the crowd, and Samuel grabbed Tori's hand and tried to pull her along to catch up with Douglass. “Sorry I'm late. I asked the lost and found if there were any spare weapons that the losers had given up, and they gave me a rapier, so now I've got three weapons for us.” It took a few minutes, but they finally caught up to a screaming Douglass.

“Hogan!” Douglass yelled. “Hogan!” Samuel was sure that Hogan couldn't hear him over the crowd. Douglass struggled to get his attention in vain for a few more minutes, before the signal came for the combatants to take their starting positions.

“Give it up, Douglass,” Samuel said. “We'll just have to wait for the battle to end. He might actually beat Sir Reginald.” Douglass pushed his way to the edge of the

crowd, and they ended up with a pretty good view of the battle, but Samuel felt a little guilty. He was kind of tall, so everyone behind him on this level would have trouble seeing the match. Maybe he should be more concerned with the fate of Polonia, but that was no excuse to stop caring about proper courtesy.

Samuel looked on as Hogan trudged onto the field. The stone armor seemed like a terrible idea at first, but seeing how fluidly it matched Hogan's form as he moved made it seem like a very prudent choice. His great club rested at his side as usual. The man's expression was completely unreadable. Samuel knew that if he were in the same situation, he'd be terrified.

Sir Reginald was present on the other end of the field. Sir Reginald had three grafts which collectively made him a fantastic bodyguard to Queen Rafnia. His first was naturally a turtle graft. Sir Reginald wouldn't be worth his title if a peacock or a cobra could come along and hypnotize him into turning on his charge. The second was an armadillo, which made his skin as tough as iron and immune to even more forms of attack. Then finally, just in case he couldn't handle his job with defense alone, he had an electric eel graft that rendered metal armor useless.

That was why this seemed like such an even match; Hogan's armor would protect him from Sir Reginald's electric attacks, and Hogan's rhinoceros powers are indirect so the turtle graft wouldn't protect Sir Reginald from them. Sir Reginald was a little stronger, a little faster, and a little more durable, but Hogan's stone-craft might give him the

versatility he needed to win the day.

The crowd held their breath in anticipation. The bugle sounded, and the combatants sprang into action. Hogan started his momentous charge, and Sir Reginald began walking briskly forward, shield raised and cape trailing loosely behind him. They met in a stalemate somewhere in the middle of their starting zones.

Sir Reginald fought defensively at first. His skin was impenetrable, but a hit from Hogan's great club would probably still cause some bruises. Samuel wanted Hogan to win, but he admired Sir Reginald's fighting style more. Sir Reginald parried blows smoothly with either his shield or his sword, never wasting any energy and never losing his balance.

Hogan, on the other hand, pressed the attack with little regard for defense. His great club was certainly dangerous, but he was having trouble connecting with a solid hit. After a few minutes of fruitless battle, Hogan flicked his wrist with the great club in it, and suddenly the mass of the entire thing shifted, turning into a fluid whip. The whip struck Sir Reginald in the arm with a loud *crack*, and Sir Reginald fumbled to keep ahold of his sword. Or at least, that's how it looked. Hogan tried to follow up the trick with a reformed great club, but Sir Reginald sidestepped at the last moment and attacked the weapon directly. He severed the great club cleanly above the handle and kicked the fragmented piece as far away as he could. Hogan pulled a bit of the stone from his armor and merged it with his handle to form a small shield. He was trying to buy some time.

Samuel could see where the battle was going. Sir Reginald would gradually wear down Hogan's supply of stone, unless Hogan could come up with something clever. Hogan must have made the same observation.

Hogan charged at Sir Reginald with a shield bash to get in close and grapple with him hand-to-hand. As Sir Reginald tried to break free, most of Hogan's armor began to crawl off of him and on to the ground, where it started to congeal. Hogan pushed Sir Reginald off of him, falling back just as his stone snapped shut to form a cylindrical prison. Hogan heaved breathlessly. At first Samuel thought Hogan was trying to suffocate Sir Reginald, but then Hogan moved forward to touch the cylinder. The crowd watched on silently as a thumping sound arose from the cylinder. Whatever Hogan was doing to Sir Reginald inside that prison, Samuel couldn't see it, but it definitely sounded painful.

Without warning, the stone exploded outward, knocking Hogan from his feet and spewing dust across the battlefield. Sir Reginald didn't hesitate; he charged Hogan's body and impaled him just below his rib cage. Without the stone armor to protect him, Hogan suffered the full brunt of the electricity that channeled through Sir Reginald's sword.

Samuel rushed onto the field, with Douglass and Tori not far behind. The guards tried to prevent him from disturbing the match, so Samuel screamed, "The man is wounded! He needs a crocodile." Samuel was worried. A wound like that could kill a man pretty quickly, and nothing could heal the dead.

Sir Reginald stepped back as Samuel put his hands

on the body. He still felt the spark of life, but it was dim. He fanned that spark, gently, delicately. He let it smolder, careful not to overwhelm it. It grew into the flame of a small candle. It wasn't impressive, but it would continue to burn.

As Samuel continued to coax Hogan's natural healing abilities into rejuvenating, the wound seemed to close. Hogan opened his eyes.

“Who are you?” Hogan asked, clearly still in quite a bit of pain.

“Just relax,” Samuel said assuringly. “You're going to be just fine. You were stabbed, but I'm healing you now. My name is Samuel, and this is Douglass and Tori. We need your help.”

Chapter 20

Marten

Marten, the paranoid weasel on the lam. Your whiskers are supposed to keep you from getting stuck in sticky situations, aren't they? But you seem to dive in headfirst, breaking every law you can, as if it's your civic duty to keep the police and the lawyers and everyone else in business. Even criminals have a place in Polonia.

Marten knew the horrible truth. He had tried to tell people a thousand times, but no one ever believed him. He knew the truth ever since that fateful day two months ago when he got a weasel graft from Arcane & Stable, and he'd been on the run ever since. He didn't care about the truth at all, but just knowing it made him a target. Every so often, he would know he was being followed, and it took all of his powers to give his pursuer the slip.

This time, his powers led him back to Arcane & Stable. He wasn't sure how revisiting the place of his chimerism would help him, but he was willing to try anything to shake his tail.

A *caw caw* announced his arrival, and he was greeted by Capella and Manta, two of the people involved in getting him his graft. He knew that weasel grafts were unpopular, but that sexy model managed to sell him on the idea, against his better judgment. He wondered where she was; only an idiot would fire an asset like her.

“You sold me this graft, and I am not satisfied,” Marten declared to the room. Manta, who he remembered

as being very abrasive at their first meeting, was suddenly kisses and honey.

“Is there some sort of problem with the graft?” she asked with a bit too much sugar in her voice to be sincere.

“Yeah, it's going to get me killed. I'm being hunted by someone, probably because I know the Queen's secret,” Marten snorted as his eyes darted about the room, searching for some unseen danger.

Manta went on as if she didn't hear the bit about the Queen; Marten was used to this by now. “Are you sure you're being hunted?” She seemed skeptical. That was the curse of being a weasel. No one ever believed you.

“God, why won't anyone believe me!?” Marten screamed in frustration.

Capella spoke up, “Actually, I do believe you.” Manta gave her a skeptical look, and Marten worried that she was putting him on.

“I think I just figured it out, Boss. You know how the news said that one of the chimera couldn't be identified?”

“Yes,” Manta said. They seemed to have forgotten that Marten was there.

“Well, I think I know what kind of graft it was. I was looking at the chimera pods, and based on the settings – Well, I mean, I could be wrong, but,” Capella stammered.

“Just say it already,” Manta said.

“I think it was a human graft,” she said, quietly, glancing at Marten. *A human graft!?* he thought. *Impossible.* Manta said as much.

“And there's more. The reporter who broke the story

– Ferelle, I think her name was – she seemed to think that the victims were all people who had just gotten grafts. I think she's wrong. I think our friend – what was your name?”

“Marten,” Marten said, wondering when they would pay attention to him again, but kind of interested in Capella's story. For a monkey chimera, she was kind of hot.

“I think our friend Marten here may be a target too. It's not when they got their graft, but the specific powers those grafts grant.”

Manta thought about it, “I don't understand. So we know that some of the victims were dolphins, some were humans, and now we think some are weasels. Weasels are kind of powerful, since they can escape from almost anything, but dolphins are fairly weak. And humans, I don't even know what kind of effect that would have.”

“We can't really be sure,” Capella admitted. “After all, no one's ever grafted a human before. But dolphins and monkeys are both intelligent creatures, so they grant intelligence-boosting powers. What's more intelligent than a human? We can assume that the power was mental in nature.”

“Umm, ladies,” Marten interrupted. “I really need some protection here.”

“Not now, Marten,” Manta said. “Aha! I see where you're going with this.” Marten didn't.

“Right. All of the killer's targets can escape or prevent mental effects. There's just one problem with this theory,” Capella furrowed her brows.

“What's that?” Marten asked.

“Well, turtles are immune to mental effects too. So why hasn't anyone attacked Sir Reginald, or Detective Irvine?”

As if saying his name made him appear, the door opened with a *caw caw* and a detective entered. The ladies seemed familiar with him, so Marten guessed this was Detective Irvine. Marten was not exactly known for living a law-abiding lifestyle, so his instincts told him to shut up and escape at the first possible opportunity.

“Ah, Detective Irvine, speak of the devil,” Manta said. Marten wondered where that expression came from or what a devil was. Manta sounded like she might originally be from Dhapandur – maybe it was some animal from her homeland?

“Hello, ma'am. I'm just stopping in to check up on Rush. How's he doing?”

“He's about the same, I'm afraid,” Manta said. “Say, Detective Irvine, have there been any more attacks?” Capella was furiously trying to tell Manta something with her expressions, but she pretended like she wasn't whenever the detective could see her.

“There have been a few, but at this point I'm sure you've read about them all in the papers.”

“So no one with a turtle graft has been attacked?” Manta asked, and Capella looked very frustrated with her.

“No,” Irvine said with a confused look on his face. “Why would you ask that? Do you ladies know something I don't know?” When the detective looked away from Manta, Manta signaled that she had the situation under control to Capella. Marten wasn't even sure the detective had noticed

him, for which he was grateful.

“We think that the killer is choosing his victims based on the powers they have.” She explained Capella's theory in full.

“So,” the detective said after some consideration, “Two questions remain. First, what mental effect is so important that someone would kill over it?”

“Oh, that's easy. I could see someone killing to hide the Queen's secret.” Marten said. As usual, everyone ignored him. He was kind of grateful that the detective did, actually.

“Second, why would the killer not attack turtles? I don't know the answer to the first one, but I could come up with some theories for the second.”

“I'd like to hear them,” Capella said.

“Well, theory number one: maybe the killer is using chimera powers to poison his victims.”

“But I thought the poison was derived from the old magicks,” Manta said.

“Sure, but maybe he's delivering them with chimera powers. Like a scorpion, maybe, or a toad.”

“Okay, that sounds possible,” Capella said. The detective scratched his chin, before arriving at another idea.

“Theory number two: Maybe the killer is a coward. We turtles are a hearty bunch. Sir Reginald is a stalwart one. Plus I'm no slouch, especially since I'm on the lookout for the guy.”

“Or girl,” Manta corrected.

“A lady serial killer?” Marten snorted despite his promise to himself to remain quiet. “Yeah, that's likely.”

The detective looked at Marten with his eagle eyes, and Marten decided that shutting up was probably a good idea.

“Anyway,” the detective said, “this theory would also explain why he hasn't finished the job on Rush. Your husband seems to be keeping a close guard on him, and he's no weakling either.”

“How did you know we were married?” Manta asked suspiciously.

“Ma'am, I'm a detective. It's my job to know things. Anyway, theory number three: the mental effect is being caused by the old magicks, so turtles aren't actually immune to it.”

Detective Irvine seemed very proud of himself. Capella and Manta looked like they were trying to hold a conversation without using words. Marten just felt more and more nervous.

Suddenly there was a shout from the back room. A cow chimera came down off the roof, and everyone ran into the back room, even Marten. There was a crocodile and a grizzly too, and that girl that sold him on the weasel graft. And some old lady making dinner or something.

Everyone was looking expectantly at someone who looked to be in really bad shape. The guy had cuts and scars all over his body. *That must be what it feels like to be put through a meat grinder*, he thought. The man's eyelids were fluttering quickly. Even that looked painful, since even his eyelids were torn apart like the rest of his skin.

“He's trying to tell us something,” Capella said.

“Yeah, you're right!” the peacock girl said. “What is it, Rush? Are you okay?”

The man seemed to fall unconscious again, and there was a lot of discussion among the people there. Mostly they were rehashing the theories that Marten had already heard, and his instincts were still telling him to run. Somehow, he slipped out without being noticed; even the door was kind enough to forget to signal his exit. His power just worked that way sometimes; often he wouldn't even notice.

Oh well, he thought, as he made it out on the street. The danger's pretty much passed at this point. Guess I might as well go catch the fight. Hogan versus Sir Reginald; that's going to be an impressive one. I hope Hogan wins. Sir Reginald and his Queen need to be taken down.

Chapter 21

Ahmed

Ahmed, an entrepreneur whose ingenuity is truly inspirational. Your ideas will carry you farther than your legs, though your legs do take you pretty far as well. A family man, your children could do much worse than follow in your hoofprints. When you learn of a problem, you feel compelled to solve that problem, no matter whose problem it is. And if there's a profit to be had, so be it.

Ahmed woke up that morning grateful to be a Polonian citizen. He had worked hard for his citizenship. Follow the laws and be a productive member of society. Those were the instructions he got from the immigration officials.

It was hard at first. He had no money, no wife, and no job. But he had plenty of determination. He started by selling cold drinks on the Marble Road. He turned a great profit with that business; visitors to the palace had to hike up an entire mountain, so they were often thirsty when they got there and would pay three to five times the normal rate. Ahmed just got good at running.

One day it occurred to him that by quenching the thirst of the hikers, he was at best treating a symptom of a disease and at worst he might be preying on victims of a failed system. Polonia Mons was a wonderful city, but her people were suffering. No one should have to climb a mountain just to go to school or to see a sports game. And they certainly shouldn't have to climb a mountain to find

the immigration officials after an already horribly long journey.

Then he heard about this new thing called chimerism. Ahmed had saved up quite a bit of money, so he could afford to get a graft. He had never seen an elephant, or else he might have tried to get an elephant graft. But he had seen a horse, so that's what he chose.

For days, he stood in the main thoroughfare, shouting at the top of his lungs that he would give anyone a ride to the top of the mountain for cheap. It was slow, but gradually people began to take him up on his offer. Soon his business was thriving, and he had plenty of competitors. People would line up for the next available horse chimera. Now people could get to the summit of Polonia Mons without getting thirsty. It wasn't long before the Queen noticed this idea and ran with it, creating the first public transit system that Polonia Mons had ever known. Her citizens had never been happier, and there was still plenty of business left for the private entrepreneurs like Ahmed.

Ahmed's idea had fundamentally transformed the way of life in Polonia.

Eventually Ahmed fell in love with one of his regulars, and she came to love him back, and they wed and had three children. Those three children joined the family business, becoming horse chimeras as well. Soon Ahmed found himself managing a fleet of horse chimeras, and he earned the somewhat embarrassing title of "Admiral Ahmed". He was embarrassed about his title, but he was proud of what he had done.

Then one day, at the semi-final match of the Grand

Tournament, he got a pair of unusual passengers. They told a very strange story that left Ahmed thinking for a long time after he dropped them off. The boys sounded like they were in trouble. He couldn't help but be reminded of his own boys. He summoned them up on the Hive and told them to meet him at the arena. They were there and waiting for him when he arrived.

Ahmed watched some of the crowd file out after the first fight of the evening. Among them were the men he was looking for. He galloped over to them.

“My fellows,” he said, “I believe you were in need of some muscle?”

The cow chimera just blinked. “I don't understand,” he said. “Why would you help us? You don't even know us.”

“I heard enough of your story to hear that you needed help. I want in, and so do my sons. We'll take you where ever you need to go, and we'll help you squash those bugs that threaten our world.”

The cow chimera turned to his companions, a crocodile, a fly, and a rhinoceros, and said, “Well, you heard the man. Mount up!”

The cow mounted Ahmed's back, and Ahmed turned back to him, “Where to, sir?”

“To the base of the mountain! I'll show you where once we get there. And thanks. I'm sorry about how I treated you earlier,” the cow said, referring to small-talk or the lack thereof.

“Don't mention it,” Ahmed said. “Besides, your friend gave me a huge tip. I couldn't stay mad at you for

long.” Ahmed's smile was infectious, and the entire group seemed to be in high spirits despite the task that lay before them.

Chapter 22

Hogan

Hogan, a plucky fighter whose reputation precedes him. Others believe you to be braver than you actually are. You take yourself so seriously for some reason. The Colosseum may be life-or-death, but not everything is. Maybe you can find a way to loosen up and see the brighter side of life.

Hogan was lucky to be alive, and he knew it. He had put up a decent fight, but he should have been more careful about Sir Reginald. He had nearly thrown his life away, and now he had Samuel to thank for his recovery. So when Samuel asked for a favor in return, the only honorable thing he could do was accept.

He soon found himself mounted on the back of a horse chimera, which due to his large size was awkward for him and the young horse both. The cow named Douglass was informing everyone in the group of the plan.

“As near as I can tell,” Douglass said, “the man we are rescuing, Warren, is spending his entire concentration on keeping the incoming horde at bay. The individual insects are not so dangerous, but there are more of them than I can count, and if even two escape they can breed and multiply. We have to cut them off at the source, and that's where you come in, Hogan.”

“Me?”

“I need to know the extent of your abilities. How close do you have to be to stone to shape it, and how quickly could you make a cube that's about two meters by

two meters by two meters?”

“I’m not sure,” Hogan answered. “I have to be pretty close to the stone I’m shaping. I have to be touching it, at least, and even then I can only stretch it to about two meters.”

“That means that we’ll have to get you right next to the portal, as I expected. How quickly can you make it?”

“Depending on the stone, between ten and thirty seconds,” Hogan answered.

“You hear that, everyone else? When Hogan charges forward to seal the portal, Warren won’t be able to staunch the flow of insects without risking hitting Hogan. Your job is twofold. First, make sure you protect Hogan; if he falls, we all do, as does the rest of the world. Second, make sure none of the insects escape. Tori and Samuel, you’re with me on the front line. Ahmed and the rest of the horses, I want you to form a perimeter to catch any of the bugs that might slip past us.”

Hogan considered these people before him. He thought that he was brave, by entering the tournament and trying to prove his strength despite the chance of death. But these people were the real heroes. They were risking what sounded like almost certain death, and if they were successful no one would even know of their deeds. Could Hogan back down from this, knowing that these people were willing to put it all on the line? Obviously not. Besides, without his help, these people didn’t stand a chance.

They made their way to the base of the mountain, to a sewer entrance that Douglass seemed to recognize. A thin

plume of smoke rose from the grate and tickled Hogan's senses. As his horse carried him into the tunnel, Hogan reached to recover his supply of stone from the sewer walls.

“I figure you could all use some more weapons,” he said to no one in particular, as he began shaping the stones into maces.

“You just need four of them,” Douglass said. “We have a bow, a kukri, and a rapier.”

“I don't know,” Tori said. “If these insects are as nasty as you say, we might want to have Hogan make us all weapons. Their exoskeletons might protect them from sharp weapons, but bludgeoning weapons still seem pretty effective. That's just one of the things I've learned in the past few days in Fantasy Colosseum; I chose stupid weapons to master, and an animated sword sounds a lot cooler than it really is.”

Hogan reached out and made three more maces. He started to make one for himself, but realized that if he had to use a weapon then they had already lost. He did restore his armor, though; that might come in handy against these ravenous creatures.

The smell of smoke grew stronger as they made their way into the heart of the sewers of Polonia Mons. They followed markings on the walls that led them deeper. With the horses, it didn't take them very long to find the scene that Douglass had described.

Hogan was not prone to fear, but when he saw how many insects were pouring through the portal he couldn't imagine how he could survive this plan. These eight people

would have to protect him from hundreds of these insects.

“Warren,” Douglass called from a few meters away. “I brought some people with me. We’re going to seal the gate.” Warren didn’t respond.

“It doesn’t look like he can hear you,” Samuel said.

“No, he can, he just can’t spare the concentration.”

Hogan had an idea. “If we’re going to do this, we should do this right. How many exits are there to the room?”

“From what I can tell, there’s this ground level exit, the main sluice gate, and hundreds of pipes up above that the insects could probably climb up to,” Douglass said.

“In that case,” Hogan said, as he dismounted. He reached down to the ground behind the group, and gradually raised a thick wall to seal the tunnel behind them. The group got noticeably more nervous now that they were sealed in. “That will seal their exit from this end. Can you fly, Tori?”

“I can probably fly for about a minute. That should be enough, right?” she answered.

“Yeah, that might work. Your job is to fly over the battle and make sure that none of the insects escape up the walls to the pipes.”

“I think I can do that,” she said.

“You four,” Hogan said, pointing to Ahmed’s crew. “As we start the battle, I want you to form a wall by the basin. I don’t think anyone here is equipped to hunt them down in the water, so you must not let them pass. I wish I could build a wall over there to help you out, but I can’t do it from here.” The horses nodded agreement.

“Douglass, Samuel, and Warren, that leaves you to actually kill as many of the creatures as possible immediately as they exit the portal,” Hogan finished. He looked around at the group expectantly. The group sat silently for a few moments, with the shrieks of burning insects as the only sound to break the mood that had taken the people there.

“It sounds like a good plan,” Douglass said. “I’m ready when you are.” Everyone dismounted and lined up behind Warren, ready to enact the plan. It was up to Hogan. When he gave the signal, this massacre would begin. He hated drawing things out, and was sure the tension was killing his comrades, but for a moment, he was petrified with fear.

As if he could tell what Hogan was thinking, Douglass said, “You can do this, Hogan. Heroes don’t choose to be heroes. Heroes are made when circumstances call for heroism. Everyone here today is a hero. We’re ready to back you up.”

Hogan felt a real camaraderie with these people. He had never met any of them until an hour ago, and suddenly he was trusting them all with his life. Sometimes you just couldn’t know where life would take you.

“Charge!” Hogan screamed, and he started running forward at full speed. Warren’s streams of fire continued for as long as they could, until Hogan began to get in the way. Then Warren moved for the first time. He hugged Hogan closely as Hogan made his approach to the side of the portal. The insects went immediately for the two of them, but Warren seemed to fend them off with impossible speed,

as his six arms flailed about independently of each other. But it was all Warren could do to keep the insects off of Hogan, and the other insects poured out in a steady stream as the rest of the group took their positions.

Hogan tried to ignore the chaos around him and focus on his responsibility here. Stone-craft took concentration, and this was the most stressful thing Hogan had ever experienced. Insects were shrieking everywhere, above him, beside him, and he could hear them over by the basin. The sound of his stone maces squashing their carapaces was sickening. He tried to shut it all out, but he couldn't help but be distracted. He could feel metallic teeth grating against his stony armor. With the distractions it took him nearly a full minute to surround the portal in a two meter wide cube. It stopped the flow of the horde, but Hogan couldn't imagine how many had escaped in that time.

Hogan looked at the ongoing battle. Warren had taken to the sky, since he could use his blasts of fire up there. Tori got out of his way and had accompanied the horses at the edge of the basin; she was doing her best with a rapier, so she must have lost her mace during the battle. Everyone but Hogan had bite marks on them, but the older horse, Ahmed, lay motionless on the ground, having succumbed to his wounds. Tori was doing everything she could to protect his body from further attacks, but there were just too many insects.

Samuel and Douglass were now chasing the last of the stream of insects towards the basin, and Hogan stood up to join them. He ran to the edge and quickly built a small

flimsy wall to prevent the bugs from getting past the group and into the basin. The wall wouldn't hold for long, but it gave the group enough time to finish off the rest of the creatures.

For a few seconds, no one moved. There were no more creatures. Then everyone converged on Ahmed's body. Samuel reached down and closed his eyes.

“He's going to make it,” Samuel said. The horses cheered, and were soon joined by the rest of the group. Except for Warren, who was still flying around above the battlefield. Minutes passed, and the adrenaline from the fight began to wear off. Everyone but Samuel sat down and were recounting their experiences to each other.

Finally, Warren landed. His gaze took in the entire group. “Thank you so much,” he said. “You have no idea how much this means to me.” By the time he finished speaking, he was looking only at Douglass. Douglass rose and walked slowly towards Warren. At first Hogan thought they were going to hug. Douglass stood silently in front of Warren for a moment, admiring his wings, and his horn, and his arms. Hogan had to admit that Warren was very impressive. Warren watched Douglass's eyes as they drank him in. The two seemed to have an entire conversation without words, and Hogan could only imagine what passed between them in the exchange.

Then Warren reached out with all six arms and pulled Douglass into a firm embrace, and leaned in for a kiss that Douglass eagerly returned. Hogan took a step back from them, and looked at the rest of the group to find that they were just as surprised as he was, even Samuel and Tori

who supposedly knew Douglass well.

Had Douglass just brought them all here to risk their lives to save his boyfriend? Hogan began to get upset that he had been used. He maintained his grip on his anger long enough to think the situation through completely. These creatures really were a threat to Polonia. Douglass did the right thing by bringing them here, and Hogan felt a little guilty for doubting his motives, even if it was only for a moment. In the end, though, it didn't matter how Hogan felt. They had made the world a better place, and no one would even know it.

“Man, it feels good to stretch my wings,” Warren said, after he and Douglass had finished their embrace. “I've been stuck in that same position for years.” He twisted his back and Hogan could hear his bones cracking. He walked back towards the stone cube, and went to a pile of ash. With a mighty flap of his wings, he blew the ash away from him, ruining the clear semi-circle he had protected all that time. At the bottom of the pile was a skeleton.

“I'm sorry, dad,” he said. “I'm sorry that I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry that I couldn't even say goodbye. But I hope I made you proud.” Warren shed a tear. Douglass walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Hogan walked over nearby, behind the two meter cube he had constructed. His efforts left a large hole in the base of the floor that needed to be smoothed out.

“Would you like me to bury him?” Hogan asked. Warren looked up from his father's bones at Hogan, and nodded solemnly. He and Douglass gathered the bones carefully and placed them in the hole. In moments, Hogan

smoothed the ground over. The two meter cube stood as a massive tombstone. “Would you like an inscription?” Hogan put his hands against the cube.

“Here lies William Tacrolimus. His genius was matched only by his hubris. For better or for worse, or perhaps for both, he changed the world.” Hogan couldn't begin to imagine what that meant, but he didn't need to to inscribe it. The group held a moment of silence to honor the fallen. It was Warren who broke the silence.

“Unfortunately, we missed one,” he said out loud to the group.

“One what?” Douglass asked.

“One of the creatures. I counted three hundred forty seven of them exiting the portal, and there are only three hundred forty six corpses.” Hogan didn't understand how this man could possibly have tallied either of those numbers so quickly. Hogan realized that with that many grafts, he was bound to have some powers to help. Still, the guy just sounded so *certain* of himself.

“One hundred eighty two tried to escape up the walls, and the one hundred sixty five remaining went for the basin. I believe that the one who got away managed to get by one of the horses, when he fell.”

“Well, we still did pretty good! Sure, the creature's dangerous, but there's only one of him, so he's not really a problem, right?” Tori asked. It sounded right to Hogan.

“I'm not sure,” Douglass said. “I don't know enough about the creature. Plants, for instance, can clone themselves asexually. For all I know, this creature might be able to do the same. And sometimes one kind of animal can

breed with another kind to make a hybrid of the two. The offspring are usually sterile, but they would probably inherit many of the traits of the parent, so they could be dangerous still. What do you know about these creatures, Warren?"

"I really don't know much more than you," he replied. "They come from another reality, so I don't think the same creature could be found here in Polonia. I guess there might be something like it though, like a scarab beetle or something. I know that they do reproduce sexually, but as with plants that doesn't mean they can't reproduce asexually. Still, it's unlikely that the creature will be able to reproduce quickly, at least. I think that without knowing more, the best thing that we can do is to track it down as soon as possible."

"I'll get on the Hive and hire a bloodhound," Tori said.

"The Hive?" Warren asked as Tori closed her eyes. "What's that?" Everyone in the room looked at Warren a little strangely.

"How do you not know what the Hive is?" Douglass asked.

"Is it new? I've been down here fighting those creatures for twelve years," he said, and he looked embarrassed. Hogan and the others gasped out loud.

"How?" was the only question Hogan could form.

"You'd be surprised at how far you can push yourself when you don't have a choice," he said. Douglass took one of Warren's hands in his, and Warren's demeanor visibly brightened. Hogan could only assume that Douglass

was using his power to nourish Warren, and it seemed to help.

“So what do we do now?” Hogan asked.

“I guess we wait for Tori to finish hiring a bloodhound, then send one of these guys,” Douglass pointed toward the horses, “to pick him up and bring him here to start the search. I think Warren and I can handle it from here probably, if you all want to go.” Hogan went over to their exit and removed the wall that, apparently, did a good job of preventing the creatures from fleeing.

“Okay, I’ve hired someone,” Tori said. She gave Ahmed’s people the address, and they ran off.

“We can at least keep you company until the bloodhound gets here,” Samuel said. Hogan kind of didn’t mind the idea. His body had gone through a lot, today, so he was feeling pretty exhausted. The group sat down on the cold stone floor and shared more stories of the battle. It didn’t take long for Hogan to feel like a fifth wheel, as the two couples seemed to take comfort in each other’s presence. He was about to excuse himself to leave when one of the horses returned with the bloodhound.

She was the most beautiful woman Hogan had ever seen. Even her large pink nose was cute; besides, who was Hogan to judge given his horn? Her body was voluptuous, and slightly larger than what most people would consider the ideal, but to Hogan, she was perfect.

“Someone wanted a bloodhound?” she asked in a smoky, rasping alto. “Miracle the bloodhound, at your service.” She looked at the carnage around her, a combination of ash and insect ichor spread all over the

room. She seemed to forget herself for a second. “Good gods, what in the world happened here? Please don't kill me!”

Chapter 23

Barnaby

Barnaby, a man with pure intentions if somewhat dubious scruples. Your brightly colored feathers might distract some people from your sleazy nature, but anyone with half a brain will know to be careful around a parrot.

Barnaby needed ingredients. He was something of an oddity in modern Polonia. He was a parrot chimera who practiced the old magicks. His chimera power, the ability to mimic others' powers, was definitely useful. But he had to be very near other people to use their powers, so this often left him powerless. Not that he minded the rainbow-colored feathers in his hair, but sometimes he just felt so useless.

This is why he turned to the old magicks. Anyone could use the old magicks, even if they were a bit unpredictable. With the old magicks, he could be capable even when no one was around to copy.

Unfortunately, this often meant that Barnaby needed ingredients. It was pretty late at night, though, so most of the shops would be closed. He made his way down the main thoroughfare until he found one with a light on. Arcane & Stable.

He knocked on the door. He heard some sort of *clanging* sound coming from inside, but he wasn't sure what it was. He knocked louder, and at some point the *clanging* stopped. The door opened a crack.

"I'm sorry, but we're closed," a face said. She was a crow. Barnaby copied her power instinctively.

“Please, I need to buy some ingredients. I'll make it worth your time.” The crow searched him up and down.

“Fine, come on in. But let's be quick about it,” she said. She opened the door and it squawked a *caw caw* as he entered. He saw there there was someone else there, a monkey chimera sitting next to something under a sheet. Barnaby didn't really care what that was about. He just started searching the shelves for the ingredients he was looking for.

The door to the back room opened, and an old woman stepped out. “There. I've done everything I can. The potion needs to cook for a day, but I'll be back when it's time to give it to him.”

Barnaby couldn't help but ask, “What kind of potion takes an entire day to cook?”

“What's this, then? Some furry thinks he knows more about magicks than me?” the woman guffawed.

“I didn't say that, ma'am. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend. I'm just interested in the healing arts and I've never heard of something taking so long,” Barnaby said nervously.

“Well, for your information, this is a very special case,” the woman said.

“Could you give me the recipe?” he asked.

“Could I – Boy what do you think I am? Your grandmother?”

“Oh, I would pay you!” he said. Barnaby considered things for a moment. “I think five gold marks would be a fair price.”

“Five gold marks!” the woman exclaimed. “For that

much, maybe I will give you the recipe.”

“Sorry, I spoke without thinking. That was the crow power talking; I see the recipe is certainly worth something, but I couldn't possibly afford five gold marks. I apologize if I got your hopes up. The best I could do is one gold mark.”

The old woman scratched her chin. Then the crow spoke up, “Don't trust him, Matron Beauregard. The recipe is worth far more than he's letting on. What makes you think you can outcrow a crow?”

Barnaby scratched his feathers and shrugged. “I was hoping that you'd admire my moxie. Besides, anyone could tell that you don't get along with this woman.”

“Get out of my shop!” the crow yelled. “Even if I didn't like her, I am a professional, and I will not allow you to so brazenly besmirch my reputation.”

“Please, please, I need these ingredients,” Barnaby said. He realized the words were a mistake when he said them. His bargaining position plummeted, and everything in the shop just appreciated in value. “I'll be honest, my sister is sick, and she needs a potion to heal her.”

The crow still looked angry. “Very well, Matron Beauregard. I will see you in a few days. I appreciate all of the work that you've done for Scarlett and for Rush.”

“I couldn't leave Rush like that, and you know it,” the Matron said, as she left the shop. She did something with the door to prevent it from crowing as she left, but Barnaby couldn't see what it was.

“Well, then,” the crow said. “We can do business if you'd like.”

Barnaby ended up paying an arm and a leg by the time he was finished. He also picked up a few other powers while he was there. There must have been a few people in the back room, because at one point Barnaby was holding on to five powers at once, which was about his limit. As he was about to leave, the monkey stopped him.

“Wait. You’re a parrot, right? What powers did you pick up tonight?”

“Well, I got yours and hers, obviously. Then there was a grizzly bear, a dolphin, and a peacock, I think,” Barnaby admitted.

“You got the dolphin graft!?” Barnaby wasn’t sure why the crow was so shocked.

“It must still be lingering in Rush’s body, despite the poison,” the monkey said. “What’s your name?”

“Barnaby,” he said.

“I’m Capella, and this is Manta. Would you mind doing something for me?” she asked.

“Maybe for the right price,” he offered.

“Now that you have the dolphin power, there’s some mental effect that you’ve been freed from. Can you figure out what it is?”

Barnaby thought about it. It was kind of hard to be introspective when you didn’t know what to think about. “Can you give me some sort of clue?”

“Probably not,” Capella admitted. “If I could, I might be able to figure out what the effect was myself. But it must be preventing us from thinking about it.”

The Queen! Barnaby thought suddenly, though he wasn’t sure why. Then he remembered something,

something he had known his whole life but didn't realize again until just now. And his first reaction to it made him angry.

“Oh my gods, the Queen is clouding our minds!” he shouted. Capella and Manta acted like he hadn't said anything. “Oh gods. Oh gods. You're forgetting these words as I say them. As soon as I walk out of here, I'm going to forget this. Someone has to know!”

Capella spoke up, “Sorry, Barnaby, I'm having trouble understanding a lot of what you're saying. Maybe you should write it down.” She handed Barnaby some paper and a jar of octopus ink.

Barnaby plucked one of his own feathers, and began writing furiously. He filled up the page by the time he was done. He handed the paper to Capella.

“What? It's blank,” she said as she turned it to show it to him. He could see the words plain as day. He could also see that the paper was worthless, at least to him.

“Fantastic,” he said as he threw up his hands. “Keep that paper safe. Hopefully someone will be able to read it.” Barnaby picked up his merchandise and left the store, with a *caw caw* announcing his departure.

“Wait, you should be careful going home tonight!” Capella tried to yell at him as he left. A few kilometers down the street, his powers faded, and the street was suddenly very empty. Barnaby looked around himself nervously, but he didn't see anyone.

He made it all the way home, and he locked the door behind him. He went upstairs to his room, where his sister was waiting for him, unconscious, and he spent the

entire night making the potion to help her recover.

At some point after administering the potion, Barnaby fell asleep on the bed next to his sister. She would recover, but Barnaby would never wake again.

Chapter 24

Miracle

Miracle, a bloodhound just trying to make a buck. Crime is just not common enough in Polonia for your skills to be useful, most of the time. But you get by, and you hope some day you'll find a man who will get you pregnant and take you away from this lousy career.

Miracle's business barely put food on the table. People didn't often need bloodhounds, but the police sometimes did, so she could at least get municipal contracts. She had gotten a lot of these contracts recently on this one case in particular. One of the detectives in the PMPD, Detective Irvine, had been asking for her help on a case. There was a serial killer about, and she was often charged with finding the killer's victims. It was grim work. These people were mangled up pretty badly.

That was why Miracle was so happy when she got a visitor to her Hive site.

"Oh good, someone's available this late. Why aren't you at the semi-finals?" the fly chimera asked. The answer was that she couldn't afford to go, but she didn't want to let a potential client think she was bad at her job.

"Bah, I hate sports," she lied. "Trust me, if you were in my line of work you would have had your fill of violence."

"Of course," the girl said. She clearly wasn't buying it. "Listen, I need something done as soon as possible. Are you willing to get a little dirty?" she asked.

“Sure.”

“Okay, great. My name's Tori. I'm sending someone to pick you up, I think his name is Kareem. You'll be working for two guys named Douglass and Warren. Where should I send Kareem?”

“Don't you want to talk price?”

“Oh, sure. How much are you charging?”

Miracle liked the sound of that. A person who doesn't care about price is someone who can afford to pay.

“A gold mark per hour,” she said. The girl stared at her blankly for a few minutes.

“You know, I have a friend who's a crow, I should probably just go get her help with choosing someone. I hear there's a good tapir near here.”

That blasted tapir had been stealing all of her customers. He did the job twice as fast for half the price. It's not her fault that tapirs were better at smelling than bloodhounds. “Fine, I can probably do it for a silver mark per hour, but my time is really worth more than that.”

“Great. Kareem will be there soon. It's been a pleasure doing business with you.” The girl disappeared, and Miracle likewise broke her connection to the Hive.

It didn't take very long for her ride to arrive. On the way to their destination, he opened a grate to the sewers.

“Whoa, we're going in there?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “You'll see when you get there.”

He led her deep into Polonia Mons's sewer system. She had no trouble smelling a lot of distinct smells, most of which were unpleasant. But there was the aroma of a fire,

though whatever was burning was something she had never smelled before. It didn't smell bad, exactly, but it was more acrid than she would have liked. Before long, Kareem had led her into a wide-open room.

“Someone wanted a bloodhound?” she asked, prepared to dazzle them with her unflappable professionalism. “Miracle the bloodhound, at your service.” She looked at the carnage around her, a combination of ash and insect ichor spread all over the room. Before she could stop herself, she exclaimed, “Good gods, what in the world happened here? Please don't kill me!”

“Relax,” one of the people said. “You're perfectly safe here. I'm Douglass, and this is Warren. We're the ones who hired you.”

“I guess we'll be going now,” a crocodile said, and he and Tori got up off the floor and started to leave with Kareem.

“I think I'll stick around,” the rhinoceros said. A rhinoceros!?! This must be Hogan!

“You! You're Hogan!” she exclaimed.

“I thought you didn't like sports,” Tori said coyly as she made her exit. Miracle blushed and was thankful that the inconsiderate girl was leaving.

“You've heard of me?” Hogan asked. “Wow.”

“Who hasn't heard of you? You're doing great in the tournament!” The guy named Douglass snickered.

“I just lost my match against Sir Reginald. I guess you weren't there to see it.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” she said as she walked over close to him. “I would have been there, but to be honest I kind of

need the money, so I was working tonight. And now I'm glad that I am." She flashed him a smile that promised a lot more.

"So anyway," she said, trying to remain mostly professional. "What do you need me to track down for you?"

"Well, I assume you see the hundreds of dead insects around you," the man named Warren said. "Well, one escaped and we really want to find it."

"What *are* these things? I've never smelled anything like them." She scrunched up her nose as she got the scent.

"It's really not that important, but we can explain on the way if you want. We're pretty sure he went that way." Warren pointed towards a stone wall. Miracle followed the ground with her nose until she got to the wall.

"Allow me," Hogan said. He pressed a hand against the stone wall and it turned to putty in his hands, climbing up his body and clinging to his tough skin. She hoped she could do the same later; celebrity really appealed to her.

She continued sniffing. "Well, if he jumped in the water here, it's going to be pretty hard to track him, but I'll try. Are you all going to follow me in?"

"Sure," Douglass said. "You might want to lose the armor, though, Hogan."

"Good idea," Hogan said, and it melted off of him. Miracle idly imagined the rest of his clothes melting off too. It had been too long since she had been on a date.

"Well, in we go, then." She took a deep breath and dove in. The water was pretty disgusting, but a paycheck was a paycheck. Plus, she got to work under Hogan! *Under*

Hogan, she thought wistfully.

The underground river eventually made its way out of the mountain and in to the countryside. By the time she had doggie-paddled out there, the sewage had diffused pretty well, so she didn't actually feel that dirty when she emerged on the bank of the river. She sniffed as hard as she could. The others were not that far behind.

"Great," she said. "He got out of the water right away, so I think I can track him."

"Oh, thank goodness," Hogan said. It really made Miracle wonder what these creatures were. She started off on its trail.

They hunted all night long, and finally they had cornered the creature in a cave near the base of the mountain.

"He smells so scared," she said. "And hungry! I don't understand. You're not going to kill this guy, are you?"

"We kind of have to," Hogan said. "He's extremely dangerous."

"Well, maybe not," Douglass said. "We don't know that he can reproduce, and the only reason he's so dangerous is because he's so hungry. Let me try something."

"Be careful, Douglass," Warren said, as Douglass stepped carefully toward the creature. The thing still looked scared, but its curiosity was getting the better of it. Douglass reached out and grabbed the creature by its mandibles, holding its mouth shut. The chitinous thing

calmed down as Douglass used his power, and started rubbing itself against Douglass's leg.

"I think it likes me," Douglass said. "What do you think? Should I keep it?"

"I don't know, this doesn't sound like a great idea," Hogan said, nervously.

"I think it would be fantastic, Douglass," Warren disagreed. "After killing so many of these creatures, it would be nice to save one of them from its wretched agony. I feel like this would give my father's death meaning. Not much, I admit, but it would at least be something."

"You'd better keep an eye on him, though. If he starts breeding, we need to know right away," Hogan said.

"You mean he's the last of his kind?" Miracle asked. She was trying not to tear up.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Warren started. "But yeah, you could think of it that way."

"That's so sad," she said as she pretended to cry on Hogan's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her, and she didn't want to pull away, but she had to.

"That'll be six silver marks." Douglass reached into his pocket and paid her. The insect crawled up Douglass's leg and back and onto his shoulder, where it rubbed its mandibles against Douglass's cheek.

"It is kind of cute," Hogan admitted. "What are you going to name it?"

"How does Chomper sound?"

"It sounds perfect," Warren said, and he reached over to pet Chomper on his thorax. "Well, Miracle, thank you for the assistance. You've been incredibly helpful."

“Thanks for the work,” she replied. “Say, it's the middle of the night, and I've been hearing about this serial killer that everyone's so scared of. Would one of you fine gentlemen walk a lady home?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Hogan said. “Nice meeting you two,” he said to Douglass and Warren, and they went their separate ways.

She and Hogan had a good night together.

Chapter 25

Tyron

Tyron, the faithful husband with a strong sense of duty. Your gruff exterior, shaggy fur, thick corded muscles, and looming swagger mask the gentle heart you hold inside. You want things between you and Manta to be open and honest, but things are not always so simple. Who can say why we keep secrets?

Manta stayed with Tyron in the infirmary on the night of the semi-finals. She waited until Scarlett fell asleep before she started with her nagging.

“What have you been keeping from me?” she asked, bluntly. Tyron knew this was coming. After all, Manta was his wife, and they knew each other about as well as two people could know each other. He couldn't expect to get away with this forever.

“I knew one of the victims. It was my niece, Sharonda.” Manta looked at him askance in silence, prompting him to reveal the rest. “And I think it's entirely my fault. Capella said one of the grafts was a human graft, right? I was here when it happened, and I could have stopped them, but they practically begged me not to.” He felt so ashamed. “I should have stopped them, but I had no idea what kind of trouble they were getting into.”

Manta looked on at him in silence for a few minutes. He enjoyed her company; it was something he had been missing over the past few days, with his duties.

“You couldn't have known,” she said, but it didn't

make him feel better. Manta knew that, but there was nothing else to say.

“There's something else, too,” Tyron grinned, looking over at Scarlett to make sure she was asleep. “I think Scarlett's been trying to hit on me.”

“What!?” Manta replied.

“Shhh, don't wake her. I guess she's just grateful that I've been watching over Rush, and she doesn't really know how to express that gratitude correctly. Oh, to be young again.”

“Well, I'm still jealous,” Manta pouted. “You'll have to make it up to me.”

“Oh? What do you propose?” Tyron smiled back at her lasciviously.

“Go out with me on a date tomorrow? This whole thing has been too depressing. I've been missing you desperately, and I think you deserve a break. We can catch the finals.”

The finals did sound appealing; Tyron was pretty upset that he hadn't been able to go with Douglass to the tournament. “Oh, that would be nice,” he said. “But you know I can't. Rush needs the protection.”

“Who's the boss here, me or you?” Manta asked. “The battle won't take more than an hour, and Scarlett and Capella will still be here. It will be fine. You need to take a break, anyway.”

“Well,” Tyron smiled, “If you insist, who am I to say no?” He bent down to give her a kiss on the forehead. “But for now, you should really get some rest.”

Manta grunted, “I'm not sure I could rest here if I

tried. Matron Beauregard's potion is starting to develop a powerful odor. Hopefully the smell doesn't kill Rush before he has a chance to drink it."

"Then you should go home and sleep. We can spend time together tomorrow."

"On second thought, I don't think I could sleep *anywhere* tonight," Manta said. "Tomorrow's going to be a big day." She looked up into Tyron's eyes, and he worried that the stress of the situation was getting to her.

The following day, nearly everyone was in the shop. The air seemed thick with tension, especially between Manta and Capella. Tyron didn't understand what was going on there, but he knew Manta would tell him when she was ready. The pair of women had a lot of time to bond just the two of them for the past few days, since everyone else had been busy.

Samuel was in as usual, and even Tori was in to keep him company. Douglass had brought a new friend with him, a plain-looking man with dark brown hair and blue eyes. If the man had a graft, Tyron couldn't see it.

"Manta, Capella, everyone," Douglass said, "This is Warren. He's kind of new to town, so I thought he could stay with me for a while and hang out at the shop."

"Of course," Manta said. "Any friend of yours is a friend of ours."

"You all missed an exciting time last night," Tori grinned. Douglass smiled back at her, but Samuel seemed a little sick. Tyron couldn't really read Warren's expression. He seemed to be distracted, taking everything in.

“It sounded important,” Capella said. “Did you want to tell us about it?”

“Eh, it's not that important,” Douglass said, sarcastically. “We only *saved the world*.” Like Manta and Capella, Tyron wasn't sure how seriously to take Douglass.

“Oh, and say hello to Chomper,” Douglass said, as he opened a bag he brought with him. An enormous green insect climbed out of the bag and skittered onto the floor.

“What is that thing!?” Manta shrieked.

“None of us are entirely sure,” Warren finally spoke. “I'm the most familiar with him, and the best phrase I can think of to describe him is 'hungry insect'. As far as I can tell, he's not dangerous, as long as Douglass here is around to keep him well fed.” Warren paused for a moment. “But if you see him breeding with anything, you should probably tell us.” Tyron thought he was joking at first, but the look in his eyes said he wasn't.

Capella walked over to Chompers and pet him on the head. He seemed to like it, and curled up in a ball at her feet. She gently pushed him and he rolled across the floor, then sprang out of the ball and started jumping up and down making excited noises.

“Welcome to Arcane & Stable, Chomper,” she said.

“Aha, so this is what you were talking about,” Warren said, as he stared at a blank sheet of paper tacked to Capella's wall. “The Hive.”

Douglass walked over to look at it. “Huh? It's just a blank piece of paper.”

Warren looked at the paper, then at Douglass, then back at the paper. “Oh, of course. My mistake. Nevermind.

Maybe we can talk about it later. And what's this then?" he asked as he approached something else in Capella's workspace, a large mound covered in a sheet.

"Um, please don't touch that!" Capella shouted as she ran back to intercept Warren. "It isn't finished. It's just a little project I've been working on. I'd be happy to show it to you tomorrow."

"Sure, that sounds fun," Warren said. "There's so much going on here. I really like what you've done with your shop, Manta."

"Thank you very much, Warren," she answered politely. Her smile was genuine; she was always proud of what she had created. Tyron loved to see her smile. "But enough of that. Tyron, shouldn't you be with Rush? And Douglass, you've been neglecting the animals for the past few days; I hope you're well-rested for the work you've got ahead of you today. Maybe Warren can help you?" Douglass put Chomper on his shoulder, grabbed Warren's hand, and led him to the roof. "I'm sure the rest of you can find something to do."

Tyron was excited about this evening. He hadn't left the shop in days, and as much as he wanted to be there for Rush, he needed the break. Stepping out onto the thoroughfare brought a blast of fresh mountain air, and Tyron inhaled deeply.

It was a triple date, actually, or so it seemed. Tyron wouldn't ordinarily make assumptions about Douglass and Warren, but they didn't seem to be trying to hide their affection. They actually kind of reminded him of how he

and Manta used to act when they first started dating. And then there was Samuel and Tori. He wondered when Tori would propose. There was basically no doubt that it would be Tori who would do the proposing when she was good and ready. Capella and Scarlett stayed behind in the shop, and Chomper was safely on the roof with the rest of the animals.

It was a beautiful summer evening, with a cool breeze coming down off the mountain. The group of six left the shop early to get good seats, but they decided to just take their time hiking up the mountain. They made small-talk, and Douglass and Tori recounted the battle they had last night. It sounded almost unbelievable, but the four of them all seemed to agree about the harrowing experience.

“So Warren,” Tyron started. “You held the creatures off for twelve years? How?”

“Oh, well, you see,” Warren began. He glanced around to make sure that no one was looking at them, and then his form shimmered and changed. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.” Tyron and Manta reached for each other at the sight. It was a startling transformation, and just as fast he was back into his purely human form.

“That is quite impressive,” Manta said. “You must have a lot of talents.”

“Naturally,” Warren said. Tyron really wasn’t sure what to make of Douglass’s new “friend”, but he seemed nice enough. In any case, he seemed like he might be handy to have around if there was a killer about.

The group eventually got into the arena, and they managed to get pretty good seats since they were there so

early.

“So,” Warren asked Douglass, “This is the final match of the tournament, is it? Who's fighting?”

“Well, it's Sir Reginald – he's the Queen's bodyguard with three grafts, turtle, armadillo, and electric eel – versus Danika, the beastmistress with half a dozen lethal pet chimeras. I'm not sure who to root for, honestly. On the one hand, Danika kind of reminds me a lot of myself, since we both raise animals. But Sir Reginald is valiant, so it's kind of hard to be against him.”

“Sounds like it might be exciting.” Warren said. Douglass certainly seemed to be quite excited about the upcoming battle, and Warren seemed more amused about that than excited for his own sake.

Some time passed and it seemed to be past time for the match to start. Manta was being unusually quiet.

“What's wrong, Manta?” Tyron asked.

“It's nothing,” she said. Tyron just stared at her. “Oh, fine, we're in a crowd now anyway, so I guess there's no harm in telling you now.” Everyone stopped to pay attention to her. “Capella and I have set a trap for the killer, and with any luck Capella should be springing it right now. I'm just worried about how it's going.”

Tyron was stunned. “*That's* why you insisted I leave Rush alone tonight, to lure the killer out? Gods, Manta, you should have told me.”

“I would have, but Capella and I didn't want to give anything away.”

“There's a killer about?” Warren asked.

“Oh, yeah. That's why Rush is hurt,” Douglass said.

“Yes. Capella has figured out the killer's modus operandi. He's going after chimeras who are protected from mental powers. She has a few suspects in mind, but she's pretty sure that it's either Matron Beauregard or Detective Irvine.” Tyron was shocked, and he could see that Douglass, Samuel, and Tori were too.

“You left me there with Matron Beauregard even though you thought she might be the killer?” Tyron asked.

“Well, we couldn't really be sure.”

“Huh,” Warren said. “Why isn't Sir Reginald on the list of suspects?”

“Sir Reginald?” Manta asked. “He was, but Capella dismissed him. Why do you ask?”

“Well, as the Queen's bodyguard, I would think he would have the biggest motive. You know, to protect her secret. Oh, of course, you'll have trouble understanding that.” Tyron wasn't sure what Warren was trying to say. “The killer is killing people because they all know the same secret.” Tyron and the rest of the group managed to stay with him, and Warren verified that before moving on. “So the killer must have a graft that protects himself from the effect in order to know about it. Sir Reginald has a turtle graft, and he has the motive to protect the secret. I'd tell you more, but the secret will prevent you from understanding me.”

Tyron was able to follow that, though he wished he could understand it better. “I think I get it,” he said.

“Good,” Warren said.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” a cricket chimera announced with a chirping ululation from the middle of the

arena. "I apologize, but we need to delay the beginning of the match. We are still trying to locate one of the combatants. We appreciate your patience."

Manta had a horrified look on her face. "We've left Capella alone to face Sir Reginald, and she doesn't even know that it's him. She can't possibly stand up to him!"

"You're probably right," Warren admitted.

"Go, Warren, and take Samuel if you can," Douglass said. "Capella might need him. We'll find you at the shop."

Warren grabbed Samuel under his armpits, and shot up into the air in the blink of an eye. The rest of the group began pushing its way through the crowd to get to the exit.

Curses, Tyron thought. *If any of them die, it's my fault for not being there. Some muscle I am. I've never felt so powerless.* He tried not to dwell on what he couldn't change, but he couldn't help but whisper a prayer for the safety of Rush, Scarlett, and Capella. He had given up on the gods a long time ago, but in case anyone was listening, he wanted to be heard. *Come on, Capella. It's up to you.*

Chapter 26

Capella

Capella, a crafter of things and a planner of plans. Your analytical mind spots patterns and designs that others often miss, and you have the ability to act on it. Your flexible frame won't win you any beauty contests, but a man would be a fool to pass up the opportunity to be with you.

Capella held her breath. There was a *crack* of the breaking lock, and then the door to the shop opened with it's signature *caw caw* as Sir Reginald entered.

Sir Reginald! She panicked. *I thought for sure it would be Matron Beauregard or Detective Irvine.* She and Manta had been working this out, trying not to disturb the other employees, especially Scarlett. Matron Beauregard had a grudge against chimeras, which Manta thought made her a suspect, but Capella felt that it was unlikely since all of the targeted chimeras had similar powers. Unless, Capella thought, unless maybe Matron Beauregard was using the old magicks to cause some sort of mental effect that she was trying to keep secret. That could explain why no turtles had been targeted; since a turtle only protected its host from other chimera powers, the turtles would be affected by the mental effect too. But what the mental effect was, Capella couldn't imagine. As a practitioner of the old magicks, Matron Beauregard would have surely been able to create the poison that had been used on the victims.

Matron Beauregard also satisfied another key

constraint on Capella's suspect list; she was involved with the Arcane & Stable shop. Most of the victims, especially the ones since Rush's attack, had visited the shop just before their murders. Matron Beauregard had been around quite a bit since then, so she would have the opportunity to track these people down. But she wasn't the only one who had been around.

Detective Irvine had been keeping an eye on the shop, and Capella found this suspicious. They would have informed him when Rush's condition changed, so he really didn't need to see to this personally, yet he did. She thought maybe he was trying to find a way to finish the job that he had started. Except, up until now, he hadn't had the chance to do it. By sending Tyron away, Capella and Manta were trying to flush Irvine out, since they thought it was cowardice keeping him from finishing the job. Capella couldn't imagine Irvine's motivation, though. If the mental effect were from a chimera, wouldn't he want to take out Sir Reginald, who could report to the Queen? Still, Irvine seemed like a likely suspect to her.

But Sir Reginald was just so unexpected. What interest did he have in Arcane & Stable? How would he have found the victims? At least Detective Irvine had an eagle graft; Sir Reginald didn't have any powers to enhance his perception, unless he were somehow hiding them, or working with someone. It just didn't make any sense to her. But that was the situation before her, so now she had to decide what to do.

She was prepared to deal with Matron Beauregard or with Detective Irvine, but she wasn't sure she could take

Sir Reginald, especially not in a fair fight. She did still have the element of surprise, if she was lucky, but even that might not be enough to let her deal with Sir Reginald's impenetrable skin.

She stood there in the corner of her workshop, hidden under the sheet that had been hiding her project from prying eyes. She wanted to move, but she was frozen. Sir Reginald walked slowly across the main room as he made his way to the infirmary. But still, Capella couldn't make herself move. If she moved, Sir Reginald would almost certainly kill her. Her plan to trap the killer had become a trap for Capella herself, and she was paralyzed with fear.

When Sir Reginald reached the door of the infirmary. Capella could just barely make out Scarlett standing in the next room. Scarlett would try to use her power, and it would fail. It would have failed on any of Capella's suspects, that's why it was okay for Scarlett to stay for the trap. Rush would appear to be practically unguarded, at least, as unguarded as he would ever be. But now Scarlett was a liability. Capella couldn't leave her unprotected.

She flicked a switch on her mechanized armor and threw off the sheet. The armor began to *clank* and *whirr* as it powered up. The hydraulics began to move, and steam fired out of the suit in the places that it was designed to. Capella put one foot forward. The suit responded seamlessly, even faster than Capella had hoped. She soon found herself running across the room faster than she could have without the suit, but the suit made significantly more

noise than Capella had counted on. The element of surprise was lost, despite Capella's best efforts. Sir Reginald was ready to meet her when she reached him. *Here goes nothing*, she thought.

Capella leaped nearly a meter into the air with a kick aimed at Sir Reginald's chest, which sent him staggering backward into the infirmary. Sir Reginald recovered quickly and began blocking Capella's punches as she continued her assault. The suit was boosting both her strength and speed; she suspected she could even take Tyron in a fight in this thing. As a monkey chimera, she had plenty of agility and power even without the suit. She was lasting longer than she expected against Sir Reginald. She was surprised that he hadn't already tried to shock her through the suit; if he did that, she would be done for. Instead he seemed to be satisfied with trying to defend against her attack with martial arts. Capella wished that she were trained in martial arts; she'd be able to use the suit more effectively if she were.

“What's the matter, Reggie?” Capella teased, hoping to distract Sir Reginald from the fight. “Did you run out of batteries? Mine are still going strong,” she boasted as she threw a flurry of quick jabs.

Don't get cocky, Capella, she thought to herself. *No help is coming for you. Maybe Scarlett will be able to pull something off, but it's up to you. If you fail, you, Rush, and Scarlett are all dead.* She got more creative with her attack, tapping into her monkey graft to try to attack in unpredictable ways, or at least in ways that would be unusual for anyone else to attempt. She thought that by

throwing Sir Reginald off, she could overcome his martial arts which were geared toward fighting human beings.

Capella leaped to the ceiling and grabbed onto it with clawed, mechanical feet, and attacked while hanging upside down. Sir Reginald adapted fairly well to this change, but Capella landed a few solid punches to his chest that made him stagger. If she could keep him off balance, she might have a chance.

“Man, the Queen is going to be angry at you when she finds out about this!” Capella yelled to make him mad.

“You shut up about the Queen!” he responded, finally. Something about him seemed wrong, but Capella couldn't put her finger on it. She had never heard Sir Reginald before, but his voice didn't fit someone of Sir Reginald's stature.

Scarlett had been avoiding the fight, but when Sir Reginald responded to Capella's taunts Scarlett finally found the opportunity to throw a box of medical supplies at him. Sir Reginald devoted just enough attention to deflect the box, giving Capella the opening she needed to land an uppercut on the side of Sir Reginald's head. She used the full force of her mechanized arms in the process, and it propelled Sir Reginald five meters across the room, where he landed on one of the infirmary beds.

Sir Reginald looked unconscious, and based on her estimates of her machine's capabilities, she thought he would be suffering from some severe head trauma. She and Scarlett slowly made their way across the room.

“Did you – Did you kill him?” Scarlett asked as they neared the body.

“I don't know. Maybe? I hit him pretty hard,” Capella said. Capella reached out to the body with a tentative, trembling hand.

Chapter 27

Danika

Danika, the beastmistress. Dedication and perseverance; these are the hallmarks of your trade. Your animals love you because you treat them well and care for their needs. Unlike most chimeras, you draw a lot of physical traits from your sheepdog graft, such as your long shaggy white hair that nearly covers your eyes and your soft and gentle paws. Perhaps this is just a physical manifestation of the closeness you feel to your animals.

Danika had raised several different animals in preparation for the tournament, but she had saved the best for last.

In the first round of the tournament, Danika used Spitter, creature with the head of a snake and a the body of a frog. Spitter was so named because of his particular talent; immediately after his chimerism he possessed a poisonous spit attack. Danika specifically tailored his diet and trained him to mix acid into this spit, to allow the spit to directly enter the opponent's bloodstream. The poison was not so potent, but it managed to slow down the hippopotamus chimera enough for Danika to take him out herself. Danika herself had no special combat abilities; as a sheepdog chimera, she merely possessed a supernatural empathy with animals that helped her raise her pets. But the poison gave her all of the edge she needed in that early round.

Danika deliberately didn't use the same animal twice. Not only would this keep her strategy secret until the battle, but this also prevented the animals themselves from being worn out. According to the tournament rules, she was only allowed to bring one animal companion to each battle, which she thought was more than fair.

Danika's second battle was a bit more dangerous and brutal than her first battle. She was facing a tiger chimera in that battle. All that she knew going into it was that this opponent had long, sharp claws on both hands. Based on that, Danika chose her most defensive animal: Snips, a combination of a clam, lobster, and bison. Snips was certainly defensive, since he had both an exoskeleton and an endoskeleton. He had horns and claws, too, which helped him keep his opponents at a safe distance but also let him land a killing blow when necessary.

But what Danika hadn't anticipated was the tiger's speed; Snips's four heavily armored legs became a weak point. Snips had trouble maneuvering to protect Danika from the tiger, but Danika had no choice but be present on the field, so it was mostly a game of cat and mouse where Danika tried to keep Snips between herself and the tiger. After Snips failed to protect her, the tiger landed a nasty gash on Danika's stomach, and nearly finished her off until Snips, without direction from Danika, scooped her up in his massive antlers and held her out of the tiger's reach. After that, the tiger wasn't able to inflict any more harm on Snips, and Snips was eventually able to wear the tiger out and finish him off.

The next battle, the quarter-final match, was

actually the easiest battle for Danika. She faced a redwood chimera, of all things. She had never heard of a plant chimera before, but she guessed the same concepts that allowed people to graft animals would also allow them to graft plants. Her opponent was extremely tall, and his skin was covered in thick protective bark. He even had leaves that she suspected were fully functional and allowed him to get energy from the sun.

But those leaves and the bark actually worked to Danika's advantage. In this battle, she used Pyro, her salamander and toad chimera. Pyro was able to spit tiny fireballs at his opponents, and the redwood chimera inherited all of the flammability of his patron vegetable.

Danika's semi-final and final matches then came down to her two best pets. In the semifinal, she chose to use Manticore, a creature with the mouth of a shark, the head and body of a lion, and a tail of a scorpion. Danika found it amazing how easy it was to combine many animals for her pets, when humans sometimes had trouble finding even one graft that they could accept. She supposed that much of this was due to this human conceit that they were somehow above animals, a conceit that Danika never agreed with.

Manticore was a fairly vicious warrior, between his razor-sharp teeth, agile front and back claws, and dangerous poison that he could inject with his tail. Her opponent for the semi-final was dangerous too, but Danika had the edge in their fight. She had a peacock graft, which had gotten her pretty far in a male-dominated tournament, and a beetle graft that still left her pretty well protected even if she couldn't charm her opponent. Danika was

somewhat jealous of her opponent. She had inherited the beetle's durable exoskeleton that hugged her body surprisingly close, but it was actually quite beautiful since it absorbed a lot of the colors from the peacock graft. It was a blend of dark blue and some teals and a few greens here and there in spots, and it created a very attractive effect.

Unfortunately for her opponent, Manticore was easily a match for the beetle armor, and Danika was immune to her opponent's charms, so Danika again did not have as much trouble with that match as she could have.

Danika had managed to match the right pet up to the right opponent all along, but Sir Reginald would be a challenge for any of her pets. She had saved her best for last, but she wasn't sure that he would be able to take him on.

Mira was Danika's favorite. Mira had the body and head of a lioness. Her tail was a snake, complete with the head of the snake at the end of the tail. Coming out of her spine was another head, the head of a goat, which peered just over the lioness head. Mira's unique combination of grafts made her something of an oddity, and she had several powers that were hard to explain. The venom from the tail and the supernatural agility and litheness were easily explainable as traits of the component animals. But the intense stream of fire that the goat head could generate, that was not a trait of any of the individual animals. Nor was the paralyzing glare from the snake's eyes.

But all of that paled in comparison to Mira's true power. This was something Danika was just beginning to understand, through her empathy with Mira. Danika lived

on a farm about thirty kilometers away from Polonia Mons, so she rented out several rooms at the Polonia Grand Hotel to be able to house her animals over the course of the tournament. As Mira spent more time on Polonia Mons, she seemed to be getting stronger, faster, and bigger. Danika wasn't sure what the limit to Mira's growth was, but Mira was sending out signals to Danika to let her know that she was pulling strength from the mountain itself.

Unfortunately, this left her and Balk, the innkeeper, with a bit of a dilemma on the evening of her final match with Sir Reginald. Over the past five days, Mira had grown substantially and Danika had failed to prepare for that. Mira was stuck in her room, and Danika had no way to remove her.

She sent a messenger to the arena to let them know that she would be a bit late, and then set about to handle the extrication problem.

“If I win the tournament, I should be able to reimburse you for the wall,” Danika promised Balk, hoping she could convince him to let Mira just break out of the room.

“Yeah, right. Do you really think you're going to beat Sir Reginald?”

“Oh, come on! Look at her!” Danika said as she opened the door to the room. A lioness head the size of a small child peered out into the hallway, and looked over toward the innkeeper. Mira licked Danika on the side of her face and purred.

“Oh, yeah, she looks really frightening,” the innkeeper mocked.

“Mira,” Danika commanded, “be frightening.” Mira unleashed a deafening roar and swiped a long paw – claws retracted, of course – out into the hallway as far as she could, batting the innkeeper against the wall. Balk fell to the ground and stood up shakily.

“Okay, okay, I admit, you have a chance. But I barely get by here, I can't really afford it if you lose. You've really got to work with me here. I would have never taken these beasts in if I had thought this would happen.”

“And I swear, I would have never tried to force this on you if I had known it would happen. But what am I supposed to do now?” Danika was stuck as surely as Mira was.

Down the hall, a door opened, and a man came out into the hallway wearing nothing but a towel. “What was that sound?” he asked, with a tinge of alarm in his voice.

“It was –” Danika began to answer without thinking, but then realized, “Wait, Hogan! You're just the person I need.” As a fellow combatant, she would have had no trouble recognizing him even if he didn't have such a unique graft.

“Oh, Danika,” he said. “I didn't know you were staying here, too. Your beasts *must* be well-trained for me not to have noticed them until now. Wait, why are you here? Shouldn't you be at the final match?”

“Yes, I should, but I'm in a bit of a pickle,” Danika admitted. “I'm hoping you can get me out of it, actually.”

“See, a less honorable man would be unsportsmanlike and leave you to your problems, but not Hogan,” he said, though he seemed to direct the comment

back into his room. Danika thought she heard a woman's deep-throated laughter bubbling out of the room. Hogan was being unusually gregarious. The one or two times that Danika had spoken to him in the past few days he had been far more stoic. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he was only wearing a towel.

“You're the best, Hogan. I'll find some way to repay you, I promise. All I need you to do is to make a way out of this building for Mira, here.” Danika pointed Hogan to the room, and he looked inside.

“Gods, Danika, what is this thing? It's *huge*. I'm kind of glad I lost last round. This thing would have torn me to shreds! Wow, you're going to really put Sir Reginald in his place. I would have helped you with this even if I weren't a gentleman.” He muttered to himself, “Seems like everyone needs my help these days.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Danika said as Hogan squeezed passed Mira to get into the room. Hogan made his way to the wall, and put a hand against it, causing it to peel outward and open wide to the street. Mira gave a deep purr, rubbed her head against Hogan's shoulder, and leaped from the second story room onto the street below. The street had been largely empty since practically everyone who was anyone was at the arena, but the few remaining pedestrians were startled, and Danika could sense a few chimera powers going off instinctively. She kept a tight leash on Mira's emotions, and soon the bystanders realized that Mira was not actually a threat. Then she began to draw a crowd.

“Thanks, Hogan. You're sure you don't want to see

the final match?"

"Oh, it's tempting, but I've got more pressing matters to tend to here," he said.

"I'll bet you do." Hogan blushed; at least he had some modesty. "Well, thanks again, and sorry for the inconvenience!" she shouted to the innkeeper as she ran and jumped out of the room onto Mira's back, just behind the goat head. She grabbed onto the goat's horns as if they were reins, and exclaimed, "Come on, Mira, let's ride! Tonight, we take home the championship!" The innkeeper looked on in awe through the hole in his building as Danika kicked Mira into a gallop.

"Give him one for me!" Hogan called to her as he resealed the inn's wall.

Danika made it to the arena about thirty minutes later than she was supposed to, but as she rode Mira in through the arena gates, she was greeted by a cheer from the patient crowd. Mira soaked in the applause, and strutted elegantly to Danika's starting zone. Danika raised a fist into the air above her head, which made the crowd cheer even more. Across the arena grounds, Sir Reginald was also taking his place for the final match.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the announcer proclaimed. "Before the final match, the Queen would like to have a word. Please be quiet so that she may speak."

Queen Rafnia had a front-row seat for the festivities, which she vacated to join the announcer in the middle of the battleground. She was accompanied by two retainers, members of Polonia Mons's night watch. The

announcer's cricket graft gave him a shrill voice that carried throughout the arena; a talent that the Queen replicated through sheer presence. Her voice sang with authority, and the crowd was enthralled by her song.

“People of Polonia,” she began. “When we began planning for this tournament, we had one goal in mind. Unity. Our queendom is at its best when we are united, when we work together towards common goals. Other kingdoms fail to unite; they bicker and squabble amongst themselves and each other, and the people suffer for it. As your Queen, it is a tribute to us that you, our people, are united in common purpose.” The Queen's speech elicited a cheer, to which Danika added her own.

“As a whole, we are greater than the sum of our parts. But tonight, it is those parts that we celebrate. The parts that make us individuals, that give us a purpose and a place in our society. That is what we celebrate tonight. From the diligent goat chimeras who clean the trash off the streets, to Sir Reginald here who guards the queendom and her interests, to those among us who practice the old magicks to fill in the gaps that chimeras cannot fill, to Danika here, a farmer who raises the food and beasts that we need to survive and thrive in a world that is not always hospitable towards us.

“We all have our part to play, and this queendom could not work without the support of all of her citizens. Tonight is a tribute to you all. Be you fans of Sir Reginald or of Danika, your voice matters, and I hope that as Queen we can continue to provide the order and efficiency that defines our reputation.

“We realize, however, that despite our celebrations tonight, many of you are concerned about the recent events that have been plaguing our humble city of Polonia Mons.” This declaration drew a series of boos and hisses from the crowd. “It grieves us that we have not been able to prevent the tragic deaths of so many members of our community, but it gives us great pleasure to announce that the killer is being taken care of as we speak. We expect to have this villain in custody by the end of the night. None of you need fear the shadows when you return to your homes tonight.” The crowd cheered again, and the Queen smiled widely, baring her teeth in a display of joy.

“Once again, thank you, people of Polonia, for being the best queendom a Queen could rule. Good luck to both combatants, and may the best man or woman prevail.” The Queen returned elegantly to her seat along with her entourage, clearing the battlefield for Danika and Sir Reginald.

Danika couldn't imagine how other combatants were nervous. To Danika, this was a thrill. She worried for Mira, of course, but Mira was a tough girl. Danika felt that she could handle it, and her bond with Mira told her that Mira was as eager for the opportunity as Danika was herself. Danika could swear that now that they were on the summit of Polonia Mons, Mira had grown three more meters in length beyond how large she was when they left the hotel. Danika looked down on Sir Reginald from across the field, and she felt very much in control of the battle even before it began.

Finally, the bugle sounded. Mira and Sir Reginald

both began walking towards each other. With ten meters between them, Mira's massive lioness nose breathed wisps of air that visibly ruffled Sir Reginald's hair. Sir Reginald, to his credit, stood his ground in front of the towering beast, and gave a bow. Mira returned his bow in kind by going down to the elbows on her front paws, before straightening again.

Sir Reginald drew his sword, and that signaled the true start of the battle. Danika and Mira worked as one, and began with a jet of flame from the goat head that put Sir Reginald on the defensive. Danika and Mira had trained for this, and they were able to keep Sir Reginald off balance by controlling where he would dodge. His turtle graft would protect him from the direct impact of the flames, but he would still have to avoid the indirect effects of the heat and burning that arose. Mira couldn't sustain the flames forever, though, and soon Sir Reginald seized the opportunity to go on the offensive.

He struck quickly and decisively, aiming directly for one of the lioness paws as it swiped towards him. Mira's size worked against her in this case, as Sir Reginald was actually able to dodge between Mira's deadly claws as he sliced upward through the pad of the paw. Sir Reginald unleashed a blast of electricity that Danika could feel even from her perch on Mira's back, but Mira seemed to absorb and diffuse the impact of the blow. Danika felt the pain of the slice on the paw, and sent Mira encouragement through their bond.

“A clean strike,” Danika called out as Mira bounded back from Sir Reginald. “I applaud your talent, good sir.”

“And I applaud your trade, my lady,” he replied. “Not many people could manage a beast such as this with such ease and grace.” His baritone resonated with eloquence and honor, as one might expect from someone with his standing as the Queen's personal bodyguard.

“It is a pity that the Queen will lose her most trusted companion this evening,” Danika taunted.

“You seem awfully confident. What makes you so sure you'll win?”

“I guess I'm just optimistic,” Danika said with a laugh. “Are you ready to finish this?”

“Just say the word,” Sir Reginald replied.

Let's do this, Danika said to Mira across their bond. Mira hurled a ball of flame at Sir Reginald, forcing him back another meter, which led him directly into Danika's trap. She had been feeling the power of Polonia Mons growing in Mira, building, until finally Mira was ready to unleash it. The entire arena shook, and the ground opened up beneath Sir Reginald's feet, causing him to stumble and fall. The ground split apart, revealing molten lava below with Sir Reginald dangling precariously on the edge opposite of Mira.

“I could blast you right now, Sir Reginald,” Danika called as Sir Reginald began trying to climb his way out of the pit. “I do hope you appreciate the courtesy I'm giving you by not outright killing you.”

“I do,” Sir Reginald said as he made it to his feet. He was followed by several fireballs that sent him dodging about the arena again, and the scar in the mountaintop slowly stitched itself back together. Mira's size seemed to

shrink considerably after the exertion of opening the earth, but the display had achieved Danika's goal. She had shown the crowd, and more importantly Sir Reginald, who the true victor of the fight was no matter the outcome. Of course Danika wanted to win officially, but she didn't want to have to kill Sir Reginald to do it.

Fortunately, she didn't have to. Her next lance of fire sent him to the edge of the arena, directly in front of the Queen.

“Stop!” he shouted, throwing his sword to the ground and throwing his hands in the air. “You win. I will not fight you if you insist on placing the Queen in danger.”

The crowd erupted in a cheer as Danika dismounted Mira. “Relax, Sir Reginald. You know I wouldn't hurt the Queen. I appreciate the victory, though. You did your best, but no one could beat Mira, at least not on Polonia Mons!”

“I can see that,” Sir Reginald said. He walked up to Mira and stroked her behind the ear, which she seemed to enjoy with a purr.

“Congratulations,” Queen Rafnia called out, earning the silence of the crowd. “It is our privilege to announce that the winner of this year's tournament is none other than Danika, the beastmistress. Congratulations to Danika and her beasts, they have fought an admirable campaign and deserve the prize money as well as a place in our hearts.”

The Queen approached Danika, and Danika instinctively dropped into a deep curtsy. “Thank you, your majesty.”

The Queen spoke only to Danika. “There is no need for such humility. Even the Queen is but a thread in the

elaborate tapestry that is Polonia. You have proven yourself brave and resourceful, and for that we commend you.

“Sir Reginald,” she continued with her normal voice. “I believe you have someone to apprehend. You'd best beat the rush to leave the arena. We will tell you where to go and what to do en route.” The Queen's frankness seemed somehow refreshing, perhaps like a betrayal of the stodginess that Danika expected from one of her station. Sir Reginald saluted her and began running for the exit.

“Once again, thank you all for making tonight the exciting event that it was, and we look forward to meeting next year's challengers.” The Queen rejoined her entourage, and she welcomed Danika and Mira among them as they recounted the events of the tournament. Danika had never been prouder of herself or of her pets, and she was eager to return to the rest of them to give them the accolades they deserved for getting her to the finals. This night would be remembered for years to come by the citizens of Polonia.

Chapter 28

Sir Reginald

Sir Reginald, a man more noble and more honest than any other. A friend and a confidante, you follow your conscience even in difficult circumstances. Your thick skin can protect you from anything but uncertainty about your actions.

Reginald briskly walked to the main square of Polonia Mons. He beat the rush of the crowd leaving the final match, so his journey had few interruptions. Along the way, the Queen contacted him. Unlike most Hive users, the Queen was able to send messages to others without pulling them into the virtual world of the Hive, and for that matter without even distracting them or herself from whatever activities they were performing in the real world. To be able to receive such missives, though, Reginald had to consciously suppress his turtle graft's power.

Sir Reginald, the Queen said directly into his mind. I'm here, your majesty, Reginald replied.

In the commercial district there is a shop called Arcane & Stable. We have discovered that the killer has been captured and bound by a monkey chimera by the name of Capella, one of the employees of the shop. You are to bring him in for investigation.

As you wish, my Queen, Reginald responded without slowing.

Be careful, Sir Reginald. He has three grafts as well: an eagle, a turtle, and a chameleon. He is surrounded by the store employees, most of whom are genuinely trying

to decide what to do with him. However, we cannot discern the intentions of three of the people there. One, we believe, is one of the killer's victims, and his connection to the Hive was severed when his graft was removed. Another is not a chimera at all, yet she is also beyond our reach; perhaps she has found a way to protect herself with magicks. The last is a dolphin chimera at least; he has several other grafts as well but we cannot identify all of them.

I understand, your majesty, answered Reginald. *I will be careful, and I will bring the killer to the palace to await your judgment.*

Reginald opened the door to the shop slowly, producing a *caw caw* that announced his presence. The shop was crowded, and everyone stood motionless as Reginald entered, as if afraid to take a breath. Reginald scanned the crowd, enlisting the Queen's help to identify them by name.

“Manta, Tyron, Capella, Scarlett, Samuel, Tori, Douglass, Warren, and Matron Beauregard,” he announced. If they were impressed by his knowledge of their names, they didn't let it show. Given that these people were able to take down the murderer that had been plaguing Polonia Mons, perhaps Reginald was not surprised at their steady nerves. “Thank you for apprehending Detective Irvine. I am here to take him to the Queen for judgment.”

“Now wait just a second—” Warren began.

“No, Warren, this is good,” Manta interjected. “We had already decided that we couldn't take him to the police, since he is a detective himself. Who else is there to turn

him over to than the Queen herself?"

"You don't understand," Warren said, as he locked eyes with Reginald. Reginald knew that look. Like Reginald, Warren knew the Queen's secret. "You can't understand, because the Queen won't let you. The murderer here has the Queen's interests at heart, so handing him over to the Queen is exactly the wrong idea."

"Warren," Douglass pleaded, "you're not making any sense."

"You should listen to your friend, Warren," Reginald added.

"I'm not talking to you, *Sir* Reginald. If I turn this man over to you, the Queen is going to let him go free and continue his rampage. What's more, he'll come after these people, and I'm not sure I can protect them." Reginald understood Warren's position. In fact, it was exactly people like Warren that this murderer was trying to eliminate.

Reginald had had time to understand the Queen's secret. As a turtle, he was immune to her powers, and he eventually began to notice their effect on other people. The Queen had deposed Polonia's ruling family in a bloodless coup, and only a few people alive, the few people who found ways to block the Queen's muddling mental effect, were aware of that fact. And when they became aware of it, they had a choice to make.

Reginald chose to protect the Queen, and over the years it became clear that his decision was the correct one. The Queen did so much for her people, even without them knowing it, perhaps even without the Queen realizing she was doing it. Crime and discontent had been reduced

dramatically, though not entirely eliminated, but of course since no one remembered the old regime they had nothing to which they could compare their current prosperity.

Did the end justify the means? As a philosophical question, Reginald would generally say no. However, in the case of Queen Rafnia's "ends", the "means" were arguably both moral and ethical. There were objective measures that indicated that society – and thus countless individual lives – had improved as a result of her actions. And what were the drawbacks? A small group of people, the royal family, retired to a life of luxury furnished by the benevolence of the new Queen, and the Queen's powers kept them from being sour about the transition. And now, for the first time during her reign for the past nine years, a misguided man committed a series of murders to protect the order she had established. That, weighed against the number of lives she had saved? Against how much better life was now? Against the good will that the Queen had fostered with neighboring kingdoms?

The Queen rarely imposed her will. In general, she allowed people to exercise their own free will as much as possible. Was the imperceptible loss of liberty worth the benefit that it provided? For Reginald, the answer was a resounding yes. And besides, if Reginald had decided that the answer was no, what right did he have to make that decision for all of the other citizens of Polonia? Wouldn't that be limiting their control over their own destiny as well, to permanently remove the option of allowing the Queen to help them organize themselves for the common good?

Reginald had seen others come to the same

conclusion. He imagined that that was what Detective Irvine decided as well. But where Reginald generally assumed that people will eventually come to side with the Queen, Irvine must have seen these people as a threat to the Queen's rule. As a policeman, he probably favored order and law, so Reginald understood his motives even though he obviously disagreed with him. It's too bad Reginald couldn't have just worked this out with Irvine with words, before Irvine went on his killing spree. But Irvine had spilled blood, and the people of Polonia would never understand or accept it. The entire situation would go down as a man, disgruntled with the emergence of chimerism as a way of life, deciding to take these chimeras out one by one if he had to. Polonia's citizens would demand his head, and the Queen knew it. Reginald knew the Queen had it in her to mete out the justice required, but he also knew it would sadden her, as any suffering did.

Unfortunately for Reginald, these philosophical musings were important but perhaps not germane to his current dilemma. Warren had just recently learned the Queen's secret, and he was angry and doubted both the Queen's and Reginald's motives.

“Warren, please,” Reginald said. “Think back to before the Queen's reign. The world was a very different place, and times were much harder. The Queen has done a lot of good.”

“Oh really?” Warren asked. “I wouldn't know. I've been kind of busy for the past twelve years. If the Queen wanted to do some good, why didn't she help me out?”

Reginald had no idea what Warren was talking

about. “What do you mean?”

“The Queen. I've figured out how the Hive works. She's connected to all of the people of Polonia. She must have known I was down there in the sewers for all of those years, single-handedly protecting humanity from a threat that would have swallowed us whole. Yet she did nothing!” There were some murmurs among the people present, and Douglass tried to take one of Warren's hands, but Warren pushed him away. Warren looked to be on the verge of tears.

Is this true? he asked the Queen through their psychic connection.

We did learn of his plight, the Queen admitted. But you know that we do not wish to interfere with the will of the people of Polonia. It is not that simple to solve all of the world's problems. It's not as though we can control people; we can merely give them guidance and hope that they behave the way we expect them too. In this case, we became aware of Warren's plight far too late, and had to make far too many sacrifices to save him and Polonia.

Reginald was not entirely sure that he understood the Queen's meaning. What had she sacrificed?

“The Queen did what she could, for you,” Reginald said, a bit unsure of his position. “It wasn't easy for her to liberate you.”

“You conceited witch!” Warren screamed to the air. “Don't you dare take credit for saving Polonia. If you wanted to save Polonia, you could have done it at any time. Why would you make me suffer for all those years, never even able to mourn my own father? If you were half as

noble as these people who *actually* freed me, maybe you wouldn't have someone killing in your name.”

“Warren, please –” Reginald began.

“I've had enough of your lies. I think I'll be delivering Irvine to the Queen myself,” Warren said. “Are you going to stand in my way?”

Reginald studied Warren carefully. His eyes projected a dangerous promise that Reginald knew Warren could fulfill. But he knew he had to side with the Queen. “Are we really going to do this?” he asked.

“I guess we really are,” Warren said, his voice dripping with anger and betrayal. Reginald wasn't sure he could blame him, but he had a duty to fulfill.

“Please,” Manta pleaded desperately to Warren. “I don't understand what's going on, but please do not fight in here. Please do not destroy this shop that I have worked so hard to build.”

“I am willing to take the fight to the street if you are,” Warren said.

“So be it,” answered Reginald.

A crowd had gathered around Reginald and Warren. The employees from Arcane & Stable were there, too, of course, but Reginald was not surprised that there were others that were drawn to the fight. He wasn't completely sure what Warren was capable of, but he was not optimistic about his chances in this fight. The sun setting over the horizon painted a strange orange glow across the entire mountainside. Warren's eyes smoldered with the flames of a righteous anger, and Reginald couldn't help but feel that

Warren should to be angry. The crowd watched on in silence as these two warriors stood in front of the spring in the town square.

Warren dropped the illusion that he had been generating to mask his true power, and Reginald stood in awe. Warren's hair seemed to be made of bright red flame, visibly echoing his rage. Warren extended his six arms to his sides, and opened his hands to reveal his palms, each of which had mouths. The mouths opened, and flames leaped from his hands to surround Reginald.

Warren seemed to intuitively know how to deal with a turtle graft; perhaps the dolphin graft gave him the insight. Reginald could negate the effects of the fire directly, but by hitting the ground near him, Warren constrained his movement. Seven jets of flame were enough to cut off most of Reginald's options. Warren began to walk forward toward Reginald, and Reginald had a sinking feeling that the spiraled horn on Warren's head would be strong enough to pierce his skin.

Reginald had learned from Danika that if he relied on defense alone, he could not win in a battle like this. Reginald channeled his energies inward, and curled up into a ball on the ground. As he concentrated, he felt a spinning sensation originating from his stomach. He focused on that sensation, and extended it until it encompassed his entire body, and then he released it. His body launched forward, propelled purely by his force of will. This was an armadillo power that he rarely had need to use, that had allowed him to break through Hogan's stony torture chamber during their match. He plowed through the streams of fire, and

though it did burn, his momentum and thick skin seemed to protect him from most of it.

After a few meters of rolling, Reginald collided with Warren. Warren braced himself, and Reginald's spinning form bounced off of Warren without so much as budging him. Reginald was left sprawled on his back, gasping for breath.

That was my strongest attack, he panicked. He didn't have long to panic, though.

"I'm sorry, Sir Reginald," Warren said. "I imagine I'll see you soon." Warren picked Reginald up by the neck with one hand and glared into his eyes. With disturbing ease, he hurled Reginald clear across the plaza, past the cliff at the end of the plateau. Reginald had several seconds to brace himself for the impact of the fall as he plummeted down the mountainside. It had to be at least a hundred meters. He knew he would survive the fall, but he wouldn't be able to stand for quite some time. Reginald knew what Warren's next move would be.

I'm sorry I've failed you, your majesty. Warren is on his way.

Chapter 29

Matron Beauregard

Matron Beauregard, a crafty and most talented witch. Your talents with the healing arts are unique, and it is a true loss to this world that chimerism has displaced the old magicks. Your gruff personality shrouds a compassionate soul, and you will go far if you can learn to work with people rather than against them.

“I'm really very sorry,” Capella said. “I should have been nicer to you, but I couldn't help but be a little suspicious.”

After how much trouble she had gone through to help with Rush, Matron Beauregard was offended. She had toiled for days to heal Rush, and this is how they repaid her? By thinking she was a murderer.

“Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, girl,” the Matron said. “It would be convenient if the woman you didn't like were the villain.”

“Please, I didn't mean it like that,” Capella said.

“Oh, give off. I know you didn't. You were probably right to doubt me,” the Matron admitted. “But Rush is lucky that you were wrong.”

A few hours ago, Matron Beauregard walked in on Capella and Scarlett standing over the near-dead body of Detective Irvine. Apparently he had tried to finish the job he had started on Rush, and he impersonated Sir Reginald in his attempt to do it. The Matron tended to the wound until Samuel and Warren arrived, and Samuel took over

from there. Pretty soon they had Irvine bound and gagged and under control. The rest of the employees arrived and Manta congratulated Capella on her victory. Capella explained everything that had happened, and they were trying to figure out what to do with Irvine when Sir Reginald arrived.

But something still bugged Matron Beauregard. How did Irvine get the poison that turned a graft against its host? Such a poison would require a skilled practitioner of the old magicks, and Matron Beauregard could count the qualified magi on one hand. She doubted she would ever learn the answer, and that didn't sit well with her. After their battle – if it can be called a battle – Warren had taken Irvine to the Queen, and Matron Beauregard wouldn't be surprised if she never saw Warren or Irvine again.

As the Matron sat by Rush and watched over her brewing potion, it finally changed color to a deep orange, somewhere between the color of tomato soup and grapefruit juice. She began to ladle the solution into a cup, and let it sit to cool.

“You're going to give him that?” Samuel asked, skeptically. “That looks like it might kill him on the spot.”

“No,” Manta answered. “I think it will work.”

“Really?” Scarlett said hopefully. “How can you tell?”

“Remember when I said Rush might be worth a Queen's ransom, if he survived?” Manta said. This was the first Matron Beauregard had heard of it.

“Yeah,” Scarlett said.

“Well, Capella's sleuthing is just conjecture. I'm

certain that she's right, and I'm sure the Queen is too, but to allay the fears of the citizens of Polonia, the Queen needs an eyewitness. She needs Rush, and she's going to pay us handsomely for saving him." Matron Beauregard coughed. "Of course, I will be happy to split the reward with you fifty-fifty, Matron."

"Fifty-fifty? Without me there wouldn't be a reward," she grouched.

"I could say the same thing," Capella contended.

"We all played our part," Manta mediated. "Fifty-fifty, take it or leave it."

"Very well, but on one condition. You hire me to handle the magicks around here."

Manta stared into Matron Beauregard with her piercing black eyes, and the Matron couldn't help but shudder slightly. "Typically when you haggle, you should try to get a better deal. Not that I'm complaining that you've given me more than I asked for." It was the closest thing Manta knew to a compliment, but Matron Beauregard felt a certain amount of pride that she had earned the friendship and respect of these young people despite herself.

"It's time," she said, as she tested the temperature of the glass containing the potion. "Rush, it's time to wake up." Rush's eyes were wide open and looking directly at her. She had Tyron lift Rush up by the shoulders as she forced the potion down Rush's throat. Rush convulsed briefly before settling back to the bed.

There was no flashy effect, and his wounds didn't stitch themselves back together. There was just a twitch in his hand, then a twitch in his other hand, and then he could

move his arms. After a few minutes, he was able to sit up. Scarlett gave him a glass of water, which he gulped down quickly.

“You did it,” Rush said, voice barely more than a whisper. “You saved me. I thought I was dead for sure,” he said.

“Save your strength,” Matron Beauregard said. “I’ve done what I can for you, and you’re going to survive, but you still need time to heal.”

Scarlett was the first to give him a hug, but everyone had their turn. “Thanks, everyone,” Rush said. “Gods, what did I do to deserve this?” he asked as he looked at his arms and legs.

“You didn’t do anything,” Matron Beauregard said. “Sometimes bad things happen. Sometimes there’s a reason, but usually there isn’t. And even if there is a reason, it’s usually not a very good one. Live as long as I have, and you’ll see the worst things happen to the best people, and the best things happen to the worst, and everything in between. That’s just how the world works.”

“That’s awfully bleak,” Scarlett replied, discouraged.

“That’s just a matter of perspective,” Matron Beauregard replied. “Some day down the line, you’ll look back on this experience and realize how important it was. It may hurt now, but you’ll find a way to use it to make your life better.”

“Easy for you to say,” Rush replied.

“It is easy for me to say, because I’ve seen it happen hundreds of times. This shop is a perfect example. It was

born out of the conflict of the student strike, yet it thrives precisely because of the lessons learned during the strike. I'm confident you'll find a way to do the same." Scarlett smiled at Rush and squeezed his hand tightly. Matron Beauregard was pleased that she was able to help them out.

Rush seemed to rest a bit easier that night, and it wasn't long before he recovered enough to leave the bed and join the rest of the group for Irvine's execution. Only Matron Beauregard and Tyron stayed to tend the shop.

"You didn't have to help him, you know," Tyron said to her in the quiet of the afternoon.

"Neither did you," she said.

"Are you kidding? Manta would have killed me with her own bare hands."

"I'm sure that's what made you help him," the Matron answered sarcastically.

Tyron thought about it. "You're right. I just didn't want to see someone suffer."

"No one ever does," was her reply.

Chapter 30

Queen Rafnia

How should we describe ourself? We strive to do good, to be the Queen this queendom needs. But we are young, in some ways innocent, and we were not prepared for the challenges our rule would bring.

Warren was certain to be on his way. This confrontation was inevitable, but it did not make it any easier for Rafnia. Warren had more reason to hate her than most, and enough power to kill her with ease. Had she misjudged him? Was everything she built about to crumble?

She nervously picked at the embroidery on her dress while she waited. She had opened the windows in the throne room and dismissed her guards. The cool nighttime mountain air blew through the room, whistling softly, echoing Rafnia's loneliness. She was more connected to her people than any monarch had ever been before, yet it came at a price. Sir Reginald was her closest friend, but she had to keep him at arm's length, just like the rest of her subjects. It was a burden, but it was necessary. Maybe she could find companionship in Tori, as she came to know her.

Rafnia was no one special. She was born a commoner, an unwealthy one at that. Her sixteenth birthday came and went, and she got a job and saved her money to get her graft. A queen bee. Rafnia was fascinated by insects, bees especially. Their societies were so organized, and efficient; they managed to work together even without intelligence to guide them. Was it instinct? What was it

about them that let them cooperate to become something greater than they could be individually?

Little did that teenage Rafnia know where her decision would lead. It started with her parents. She developed a connection to them that let her speak to them from a distance. Pretty soon they realized that they could speak to each other as well. The more Rafnia interacted with others, and the more those others interacted with still more others, her influence grew and spread. The Hive developed naturally during this process, and Rafnia gradually learned to maintain the Hive subconsciously.

Rafnia expanded to the entire land of Polonia, but her powers were at her limits. She knew what needed to happen; she needed to recruit a few more subordinates to distribute the load of managing so many people. It would happen eventually, and she had started the process with Tori, but there was always room for improvement, and it would take time.

Of course, the process hadn't been smooth. She had to replace the previous King and his retinue. The King wasn't an evil man. He was greedy, and selfish, and had poor relations with neighboring kingdoms, but Rafnia didn't think that his intentions were evil. Her experience with the people of Polonia told her that no one was truly evil. Their motivations were often counter to the objectives of others, but that wasn't evil. A responsible and effective ruler needed to find a way to motivate people to work for the common good.

It wasn't easy. Rafnia was in a better position than most to rule. The most important skill a ruler could have

was to be able to quickly and accurately assess the needs of her people. Knowing their needs, Rafnia could provide the incentives that the people needed to work towards solving real problems.

And lately, she had been dealing with the biggest problem of all. She did not know of Warren's burden immediately. It took time for her ability to blanket the land of Polonia, but eventually she could tell that something was wrong in the sewers. She could not tap into Warren's mind, but she felt the terrible hunger of the creatures that he held at bay. It was a phenomenon that she had a lot of difficulty understanding, because Warren's perspective was occluded from her.

When she finally did realize what was happening, she knew she had to act. But what could she do? Send Sir Reginald? She knew him too well; he would never have left Warren's side and would have died fighting the horde. Convincing someone to go into the sewers was hard enough, but to get them to explore the sewers thoroughly? An image came to her mind, she guessed from one of her subjects: a rare plant that could only be found in the heart of the sewers. Why would they need that? Healing magicks. But who needs healing magicks now that there are crocodile chimeras? A specific poison that resists the healing powers of the crocodile. And how to get someone to administer the poison? The pieces fit together in Rafnia's head effortlessly; perhaps this too was a part of her power. It wasn't so much a plan that she devised as it was a possible destiny that she could produce. Rafnia just needed to set the wheels in motion.

Convincing Detective Irvine to get his turtle graft was the hardest decision that Rafnia had ever made. She knew what Irvine, Matron Beauregard, Douglass, and the rest would do. She didn't need her powers to convince them to play their parts. She knew that people would die because of Irvine's convictions, but it had to be done to protect the world. Worse, she was setting Irvine up to be a scapegoat for the crimes for which she would be indirectly responsible. But Warren, though he fought bravely and tirelessly, would not last much longer. Sometimes, the only decisions that one could make were terrible ones.

Verna, Wesley, Sharonda, Jason, Neil, and Barnaby. Those were the names of the people that Irvine killed, not to mention Rush, the one survivor who would be horribly scarred for the rest of his life. And Jeremiah, and Silas, and Gregory, the poor medic; they died in the tournament designed to attract Hogan to Polonia Mons. The blood of all of these people was on her hands. But how many more would have suffered if she had done nothing?

Her plan seemed needlessly complicated, in retrospect, but that was just how her power worked. If there were a simpler, cleaner solution, she didn't have it.

She didn't blame Warren, as he flew in to the throne room. His anger was not really directed at her, but rather at his situation. He was projecting that anger onto Rafnia. She knew that. But a part of her felt like she deserved it.

"Hello, Warren," she said with all of the poise and nobility she could muster. She was prepared to die.

"Hello, your majesty," Warren said angrily. He made the word *majesty* sound like the worst possible thing

you could call a person. It sounded like when the older bigots called chimeras *furries*. At least Rafnia had done something specific to arouse Warren's ire, unlike the *furries*.

“We understand your anger, Warren,” Rafnia began.

“You understand nothing,” he said. “Twelve years. You can't be more than thirty years old. How would you feel if nearly half of your life was spent in chains? Symbolic chains, perhaps, but they bound me tighter to that spot in the sewer than any literal chains could have.”

“As the Queen, we understand your duty more than you realize. Do you think that we are not bound by chains as well? The safety of our people binds us as surely as it bound you.”

“You expect me to believe that you care about your people's safety?” Warren replied, throwing Irvine unceremoniously to the ground to punctuate his recrimination.

“We wish that you would,” she answered.

“Then why didn't you protect me!?” he screamed at her, injecting the pain of twelve years of hardship into each and every word. His scream echoed off of the stark and empty walls of the throne room. His voice attacked her from all sides, as if the ghosts of the victims of her machinations were joining in a chorus of accusations.

“I can't protect everyone,” she said, dropping the royal “we”, dropping her defenses completely, falling to the floor and sobbing. “I can't protect anyone! I thought I could do this job, but I can't. How can I make everyone happy? It just can't be done! I did my best, and look at the result!”

Rafnia's eyes focused through the tears at Irvine, a reminder of what she had done. His form blurred beneath her tears, but she couldn't pull her eyes away.

Warren and Rafnia remained in silence for minutes. It felt like hours. Rafnia bawled her eyes out like a child, like the child that she felt like, not like the Queen of the greatest queendom in the world. The flames of Warren's anger seemed to lessen, until they finally extinguished.

“Gods, you're just a kid, aren't you?” Warren said, anger replaced by pity. Rafnia's tears were genuine; though she appreciated his mercy, she was not deliberately trying to invoke it. “You're just as lost as the rest of us, fumbling your way through life.

“Who am I kidding?” Warren continued, a bit softer. “It's not your fault that I was there. If it was anyone's, it was my father's. Even then, it was just a horrible accident. Why should I expect you to solve all of the world's problems? I know as well as you do: power, and money, and influence – they don't make us better people. No matter how powerful we are, we can't do everything. We can't control the world.”

Rafnia's tears were drying up. Warren was right. She did the best she could in a bad situation.

“But you weren't lying. You did have a hand in this,” Warren said as he motioned toward Irvine.

“Yes,” Rafnia said breathlessly. “We did.”

“This was the price of my freedom?” Warren asked.

“That was the price for the future of this world.”

“It was too high. Far, far too high.”

“But it has been paid,” Rafnia declared as she rose

once again to her feet, once again sure of herself. “And if we had to do it again, we would.”

“And what? We just live with the guilt?” Warren asked.

“We do. And we do our best to prevent tragedies like this from ever happening again. Are you with us?” Rafnia asked.

“I am.”

Epilogue

Detective Irvine

Irvine, Irvine, Irvine. You crave order, and your intentions were good. If only you could cope with the secrets you learned.

“Why did you do it?” Irvine asked, hoping that he could get some answers since he was about to die. “You recommended that I get this blasted turtle graft in the first place. I thought that was your way of obliquely enlisting me as an assassin.”

Irvine and Queen Rafnia had some time to chat, before the execution, and Irvine felt like he deserved answers. His neck and arms chafed from the stocks, but his physical pain paled in comparison to the betrayal he felt from his Queen.

“We did not want an assassin. We hope that it is obvious by now that just because we have a secret, it does not mean that we need to guard it so closely. Sir Reginald and Sir Warren have peacefully resolved the conflict that my rule presents in their own minds. You have too, in your own way, since you were trying to protect us. What makes you think that your victims would not have come to the same conclusion, that they too would not have decided to protect our leadership?”

“Your majesty, I'm a police officer. I see the worst in people every day. You're naive if you think that no one wants you dead, and you're even more naive to think that if everyone knew your secret that there wouldn't be upheaval and anarchy.”

Queen Rafnia seemed to consider his words very seriously. Irvine wasn't sure what he said that had put the Queen into such deep thought, but he almost wished that he hadn't said it. She had wrapped herself up in silence, and now Irvine had no one to talk to during his last moments.

Irvine thought back on the journey that brought him here. His eagle and chameleon grafts made him ideal for infiltrating Polonia's drug cartel. At the end of his investigation, he was injured in a literal firefight during the final sting operation. His investigation taught him about the street drugs of Polonia Mons, and it's also where he learned about GVHD, the poison that turned a graft against its host like a dog turning on its owner after getting infected with rabies.

The Queen called Irvine in for a commendation on his good work after his injuries. She recommended the turtle graft, to protect him from such burns in the future. After searching a few turtles, he found one that was compatible with his existing grafts. He got the new graft, and it wasn't much later that he began to remember the past, Polonia before the Queen's rule. It took time, but he eventually knew what he needed to do. The Queen must have known what he would do, he thought. They had a unspoken arrangement; he was working for her to protect the queendom's interests.

He chose his victims randomly at first, or so he thought, until Rush somehow survived. From then on he spent most of his time watching people come and go at Arcane & Stable, waiting for the opportunity to take Rush out before he could talk. That lousy grizzly Tyron was

always there, and Irvine would never have been able to take Tyron on in a fair fight.

Instead, he used his stakeout as a means to discover other potential dissidents. Irvine still wasn't sure how Marten managed to slip through his fingers, the slimy weasel. And Ferelle, the persistent reporter; it took a lot of misinformation and false leads to keep her investigation away from Arcane & Stable. Irvine thought that he was above suspicion, but he had severely underestimated Capella's ability to both fit the pieces together and to defend herself and Rush from his ambush.

The crowd continued to filter in to the expanding arena as fast as the stone-workers could make room for them. Irvine could feel their baleful eyes judging him, as if they knew the entire story, and knew him to be the worst villain the world had ever known. They never would know the whole story; because of the Queen's power, they never could. But Irvine knew.

“People of Polonia!” Queen Rafnia commanded silence from the crowd, and all eyes turned to her. Irvine watched the Queen out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't turn his head far enough to see her.

“We welcome you here, today, to witness an event that has been a long time coming. As you are all aware, this man has murdered several citizens of Polonia. Eyewitness evidence links him to the crimes, and his crimes are punishable by death.” She paused to let the weight of her words sink in.

“However, we will not be killing this man today.”

Irvine's heart leaped into his throat, and the crowd began to stir.

“We are not saying that this man is not responsible for his crimes; quite the opposite. Allow us, though, to tell you a story. A story that we hope you will believe. A story that we hope will explain the pain our humble city has had to endure this past week.”

Irvine couldn't believe his ears. Queen Rafnia regaled the crowd with the story of her rise to power, with the tale of Warren and his eccentric father, with the lives and motivations of Irvine's victims, with the excitement of the tournament, and with the heroic efforts of the employees at Arcane & Stable. For someone that Irvine often considered to be stodgy and prudish, the Queen seemed to come to life as she wove her tale, and the crowd was caught in rapt attention. Irvine could tell through his eagle graft that the Queen was no longer holding these people under her mental influences. Yet, she seemed to merge the Hive and the real world for her story, to fully immerse the crowd in the events that she was describing by creating a psychic projection of the events as she must have witnessed them.

“So you see,” the Queen concluded as the effect ended. “I am just as responsible for his crimes, perhaps even more so. If anyone should die for these crimes today, it should be me. I have bared my misdeeds to you all, that you might decide the future of Polonia. If the price of blood still needs to be paid, I ask only that a brave citizen of Polonia claim that payment from me.”

The Queen's words echoed throughout the arena,

hanging thickly in the air and on the minds of the crowd.

Surely someone will turn on her, Irvine thought. If not now, then soon. How could they ever forgive her after this? So many people. There's no way that they will all understand and approve of her actions.

The crowd watched on in silence as Queen Rafnia walked defiantly out of the arena. Irvine watched her too, dismayed that his efforts to protect the queen had been for naught. The Queen's secret was out, and Polonia Mons would never be the same.

Afterword

This novel is only possible because of National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo as my fellow wrimos call it. The goal of NaNoWriMo each November is to – starting with a completely blank page – write a short, fifty thousand word novel during the month of November. It is an ambitious goal, especially given all of the things that can happen during your life in a month to derail you from your goals, but it is an incredibly rewarding experience that I would recommend to anyone and everyone.

Speaking of derailed life plans, I, the author, am something of a chimera myself, literally and metaphorically. Metaphorically, I sometimes feel as freakish and unique as Warren; I'm a twenty-seven year old gay graduate student computer scientist gamer geek recovering from leukemia with a remarkably healthy love of the English language and an interest in complex interconnected systems. Some aspects of my identity have been harder to come to grips with than others; realizing that you're gay at fifteen really throws your entire perspective of the world into question and teaches you coping techniques that most people don't learn until well into their adult lives.

That's why my diagnoses of Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia and then Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia last year, while terrifying and arduous, were just par for the course for me. After the miracle medications failed for me, my brother stepped up to the plate and provided the life-saving bone marrow transplant that I needed. His blood runs through my veins now, and I guess that's pretty okay. Know then, that when I speak of chimeras, I know what I'm

talking about, because in addition to being a twenty-seven year old gay graduate student computer scientist gamer geek recovering from leukemia with a remarkably healthy love of the English language and an interest in complex interconnected systems, I am also a real-life, bona fide chimera. It's not something I'm proud of, kind of like how I think the notion of "gay pride" is nonsense too, but it is something that I think is kind of cool and fun, and that's really what I care about in life.

So that's why you get this book from me. It's meant to be a cool and fun romp through the terrible experiences of my past year recovering from leukemia. Some guy, Proust maybe (though I've never read his work), suggested that hardship builds character. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that hardship inspires stories. I do hope that you enjoyed this one, because then at least we all got something positive out of my experiences.

My only regret with the book is that I wasn't able to somehow work in a metaphor that expresses the irony that, as a gay man, I managed to avoid the dangers of HIV long enough to land a stable, loving, and healthy relationship only to end up with *another* disease of the immune system. I just wanted to let everyone know that I'm not bitter about that one at all, and I sure do appreciate the irony.