

The Gaslight Volumes of Will Pocket:

Turnkey

By Christopher Dunkle
With Lori Williams

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For those who've helped shape this world, those who've encouraged its creation, and my lovely Lori,
without whom the Doll and this work would never exist.

- Christopher

Prologue

The Story of New London

England. June 1840.

Two months into her marriage and pregnant with her first child, Queen Victoria is taking a public carriage ride with her husband, Prince Albert. A mad tavern worker named Edward Oxford interrupts the Queen's ride and fires two shots at the couple, striking both in the head. Both die along with Victoria's unborn daughter. Oxford is deemed insane, but because of the severity of his crime, is sentenced to death by hanging. The Queen's assassination, however, throws the country into a fevered panic, and with no direct heir left to claim the throne, England enters its "Black Period," a time of civil discord, international disapproval, and broken government.

England. 1850.

England barely survives a decade under the rule of a string of temporary figureheads. Determined to find a proper heir to the throne, Parliament hunts down the man they believe to be the closest living blood relative to the late Queen, a man named Alexander Renton. Absolute evidence of Renton's royal lineage is never presented, yet the public accepts him as a successor. He ascends the throne, becoming Alexander I, and the great suffering of Britain finally comes to a close. What follows is England's "Bright Period," a time of incredible societal and especially technological advancement. Brooding heavily on Victoria's fate, Alexander becomes obsessed with preventing the country from falling into another decline, and pushes the advancement of medical, mechanical, militaristic, and

scientific studies. The British Empire soon evolves into an empire of machines, primarily built upon the developments of the forgone Industrial Revolution. Alexander's motivations and drive to improve results in a greater acceleration in these developments, particularly the commercial use of steam power, burning gas, and even a select few, limited, and experimental uses of electricity. Thanks to Alexander's fervent enthusiasm, England progresses over the next thirty years into a technological marvel. To make an example to the rest of the world, who had lost great faith in the British Empire over the preceding Black Period, Alexander I decrees the rebuilding of London, once the centerpiece of the empire that had since fallen into horrible disrepair. The entire area is rebuilt very nearly from the ground up and becomes what poets of the period call "a monument in steel and brass, a city alive with the perpetual turning of clockwork." Alexander proudly titles his city "New London."

Victoria's death also stirs in Alexander the importance of security. Under his command, the monarchy becomes heavier guarded and far more secretive. While this creates a feeling of detachment amongst the citizens, there is no great protest against this change. The public as a whole accepts these measures, wanting dearly to prevent another chance at assassination. Alexander becomes increasingly private, almost never appearing in public. He also creates the Royal Magnate Militia, a highly-trained, heavily-armed group of advisors who exist primarily as direct protection for the King, but also as general peacekeepers upon the streets on the city. The Magnates, as they are commonly known, become a symbol to the public of the King's unwavering dedication to security.

New London, England. 1888.

New London continues to grow and prosper, and by 1888, it is again a culturally-vibrant city and political hot spot. Steamships and zeppelins fill the sky, electric carriages and steam-fueled motorbikes zip through the streets, and gaslight lanterns glow upon every corner. As the city grows, however, so does the inevitable backlash against the aging Alexander I. People grow uncomfortable

and suspicious of the King's secretive demeanor and demand to be more informed of the country's international dealings. Alexander takes great offense to these protests and in response becomes even more private with England's affairs. Further complaints are silenced publicly thanks to the intimidating presence of the Magnates, but discontented conversation continues behind closed doors. It is a period of achievement and discord, of growth and isolation. Of those pushing forward toward modernity and those left behind by it. Contrast is the flavor of the times.

New London, England.

October 1, 1888.

Twelve-fifteen A.M.

It is the meeting of the seasons, as crisp autumn changes into frigid winter. Snow has begun to fall and at this silent minute the city seems dead. It is a moment of bleeding in the city, as the last of the lively pubs open their doors and drain their patrons out into the streets. In one block of shops, down one such street, stands one equally-bled tavern, the Good Doctor. The last of the Doctor's customers are plodding through the door, and the establishment is quickly emptied, save for the two remaining at the bar. One's a customer, one's a tender, and between them is only air and time and a sticky glass mug.

Oh, and one of them is me.

I suppose that's relevant to add.

- W. C. P.

Chapter One

Pocket and Dandy

October 1, 1888

“You ever fall in love with the end of the world, Mister Alan?”

“That more of your poetry, Pocket?”

“Not this time, I'm afraid.”

“Because it's getting a little late for poetry.”

“Then don't worry.”

“I won't.”

“Good.”

“All right. I'll bite.”

“It's a long story.”

“You finish your drink?”

“Wait...yeah. Done.”

“Then go ahead and talk. Your tab's due.”

“Normal price?”

“Normal price. A story for a round. But tell it good, Pocket. Lots of flash and pop and romance. Give me my beer's worth.”

“The beer was a little watery tonight.”

“Then you can give me a weak ending. I don't care. Just start entertaining. It's getting dull in here.”

“Of course it is. It's closing hour. I should be leaving, not spinning stories.”

“You think I’m letting you away with an unpaid tab? Bah. Start spinning.”

“All right, fine. If you’re so desperate for it, then...let me think. It all started more than a few weeks ago...in a bar much like this, come to think of it. You were there. I was—“

“No, no, no, Pocket. You can't just start off a good story with 'I was sitting in a bar and then this happened.' You've gotta start strong.”

“All right then...um...Ah. Got it. The cold British wind never feels quite so present as it does between the cracks of your fingers as you claw your way, tired and broken, to the tip of the highest steeple you've ever seen, your hands charred and dirty, your eyes on the figure poised on the point, framed in her tragedy by that divine moon.”

“Whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. Now you're on a steeple? On top of a church?”

“Well, yeah.”

“How did you get up there? What happened to the bar?”

“You said you didn't like the bar. And the steeple scene has flash. It's the big climax.”

“You can't just give me the big flash right away like that! You've got to work forward to it!”

“Well, I thought I could work backward and—“

“No, no, no. That's terrible. Look, just stick with the bar scene. Go from there. And none of that 'divine moon' talk. I've heard it a thousand times.”

“Okay...”

“And at least give this thing a title. Something that sticks with your audience.”

“You're a demanding critic for a bartender, Mister Alan.”

“I'm demanding when I'm bored.”

“Okay, okay. This...uh...okay...this begins the story of a girl.”

“Oh, good. I like those.”

“Will you let me tell it? Okay...this is the story of the unlucky. Of those select, unfortunate few that funny Mistress Fate picks like fallen cherries from the dirt and throws together under the baking

heat of a fantastical pie. A pie of confusion and adventure. A pie of curiosity and pursuit and danger and, uh, vivacity! A pie of heartache and joy, of danger and revelation! A pie—“

“I thought you were going to tell the girl story.”

“This *is* the girl story!”

“Not the way you tell it. Sounds more like a cooking story.”

“Look, the image of the pie is there to paint a picture in the imagination of the audience.”

“So they'll be thinking about pie?”

“Okay, forget the pie. This is...sigh...this is, Mister Alan, the story of the most beautiful girl I have ever seen and the most ugly ride I have taken at her side. This is the story of your humble narrator, and above all other things, Mister Alan, this is the story of the turnkey girl.”

It was the dead of night in the golden city and I was off hiding from the cold and my own boredom. A few yellow-brown bubbles popped on the surface of my beer, I remember because I was counting them for entertainment while I waited to be drunk. Alcohol and I have an understanding. We keep the relationship professional. While a lot of gentlemen and even ladies I've met hold onto the philosophy that fun lies at the bottom of a glass bottle, I still maintain that the pastime of drinking is merely a stand-in for enjoyment, not a source.

I could, of course, be wrong in this theory. It is equally plausible that I'm just not a very fun drunk. At any rate, it wasn't stopping me from emptying my glass that night.

“Another round, Pocket?” the barkeep asked, leaning over the worn, wooden counter, his elbows hovering centimeters above the splinter-ridden surface. The Brass Rail wasn't known for much, and...something...something witty about its atmosphere, lack of atmosphere...sorry, I'm still drunk. Anyhow, it was a room with two ceilings, the lower of which was an artificial layer of grey-black smoke provided by the pub's exhaling clientele.

The bartender asked again if I was interested in another glassful of distraction. I don't recall what answer I gave, but if I decided on another beer he must've quickly forgotten about it, as I never received it. Just as well. I was content sipping on the remainder of my glass and watching the bartender not serve me a drink.

“Okay, Pocket. I get it.”

“Stop interrupting. You're about to make your debut.”

The barkeeper left his post and began fiddling with a rickety music box that was rigged up in the least cobwebbed corner of the place. A few kicks to its worn casing and a flourish of semi-sour notes filled the room.

“Ah!” the bartender announced, pride in his eyes. “What did I tell you?”

I raised my glass to him as he slid back behind the bar top. No one else I've met could ever get that box to spit a song.

“I was an idiot to ever doubt you, Mister Alan.”

“Yes, you were.”

I caught myself grinning and hid it behind my glass. The playing needle hit a particular bump in the turning wax cylinder, and the vocals began. Alan cracked open a new bottle of something and began singing along.

“Black sky tonight, and it ain't gettin' any brighter. Ships fly this night, but I think they're gettin' lighter...”

Alan Dandy. Good man, really, and an acquaintance I've made over time with very little effort. He's...I guess you could call him a freelancer, though it's unusual for such a profession. He works nights, tending bars across the city. I suspect he only takes jobs at dumps like the Brass Rail to mess around with the music boxes. Guy's got a soft spot for music. Like I said, I've never considered myself

to be a career drinker, but he must think I am by now. I keep managing to run into Alan at various corner pubs and taverns all over New London. I don't know why. Call it fate. Sometimes I wonder if there's some reasoning behind which people you get stuck around in life, but then that's a storyteller response, isn't it? I'll leave it up to you. Anyway, the night rolled on and Alan rolled along with it, slapping bottles onto the counter for his whisker-riddled customers.

“Hold off a second, Pocket.”

“Now what?”

“Why are you telling me about myself? I know who I am.”

“Look, if I'm going to tell this whole story once, I may as well be prepared to tell it again. I've got to get used to setting up characters. This is my meal ticket, you know.”

“All right. Just move on, already. You've talked enough about me.”

“You shy, Alan?”

“Just get on with it.”

“Okay, so where was I...”

I wobbled on my stool for awhile and tried hard to listen to the music instead of the inebriated claims of female conquest that were being wheezed around me.

“I like the song,” I said to Alan.

“What's that?”

“I like the song. The singer, she's got a nice voice.”

“Yeah, that's a classic. Lady Jay.”

“Hmm?”

“The singer. Lady Jay.”

“Haven't heard of her.”

“You should. Great string of hits.” He poured something wet and rust-colored into a tumbler and slid it to a customer.

I took another uninterested gulp and realized that someone sitting next to me had been tugging on my shoulder for a good, I'd say, two minutes. It was a blonde someone and she smiled at me. I smiled back out of courtesy. The blonde someone was spinning her ankles around the edge of the stool and spitting peanut shells. She must have been seven, eight at the oldest.

My luck, the first woman to ever approach me in a pub...

“Hello, hello!” the little thing said.

“Hi,” I replied.

“What are you doing?”

“Sitting.”

“Oh. Me too!”

“Congratulations.” I took another swallow of beer and watched the child spin in her seat.

“Aren't you a little young to be in a place like this?”

“My daddy says it's okay. I have ta' wait for him ta' finish doing daddy things.”

“Ah. Good man.” I tried, without success, to return to my drink.

“My name is Annabelle.”

“Hi Annabelle.”

“What's yours?”

Sigh. I fished around in my coat pocket and produced a small, dog-eared, white calling card and handed it to the girl. She took it in both hands and furrowed her brow.

“Can you read?”

“Of course I can read!” She furrowed some more, then traced her thumbs over each printed black letter that spelled out: WILL POCKET, THE ABSYNT BARD OF NEW LONDON.

“You misspelled 'absent,’” she finally said.

“I didn't print it myse—”

“What's a bard, then?”

At that point, Alan returned to my spot on the bar to collect empty glasses and sweep up Miss Annabelle's peanut shells. I shot him a look, hoping for a little assist in escaping my present company. He grinned and nodded back to me.

“Yeah, Pocket,” he said. “What's a bard, then?”

My mood, my face, and, somehow, my beer instantly soured. I met Alan's question with restrained annoyance and began to tap on the bar.

“Well...” I said, surrendering to this barstool interrogation. “It's like a performer.”

“Like an actor?” asked the girl.

“Sort of, but more of a storyteller. With tricks and songs and such.”

“Oh! Do you sing, Mister Pocket?”

“Well...not really. I mean, not extremely well.” That was slightly understated. I am horrible.

“Oh,” she said. She stood up on her chair and tried to reach over the bar top to grab at more peanuts. Alan restrained her and she began a very noisy protest. I thanked the heavens for the opportunity and tossed the only bills in my pocket on the counter.

“I'll see you around, Alan.”

“Whoa! Pocket!” he shouted back to me, now clinging to the girl's ankles as she thrashed at him. “Get back here! This isn't going to cover your rounds!”

“That's all I've got at the moment. Can't I owe you the rest?”

“I don't know when I'm going to see you again!”

“I'll come back here tomorrow night.”

“I'm not working tomorrow night!”

“Watch your fingers,” I advised as the child brandished her teeth.

“Look, why don't you—OW!”

“Told you.”

“Why don't you tell a story for the balance and we call it even?”

“It's getting late for stories, Alan.”

I realize now how often I seem to be making this argument.

“A story!” yelled Annabelle, “I want a story!”

“Fine, a story,” I said, rubbing my temples, “What about?”

“Tell one about my daddy!” Annabelle shouted.

“Fine. Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Annabelle and one day her father went out and killed a dragon. The end. God save the King. Goodnight, Alan.”

“My daddy never did that! Tell me a *true* story!”

“I...uh...all right. What does your daddy do?”

“He works for the castle!”

“All right, then. Once upon a time, there was a man named...”

“Annabelle's daddy!”

“...Annabelle's daddy, and he worked for the greater good of all of Britain, serving proudly as...what is it he does?”

“He's a magpie!”

“A wha...do you mean a Magnate?”

“That's it!”

“Your father's a *Magnate*? All right...eh...so Annabelle's daddy worked bravely night and day, tending obediently to the whims of our great Alexander. Annabelle's daddy and his fellow men patrolled the streets of England in grand black robes that bore blood red emblems in the shape of crowns, the famous mark of the King's personal militia. They fought hard and true and made sure that the people who didn't realize that they needed constant supervision were constantly supervised. The end. God save the King.”

I moved into the direction of what I thought was the front door only to collide face-first with the large frame of a barrel-chested man with curled blond bangs and a squared jaw.

“Evening,” I said.

“You tell stories?” he said, snorting through his nostrils.

“He tells lots of stories!” shouted Annabelle, who was suddenly standing behind me. She handed him my card, and the man stood there for a moment, squeezing it in his sweaty, thick wrist.

After about a minute, his extended brow began to furrow.

“Can you read?” I asked. He flicked the card off of my forehead and huffed.

“You talk a lot.”

“Kinda helps to tell a story.”

That was when he threw me onto the bar. It gets better.

“Is there a problem?” I politely inquired.

“Yer story,” he said. “Found it a little insulting.”

My head was resting on the wider ends of two overturned beer bottles.

“How so?”

His meaty hand grabbed at the buttonholes of his whiskey-soaked jacket, popping it open. From inside, he retrieved a small leather flap with a red-on-silver symbol of a crown pinned onto it.

An off-duty Magnate.

He stumbled over his boots and breathed over me. A *drunken*, off-duty Magnate. My luck was immeasurable.

“Well, for starters...” he grunted, cracking his knuckles. “I thought yer interpretation rang a little anti-Alexandery.”

“Did it?”

“Personally I felt yer wordplay smelt of rebellion.”

Now, dear readers, it has never been my practice to question the criticisms of those larger or drunker than I, but given the situation at hand, my first response as author was to defend my artistic point of view.

“Rebellion?!? Where in God's name did you find *rebellion*?!?”

“You 'ere talking 'bout our crowns 'n buttons, and you called them, I believe, blood red.”

“Did I?”

“You did.”

“You have a problem with adjectives?”

He grabbed my shirt's collar and lifted me off the bar. At the moment, I had wished he would make up his mind on where exactly he would prefer me to lie in intimidation.

“As I see it, *blood* is a fairly suggestive word.”

I was hanging in the grip of a literary scholar, it would seem. My feet dangled over the ground.

“Well, yes, of course it is,” I replied. “I was merely trying to create an image of color in the minds of the audience.”

“Blood suggests violence, death, and whatnot.”

“Well, that's one reading, sure. But—”

“Are you implying that the monarchy operates under a thinly...hiccup...thinly-veiled pretense as a bunch of murdering crooks?”

“Not at all. I didn't realize you military men were such sensitive scholars.”

“That a crack on our intelligence?”

“No, I—“

“Because I don't like insinuation! I once knocked a man cold for insinuation!”

“I'm sure you did, but I can assure you—”

“Do you swear yerself loyal to our King and our great lady England?”

“Look, if you could put me down—”

“Or do you stand as an enemy to the Crown?”

“No, of course not! I believe your interpretation may be slightly askew, is all.”

You know those points in stories where a dangling protagonist is saved from a perilous situation by the innocence of a child?

“You gunna throw him real far, Daddy?” little Annabelle, sweetheart of the city, asked my assailant. Lovely.

I was soon introduced with “real far,” as Annabelle's daddy threw me headlong out of the Brass Rail. I remember thinking in midflight that this would make for a lousy beginning to a story.

Moments later, I collided with a man-shaped fox and the night took a turn for the strange.

Chapter Two

The Bottle and the Fox

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“You stopped talking, Pocket. Where's the rest of the story?”

“That was the story, Alan. I'm done.”

“You told me a story of how you got thrown out of a bar! I could tell you a dozen of those!”

“I'm...I'm tired, okay?”

“Come on. The drinks tonight weren't *that* bad. You owe me better than that. You build me up with turnkey girls and man foxes, then tell me something I was there to see?!?”

“Eh...”

“*Eh?!?* Don't give me, *eh*. What happened to flash?”

“Look, the truth is, I'm having second thoughts.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. Maybe the booze's wearing off. You wouldn't understand.”

“Wouldn't under...Hey, Pocket. I already told you, I don't care how long it is, just—“

“It's not a matter of length, Alan. It's just...well... it's not a story that's particularly easy for me to tell...actually harder than I thought. So just forget it. You wouldn't believe half of it, anyhow.”

“I don't care if I believe it! I'm bored.”

“Alan—“

“I can be this stubborn all night.”

“...ug...fine. Hope you're comfortable. Where was I?”

“Man-shaped fox.”

“Right. Tell me, Alan. You know a guy named Kitt Sunner?”

“Yeah, actually. Not in a long while, but he used to come around this place, asking for leftover peanuts. What about him?”

“He's a headache.”

The first things to come to me were sounds. Wind, coughing, swearing. A faint, drunken laughter in the distance, eventually muted by the slamming of a door. Next came more physical sensations. A spinning dizziness. Someone's fingers pushing against my shoulder. The cold, wet, griminess beneath my fingernails that only genuine, British back-alley slush can provide. A tightness in my lungs.

A headache.

“Damn, that hurt,” said a voice. I was surprised to realize that it wasn't mine. “You okay?”

I rolled over onto my back, shook the snow from my nostrils, and began thumbing the frost out of my eyes.

“I think so. Are you?”

“Think so. You hit me.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“That's okay. I've been thrown around before. Somebody in there not like you?”

“I really am not sure.”

I blinked. Shadows and shapes formed, particularly the shape of the young man I had slammed into on my way outside. A dark silhouette of two fox-shaped ears sprouting from a round head appeared. I began to fear that the impact had caused me to hallucinate, so I spoke very softly and slowly.

“So...” I carefully pronounced, “...you appear...to be a fox.”

The fox laughed.

“You could say that. Sure.”

“All right,” I said, blinking out more ice. “Are you a...uh...good fox?”

“Just open your eyes, Pocket.”

I did as commanded. As my vision came into focus, I found not a fox but a young man sitting on his left knee. What I had mistaken for ears were actually flaps of leather sewn into rather fox-like points on the top of an old aviator’s cap. Unfastened chin straps hung down on either side of the young man's youthful face over curly, black hair. He smiled cheerfully.

“Oh,” I dumbly said. “You're not a...”

“No. But don't feel embarrassed.”

“Should I be embarrassed about being thrown into you?”

“Probably a little.”

“Good. I'm reacting properly then.”

“It's really no big deal, Pocket.”

“Right. About that. How exactly do you know my—”

“This was stuck to your boot heel,” the boy said, holding up a stained, white card. “It smells like whiskey and anger.”

“It should. The man who—”

“Did you know you misspelled 'absent?’”

Sigh.

“Yeah, well, I didn't actually print the card myself, so—”

“You’re really a bard? What's that like?”

“A paradise of fulfillment. I'm sorry. I didn't get your name.”

“Oh. I'm Kitt Sunner.” He was decked in leather and had a pair of thick flying goggles strapped to his unusual fox-eared cap. He reminded me a bit in appearance of a child with piloting aspirations

playing dress-up and make believe. We helped each other up. I took back my card and Kitt frowned. He started slowly stretching his leg and I raised an eyebrow.

“I’m okay,” he said. “Just a little stiff. Nothing broken.”

Broken. A thought occurred and I immediately began padding down my overcoat and vest pockets.

“Something wrong?” Kitt asked.

“I just remembered that I was carrying a...oh...”

I felt a jingling in my left coat pocket. I fished from it a handful of emerald green slivers of glass. The fox-headed boy traced them over with his eyes.

“What’s that you’ve got there?”

I frowned. “Scrap glass, now.” I removed the prized set of round, golden-framed, green-tinted spectacles I had found at a carnival but a week before. They were now snapped in two and the right lens had smashed into sharp confetti when I hit both the ground and the wide-eyed stranger.

“They would’ve been nice,” Kitt added. I’m fairly sure this was an attempt to cheer me up, but the comment achieved instantly the opposite effect.

Determined to play the optimist, I took the un-mangled half of the spectacles and hooked the frame under my left ear. The snapped bridge rested slightly lopsided on my nose and the rounded left frame sat poised before my eye as a sort of makeshift monocle.

“What do you think?” I asked, hoping to hang onto at least the slightest bit of class on this increasingly deteriorated evening.

“Unusual,” Kitt admitted, studying the fashion of it. “But I think I like it.”

“You’re a man of taste.”

A wind hit us and Kitt began rubbing his hands. “It’s late. I should...”

“Right. Sure. Nice running into you.”

“That’s a horrible joke.”

“Yeah. Well, good evening to you...Kitt, right?”

“Yeah,” he replied, brushing some snow off of my coat, “Good evening, Mister Pocket.”

Kitt pivoted on his heels and strolled away from me, throwing a cheerful wave over his back in my direction. I nodded and, stuffing my hands in my coat pockets for warmth, started off in the opposite way. Something seemed immediately different about the feel of my inner pockets, but what was missing didn't dawn on me until Kitt shouted “Hey!”

“Hey!” came again his angry shout, fired from the distance. I looked over my shoulder to find Kitt standing in the slush, gripping something small and brown in his fist, and shaking it so that I could see.

“Hey!” he repeated a final time, now that I was watching. “Is this some kind of joke, Pocket?”

“Eh?”

Wearing a look of grave disappointment, he marched back up to me and tossed the little brown thing into my open palms. It was a small, leather bag. Empty.

Empty...

Of course. Kitt had just handed me my own wallet.

“This...” I began, at a loss for words. “This is...”

“Empty,” he added, a bit sour.

“You...stole from me?” I said, more confused than upset.

“I *tried*. You know, it's kind of a waste of my time to pick pockets shallower than mine.”

“Excuse me?”

“Forget it. If you ever get any rich friends, send them my way.”

He shrugged, mumbled something to himself, and tried to walk away. Fortunately for me, the collar of his jacket was instantly caught in the angry fist of a bard who had just in that moment realized the reality of the situation.

“Do you mind?” Kitt asked.

“You snatched my wallet!”

“Yeah. I know. Nothing personal, Pocket. Heh, Pocket. I picked Pocket's pocket. Pretty good, right?”

“You. Snatched. My. *Wallet!*”

“It's right here.”

“What difference does that make?!?”

“I don't know. I thought you'd appreciate the gesture. I mean, if you want to make a case out of it, remember that I gave it back—“

“Because there was nothing in it!”

“I'm not thrilled about that either.”

“So you're...what? Some kind of street thief?”

“No! Well, I mean, yeah. I am. Not like I have much of a choice.”

“No?”

“No. This is...look, I don't have to explain myself to a complete stranger!”

“You do when you've *stolen* from that complete stranger, you cutpurse!”

“Would you keep it down? You'll attract attention.”

“Oh, good point! I wouldn't want to bring any notice to the thief who's robbing me!”

“Robbing implies that you had something to steal!”

“Funny!”

“Look, will you calm down? You'll wake up half of the city.”

“Fine! Let's wake them up! See what I care!”

“Have you...been drinking tonight, Pocket?”

“I don't see what that—yeah, a little bit.”

An understatement, but it was a good point for Kitt to make. I took a moment to wisely shut up.

Unfortunately, the damage was already done.

The door of the Brass Rail swung open and the same curly-locked Magnate who had sent me into flight leaned through the frame, snorting like a bull.

“What’s all this shouting about, then—Oh, ho! Storyteller! You still squawking about here?”

That’ll sober a man up fast.

“Uh...hey there!” I bumbled. “Good seeing you! My friend and I were just having a bit of a lively discussion.”

“Political discussion?”

“No! Nothing political! Just catching up on old times, right Kitt?”

“Is that the man who threw you into me, Pocket?”

“Just get out of here before I bury you both!” the brute shouted. “And storyteller! Take yer junk with you!”

Without another word of warning, the Magnate flung something transparent, the size of a small cannonball, whizzing at our heads. Kitt and I hit the dirt, just centimeters away from getting our skulls cracked. As a new round of slush coated my eyes, I heard the Magnate chuckle. He shouted something idiotic to a few friends inside and closed the door. I rolled over and opened my eyes. My view was filled with the blue-purplish smear that was the English sky, dusted with the flicker of starlight.

My only favorable view of the night thus far.

I could hear Kitt rustling beside me, shuffling to his feet and scraping his boot heels in the ice. I didn’t feel like making the first sentence, so I let him have it.

“That was close,” he said. Not a bad first sentence. I would’ve gone with something slightly more expressive, but it broke the silence.

“Yeah,” I said, not being expressive at all. For some odd reason, I didn’t take my eyes off of the stars, feeling that if I waited long enough, some grand answer would be spelled out for me amongst the vanilla dots.

“We should leave,” I heard Kitt say. “I don't want that man to have some more drinks and decide to throw some more of pieces of junk our way.”

The drunk's projectile had landed, miraculously unbroken, in a small patch of grass behind us. It was an oval-shaped bottle, wide-lipped, corked, tagged, but most importantly, half-filled with a bubbling, green liquid that seemed to be glowing on its own. The bottle was, as the brute so eloquently claimed, an oddity of my own possession.

Kitt wrapped his gloves around it. “What's in there?”

“Faerie juice.”

“I see,” said Kitt, who clearly didn't. He took hold of the bottle and shook its contents. “Where'd you find faeries to juice?”

“Electric Bohemia.”

Kitt played some more with the bottle, his attention not entirely on the answers I was giving him. “Uh-huh...look, it gets all shiny when you hold it up to the moon.”

“I know.”

“That's a pretty neat trick. Where'd you say you got this, Pocket?”

I sighed. It would not be the last time.

“Electric Bohemia.”

“Hold on.”

“What is it now, Alan?”

“I like imaginative stories, Pocket. I do. But you start talking about spotting faeries and they'll lock you up in Bedlam with the other 'imaginative' gentlemen.”

“Yes, yes, I'm getting to it.”

“Well, get to it faster.”

As I, for some reason, then explained to the inquisitive fox boy, the bottle in question had found its way to me one peculiar time in the spring of the previous year. A time in April, specifically, and being such, the sky was pouring rain. It was also the dead of night and between the blackness and the wetness I was having considerable trouble navigating the southbound streets of the city. I was soon lost.

“Huge surprise.”

“Alan, please.”

I wandered for awhile until walking over something large in the street that turned out to be an elderly Frenchman. I asked if he was all right, and he informed me that he had taken to the streets in search of “an enlightenment of the senses.” I pointed out to the old man that it was raining quite hard for such experiments and he told me that rain was a vital part of life and therefore the sensation of water on skin was critical to his research.

“Sounds like he spent considerable time 'researching' an opium den.”

“I know, but listen...”

I hated to bother someone so entranced with the weather, so I apologized for running my boots over his stomach and fell into a mud puddle. The old man wheezed and cackled. I swore and tried idiotically to ring myself out under the pouring shower.

“Bravo!” the Frenchman bellowed, sitting up and clapping hard. “Merci bien!”

I ignored this and waited for the rain to wash the mud off of my coat. I dipped my hands into my pockets, the insides of which were especially wet for some...oh no. I pulled my hands out at once to find them dyed black-purple, right down to the fingertips. I remembered that I had been toting a small

inkwell that must've overturned when I fell. Angry, I pitched the empty vial into the mud, only to watch it skip over the surface like a perfectly timed stone.

“You have great skill,” the Frenchman said.

“Sure,” I replied, staring at my hands. “It takes a special breed of idiot to change his skin purple.”

“Indeed it does!”

I raised an eyebrow at him, the old loon playing in the street like a child.

“Eh...thanks.”

“Are you a child of the Revolution?”

“I don't think so.”

He cackled and wheezed again. “Forgive me,” he said at last. “You must think me terribly rude. But I find you endlessly entertaining.”

“Thanks,” I grunted.

I wandered off towards an orange orb that I figured was a lamppost when the sloppy footsteps of the coot hurried beside me.

“Now, now, now,” he said. “Wait, wait, wait. You can't go just yet!”

“I can't?”

“No!”

“I don't know. Look at my legs. Left, right...yeah, I'm pretty sure I'm perfectly able to leave. Good evening, sir.”

“Hang on a bit!” he pleaded, grabbing at my coat. “I need to reward you.”

“Reward? What for?”

“The entertainment.”

“I appreciate it, but you don't have to celebrate me falling down in the mud.”

“Of course I do!”

“In fact, it's the sort of thing I like to try to forget.”

“Oh, you shouldn't do that, friend. You should never do that. Besides you added a critical, yes, an absolutely critical element to my investigation. You, sir, are a stimulant and a vital touch of that great magic.”

I slid against a wall under a small awning and enjoyed a small cover from the showers. The Frenchman chose to remain in the rain, smiling wide at me.

“I hate to tell you,” I finally said. “But if you're expecting to get any magic out of me, you're going to be greatly disappointed.”

“Says the man with the magical hands.”

I looked down at my purple skin. It was already starting to run with the rain.

“That's only ink.”

“Maybe. Or maybe that's your clever little lie. Keep all the magic to yourself.”

“You overestimate me.”

“I think not, storyteller.”

“How did—“

“How can you tell a duck's bottom feathers are wet?”

Hmph...lucky guess. You see a man with ink on his fingers and you make assumptions. He could've very well called me clerk or bookkeeper. I wasn't buying this muddy oracle act. I didn't answer his question and instead shook my hands. The color was quickly fading. I held them up for presentation.

“Sorry,” I said to the man. “Looks like my magic's run dry.”

“How sad for a man of your ability.”

“Maybe. But I'll live.”

He took a deep breath of rainwater and spit it out. "I suppose you will." He retrieved from somewhere unseen a long cigarette and a single match. Cupping both from the rain, he lit the match against his heel and put it to the other.

"Now it's my turn to laugh," I remarked. "If you think you're going to be able to smoke while standing out there."

He said nothing, arched his back, and began taking long, pronounced drags on the cigarette under the downpour. I watched in amazement as the hot red glow of the tip continued to burn through the dousing rain. Impossible. The Frenchman released a round of smoke through his nostrils, flicked ash to the ground, and continued smoking. Impossible!

"How did you do that?"

"Just maybe," he said to me. "Just maybe I have lost in my years less magic than you. Here."

He reached a wrinkled hand under the awning and handed me four soggy, long cigarettes. They were wrapped in purple papers and smelled very slightly fragrant.

"I don't really smoke."

"Take them. Try smoking in the rain sometime."

"Uh...sure," I said, plopping them into my coat pocket without thought.

A splash of wind spit through the rain. I started to shiver.

"You were asking about shelter, right?" the old man said.

"No. Never mentioned it."

He shot me a wild eye.

"But you meant to."

My foot pushed against the wall and propelled me off once more into the rain. We walked for a bit, stomping around in the slop. Once we had been stomping for a good while, he began rubbing his chin, as though the act powered his brain through some strange utility of kinetic energy.

"I'll tell you what you need," he said to me. "A good woman. You have a woman, friend?"

“No.”

“You should find one. Great way to gain some magic.”

“Great way to lose some magic too.”

“Hmm...I suppose,” he cackled. “But find one with nice enough curves and you'll never mind.”

“Heh,” I smirked. “If you say so.”

“Why, boy? What's wrong with a shapely woman?”

“Not a thing in the world.”

And so the old man led me in his frenzy through the wind and the rain and the overwhelming darkness of the night through the veins of the city, through the crooked, weaving lines that wiggled through the southside. I hopped bins and crates, squeezed between buildings, and hurried down alleyways. At last he led me to this faint glow in the night which revealed itself as an inn. Or what used to be an inn. The look of the place alone suggested that it hadn't been properly run for years. But there was definitely a life about the place, something in the ether I couldn't quite sort out, and when I asked the Frenchman about its condition, he was more than happy to respond.

“Optimum operation, boy! Optimum operation!” he said as we approached the front door.

“This place is no longer simply a nailed-up box of lodging, of refuge. Yes, boy, we can extend the courtesy of a dry roof and a warm bed, but this is *more!* This is an outpost of essence! A phantom limb to the body of revolution I left behind in Paris!”

“Look, you might want to quiet down with all that 'revolution' talk. The King's not that keen about words like that.”

“Oh, you English are so drab, with your militarists and your industry! I'm talking of a movement of passions! Of humors! Of...boy, could you lend a shoulder? The door's stuck again.”

“Sure.” Push. Thud. Squeak. We went inside. Electric Bohemia, he had called the place. It was written across the walls of the lobby in scavenged letters taken from city notices that must've been previously posted on the premises. The “EM” in BohEMia, for instance, was stamped with a familiar

government typeface. And given the state of the establishment, I dared to suppose that it may have very likely been clipped from the word “CondEMned.”

A man with a curled beard was sleeping behind the front desk. The Frenchman rang a rusted bell and the gent woke in a bustle. He then blinked and asked my escort how his nightly experiments had fared. They made small talk, or not, maybe it was some probing debate on the fiber of all humanity. I wasn't paying attention.

“Now!” the Frenchman announced, clapping his hands at me. “All seems to be in order. There remains only the matter of your gift.”

“Gift?”

“I owe you for the entertainment, remember? How quickly the youth of this world forget!”

“Really, sir. The dry room is gift enough. And those unusual cigarettes.”

I lightly patted my soggy pocket, assuming the already-dampened tobacco sticks were by now reduced to a glob of sour pulp.

“Nonsense! Petty offerings! You need something more...*appropriate* for the favor.”

“Oh? And what's appropriate for a mud puddle performance?”

“Hmmm...that seems to be the question...”

He started rubbing his chin again. I shook some rainwater off of myself.

“Look, sir,” I began, softly. “Really—“

“Got it!” he said, beaming. “Entertainment for entertainment! A fair trade!”

“Fair trade?”

“You like to be entertained, don't you, friend?”

“I...suppose so...”

“Then why don't you make yourself good and comfortable, and I'll see if I can't send something nice and expressive your way. You like expressive entertainment, don't you?”

“Oh...sure. Expressive is fine.”

“Good! I thought so! On your way, then.”

He took me by the arm and led me through the lobby, pushing along deeper into the inn.

“That-a-way, young man,” he instructed as we ventured along. “Go on.”

He then vanished through a side door and initiated loud conversation with another on the opposite side. The discussion was clear and blunt, but being a little cold and dizzy from the weather, I did not pay adequate attention to exchange.

“The boy wants 'expressive beauty,’” I half-heard the Frenchman say. “You're an expressive beauty, right?”

“I can do expressive,” said another.

Rather than ponder the implications of these words, I shook a little water from my ears and wandered forward, drippy and alone, on my way.

The old man had sent me in the direction of a crooked hallway toward the back of the establishment. It was dim and a smell I could only classify as week-old sour milk led me by the nose down the corridor to a small corner bedroom, windowless and warmer than the rest of the inn.

I closed the door and sat on the edge of a table. The walls were mustard yellow, though clearly not originally. Still, the stained color brought a sense of décor to the box, and I let my eyes bounce from the yellow to the green of the untrimmed potted plants that had been stacked in one corner. An overstuffed and overused sofa sat across from me. To this day, I do not know what possessed me to choose a tabletop to nest on in place of the obvious seating arrangement, but I went with my gut and knocked songlets and diddies into the wood with my knuckles, waiting for God knows what to appear.

A good quarter of an hour later, a woman finally came through the doorway, tried once, twice, and finally succeeded in closing the peel-paint door, locking it with an old brass key. She was wearing the faintest shade of green I'd ever imagined and looked me over with great exaggeration while her right hand tugged on the one-piece leotard she wore. The choice in wardrobe made me instantly

associate her with a golden-haired trapeze artist I had seen as a child, and I found it suddenly very difficult not to regard her as an acrobat.

“You the one the old man sent me for?” she spoke.

“I think so,” I answered, a little cautiously.

“You're all wet.”

“It's raining.”

“Oh.” She rubbed her painted thumbnails over each other and caught a look at a neatly arranged triangle of bubble-bottomed glass teacups. “Oh! The hell did you do with those?”

“Not a lot.” In truth, I had found the three cups lying overturned on the floor upon entering the room and, in waiting, had properly arranged them to kill time and make a good impression. My act seemed to have had the opposite effect.

“Well, just great,” she spat. “There's nothing left to be arranged, is there?”

“I...suppose not.”

“Wonderful.” She grabbed at the veil she had been wearing on her head and cast it to the floor.

“Can't really play servant when you've left me no task to serve, can I?”

I didn't know what to say, so I apologized.

“I'm...sorry.”

She looked with a fiery-green annoyance hard into my eyes, no easy task as my sloppy wet bangs were trying their hardest to curtain them. She then suddenly softened into a smile and placed her painted fingers on her hips.

“That's all right, sugar. No harm.”

“Glad.”

She nodded, politely smiling like a show horse, and took four pronounced steps backward. Slowly, like a lady of breeding, she lowered herself onto the old couch, her weight pushing a few rusty springs up through the material, and struck an exaggerated pose.

"I'm ready," she said calmly. "Begin when you please."

"I'm...sorry?"

"I already said there's no harm, so you can begin."

I caught my breath and attempted to solve this riddle.

"No..." I said, a little stupidly. "I mean...I'm sorry?"

"What?"

"I mean, I don't understand."

With a sigh and a grunt, she arched her back up and threw another fiery-green stare my way.

"You artist types are the absolute worst, you know that? You have to spell out everything!"

"I...think there's been a mistake. The old gentleman—"

"Frenchie's a coot, but he pegged you right. Stop with the babbling, artist, and start sketching."

"Sketching?"

"That is what you types need, right? I'm doing the modeling thing, so get going."

"I can't draw."

"What?"

"Or paint."

"This a joke? Frenchie called you an artist."

"I am. Of the written and...uh...spoken word."

"Oh, I get it." She cracked her knuckles and stood up. She then began to tap her pointed feet on the floorboards, stretching her bare and bruised legs. "Bookish type. Okay. What's your name, love?"

"Will Pocket."

"Nice to meet ya, Will. I think I know what you need."

She dropped to all fours and began pulling a rather large steamer trunk in the opposite corner from the leafy greens.

"And what's your name?" I asked.

“Not important.”

“Of course it is.”

“Not to you. Call me whatever you want. Your treat.”

“I can't just make you up an identity!”

“Some writer you are. Hey, give me a hand with this trunk, will ya, Will? Thanks. Look, if it'll help, call me Abby.”

“Abby...”

“Sure, why not? Good a name as any,” she shrugged. I observed in hesitation as the lady rummaged through the trunk, throwing tiaras, feather boas, and ballet slippers around the room before removing a pair of cheap, costume faerie wings, green as her eyes, and donning them.

“There we are!” she said with a sudden, unexpected sweetness. “Ready to be of assistance, Master Will! Shall I fetch you ink and paper?”

I watched, absolutely astonished, as the mad woman bounced on her toes from corner to corner, humming a tune I could swear sounded quite similar to the knuckle songs I was rapping into the table previously.

“What are you doing?” I said at last.

“I am this evening's Muse, Master Will! Begin as you will!”

I tried to protest, but I couldn't get a word over her song. Her humming voice became louder and she swayed to and fro, knocking over plants, which I then tended to, and knocking open dresser drawers, which I then adjusted, in her rainy night dance.

On her song's third refrain she whacked open a cabinet drawer for the second time and in responding to it, I took notice of a small, framed photograph. Without thinking, I took it in my hand and observed it. It was a yellowed portrait of two school-age girls, the taller grinning with sparks in her eyes and gaps in her teeth. Her hair was up and her body was tilted toward her companion with the grace of a circus acrobat.

“Give me that!” Abby snapped, tearing off her wings. “No one said you could start snooping! Show's over!”

“I didn't mean to upset—“

“Get out, Will.”

I have no idea why I didn't. I wanted to like hell, but instead...

“What do you think you are doing?” Abby barked, leaning in on me.

“One moment.”

“What's that there?”

“Hang on.”

I had taken from my soggy pocket a soggy napkin I had picked up somewhere in my travels and a half-dulled pencil and was scribbling furiously with one on the other.

“I'm almost done,” I calmly announced.

She leaned in to observe my work.

“What's the gag, Will? You're no sketch-painter.”

“Not before this night.”

I rose from the table I had again taken rest upon and handed her the napkin. Politely I squeezed the rain out of my shirttail while she studied my drawing, a crude stick-bodied caricature of the spark-eyed, gap-toothed young girl.

“I think I should go,” I said with a bow.

“Will,” Abby said, barely over a whisper, “I don't understand.”

I could only shrug, stuffing my hands in my sloshy pants. “Eh, me neither. Inspiration's a weird thing. I stopped trying to figure it out years ago.”

She let a faint smile out and folded the napkin into neat fourths. She was standing on the wings.

“Cynthia,” she said.

“Pretty name,” I replied. “Fitting for a bright-eyed girl.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see ya, Abby.”

The brass key was still in the lock. I twisted it and the weight of the doorknob turned in my hand as I re-entered the hall.

“See you, Will.”

“Yeah, that’s all fine, Pocket. But what about the faerie juice?”

“Can’t a guy build up to a plot point with grace?”

“See, this is why the fox boy didn’t pay you any attention. You linger.”

“I do *not* linger.”

“Sure. Just get to the faerie juice or move along. You’re losing me.”

“Well, you can be happy then, Alan, because at that exact moment the old Frenchman moved into my path and pushed a round, glass bottle straight into my gut. Satisfied?”

“I think you’re just skipping ahead because I complained. You’re far too reliant on your audience.”

“Fine! As I was saying…”

I coughed and moved my fingers to grip the glass. The old man was smiling ferociously. I prompted my feet to run.

“Was my friend able to you assist you?” he asked.

“I don’t think I’m her type,” I said with a smile. “But she led me in the right direction.”

“The room has one door. The only direction was out.”

Best direction there is.

“Fair enough,” I admitted, “What’s in the bottle?”

“Faerie juice.”

“Yeah? Where'd you find faeries to juice?”

He laughed. I cautiously took a few steps back. The Frenchman let go as I did, leaving the bottle in my hands. I attempted to give it back to him, but his implication was clear.

“You want me to keep it?” I asked.

“Of course!”

“Why?”

“Because it's your essence, obviously!”

I shook the bottle and watched the liquid splash and swirl.

“You're sure?”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!” cackled the man, raving like a lunatic. “Was there ever any doubt, my boy? Was there ever any doubt?”

The Frenchman did a celebration dance on his skinny ankles and presented little, topped vials filled with commonplace items he had collected: acorns, ticket stubs, dried pieces of old cake, rainwater. These things, he proclaimed, were his essence, invaluable parts of himself.

“And I'm a bottle of green juice, then?” I mumbled.

“Oh-ho-ha!”

“Are you completely sure this isn't somebody *else's* essence? It doesn't look much like me.”

The Frenchman became suddenly quite rigid and spoke with a wounded and highly insulted air.

“Sir! It has never been my place to question the judgment of the faeries, and I should dare not say it's yours! Are you refusing such a gift?”

“But—“

“Just take it,” called Abby from the other side of the door. “Humor the old fool. You'd look good with some green on you, anyway.”

“Fine.”

The old man's demeanor quickly returned to joy.

“Ah! Excellent, excellent! Listen to the girl, wise head on her!” He grabbed my ear and lowered his voice. “Incidentally, boy, I've always suspected that one to be in league with the faeries. Hasn't said a word of confession to such, but I wouldn't be at all surprised if she was a sprite herself. Never can be too cer—Ho! Did she reveal anything of the nature to you while she entertained?”

“No, nothing like that. And for the record, there wasn't any real enter—“

“Ah well! Ah well! We'll both find our ways, shan't we?”

So that was that. I was given a room for the night. Tried to convince myself that it was comfortable and that dozing in such a place was not dangerous in the least. When the rain cleared up in the morning, I set off. Never saw the old man again. As a matter of fact, out of sheer curiosity, I returned to the inn sometime later and found it deserted and boarded up. Oh, there was one other thing, one final question I asked the Frenchman before we parted ways.

“So what do I do with my own essence?”

“Whatever you wish!” he said. “Bear it as proudly as you would your family crest! Make it your beacon, your mark on this great world! Or if you get bored with it, you could always sell it.”

The next day I got hungry and wrote up a price tag.

“Did you ever drink the stuff?”

“Would you, Alan?”

“No way.”

“There you go.”

“Huh. You meet all kinds in this city, Pocket. Still...I guess there's a bit of fun there. Mystery of the lunatics and all that.”

“I suppose.”

“So what did the fox boy say when you told him the story?”

“He wasn't listening.”

Kitt tugged at the scrap of paper that hung by a string tied around the fat neck of the bottle.

“FAERIE JUICE – 5 PENCE,” he read aloud. “Huh. You're trying to sell this stuff?”

“Yeah,” I dryly responded. “That's what I was just telling you.”

“How much have you sold?”

“Not a drop.”

“That's too bad. Did you ever notice how it shines in the moonlight?”

“Yeah, I think you mentioned that.”

“Bottle's thick too. Pretty sturdy.”

“I don't know. I guess.”

“I mean, must be, right? Thrown out at us like that and not a crack in it. Bet it could take a few beatings.”

“Sure, probably.”

Kitt's eyes quickly acquired a shimmer that I, to be blunt, did not trust. I figured it was time to make an exit before he involved me in whatever thought was forming in...

“Pocket, could you do me a huge favor?” he asked.

Damn.

“What did you have in mind?” I had no choice but to say.

“I'd like to borrow this.”

“Uh...it's five pence a cup.”

“Not the juice. The bottle.”

“Why?”

“I've got a plan.”

“For what?”

“What do you care?”

“It's my bottle.”

“Trust me.”

“No.”

I'll skip the ten minutes of arguing that ensued and jump to the part where Kitt took off with my bottle despite my direct and notably vocal reservations.

“I'll bring it right back, I swear!” Kitt said, running off down the street. “In an hour, tops! Just stay put here!”

“Wait! Kitt!”

And he was gone. The only sensible choice was to sit still, conserve my warmth, and trust that the thief would keep his word and return promptly with my belonging intact.

Either that or...

“Kitt!” I shouted, running headlong through the dreary streets. “I mean it! Come back!”

The fox boy's shadow stayed consistently just out of reach as I began to get the impression that he was ignoring me. Fine, I decided. If he wanted to play it that way, I'd oblige.

A block of flats soon appeared on the right. Kitt slid between them and into a side alley, leaving me alone with the stars and slush. I stopped for a moment and took a much needed breath as the thief melted quickly away into the shadows. All right, I told myself as I sucked in the air. You can't outrun the little fiend.

So outthink him.

My eyes skimmed over the immediate scenery until coming to focus on one towering structure in particular.

Ah!

I hurried to the building and ran up a side flight of exterior stairs that led to the second floor of rooms. Now, before I carry on, allow me to deviate from the scene just long enough to provide a little context, a little background, so that you, dear audience, will hold a greater understanding of your

humble narrator and his motivations behind what happened next, lest you misperceive him as...you know...an idiot.

I've spent the majority of my adult life on the streets of London. As you've probably guessed, a life lived under my profession, if you can even call it such, is not one of great comfort or extravagance. After all, if corner storytellers were ranked amongst kings, I wouldn't need to find a tender who'll take anecdotes as payment for his wares.

"Nice to know just how greatly you value our friendship, Pocket."

"Oh, come on, Alan. You know better than to think like that. You're a rare breed."

"Hmph. Rare breed of dupe."

That's not to say that I live a life of vagrancy, but I've come very close to it. My only saving grace, I'm afraid, is that I do not come from a low birth. Lowish, maybe. I'm certainly not among Britain's elite, not by any long shot, but my family abroad are of enough standing and financial generosity that I'm able to maintain a little hole in the slums in which to rest my head. Anyhow, what I'm trying to get at is that a life spent out amongst New London's colorful blend of lower citizenry, the beggars and the orphans and the ladies for sale, has left me privy to certain tricks of the cities. For instance, the burn bins.

"Burn bins?"

"You know, Alan. Those covered, roundish bins on the streets."

"Those rubber-coated things the King had manufactured? Is that what those are?"

"I'll explain."

"Please do."

Garbage incinerators. Smallish, portable ones, maybe the size of half a man. One of the cornerstones of Alexander's rebirth of England, after all, was a return to purity. Wellness. Cleanliness. So when his engineers brought about a cleaner way of burning our rubbish he dotted the city with them. From what I hear, they're actually rather ingenious little devices, essentially miniature gas-powered furnaces with a butcher's scale wired into the bottom of them. When the bin fills up, the scale sinks and triggers the furnace, burning the refuse into more fuel to power the device. Pretty clever, eh? Self-regulating. Anyhow, one day, a few equally-clever bums figured out that you can deactivate the whole thing with one clean smack against the back of the bin, rattling the parts out of their natural order. So say you discard something, let's say something still fairly edible, it doesn't burn up. Just sits there. And word spread. Before long, many who call the streets home started doing this, bashing the bins and then lying in wait for some unsuspecting bloke to toss a free meal down the hole. "The People's Banquets," they call them.

"All right, granted, that is a resourceful trick, but what does any of this have to do with you and that cutpurse?"

"Yes, yes, I'm getting back to that, Alan."

Forgive me for digressing, but my point is simply that I've learned a few things in my travels, and as I found myself giving chase on that cold night, I decided to put what I've learned into action. The possibility that the pickpocket I was after might himself know a few tricks didn't cross my mind in that heated moment. What had caught my eye about the building I was now ascending was its state of repair. Many of Old London's preexisting edifices, as I'm sure you know, survived the periodic burnings and general corrosion of the debilitating Black Period, and when the city was rebuilt, several of these buildings were reinforced with thick metal plates at key structure points, plates that were attached with very large bolts that dug deep into the stone. Big bolts leave big boltheads, most the size

of a fist, and it wasn't long before flocks of street urchins began using the boltheads as makeshift handles, climbing their way all over the city.

Children are undeniably resourceful.

I moved from the outside stairwell to a balcony on the second floor. There I carefully hopped a railing, steadied my feet upon two thick boltheads, and wrapped my palms over a higher pair just within reach. Then, gripping the rusty knobs tightly, I began to climb, cautiously but quickly to the top. I couldn't help but smile a little. This corner of London was a bit crowded, and I knew that it would take Kitt a considerable amount of time to weave through the tight and cluttered alleyways that snaked between buildings. Obviously, in doing so, he had hoped to slow me down long enough that I'd lose his trail, but I couldn't imagine that he'd expect me to start hopping roofs for a shortcut.

"Hey Pocket," Kitt said, sitting crosslegged on the next roof over, my pilfered bottle resting in his lap.

Or maybe he would.

I stopped climbing and gritted my teeth before casting my eyes his way.

"How?" I muttered dumbly. "How did you get up there?"

"Oh, you know. Tricks. Don't wanna boast, but I'm pretty good at working these streets."

"I...can see that."

"Thanks. Listen, Pocket. Do you know why only children climb boltheads?"

"Is this a riddle?"

"No."

With a nasty, scraping sound, I felt my foot scuff and slip off of the bolt under my boot.

"Damn it!" I swore, quickly shifting my weight.

"It's a size issue," Kitt politely pointed out. "These bolts, they get a little smaller the higher you climb. Biggest ones are at the base. It's a subtle thing. See, children are small. No problem. Their little feet keep on climbing. But take a man of your...how old are you, Pocket?"

My other foot began to slide. “Twenty-seven.”

“Take a twenty-seven-year-old like you, your feet are going to be considerably bigger, so it presents a potential problem.”

“What?!?”

“See? You didn’t even notice, did you? It’s all right. No one really considers size when they try what you’re trying because the bolts at the bottom look so thick and sturdy and tight.”

As if on cue, I felt myself slip. I panicked and grabbed at the metal paneling itself for support. There was a crack between two nearby panels and I jammed my fingers inside, clutching the metal.

“Kitt! Could you—“

“Wait, are you going to say something comical right now? Something like, ‘if you aren’t terribly too busy at the moment for a little—“”

“Just help me off of here before I fall! And trust me, if the drop doesn’t kill me, I *will* kill you!”

“Oh. So you’re not going to say anything witty?”

“Kitt!”

“It’s just that you said you were a bard.”

I started to tilt backward. To my surprise, the metal plating in my grasp started to bend. It apparently wasn’t as thick as I had assumed. “Kitt! *Now!*”

“Okay, okay. You see that clothesline below?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s one hanging just over the second floor. Push yourself off of the wall and snatch the line on your way down.”

“Are you an idiot?!? I can’t catch that! And even if I did, it’d never hold my weight! I’d be better off hanging on here!”

“Trust me.”

“But—”

“Trust me.”

My situation was becoming increasingly wobbly. I had little choice.

“I promise,” Kitt said.

“All right.” I took a deep breath and held it in my lungs. Then, as instructed, I pressed my heels to the wall, pushed away from the metal, and dropped quickly through the air. The clothesline. I reached out and miraculously snagged it with my right palm. I bounced for a moment, then quickly grabbed on and held tight with both hands, my knuckles clenched. Slowly, my body stopped bobbing and I allowed myself to exhale. I couldn't believe it. The little thief was right.

“Kitt!” I announced, dangling in the air. “I...I've got it!”

“Well done, Pocket! Great catch!”

“Thank you. I think...I think I can start working my way...wait...Kitt, this is only twine, isn't—“

Snap. The strings broke under my weight and I fell one story into the cold snow. A sickly chill invaded my senses as I collapsed upon the wet cushioning and rolled upon my back.

A few moments later, Kitt was hovering over me with a satisfied smile.

“You're welcome,” he said.

And a few moments after that, my hands were at his throat.

“What—hey! Let go! What are you doing?!?” he shouted through a panicked fit of coughs.

“Trust me,' you said!”

“You survived the fall without getting the wind knocked out of you! That wouldn't have happened if you hadn't bobbed a moment on the clothesline!”

“You knew it was going to break?!? And you didn't tell me?!?”

“I figured if I did, you wouldn't listen to me!”

“Of course I wouldn't!”

“Then...I...” he gagged. “I accept your apology. Pocket—cough—could you please let go of my throat?”

I obliged. I think because he said “please.” Manners are in a steep decline.

“Where's my bottle?” I asked, sitting up rigidly.

“Right here, right here.” He held it up, playing with the shine of the moon once more.

“Fine. Give it to me.”

“You said I could borrow it.”

“I said, upon my funeral, you could borrow it.”

“Oh,” Kitt said, scratching his hair under his cap. “I thought you were joking.”

“Well, I wasn't.”

“Oh.”

“Right.”

“Can I borrow it anyway?”

I was tired of arguing, so I sighed. Then I realized that I was just as tired of sighing.

“How long would you need it?” I asked, succumbing to exhaustion.

“Just a moment, Pocket. We're already here.”

Ignoring every piece of logic and better judgment that filled my rattled form, I picked myself up and dragged my feet to the end of the building. Behind it was a clearing, and beyond that, the largest timepiece I have ever seen.

“So what, Pocket, you let the fox get a grab on your bottle *again*?”

“Afraid so. Heh, listen to me, Alan. I'm trying to paint myself here as protagonist, but it seems that this story's quickly forming with me as its fool.”

“There are worse roles than the fool. God knows that this life's in dire need of comedy.”

“I suppose. If only...”

“If only what?”

“If only what I found within the walls behind that giant’s clock didn't rob me of my ability to clown.”

“Ah-ha! Now we are getting places! What did you find? Some unspeakable terror?”

“No terror, Alan. Only beauty.”

“Ah, beauty...even more troublesome.”

“You don't know the half of it.”

Chapter Three

Watch Shop

Kitt slapped my shoulder as I stood there, staring at the giant advert, the oversized paper clock face that was propped against the side of the building.

“Just a moment,” he said. “I promise you.”

I walked up to the front door of the establishment and found boards nailed excessively across it. I couldn't even get a firm grip on the doorknob or read the entire nameplate below its peephole.

“Mister Ro...something, something,” I mumbled, squinting at the letters before me.

“Licensed....something...tchmaker.”

“Watchmaker,” Kitt pointed out. “It's a watch shop.”

That would, I suppose, explain the giant timepiece.

“A watch shop?” I repeated. “What do you care about a watch shop? And look, it's boarded up.”

“Yeah, that's the idea.”

“Eh?”

“Come on, Pocket. Think a little.”

I did and soon found Kitt's implication. I also found anger and only slightly suppressed it.

“You mean to *rob* this place?!?”

“A little, yes,” he nodded, inhumanly casual. “What's the problem?”

“What's the *problem*?!? Are you serious?”

“I told you I was a thief.”

“I know.”

“You kept bringing it up.”

“I know, but...I figured you were picking money off of people on the street for food or whatnot. Essentials.”

“That’s exactly what I do. Nab a few pounds here or there. Essentials.”

“Well, picking pockets is slightly different from this.”

“How?”

“How is it different from breaking into a place of business and cleaning out its valuables?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s *very* different.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not sure that I agree.”

Call me vain, but I have often thought that this world would turn just a little more smoothly if people refrained from arguing so often with me and instead took comfort in the assumption that my opinion is more than likely the correct one.

“Is that so? So you’re a pillar of ultimate wisdom now?”

“No, Alan. Not a pillar of ultimate wisdom. But not a pillar of complete stupidity.”

“Forgive my doubt.”

“Done. Shall I forgive your sarcasm as well?”

“No. I’m pretty proud of that.”

I was having a hard time convincing Kitt of my point of view, which made me nervous as he still had his hands on my bottle.

“The way I see it,” Kitt began. “Breaking into a watch shop is by far the lesser sin.”

“How do you figure?”

“It’s abandoned, right? That means whatever was left inside was left behind. There’s no one around to miss it. I feel much guiltier about the money I take from living people.”

“I don't know. What makes you so sure there's anything in there worth snatching? Even if you don't get caught, it's just a closed-up watch shop.”

“Heh. You don't read the papers, do you?”

“Not often.”

“Well, I do. *Quite* often. Usually the day after, when they throw out the unsold editions. Keeps my interest. Politics, humor. I'm especially fond of the obituaries.”

“So?”

“So, every so often, they'll announce the closing or abandoning of a home or business as a result of an occupant's death.” He pointed up at the giant clock face. “Understand? The old man who owned this shop recently passed. Paper said he lived in the upper quarters of the buildings, barely left the place. And since he had no living relatives or friends to speak of, not even a business partner or apprentice, the shop naturally shut down when he did. The King himself orders the doors sealed with the deceased's personal effects inside. Sort of a watchmaker's tomb. Sad.”

“The *King*? That doesn't make sense. What does he care about a dead old man and his corner shop?”

“I don't know. Probably some political tactic.”

“Tactic?”

“Sure. Build morale and win over some of the more persistent doubters among his people. You know, put on a bit of a show of compassion over some forgotten merchant that nobody never really noticed, cement that ever-fragile image of the People's King, the man who cares for all.”

“You have a lively imagination. Do you know that?”

“And all the while, the city's left with a neatly undisturbed collection of possible treasures, and I intend to make good use of them. Get it?”

“Almost. One question.”

“What?”

“Why do you need my bottle?”

Kitt grinned.

“To do this.”

He took a running start around the front of the building and threw my bottle into the air. The spherical lump of corked glass hooked and arched and punched through a glass window that stood on the higher floor. The shattering clash of the windowpane shook the quiet night for a moment with its clatter before returning the scene again to a chilled silence.

I was boiling.

Glaring wildly at Kitt, I instinctively made a fist.

“What?” he said innocently. “You're mad again.”

“What the hell did you do *that* for?!?”

“Oh. See, that's why I needed it.”

“Because you wanted a *projectile*?!?”

“I couldn't find a big enough rock. I have this sorta wrench thing tucked away in my jacket, but I wasn't sure it was solid enough to break the glass.”

“You could've tried!”

“Anyhow, your bottle felt sturdy. It's probably okay up there.”

I couldn't find the words. I just couldn't. I think Kitt took this as an opportunity because he quickly started moving again.

“Wha...where are you going now?” I demanded to know.

“Hold on a moment!”

He began tearing at a pile of discarded debris that was sitting on one side of the watch shop. Mostly rotting, wooden crates. Garbage. He quickly pulled and pushed, moved and stacked. Before I knew it, he had constructed a teetering tower against the front of the building, and I could guess his motivations.

“You'll kill yourself on that pile,” I said. Kitt chewed on his cheek and put his hands to the base crate. He pushed and punched against it. The makeshift ladder of trash wobbled but remained intact. Kitt seemed satisfied at this and smiled. With gusto, he lifted his foot and ascended the first box.

“Watch this,” he said.

“Look, is this really necessary? You could be arrested.”

Worse than that, *I* could. Accessory to a crime.

“You want your bottle back, don't you?” Kitt said, climbing to the next crate.

“It's still pointless,” I said, crossing my arms and watching him cling to the stack. “This mess isn't even tall enough to reach that window. Not by a long shot.”

Kitt snickered and kept climbing. When he reached the top, he stood and centered his balance. To his immediate right stood the giant advert. Gently, he reached out and clutched the oversized minute hand.

“You don't mean to climb that, do you?” I called out to him.

“Can't think of a better way,” he called back.

“But it's paper.”

“Reinforced paper.”

“You'll go through it like a stone.”

“Re-in-forced.”

“Fine. By all means, run the clock. I'm interested to see how fast you'll fall.”

He ignored this and leaned his weight toward the minute hand. The paper clock was set to 9:35, meaning that in order to scale its face, Kitt would have to inch his way up the slanted minute hand then walk right-to-left across the hour hand. At the end of the hand, he'd have to make a solid jump into the broken window. A single misfire and he'd most likely be sent falling to the earth. I began to feel a twinge of concern.

“Hey, fox,” I called up.

“Yes?”

“You don't need to do this.”

“I don't? Well, thanks for letting me know.”

He hopped from the pile of trash onto the minute hand and clutched on tight. As he jumped, his left heel kicked back against the rickety top crate and the pile came tumbling down. I frowned, but Kitt just looked down at the debris and smiled at me.

“Point of no return!” he announced.

As I've said, the fox is a headache.

Kitt slowly gripped the sides of the minute hand and moved upward, slowly but playfully. When he reached the center of the clock face, he twisted his body and threw a leg over the hour hand like a child reaching a tree branch. He pulled himself up and was soon standing on the hand. He gave a triumphant wave down to me.

Headache.

“All right,” I said to him. “Enough showing off. Just tiptoe your way over and...”

Kitt took a running sprint down the thin black line, making the paper shape bounce under his feet. As he reached the end he took a diver's leap headfirst into the air and into the broken window. As he vanished, I heard a loud crash.

“Kitt?” I shouted up. “You okay in there?”

He didn't hear me so I frowned and pushed my back against the front door. I was cold and had little to do now except wait. And I hate waiting.

Minutes rolled by and I became impatient. With luck, I was able to eventually pry the nailed boards off of the front door. Little good it did me, for the door behind was solid and wouldn't budge.

“Kitt, are you back there?” I shouted into the door. Nothing. I should have left, just bid my bottle of essence goodbye and take off for someplace warmer. Let the little thief enjoy his dusty watch shop.

I should have melted off into the night somewhere.

Instead, I began banging a rather angry symphony on the front door, a stupid move considering what happened next.

“Evening, son,” said a man in blue, coming up the way.

“Oh!” I replied, pivoting quickly around. “Evening...constable...”

The front door started to open behind me. I put my heel to it and forced it shut before the officer could notice.

“Can I help you?” I asked, a picture of innocence with a boot to the door.

“It’s late out,” the man said, coming within arm's length.

“Yes. It is. Very.”

“Very,” he repeated. “And this place, this—”

“Watch shop.”

“Yes, thank you, this watch shop, it's very closed.”

“Certainly seems to be.”

“But you were knocking.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You were knocking.”

“Was I?”

“You were.”

“Oh, right, sure. No, not knocking. Merely drumming my fingers. Trying to beat a little warmth into them in this cold. I've worn the tips of my gloves down to holes, you see.”

I showed him my bare fingers. He rubbed his chin for a moment then made a quiet sound I didn't like at all.

“What's your name, son?” he asked, raising his eyes.

“Will...well...uh, that is....”

“I’m sorry?”

“Christopher,” I said. No point in dragging out the proper monikers at this time of the night. It was far too late for introductions and even farther for telling the truth.

“Christopher what?”

“What?”

“Christopher *what?*”

“Christopher what...watt....yes.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Watt. Christopher Watt. W-A-T-T.”

“Watt?”

“I am. Nice to meet you.”

“Of course,” he said in a dry tone. “Mister Watt, do you realize that you are knocking on a condemned building?”

“Oh? I suppose that explains all the boarded doors and windows.”

“Yes...”

“Well, you know, like I said, just trying to keep my fingers warm.”

“Right...Mister Watt, in the future may I suggest you knock your fingers on a street lamp? Abandoned buildings attract thieves and bums. You wouldn’t want one of those on your heels.”

“No, I certainly wouldn’t.”

“Right, well, good evening then, Mister Watt...Watt...tell me, are you by any chance related to the Scot?”

“The Scot, sir?”

“James Watt, son. The inventor. Steam engine.”

“Yes! Yes, I...I am...James is, um, my father.”

“Is he?”

“That's right...my father...the...Scot.”

And to my surprise, the officer chuckled and slapped me on the shoulder.

“Good man, your papa,” he said. “Went and birthed the bloodline of this city, you know?”

“Suppose he did.”

“Sound a little prouder. Must feel like your very own city, boy.”

“At times.”

Another laugh. “Well then, Christopher, son of James, you have a safe night.”

“And you sir.”

Go away, I remember shouting in my head at the man in blue. For God's sake, go away before—

“Let me guess, Pocket. Something fantastic happened.”

“No, not at all. He tipped his hat at me and went about his way.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah...well...not every bit of the story can be fantastical.”

“Mmm...quick thinking with that Christopher talk though.”

“Not really. It's my middle name.”

“Mmm...”

“Hang on. It gets more interesting.”

“You've told me that before.”

I felt myself go weak and I crumpled against the building, my heartbeat a punching drum. There was another push at the door. In a moment it was open, swinging on his hinges. Kitt strolled out.

“There we go!” he grinned. “Up and back and not a scratch on me. Hey, was that the police?”

Snow began to fall again.

“Kid's a pain, isn't he?”

“He's a good enough sort, Alan. He's just...”

“Inconvenient?”

“Heh. Perpetually so.”

Kitt quickly ran back into the building as I stood blanketed in snowflakes. I caught the front door before it closed again and whistled at him. He stopped in his tracks and came back over.

“What's the problem? You're letting snow in.”

“Where's my bottle?”

“Oh, I dunno. Probably still upstairs. Lotta junk up there. I didn't check.”

“Kitt!”

“What? It's up there. Come up and look while I take care of things.”

“I'm not going to rummage through an abandoned building while you rob it. Are you mad?”

“Fine. Stay outside. Be wet and cold.”

The fox scurried away. Keeping the door cracked with my right foot, I decided to stick to my morals and wait in the snow.

“Hmph...not so cold...”

I rubbed my fingers.

“Not worth it. Not for a silly bottle of green goop.”

The snow fell harder.

“You're too nostalgic, Pocket. So you lose your essence. So what? You give it up at bar tops all the time.”

I laughed. The snow began feeling wetter. I realized it was turning into rain. Soon I was standing in a faint shower.

“Hmph...still not that cold...”

Wet. I rubbed my fingers again and shoved them in my pockets. I smiled a sarcastic grin as I remembered what I possessed. I pulled a long, purple cigarette, one of four, from inside and put it between my lips.

“Okay, old man. Let's look for a little magic.”

I had a match. Tried twice in the thin rain to light it. Nothing. I got lucky on the third strike, the rain probably stopped for a second, and a small flame sparked up. I put the match to my mouth...and...splash. A raindrop hit the light, killing it. I flicked the match and crumbled the cigarette in my hand. For some reason, it irritated me. Don't ask me why. It was late.

The rain got harder. I peeked into the slit behind the door.

“Hmph...Don't know what you hope to find in a watch shop!” I shouted in at Kitt. I don't think he heard me.

Fine, I at last conceded, shaking the water off of my coat. It's not like I had anything more interesting to do.

I left the rain behind and walked into the former home of a watchmaker. Wet rain outside made the snow mushy and buried a purple paper wad in the dark.

The front room of the watch shop was uninspiring to say the least. I apologize, dear reader, if after sitting through the previous set-up of breaking into a deceased craftman's residence, you were anticipating a revelation of unthinkable treasures and mind-melting wonders. I'll admit that I too was half-expecting a trove of pricey pilferables when I entered the room. As I brushed my shoulder through the doorway, I was sure I'd see Kitt with sparks in his eyes, rainbows over his head, and pound signs in his pupils. I thought I'd see the plucky thief, an image of heartfelt yet unscrupulous youth, filling his bottomless pockets with a dead man's riches.

I had, it seems, wrongly assumed. (Fear not, though, reader. The great wonder is coming later.)

The room was stale, which was to be expected seeing as it had been boarded up. It looked...well...much like a watch shop. Very clinical, very drab. Dusty desktops. Papers. Unfinished contracts with Tuesday appointments. Scribbles. A random tool here and there. Some sort of tiny wrench that I assumed was for adjusting the very small mechanisms of clockwork.

And on the floor was Kitt, head back against a dirty wooden case of papers. He had no theatrical gleam about him, no young-ragamuffin-of-the-city-out-to-steal-his-way-towards-normalcy.

“Hey,” he said to me.

“Hey.”

“What's the matter?”

“What?”

“You're frowning at me.”

“Oh...” I hadn't been aware. “Why aren't you...eh...”

“Stealing? Helping myself? Quick fingers? Sweat of the brow?”

“Stuffing pockets, yeah.”

He didn't smile. I thought it strange.

“You see anything worth stealing?” he muttered.

“Not really, Kitt.”

“Okay, then.”

Some silence passed between us.

“Uh...” I said at last. “I mean, hey...”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I mean, look. At least you won't land on the King's bad list.” I followed it with a weak laugh and expected a follow-up joke from his end of the room.

“The King is a figurehead.”

“Wha...what?”

“Did you know no one's ever proved his bloodline, Pocket?”

“Hey...come now...don't you think that's a little harsh, maybe?”

“Maybe.”

More silence came and did a stupid dance.

“You have some proof of this?” I asked, if only to force conversation forward.

“I listen to things.”

“Oh...All right...well...if you're not going to look around we should probably—“

“The upstairs is junk.”

“Okay...”

“But your bottle's up there.”

I looked him over. He seemed in that instant a different man, altogether foreign to me and in a suddenly nasty mood to boot.

“Uh...thanks,” I said. “You going to be all right?”

“Yeah. Just gunna sit here 'til I warm up, is all.”

“Sure. I'll...uh...be in earshot.”

“I know.”

“All, um, all right,” I awkwardly replied, nodding for effect.

I took my eyes off him and found the staircase. Again, you are probably expecting me to say that I found it warped, gnarled, and twisted into a mourner's path, every step met with the haunting echo of some new creak or moan. To your possible dismay, I admit that in all actuality it was in rather good condition and even maintained a slight polish beneath the very thin layer of silver dust.

Just to the top, I remember thinking to myself. I'd stick my head in the room above long enough to spot my faerie juice and then promptly leave.

A minister once told me that a promise is the hardest thing in the world to keep. A drunk once said a woman. A beggar once said pretty gold and a lonely sailor, good company.

Plans and well-meantings, I would soon be considering.

I pushed a heavy door at the top of the stairs and stretched my neck into a not-so-dark room. No apparent lamps or candlework, yet I could see with absolute ease. The moonlight was enthusiastically beaming in, I realized, through a clean hole cracked into an otherwise grimy window.

A broken window.

Brandishing a rather green-goop-bottle-sized hole.

I knew I was in the right spot.

Kitt's description of the room as “junk” was a grand understatement. To this day, I have no inkling as to what color the carpet beneath my feet and the sea of scrap may have been. Loose screws, soiled napkins, broken clock-bodies, simple machines, pillows, scraps of clothing, even bits of food littered the place. I made some clever joke about it to myself that I forget at the moment but would've split your side, believe me.

I waded my way through the rusty ocean, nearly lost my balance, and caught myself against a ceiling beam with a bit of paper tacked to it. Pushing against the beam to regain my balance, I accidentally ripped the paper scrap from the wall and held it clenched in my hand.

“What did it say?”

“What?”

“The scrap.”

“Oh...uh...something about the rhythm of a clock and a symphony and my love.”

“*Your* love?”

“No, not my love, Alan. Don't be loony. Whoever wrote it...it was, let me think...kind of a feminine script, the way the L's were looped...and it was kinda formerly perfumey.”

“How can something be formerly perfumey?”

“Hard to explain. See...it’s as if, well, when you put your nose to it, you don’t smell the sweet scent of...um...”

“Young love?”

“Sure, the scent of young love. But the oily spotting around the paper suggests that it had once been doused, the way the adverts hanging in a perfumist’s are.”

“Hmmm...you realize, Pocket, that it’s possible you were only reading mildew spots.”

“Sigh...well, how do you want the spots to be remembered? I’m not revising this story after—“

“Perfume is fine. Perfume is fine.”

“Good.”

I held the cherished scrap in my hand, the once scented paper bereft of any fragrance. A lover’s note. A few humble phrases I would never forget.

“Yeah, Pocket. You just said though that you don’t remem—”

Softly, I put it aside and continued through the mess. I scanned the room for the shape of my bottle, only to see more scattered half-gadgetry. I nearly stepped into a kettle that was wired to what looked like a mousetrap. This watchmaker, I decided, must’ve gone a little eccentric in his later years.

A few steps more and I saw a glassy spark, the very same kind of glassy spark my bottle regularly made under favorable starlight. I grabbed at the shine.

Oh.

Damn.

I held in my hands what appeared to be a prototypal music box. It was encased in a thick shell that reflected the shine that had caught my attention. I grumbled something stupid and dropped it. The jolt knocked unexpected life into the relic, and the damned thing started to serenade me.

“It was that woman singer, Alan. The one you're so fond of.”

“I'm fond of a few. You mean, Miss Tiffany....Tiffany Chandler?”

“No, no. The one you mentioned at the Rail the night I got thrown out of it.”

“Ah. Lady Jay.”

“Right.”

“I see. What song was she singing?”

“I don't know, but she wouldn't leave me alone with it.”

I cursed under my breath and pushed forward through the cluttered room. Behind me, the music box sang like a songbird looking to peck my eyes out.

“I think I went to bed too early, far too early for a dream...”

Not a bad line. I took a few more steps.

“Hang on, Pocket. You've got the wrong words.”

“What?”

“I recognize the song. ‘Far Too Early.’ A classic. And you're doing the wrong lyrics.”

“You sure?”

“Completely.”

“Sigh...does it really matter in the story?”

“Does to me. I'm a fan.”

“Well, I'm trying, Alan. I wasn't paying that close of attention at the time and—”

“Wait. How about this? I'll sing it for you.”

“I'm sorry?”

“You didn't know I sing, did you, Pocket?”

“No.”

“Well, now's your chance. Go on. Keep talking and I'll fill in with the appropriate musicmaking.”

“I don't know. I don't generally work with other entertainers.”

“Go on, go on. You'll love this.”

“Eh...”

I cursed under my breath and pushed forward through the cluttered room. Behind me, the music box sang like a songbird looking to peck my eyes out.

“I think I'm singing this too early, far too early for this tune.”

Not a bad line. I took a few more steps.

“But I find myself here crawling, searching beneath an autumn moon.”

Step, step, tiptoe, step. Foot in an electric bedpan. Shake. Step.

“And I've got my worst foot forward, yes, this time, I'm on my own.

Spun and shaken, I am looking, waiting just to be shown.”

Then I saw it, sitting between a...I'm not sure...let's say a gyroscopic molecular proto-stabilizing machine and a beautiful, leather-bound book, its hide only slightly worn and its pages only slightly yellowed. Anyway, cradled between the two was my bottle, intact and without a single visible scratch. I was a little surprised and, for some reason, a little proud.

I carefully dusted it off and admired it.

“I found a hole deep in my pocket, and what I put in there is gone.

Because of you I am down crawling, and I've been down here far too long.”

Huh. I don't know if it was the lighting, or lack thereof, in the room, or the sea of interrupted progress I had swam through to get here, but in the moment, my bottle seemed suddenly...plain.

I really don't know why.

Well, I told myself. I can adapt to this evolving age, can't I? Of course. I am perfectly able to exist in Alexander's grand Britain.

Progress. That was the key. So...

I rummaged around in the nearest lump of metal and cut myself. Ouch. But I am nothing if not persistent. I found a broken piece of...something. Perhaps an old birdcage or a candle tin or a lantern bottom. I bent it into a makeshift bottle holder and lodged my collection of green into it. There was also some rough leather belting, probably from one of those convenient conveyor contraptions the papers are always promoting. I worked it into a sling and tied it through the bottle's small handle loop. Wearing the faerie juice proudly at my side like a paperboy's satchel, I smiled. I am William Christopher Pocket! Modern man!

I modernly sneezed and waded back over the junk.

"And I think it's far too early to admit that I have lost.

I'm a fool and you are lovely, so I'll search at every cost.

You're a beauty on a string, hiding somewhere in the night.

And I need you hanging on me, so I...ah...so I....sorry, Pocket. Can't recall the rest."

I strolled down the stairs and into the front room, repeating the song to myself.

"...can't recall the rest," I sang.

"What's that, Pocket?" Kitt said, still sitting on the floor.

"Nothing. Just some music I picked up. What are you doing?"

He held up a mess of papers. "Checking this bin."

"I found my bottle."

"I see that. What'd you do to it?"

"Just...you know...fashioned it to this, eh, bit of metal and strap. Keeping with the times."

"How's that keeping with the times?"

I thought about it. "I guess I don't know."

Kitt laughed and got up. "You're a strange one, Pocket."

I took in a mouthful of stale air and made a show of moving to the front door. Kitt got the idea.

"Leaving?"

"I suppose so. Nothing personal. Breaking and entering isn't really my kind of sport."

"Yeah. I understand."

I pushed the door. Still raining.

"Don't you want to wait for that to clear up?" Kitt asked. I counted drops on a windowpane, which turned out to be much like counting beer foam bubbles, except without the entertainment of making the bubbles disappear.

"Maybe," I said.

"It's your call."

Eleven window drops. Twelve window drops.

I pulled an old wooden chair from behind a corner desk and sat down. Kitt returned to the floor.

"So..." I said.

"So."

Twenty-three window drops. I let myself laugh.

"Pretty awkward, isn't this?"

"Yeah," Kitt agreed. "Why is that?"

"I really don't know." I leaned forward, took off my hat, and scratched the mess of dark hair beneath. "It's been a rather strange night for me."

"I'm sorry."

"I wasn't blaming you."

"Oh."

Thirty-nine drops. Kitt's mouth remained shut.

"I've got to ask, Kitt. The outfit."

“Hmm?”

“The whole bombardier look. Not exactly subtle for a thief. What's the story there?”

And then, without warning, the crafty, animated smile crept back onto his face.

“Bombardier,” he repeated. “I like that. I like that a lot.”

Not the response I was expecting.

“So...” I said, trying to prompt a story.

“Did you hear something?” he said instead.

I heard the silence of Kitt not answering my question. It was roaring.

“No,” I answered dryly.

“I'm serious, listen.”

I did. Sure, some light squeakiness beneath the floor. Sounded like it was coming from the basement. Probably a loose hinge on a window or door or something. I made the monumental mistake of telling this to Kitt.

A monumental gleam burst from his eyes like fire. The fox had returned.

“A basement,” he repeated.

I have never considered myself to be a man of proper philosophy, so should the following musings strike you as unnatural or maddening, please ignore them. But there are those moments, I believe, in this existence, where one can nearly see the unfolding of events in time by trying very hard not to. Kind of a gained sense. There are also, I believe, moments within moments where one can just barely deduce the splitting of a metaphysical road. The changes in time, the forking. Possibility. Out of the corner of his eye, one might see a very tired Will Pocket rise from his chair while another, equally likely, Will Pocket chooses to remain seated and humor the ramblings of Kitt Sunner. One could then see the first Will Pocket mumble goodbyes and head out into the night rain while the second scratches his head and bites his tongue at Kitt's proposal of a “grand exploration.” At the biting of the tongue, a third Will Pocket might appear, choosing to withhold reservations while the second is loudly

complaining and the responsible first is half a mile away, looking for safer shelter. Minutes into this supposed possibility, the second Will Pocket throws his hands up in frustration, tells off the thief, and turns his back as Kitt begins pulling at floorboards. The third Pocket, passively waiting for the rain to clear, offers no vocal objection and finds himself somehow holding up pieces of carpet while his companion checks the floor. Time presses on and the enthusiasm of Kitt Sunner discovers a half-broken handle screwed into a square cut of wood beneath a moved workbench. It is at this moment that the third Will Pocket begins seriously wishing that his choices would have led him to become either the firm-resolved second, his hands at last clean of this whole affair, the first, moving further and further away, or a previously unmentioned fourth Pocket who had the divine intuition not to follow Kitt across the city in the first place.

This however was not the case.

“Give me a hand with this,” Kitt said, twisting his fingers around the handle. “It's hard to get a good grip.”

“Looks like someone took a hammer to it.”

“Yeah, looks like. Probably so the room won't be disturbed.”

“So let's not disturb it.”

“That's not very adventurous of you, Pocket.”

“I'm not—”

“I've got a better idea. Let's jump on it.”

I closed my eyes and counted out a hundred alternative progressions of reality. I was happy to learn that none featured a Pocket even remotely willing to hop up and down on an unknown door.

“Jump on it yourself.”

“Fine,” Kitt said, and did exactly that.

“Getting anywhere?” I asked.

“I don't know. Can I borrow your bottle again?”

“It's not magic. Going through old windows is one thing, but wood—“

“Hold on! It's moving!” Kitt jumped again and sank about an inch into the floor.

“You'd better be careful,” I advised.

“I'll be fine. Watch this.” He lifted a knee to his chest and then slammed it back down. The wood instantly splintered and Kitt's leg went through the door.

“Wow,” I said. “Impressive.”

“Don't be too impressed. I didn't mean to do that.”

“Oh. You need a hand?”

“There's...something under me. Feels like a step. I think there's a staircase down there. Can you help me up?”

“I just offered to—“

“Here.”

Kitt offered his hand and, clutching his arm, I pulled him up and out of the floor. A large chunk of wood came with Kitt's leg. He shook it off and bent over the hole he had made.

“It's dark down there,” he said.

“Shouldn't it be?”

Kitt pulled at splinters until he had broken most of the door away. He then took his first, cautious step into the darkness.

“You'd better be careful,” I repeated.

“Sure, sure.” He took another two steps. His chest was half-sunk into the black. “In case the rain stops before I come back up, it was good to meet you, Pocket.”

“You too,” I said, unsure if I was being honest.

Kitt grinned and disappeared. The sound of footsteps faded into silence.

And that should have been the end of it all. But once again...

A metallic clang came crashing from the hole, the noise echoing up into the front room.

“Hey fox!” I shouted. “You all right down there?”

Silence.

“Kitt?” I called out.

Silence.

“If you can hear me, make some noise.”

Nothing. Curious.

“I'm sure he's fine,” I said aloud, giving Kitt the opportunity to correct me if that wasn't the case. He didn't correct me. I waited. And waited. In silence. And was satisfied.

Then I climbed down the hole in the floor.

It was dark.

I moved slower with each step, finding my footing on a stair before moving to the next. By the time I inched to the bottom of the staircase, I couldn't see a thing except the fading pool of natural light from the room above. I pressed my hands against a nearby wall and began feeling my way deeper into the basement.

“Kitt,” I called once more, this time whispering. I'm not sure why I was whispering, but it felt appropriate.

I continued moving, running my fingers against the wall until I hit a corner. Turning at the corner, I followed another wall and traced it until I came to an attached shelf.

On the shelf was something that felt like a lantern. I felt around for matches but found none. Frustrated, I dropped the object in my hand back onto the shelf. Something clicked, and a bright, blue-white flame ignited from the device, casting a small circle of light. Most unusual. The object, a craftwork of polished metal, did indeed resemble a common lantern with its cover removed. The bottom of the device was dipped in formed rubber and two small coils ran from the base up and inside to the source of the flame. Retaking the device and holding it close to my person, I could distinctly smell the burn of gas.

Gaslight? Without striking a match?

Inspecting the device, I found a large button on the back of it. I pressed it, the light went out. I pressed it again, the light returned. Fantastic!

“Kitt! Kitt, you have to see this!”

I held up the gaslight lantern and marveled at it. It cast a glow onto the shelf and, looking up, I could see that it was filled with dozens of equally-incredible devices, all clad in the most beautifully-shining metals I have ever seen.

There was also a framed photograph.

“What?” said Kitt, standing directly behind me.

I dropped the lantern with a yelp and a clatter. The room once more returned to darkness.

“Why'd you do that?” Kitt asked.

“Why did you sneak up on me?!?” I shouted back.

“You told me I had to see something!”

“Well, you could've given me...sigh. I dropped a lantern. Help me find it.”

“Oh. Sure. I think it's right here.”

The blue-white light sparked on. Kitt stood before me with the device.

“Wow,” he said. “How's it doing that?”

“Don't know.”

“Pretty strange.”

“Quick work, by the way,” I commented.

“I have good eyes in the dark. Comes in handy.” He handed me the lantern. “Just watch.”

“No. Kitt!”

And once again he was gone. I didn't follow. Instead I put my gaze back to the shelf and instantly locked eyes with a monochromatic pair staring back from the photograph.

They were a woman's eyes.

The woman was young and beautiful, which is reason enough for me to frame her picture, but she was also clearly in love. A man stood next to her, a good ten to fifteen years her senior. He held her tiny hands in his and both shared a smile I would pay any sum to own and wear. He was a good-sized man, large-framed, small eyes, but such a sharp fire in them. The lovers were standing on a pier before a docked ship, and a delicate watch chain hung out of both of their coats' pockets.

Watch. There was one on the shelf. It sat quietly as it needed to be wound. It had no chain.

I looked back at the couple by the water and felt instantly guilty. I think it was the way they were staring at me.

“Sorry,” I said to them both, rather stupidly. “I don't usually break into places. I mean, I don't at all. This is...I suppose...my first.”

I laughed. The man seemed to tighten his grip on the woman's hands. A protective move.

“Anyway, I apologize. I'll...uh...return the lantern. When I retrieve my friend. He's just...”

Something made of glass shattered in the distance.

“...robbing you blind.” I looked at the gentleman's bristled eyebrows. “Anyway, I apologize. Don't miss your ship.”

The time seemed right to move on, so I moved on. Lantern in hand, I continued down the wall. It was still dark, but the glowing patch of portable light allowed me at least to see where my feet were falling. Great snaking shadows were cast on the wall, some large and hulking, others small and mechanical, but all completely fascinating to the young man walking in the dark. So fascinating, in fact, that I didn't see the long-handled lever protruding up from the floor until I had walked into it. I nearly tripped, and then, a little annoyed at my carelessness, regained composure.

Shining the light over the mechanism, I could see that it was made out of the same shiny metal as the lantern and many of the other unusual objects I had nearly walked into in the shadows. Now, I have read and have been told enough stories in my life to know that when a man finds an unusual lever lurking in the darkness, he pulls it.

So I did.

“What stories?”

“I'm sorry?”

“In what story is there a man who pulls a lever in the darkness?”

“Oh...I don't know, there must be. Something with a hero chained in a sadist's dungeon, maybe.

Or a villainous laboratory.”

“Mmm...doesn't ring any bells, Pocket.”

“Well, it doesn't matter. I'm sure there are probably hundreds. Doesn't matter.”

“Hey, since we're intervening from the grand narrative here, you know what you *could* do?”

“I'm going to forget my place in the—”

“You could have yourself get chained up in a dungeon. I mean, later in the telling, right? And then, you could get out, no, or Kitt could break you out, and then you find a magic lever—“

“I never said it was magical.”

“...find a magic lever and pull it and say something really sharp like...uh...'Told you, Fox Boy!

Happens to heroes all the time!' Yeah, put that in!”

“This isn't a work of fiction, Alan.”

“Mmm...”

“I'm trying to recall to the best of my ability the manner in which these events unfolded.”

“So maybe you *recall* getting chained up in a dungeon later, is all I'm saying.”

“Alan...”

“Look, I told you. I don't care if I believe it or not. It's entertaining.”

“But it's more than...fine. Where was I?”

“Lever in the darkness.”

A soft, chugging sound, much like a far-off locomotive, began building in the corners of the room, or what I assumed to be where the corners were located in the dark. A strong smell of gas began protruding into the space around me. I began to get nervous. The smell continued and just at the moment when I was about to throw my hands back on the lever and pull and yank with every panicky finger, the room began to light up. Not all at once, but timed, like dominoes falling in sequence. Larger blazes of fire ignited out of mounted fixtures across the walls, one after another with a pop and hiss, until the entire basement was completely lit. I realized I hadn't exhaled in a while and did so.

Incredible.

The basement was much larger than I had suspected. The large room I was standing in was one of several connected by open doorframes that unraveled under the surface of London. Large rubber and metal coils crawled across the walls like vines, sliding in and out of the rooms. Arteries, they seemed, moving from a central heart across the body of this...this...

Basement was no longer an applicable word. Laboratory seemed more appropriate. I didn't know what to think. Steam vents were drilled into the baseboards, expelling warm puffs of air at precise intervals. But what was producing the steam? And for that matter, why? What was it powering?

And what in the name of God, the larger question seemed to be, was a dead watchmaker doing with a collection of wonders boarded up beneath his office floor?

I switched off the lantern and left it on the closest table. I moved through the room like a spectator in an artist gallery, observing trinkets and inventions. They were all dumbfounding beyond all belief. A self-bubbling tea kettle. A magnetic pair of workers' gloves. And on every wall, the most bizarre sketches and schematics. Drawings of dreams, of things that might be in this day and age. I was in absolute awe.

“Pocket!” I heard Kitt shout from somewhere. “Come over here!”

“What is it?”

“Just come over here! Trust me!”

“Where are you?”

“Back room! Come on!”

“All right! Give me a moment.”

I worked my way to where Kitt was calling from and noticed the wood around the doorway was considerably more worn and seemingly bleached. It had been a strange night, all right, and it would only get more so.

I took a few steps into the room to find that it...somehow...stopped...being a room. I paused and checked both my steps and my vision, for I was now standing in what appeared to be the hull of a ship. I checked my vision again. Yes, definitely a ship. The space was outfitted with railings and various nautical equipment. Bells and barometers. Even a captain's wheel. The Union flag hung on one side of the room and on the other, a framed sailing map of the East.

“Bizarre, isn't it?” Kitt said, playing with the wheel.

“It's...a ship.”

“I know. Look at these walls.”

I did. Wooden paneling with glass portholes. I put my eye to one hole, half-expecting to see a rocking ocean on the other side. I didn't, of course, and found myself staring into a flat, cement wall.

“Why would someone build a ship into a basement?” I wondered.

“No idea,” Kitt said, blowing dust off of the railings. “There's a sign in the back.”

I followed him to the end of the cabin, er, room. Mounted across the back wall was a large wooden sign. Slivers of paint were chipping off and carved in large letters were the following words:

THE LADY VIOLETTA:

TO WORLDS UNKNOWN

“Violetta...” Kitt mumbled as we stared.

“Pretty name for a ship,” I offered.

He nodded and began checking drawers and closets.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for a bag,” he said.

“What for?”

“Carrying all of this outside, obviously.”

That's right. For some reason, I had momentarily forgotten Kitt's motives in coming to the watch shop in the first place, and I felt a little jarred upon remembering. It had felt for a very short time that we were nothing but wayward visitors, onlookers in this tomb of a museum.

“Shouldn't a thief already have a bag?”

“I didn't think of it.”

“How could you—“

“Can you help me look? I need to loot.”

I laughed. He asked why, but I declined to comment, not wanting to point out to him the silliness of proclaiming “I need to loot.”

“Fine, Kitt. I'll check back here.”

The back wall of this would-be ship was bent in a sort of W shape. The sides of the wall tucked back at an angle and connected into a corner into little half-walls. The half-walls turned out to be false and one pivoted open as I knocked my knuckles on it.

“I think I'm singing this too early,” I whispered to myself as I slid past the false wall into the opening it revealed on the left side of the room, “far too early for this tune.”

“Hey Pocket,” I heard Kitt say. “Do you think I could've been a sailor?”

“Sure, why not?” I answered. “But I find myself here crawling, searching beneath an autumn moon...hmmm...nothing.”

I blew a cobweb out of the empty cavity behind the wall, slid out, and moved towards the other side.

“Do you think I could've been a *good* sailor?” Kitt asked.

“Do you get seasick?”

“Sometimes.”

I pushed the false wall on the right side of the room. It got caught on something.

“Then, sure. You could make a great sailor, some of the time.” I pushed harder and the wall started slowly moving. It felt like there was a box or something propped against the other side. “And I've got my worst foot forward, yes, this time, I'm on my own...damn, what's back there?”

“Pocket, I'm going to check back in the hall. I'm finding nothing.”

“Uh-huh...” I set down my bottle of faerie juice and put my shoulder to the wall, leaning with my full weight. It slid a little more. “Spun and shaken, I am looking, waiting just...Ah!” I had succeeded in creating a fair-sized crevice in the space. I stepped into it and removed the box that, as I had suspected, was wedged behind the false wall.

To be honest, I was more or less expecting to find another patch of cobwebs, but in its place was a narrow corridor.

“Does this place ever run out of surprises?”

There was a switch on the wall. I tossed it and smaller gas fixtures popped up with fire, covering the path in purple.

Purple?

Ah. I get it. Sheets of colored cellophane paper were pasted into specially-crafted lantern boxes. The flickering light shined through these boxes, creating the magnificent purple glow. Gorgeous. I stuck my head at once back into the ship room.

“Kitt! There's—“

He was gone, off pursuing greater interests. I frowned and returned to the small passageway.

The walls were covered with a dark, blue-black velvet, and the floor was lined with fresh carpeting. The lack of consistency in the building was dizzying. A watch shop with a laboratory in the

floor. A laboratory with a ship for a room. And now this, some sort of hidden shrine, decorated as if for some church service, or perhaps a funeral. I followed the path, humming to break the silence.

And at the end of the line...

Beauty.

A large glass case sat against the wall, propped...no...wired? The case stood on a platform of rubber-coated bronze. The glass was smooth, curved, and darkly-tinted. Scattered around the entire display was a cluster of candles. They seemed to be arranged very delicately, as if part of a vigil, and each one was half-melted down to its copper candlestick.

Beauty. For me to even be there, swirling the still air with my breath, seemed blasphemous. I felt like one stepping into some grand, forgotten painting only to smear the aged oils with his boots.

And yet I could not move.

Beauty is a tricky thing. You either find it where it hasn't yet fallen dead or you attempt to build it up yourself. For the majority of my life, I had been attempting the latter.

But at that moment...

I drew an exaggerated breath and moved towards the glass until I could see my own faint reflection. Slowly, with greatest respect, I reached with my left hand and pressed my palm to it. The glass was cold.

I smiled.

And then...heh...looking back, I don't even know how best to say it. The glass slid open, rubbing against my fingers, and from inside there came a figure, a figure resting on pillows and harnesses. Startled, I pulled my hand from the glass and tried to slam it shut. The sliding door bounced back and, slightly shaken, the figure fell forward off of the pedestal into my arms. Unprepared, I collapsed under the weight and together we fell to the floor. Pinned, my breathing hastened. I grabbed and felt something cold and metal and pulled on it for support. I slid my shoulders up from beneath and rested against the nearly wall. Only then did I get a good look at what had fallen into my arms.

It was a girl.

Shocked into silence, I twisted my arm back and felt the piece of cold metal in my hand spin with a clank. A soft ticking began.

And continued.

Ever.

So.

Softly.

The girl from behind the glass lifted her head at me.

A deep, shining light poured out of her eyes.

Chapter Four

The Girl Behind the Glass

When I was seven years old, I once went to the theater. This was a complete accident on my part. I was taken with a group of other children by an overzealous schoolteacher who considered it her duty to “enlighten our artistic sensibilities,” a woman of what all I remember, some twenty years later, is that she used to smell of crackers. Anyhow, she was the one who took my hand and clutched and dragged me into a room full of painted faces.

But I should have never been there, should have never rubbed my little shoes on the worn red carpet. The only reason I did was because my lungs were white.

The London my parents knew was a self-loathing one. It was thirty years into a guilt trip brought about by the perpetual poisoning of the city's children. “You're darn lucky,” my father used to tell me. “You've never lifted a finger, William.” Children in the country's Black Period were given one hell of a bum deal. Most were workers, plugging along a pre-Alexandrian Industrial Age, scrubbing chimneys and moving factories with their tiny fingers. Then in the 30's, some bright mind decided it should stop, that children should be children.

Well, if they were rich enough.

Schools were founded for those that could afford, and those children grew up with a proper education, married, had children of their own, and sent off those children to receive similar education.

And so the tradition continued, years rolled by, the King eventually found his throne, furthered a national emphasis on schooling, and then I was born. The London of my childhood was a split one, one of workers and one of students. The high class, those children of the wealthy, were immediately enrolled, but crafty Miss Fate took it upon herself to leave a few empty desks that needed to be filled. My father was a merchant, so I found myself on the very thin line between classes. A doctor checked

my health and concurred that I might make for a healthy candidate for schooling, pending the color of my lungs.

The lungs of many children of my class were blackened by breathing in the smoke of industry. The only fair thing, the Alexandrian doctors felt, was to send off those already touched by the smoke to work, their extra hands on task building this steamed city. I was found to be “internally clean” enough to escape such a fate, so I somehow landed myself in a boys' school. How the doctor determined the whiteness of my lungs without cutting me open was never explained to me. I remember the man patted me on the head and said it was one of those “mysteries of modern science” and that he held “a particular clinical knack” for such mysteries.

I think my father paid him off.

Whatever the reason, I ended up in a classroom. Despite the grand advancement of science and industry that was building around me, education in my time was focused on “classical works and authors.” The motivation seemed to be on creating young gentlemen before young scholars. I didn't last long in the place.

But while I was there, there once was a moment when my instructor, my cracker-scented misses, had a moment of fury towards a group of us boys whom she felt were not evoking the spirit of the arts to the right degree, and dragged us out to a failing corner theater.

The other boys who accompanied me griped nonstop about the trip, because their daddies had taught them that young men of their class should seek out the opera for entertainment. Common theater was best left for the common boys. My teacher casually tossed off their complaints, and on the allotted day, we were shuffled one by one down the street and into the place, a struggling playhouse with a soupy stain on its ceiling. A less than reputable summit for greater learning, but it was easily available and, I now suspect, didn't charge admission for children.

The actors came bounding onto the stage before the show, half-dressed in their colorful outfits, waving and thrusting their hands to those squeezed into the front row, of which I was one. They then

shuffled off and attempted to perform scenes from Marlowe's *Faust* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* trimmed and refitted for a child audience. This they mostly conveyed with costuming. Oversized devil horns and copious amounts of face paint. I believe their perception behind this approach was that even if we weren't able to follow the dialogue, we would be easily able to distinguish the good characters from the bad.

And for the most part, it worked. We dutifully cheered when the man with the yellow beard and sword came out and booed away the man with the evil, long beard.

But then it happened.

It was late into their *Hamlet* medley and a pretty actress in a flowing, black wig started dancing around the stage, throwing plastic flower tops at us. The others laughed, fought over the flowers, tried to eat them, but I was absolutely transfixed. And when she was out of flower tops, she suddenly stopped dancing and began to cry, rubbing her fists into her eyes for exaggerated effect. She then walked across the stage to where two other actors were hiding behind wooden shrubs and waving long billows of cheap blue cloth. The girl wrung out her eyes once more and knelt into the pantomimed water, throwing her arms up as she drowned. I didn't understand. She was clearly not an evil character, as she was not wearing the ugly beard. Something, therefore, must have been amiss. Was it because she had given away all of her beloved flowers?

Without much thought, I sprung from my seat and climbed the stage, a handful of plastic petals clutched in my fist. They must not have seen me coming, because no one stepped out and grabbed me until I had done what I had done.

And I had done plenty.

I ran headlong to the supposed river and swiftly kicked the crouching men who were controlling the river square in the throat. This surprised even me as I was a generally quiet kid and not one for physical confrontation. The water fell lifeless to the floor and the woman just stood there, staring at me

in silence as I held out the flowers. The only thing she ever gave me was a momentary change in face, a flash of gesture too small and distorted that I couldn't tell if it was a smile or a frown.

My teacher later reprimanded me with a long speech about respect for performance and craft, not once considering that from my point of view I was contributing to the scene, not disrupting it. She explained to me that the drowning girl was supposed to drown and therefore must. No one will ever kick an ocean for you, I had decided.

I am telling you this so that you may gain an understanding of my general relationship and resulting interactions with women.

So let us return to the girl that came from behind the glass.

Soft ticking. By this point, I could more than just hear it, I could feel it. It was pressed up against my chest. A subtle push-and-click, almost like a pulse, but more...precise...

I could also feel my own blood pumping. Carefully, I took the girl by the shoulders and lifted her a bit from me. The lights had faded from her eyes and she had not said a word. Strange. I had expected a watch to be hanging where she had been pressed to my person, but she wore none.

So the ticking...

I looked up again at her face and found that she was staring at me. My heart jumped a little then calmed with the relief that whoever this young lady was, she was at least alive.

Alive and beautiful, but I'll get to that in a minute.

She blinked at me, lashes sliding over the milky swirls that made up her pupils.

"Hello," she said.

Another of those damned eternities passed.

"Hello," I said. "Are you...uh...are you okay?"

"I don't know."

"Oh. You want to find out?"

She squeezed her thin brows together at me.

“Of course.”

She lifted herself off of me and stretched her arms.

“Wait, Pocket.”

“What?”

“So how many times are you going to fall onto or be fallen on by people in this story?”

“That's the last time...I think. It was a long night.”

“No joke.”

She lifted herself off of me and stretched her arms. She looked about my age and was dressed in dark velvet, much like the walls, and much like the walls, she seemed well decorated for a funeral. Her face was young, round, and impossibly familiar. Her skin was smooth, white, and pale, like the sunken candles that stood at her feet, and her hair, tucked up in pigtailed by clock gears in place of ribbons, was a luminous fire of red. Long black mourner's gloves ran from her fingers to her elbows, and in the center of her stomach, surrounded by a heart motif, was a single, industrial-sized screw.

Screw?

“Aren't you going to get up?” she asked me.

“Thinking about it.”

Screw. It was spinning.

“Are you going to keep looking at me like that?” she then asked.

“Thinking about it.”

“What?”

“Sorry,” I said, shaking back my senses.

I pulled myself to my feet and scratched my head, an act that reminded me that I had lost my hat in the fall. I found it bent on the floor and reached for it. The girl surprised me by reaching faster. She was soon admiring it in her hands.

“Doesn't surprise me, Pocket. You're slow.”

“I meant it was surprising that she went after the hat. And I'm not slow. I just savor life too much to make a rush through every movement I make.”

“You're slow.”

“Alan...”

She made a tiny fist and punched into the hat, shaping the dent back into fashion. She also removed an object that I had been wearing in the brim.

“What's this?” she said, holding it up.

“A spoon.”

“It's got holes.”

“It's slotted.”

“I know how people use spoons...how do holes help?”

“Uh...I don't really know. I've never used it like that.”

“Is that why you wear it in your hat?”

“No. The spoon, it was...eh...there was this old Frenchman I met once. He was kind of fond of giving gifts, told me every young man should don a feather in his hat.”

“This is not a feather.”

“Yeah, I know. He was...persistent...and a bit strange. It doesn't really matter.”

“Did he tell you to wear your eyeglass like that?”

“No. That was my idea.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, so anyway—”

She cut me off with a smile, a trick she would pull on me many times. It was a childlike smile, all sugar and starlight, painted up in the heavy makeup that made her face resemble a child's doll. To accompany this smile, she held out my hat to me, presenting it like a Christmas goose.

I smirked and received her offering.

“Thanks Dolly,” I said, donning the hat.

She curtsied, and as she dipped, I noticed a strange shape protruding slightly from her back. I remembered the unusual piece of metal I had grabbed onto after the fall. Was it somehow *attached* to her person?

“Hey Doll,” I said, trying to present my words as casually and delicately as possible. “Could I bother you with a question?”

“No bother,” she said.

“What's that weird thing coming out of your back?” Kitt said from behind me.

My face met my palm and the two introduced themselves.

“How long have you been here?” I said through my teeth to him.

“Since the discussion of spoons,” replied the girl. “He was standing right there. Do you have difficulty being aware or observant?”

My eyes narrowed. “No.”

“I'm just a master of the shadows,” Kitt said, piping in with one of his uniquely Kitt faces of self-satisfaction. The girl seemed amused.

“In other words, your eyes adjust well to the dark,” I said.

“I could see better than you could back there,” he pointed out.

“Perhaps if you weren't wearing that half-glass,” the girl added. “You could exist more easily in the world.”

“That's a good idea,” Kitt agreed. “Even out your vision. Be less off.”

“Off...” I repeated in a restrained tone.

I wasn't liking the direction in which this conversation seemed to be heading, but I was at least happy that it was serving to distract from Kitt's blunt questioning.

“So,” Kitt said to the girl. “What is that thing sticking out of your back?”

They say the difference between tragedy and comedy is the passing of time. I'm still waiting on that one.

I could see question marks in the girl's eyes as she felt around behind her back.

“Oh!” she said, gripping the metal like a lost toy. “This is mine.” She spun around on her heels. “See?”

Kitt and I were dumbfounded. A large, smooth piece of curved metal climbed outward from the middle of her back, shaped into a large T-shape like...well...like the turnkey of a simple wind-up toy. The ends of the key curved into heart-like shapes and the entire mechanical piece spun slowly in a circle in time with the screw in her stomach.

Clockwise.

It added up. The glowing eyes. The sound of nearby clockwork, as close to me as skin. The pedestal. The glass and the metal and the tubes and the rubber. The frantic drawings on the walls. Schematics. The hidden shrine.

The face. The one that seemed impossibly familiar, as if modeled, if not identically, off of a woman in a dead man's photograph, a fair face standing before a lost pier.

A picture in a watchmaker's basement. A place of impossible things.

A girl in the dark.

A girl with a knowledge of spoons.

A girl left alone with a key in her back.

“She's a toy,” Kitt said at last.

She faced us with a smile under deep, sadder eyes. She clasped her gloves together as her key continued to turn, spinning ever softly the delicate balance of clockwork that her crafter had painstakingly cobbled beneath her thin, near translucent skin.

We had found the Watchmaker's Doll.

“A-ha! *Now* are finally getting somewhere, Pocket! Mechanical women moving on a spinning key! Just fantastic!”

“Clockwork under skin. I swear on my life. And it's *wo-man*, not *wo-men*. There was only one.”

“Too bad.”

“You don't seem to be taking this very seriously.”

“You're right, fine. Let's assume this is all true, and no one else in the world had discovered this before you.”

“And Kitt.”

“And Kitt, sure. So what then, grand adventurer? Did this turnkey girl swear you to an oath of secrecy or reveal some glorious secret as a reward for her freedom?”

“She...um...made us scones.”

“Scones?”

“With jam.”

Kitt and I found ourselves sitting on a pair of short stools in one of the dusty side rooms off of one of the dusty corridors in that labyrinth of a basement. The room also served as a makeshift kitchen and we watched in amazement as the Watchmaker's Doll slopped dough and flour together.

She had insisted on making us breakfast. Strange first response, in my opinion, to a pair of strangers who have just broken into your home. But I was hungry, so I didn't get vocal about it. Kitt did point out that it was the middle of the night, but she said that the time was close enough to breakfast to

have breakfast, so we had breakfast. And we didn't feel like arguing about proper timing to a girl who lived in a watch shop.

“You can cook?” I had asked.

“I think so,” she had replied. “Probably.”

If she was the Doll, then it seemed the three of us were playing house. I'm sure Kitt and I should have spent this time pondering on the make and workings of the sophisticated and quite revolutionary piece of machinery that was before us, but we were both more concerned with being accommodating guests to our hostess. Besides, she seemed to take insult to words like “machinery” being directed towards her.

“How...” Kitt whispered to me while she stuck the doughy globs into an oven. “How is this possible?”

“I haven't a clue. I never dreamed something like...like *this*...”

“I know! It's like something out of a storybook. Do you think she knows?”

“She seems to. I mean, she has a key in her back.”

“Maybe we should ask.”

“That seems rude.”

“Oh.” Kitt rested his elbows on his knees. “Why is she making us breakfast?”

“Because she wanted to,” I whispered.

“Why are we letting her?”

“Because I'm hungry. How long did you say this place has been closed up?”

“I forget.”

“Mmm...”

“Worried the food's already off?”

“Not enough not to eat it.”

At last, the Watchmaker's Doll came over with another smile and a pan of lopsided scones. She then sat down on a third stool and produced a sticky jar of strawberry jam.

“My favorite,” she said.

Favorite? Surely a woman filled with cogs and gears wouldn't...

“The lady first!” she announced with vigor, lifting a smeared scone to her lips. And then, quite astonishingly, she ate! She just...ate. Swallowed and everything. She continued this until the entire thing was gone and then excused herself for, as she put it, “a momentary wash.”

“What is she doing, eating like that?” Kitt whispered.

“Probably making her gears sticky.”

“Is that why she left? A wash, she said. Is she...*cleaning*...her insides?”

It was an unusual thought, but then I remembered the self-powered rubbish bins, consuming and burning away edible scraps. Could she be of similar design, or just simply a strawberry enthusiast? At any rate, I seriously doubted that she actually *needed* to eat, but the practice certainly wasn't foreign to her and she seemed to gain much enjoyment from it. Such strangeness lies in science.

“I don't know, Kitt. Ask me about the workings of life before you ask me about the workings of women.”

“But she's not a normal woman.”

“There's no such thing.”

We bit into our scones, which, despite a little bit of blackening on the bottom, were quite edible and quite delicious. I was well into my second and Kitt was licking jam off of his fingers when the Doll returned. She was carrying my bottle of faerie juice.

“Oh,” I said. “Right. I nearly forgot that.”

“It's yours?” she said, shaking the bubbles around. “What's in there?”

“My essence,” I said with a laugh.

“You keep your essence in a bottle?”

“Doesn't everyone?” I took a thoughtful chew on my meal and smiled to myself.

“What does that mean?” she said.

I thought it over. “I'm not sure. I was trying to sound clever.”

“I see.”

“Did it sound clever?”

“It sounded somewhat clever.”

“All right then. I'll mark it as a success.”

The Doll regained her seat and watched me and Kitt eat.

“So,” Kitt said, talking through his food. “How long you been on your own here?”

She tilted her head to the side.

“I'm...not sure.”

“Lost track of the days?”

“I was never following them,” she replied.

“Oh.”

“I've been sleeping a lot.”

“So you sleep, then. How does that—“

“You're being nosy,” I interjected.

“I don't care,” said the Doll.

“No, he's right,” Kitt said. “Too many questions. I talk too much sometimes.”

“That so?” I dryly questioned.

“You can talk if you want,” Kitt offered to her. “Give us a few questions.”

“All right,” she said.

I took a third scone. Her first question was a logical one, but the timing of it took me and Kitt by surprise.

“Who are you?” she asked us.

We looked at each other. Of course. We had been too busy conversing and enjoying jam to realize that no one present at this cluster of stools and jars had ever made a former introduction.

“Right,” I said.

“Right,” Kitt said. “We never told you our names or anything. You don't know us at all.”

“I know you are a master of the shadows,” the Doll said to Kitt. “So I would figure that you are thieves.”

“Very good!” Kitt said. “Clever girl!”

“*He's* the thief,” I maintained. “I just followed him down the hole.”

She nodded. “So you are a thief and a follower.”

“No, don't call me a follower. That's sounds so...weak-willed. Besides, I just came in to search for my bottle.”

“So you are a searcher?”

“I'm Will Pocket.”

She smiled and daintily shook my hand.

“Mister Pocket.”

Kitt's hand was next.

“And I'm Kitt Sunner.”

“Mister Sunner.”

“Just Kitt.”

“Mister Kitt, then.”

“Still too formal.”

“All right, Kitt-Kitt.”

“Oh my...”

I laughed and suddenly realized that I couldn't remember the last time I had had such amusement and, well, fun amongst complete strangers. I think the trick about people that become not-

strangers in your life is that when they enter your life, they don't appear very stranger-like to begin with.

Strange.

However, I was still sane enough not to hang around an abandoned building with a street thief and a hostess that was currently lingering somewhere between shut-in and jostled property.

“Well,” I said, standing and finishing my last scone. “Thank you very much for the meal. Quite tasty.”

“Thank you, thank you,” she said. Then suddenly, her eyes changed to suspicion. “You're not leaving, are you?”

“Oh...well...it *is* late.”

“So stay here.”

“I don't want to bother.”

“It's more bother to leave. Sounds like rain.”

“Yup,” Kitt added. “It's probably still coming down. Besides, don't try your luck. You think you can find another free magic French inn?”

“I thought you weren't listening to—”

“Don't you like it here?” the Doll asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“Is it me?”

“Of course not.”

“Is it him?”

Kitt made a silly frown. I elbowed him.

“No. I mean, he did take off with my bottle, threw it through a window, and stole my wallet...”

“Empty wallet,” Kitt said.

“*Empty* wallet!” the Doll repeated, trying to establish camaraderie, I think.

I was cornered. And the place was dry. And warm. With jam.

“Are there beds?” I asked.

“I don't know,” she said.

“Where do you sleep?” Kitt asked her.

“Where you found me,” she said, as if it was the most commonly-known fact in existence.

“All right,” I said, dropping back onto the stool. “I'll stay.”

“Excellent!” The Doll celebrated with a firm screwing on of the jam jar lid.

“Excellent...” I repeated quietly to myself.

As I fell asleep that night, tucked into my overcoat with a bag of rotting and therefore quite soft potatoes propped behind my head, I realized that neither I nor Kitt had ever asked for her name, if she even had one. Her last words to us before leaving for the glass case were “Dolly bids you a good night!”

Dolly...

There seemed something significant about it, something I feel that I almost grasped, but then I fell asleep.

I woke up the next morning...late...to the sound of Kitt banging around at the other end of the room. I was surprised...and a little impressed. I half-expected him to take off in the night with as much as he could carry. I got up, attempted to stretch the soreness from my body, and yawned.

“Morning Kitt,” I said, scratching my head. “How are you?”

“Morning Pocket,” he replied. I glanced over his shoulder and noticed he was stuffing clocks into a bag. Sigh. I should have figured as much. Kitt noticed me looking and grinned.

“I found a bag.”

“I see that.”

He nodded and returned to his plundering. I decided not to get involved. If I had taken to that philosophy sooner, I wouldn't be in this situation in the first place. Still...

“Kitt, I don't want you to take these things.”

“Well, if it helps, I'm not really taking anything yet. I'm just finding. Finding clocks. And I'm stuffing. Stuffing a bag. And later I will be carrying. Carrying a bag, and—“

My voice got harder. “Kitt. I'm serious. Stop.”

He dropped the act and frowned at me. I think he was a little hurt at the tone.

“I don't understand,” he said. “Why, suddenly—“

“Because, you know. *Her.*”

“What?”

“Because this place isn't abandoned anymore. There is a living resident here and I don't want you stealing from her.”

“Do you think she'd really mind?”

“I don't care. *I* mind. I don't want to see you leave this place with anything more valuable than a scrap of paper.”

“Pocket, really?”

“Promise me!”

“Fine.” He grabbed a handful of old papers from the tables and made a big show of stuffing his pockets with them. “There! You happy? Just papers!”

He grabbed some more and shoved into his clothes. I wasn't amused.

“You're hilarious,” I grumbled.

“Thanks,” he grumbled back. “So, while you're up there on your pedestal of morality, you wanna tell me what I'm supposed to do for survival with these papers? For food?”

“I have decided something!” said the Doll, walking into the room. We quieted and gave her our combined attention. She struck the pose of a royal about to deliver a great address to her people.

“I think we should go outside,” she continued.

“Outside?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Where exactly outside?”

“Around,” she said. “Around and about.”

“Uh...I don't know if that's such a good idea.”

“I won't make much noise.”

“Sorry. Not sold.”

“It's probably much safer here for you,” Kitt said. “And you've got that nice glass case back there. Very fancy. Haven't seen one of those outside.” This angered her and she went away for a few minutes. Kitt started frowning again.

“Was that the wrong thing to say?” he asked.

“Apparently.”

“Do you think she hates me?”

The Doll burst through the door again, key spinning wildly, with an old basket in her hands. She was smiling.

“I found this.”

“All...all right,” Kitt said, confused.

“You can have picnics with this, yes?”

“You want to go on a picnic?”

“Around and about.”

I couldn't help but smile. “She's cute,” I said under my breath to Kitt. I think she heard me, because she started to grin.

“I've never been outside,” she said.

“Ever?” Kitt asked.

“Never.”

“Hmm...well, I suppose you wouldn't have. But then how do you know about picnics?”

“I know many things.”

“Spoons,” I offered.

“Yes, spoons. And picnics and many things. You do not have to go outside to know about it.”

“Okay,” Kitt said. “That's fair. A picnic it is, then.”

She was all smiles.

“Have fun,” I said.

She was all clouds.

“You're coming too,” she said.

“I shouldn't. I—“

“Come on, Pocket,” Kitt said, taking up sides with the Doll. “She looks so sad.”

“Since when do you care?”

“I care about happy people!”

“You have to come too,” she said to me. “You turned my key.”

“What?”

“Look, we both slept here last night,” Kitt said. “We owe her for the hospitality. Plus, we did put a hole in her window up there.”

“We?”

I was going to argue further, but...sigh...I never could stand such a look of disappointment in a woman's eyes.

“You win,” I said. “One day outside.”

She lit up and started hunting down things to put in the basket, which she gave Kitt to hold, while chattering away about various customs and facts from the outside that she was determined to confirm with her own eyes.

When she was finished, she took me by the hand and headed for the stairs.

“Hold on,” I said. “What about that?”

“What?”

“*That.*” I pointed to the key in her back.

“What about it?”

“Don't you think you might stand out a little with that thing?”

“Maybe. I don't mind if people stare.”

“Right. Of course not. Nor should you. Me neither.”

“Then let's go.”

“Just the same,” I said, holding her momentarily back. “It probably wouldn't hurt to use a little subtlety.”

“How?”

“Oh...I don't know. If you had a drape or an umbrella or something that might draw attention away...”

“Wouldn't this be easier?” She reached behind her and, with a pop, pulled the turnkey out of her back. Kitt and I froze. She blinked three times then cocked her head to the side again.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“You can take that out?” I said.

“Of course. I only really need it turned once, and you did that for me.”

“Oh. That works.”

She dropped the turnkey into my hands. I took a few steps back, feeling the weight of it. Kitt shrugged and followed her up the stairs, basket in his arms.

I stood alone at the bottom, holding the shaped metal. I caught something. Etched into the key in an elaborate script were the words: “TWO WEEKS.” I rubbed my thumb over the W.

“Come on up!” shouted the Doll from upstairs. I felt my feet start to climb.

Yeah, I'm no follower, all right.

Chapter Five

Beggar's Vacation

The city of New London was nothing but a scrambled mess of children's building blocks. Multicolored models reaching not far enough into the heavens. London was a faraway toy on the other side of my glass. I pressed my fingers against the cool pane and listened to the hug-chug sound of the engines aboard the British Airway Grand Zeppelin No. 21. I sighed and pushed my shoulders back into the worn seat in the zeppelin's guest cabin where I was residing.

The zeppelin chugged its motors and bounced casually through the smoggy-black clouds over the far end of the city. A matron in an evening gown walked the aisles, welcoming us, her “valued guests,” to *her* London, as she so put it, her “city from the sky.” Poetic, I suppose.

The No. 21 Zeppelin was a tourist ship specializing in quarter-hour tours around the circumference of the city. It was a tour I'd never taken. Never had any interest. But now that I was aboard, hanging in the sky on this big, bloated bird, I found myself quite taken with the view.

I let my head rest in surrender in my hand. I stared out of my porthole and counted the white clouds that would rise and reveal themselves every so often amongst the smog. The clean amongst the brown-black tones of industry.

I reflected on my day thus far.

It began with Kitt, the Doll, and myself stepping out into the autumn air and leaving the stilted quiet of the watch shop behind. We were fortunately able to exit the building without attracting any attention and within moments blended into to the bustle of the city. Nothing suspicious about three young Londoners walking the town. The long ends of the Doll's key, I discovered, were hinged and

folded inward, rendering the entire piece small enough for me to hide in my coat. For once, a bit of convenience in my life.

“So what do you want to do first?” I had asked the Doll.

“See the outside.”

“I meant, more specifically.”

“Specifically?”

“Right. See, we're already outside.”

“Oh.”

She really hadn't seemed to give the endeavor much thought, other than “outside” and “picnic.” She tapped a finger to her lips.

“You pick something,” she said at last.

Wonderful. I glanced up and down the street, looking for inspiration. I glanced at Kitt. He raised his shoulders in apology. I glanced at the Doll, who was waiting impatiently for my undeniably brilliant proposal. She would have to wait a minute longer.

“Well...” I said to break the silence and assure my companions that I was deeply probing my mind and exploring every fathomable option at our disposal. “I guess we could always...”

The Doll frowned and poked at the picnic basket Kitt was still holding.

“All right...” I continued, determined to conquer this. “We could start out by...well...the weather is pretty crisp today, a lot of sunshine...”

“Yes,” the Doll said, her eyes picking up a bit more shine.

“A lot of sunshine,” I repeated. “And if I think if I've got my bearing straight...Kitt, we're just a few blocks from the trade district, aren't we?”

“One of them, yeah,” he replied. “It's a little over to the left.”

“Good, good. I've got it. If memory serves, just a bit away is this little combination butcher and barber shop owned by this enthusiastic young businessman. Nice man. Far too taken with cutting

things. Just beyond that is a little path that empties out into this beautiful little park. Perfect time of the year too. Autumn's in decline, but there's still a fair amount of gold in the trees. We can go and sit and watch the bicyclists ride over each other. You'd love it."

"Sounds fine to me," Kitt said. "What do you think abo—"

"Look!" The Doll said, pointing to the sky. A few zeppelins were launching out of the city air docks, passing an incoming commercial steamship. "We should do that!"

"Oh." Why, I wondered, did she bother assigning me the task of...no, it wasn't important. Best humor the girl then be on my way. "Sure," I said. "That works too."

The obvious problem with taking a zeppelin tour was the question of how the three of us, not a ha'penny between us, practically vagabonds in the eyes of common society, were going to afford such a luxury. I'm a fairly skilled storyteller, but I doubted that I could find an interested party and rattle off anything epic or long-winded enough to warrant the kind of coinage that I knew the shiplines would be asking. Plus my...fuller...stories tend to either cast people away or put them to sleep, despite being absolutely loaded in entertainment. You are a rare connoisseur, Alan, to appreciate the unique quality, the "flammable intensity," of a Will Pocket tale.

But once again, I veer from my path.

We walked to the docks, where a needlessly stern man with too many buttons snuffed at us and pointed out the fees for such a trip in a vernacular of such high breeding that I could nearly hear syllables in his words. He left us with a smug little grin and then, calmly and rationally, I debated to myself whether or not it would be in my best interest to punch his teeth down his flabby throat.

Rest assured, dearest reader, that your narrator is by no means a violent man. I am passionate, as is any artist, but I would never take a swing at someone who didn't deserve it. Cruelty is for barbarians. A thinking man reserves his emotions and only strikes at those who would truly harm or insult this great existence.

“And if they're not bigger than you.”

“No one is bigger than the side of justice, Alan.”

“Mmm...and how many fights have you been in?”

“More to the point...”

We scuffled away, Kitt and Dolly looking particularly sullen. I bit my lip and wondered what was coming next. I guessed that, reminded of our poverty, the girl would return to my suggestion of a nice, inexpensive day in the park.

“We need money,” she said.

“There are many things around us that don't cost a thing.”

“But...the balloons...”

I looked up at the low-floating zeppelins above our heads. They really were quite striking.

“I see your point.”

Now was Kitt's turn to chime in.

“Come on, come on. Pocket's right. Plenty of other things in the city.”

“But...” I said, looking up. “The balloons...”

“They...are nice,” Kitt replied.

I pulled my eyes away and tried to strike a more positive tone.

“Oh well. Cannot be helped. Let's be on our way.”

The fox furrowed, and I swear I saw the tips of the ear-shapes upon his hat twitch.

“Excuse me for a moment,” he said.

“Kitt...” I answered, a tone of suspicion overtaking my voice.

“Just for a moment.”

And he was off. I was beginning to get tired of that tendency. I was never really certain if he intentionally ran off in situations like that to avoid questions and complaints, but I've never ruled it out.

Dolly and I sat down one of the larger shipping crates that occupied the long, painted platform leading back from the ticket kiosk. She seemed elsewhere.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Mmm-hmm,” she nodded.

“He should be right back. Maybe. I don't know. I don't know what he'll do next.”

The small, polished cogs beneath her white cheeks pulled her mouth into that child's smile.

“He's very unusual,” she said, swinging her legs.

“Heh.”

“What?”

“Oh, sorry. It's just a little funny to hear a mechanical person call someone unusual.”

She surprised me by frowning again.

“Am I that odd?” she asked, more surprised than unhappy.

I slid closer to her.

“Trust me,” I said. “You'd have to put a lot of work in to catch up with Kitt.”

We laughed. As I reflect, I now realize that I never wondered, sitting there, how fascinating someone else might see the act of her laughter, of the complicated twisting and warping of bands and gears to create the unique sound. Such a person, I imagine, would consider me terribly backward and obsolete, as I relaxed and caught myself admiring her face and parts below.

“How long have you known the unusual fox?” she asked.

“Would you believe me if I told you only since last night?”

“Yes.”

“Last night.”

“My, my.”

She watched as another steamship pulled itself through the sky, the words “END BRITISH PIRACY, FOR KING AND COUNTRY” painted in dripping letters down the port side. I came to the

horrifying realization that I was actually having a nice time. A wave of relaxation replaced the normal feeling of pestered longing that I so often felt.

We sat there for awhile and watched the ships launch before Kitt came jogging back up.

“Hey ho!” he shouted from the other end of the walkway.

“The creature returns?” queried the Doll.

“Looks like it,” I smiled.

“Good neeeeeews!” Kitt sang, presenting the picnic basket left in his care by the Doll.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Look inside.”

The Doll hopped off of her seat and took a peak.

“Is that money?” she asked.

“You don't know what money looks like?” Kitt countered.

“I'm not sure.”

“Me either,” I said. “It's been awhile since I've seen the stuff.”

“Yes, it's money!” Kitt said. “I've gotten us some money!” He seemed to be expecting accolades.

“Accolades, Kitt,” I said.

“Thank you, Pocket.”

“So we can go into the sky now?” Dolly asked, bright-eyed.

“Wait,” I said. “Kitt, you—“

“I saw a lot of shipmen running cargo when we first got here. I asked one if I could help carry a load for a few pounds.”

The Doll hopped and clapped her little fingers together.

“Then we are off!” she spun and skipped ahead, moving back toward the ticket kiosk. Kitt followed, but I caught him by his shoulder.

“Kitt.”

“What is it, Pocket?”

“That shipman.”

“Yeah?”

“How much did he offer to pay you?”

“Oh...well...he wasn't that enthusiastic at first...”

“Kitt.”

“He told me to blow off. Unfortunately for him, he tripped over something unseen in his path.

Went falling headfirst over his cargo down a set of sidesteps. I naturally came to his aid.”

“Naturally.”

“Helped the poor man up, dusted him off, adjusted his coat.”

“I see. Changed his tone, did he?”

“Must've. Lumbered away and left me with a nice stack of bills in my basket.”

Another sigh escaped my lips. “Some luck.”

“Exactly what I thought, Pocket,” he said, clucking his cheeks. “Exactly what I thought.”

I grunted, rejected an opportunity to complain, and followed the dancing Doll down the docks.

We walked and paid and walked some more and the next thing I knew we were boarded and sitting in our seats, peeking out of portholes. Kitt and Dolly both took to wandering around the cabins shortly into our flight, leaving me alone to take in New London from the sky.

It was nothing but a scrambled mess of children's building blocks.

Before long, Kitt jogged down the aisle and jumped into the seat next to mine.

“Enjoying yourself?” I asked, keeping my eyes on the window.

“Sure am!” he said, quite loudly. “This is exciting!”

“Exciting?”

“Yeah! Up in the sky and all! Aren't you having fun?”

“Sure. It’s a pretty decent time.”

“Just decent? I kinda feel spoiled. Like I’m having a vacation.”

I sighed to myself, thinking that “spoiled” was a little too enthusiastic for a circle around the city. Then again, I bore obscenely easily, so who knows?

“A beggar’s vacation, maybe,” I said.

“Hmm…” Kitt responded. “Well, that’s still something.”

I let his comment pass without thought.

“Where’s the Doll?” I asked instead.

“I don’t know. Somewhere.”

“We’re all somewhere, Kitt.”

He stared at me like he didn’t understand the implication.

“I know.”

“Forget it,” I replied. “I’m sure she’ll turn up.”

A fat cloud passed. It looked like a painting of a king I’d once seen. One of those Richards. A finger tapped my shoulder.

“Hey Pocket,” Kitt whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to see something unusual?”

“I think I’ve seen enough strange things for this week, Kitt. Nothing personal.”

“Come on,” he said, hushing his voice, for what reason I shall never know or seek out, even quieter. “It’s pretty impressive.”

“Fine. What is it?”

“Not here. Might cause a ruckus.”

“Why?”

“Meet me on the back deck in seven minutes.”

“Why seven?”

He was up and out of his seat. And since the following six and a half minutes offered no deviation from the mild boredom that was starting to set in, I told you, I bore very easily, I wandered out to the back deck as requested.

The No. 21 Zeppelin had a small outdoor deck built onto the back of its tourist cabins that allowed eager travelers to take in a wider view through a pair of large binoculars on a stand that was welded to the floor. Kitt had his face planted into the eyeholes when I entered the scene. He seemed to be peeking in the general direction of a mattress factory. None of the other passengers were present.

“All right, I’m here,” I announced, crossing my arms. “What’s so important?”

Kitt promptly left the viewing stand and reached into his jacket.

“You’ll like this, Pocket.”

He pulled out... a wrench.

“A wrench?” I asked, dully.

“That’s right.”

“You pulled me out here for a wrench?”

“Look closer.”

“Sure.” The wrench was a little large and not at all peculiar, other than the fact that one of its ends extended past the rubber-grip handle into a blunt edge with a thin slot.

“So...what am I looking at here?”

“This!” Kitt said. He squeezed a small button hidden into the rubber grip and swung the wrench up at me. A thin, razor-edged blade, the size of a knife, no, more like a smaller dagger, shot out of the open end of the wrench, extending millimeters away from my face. I leapt backward, smacking my back against the ship’s railing.

“For God’s sake!” I shouted. “You nearly stabbed me in the face! What did you do that for?!?”

“Pretty unusual, isn’t it?”

“You could’ve taken my eye out!”

“Sorry, sorry. But it’s pretty nice, right?”

I calmed down and inspected the weapon. It was actually pretty impressive.

“It’s spring-loaded,” he said with pride.

“So…” I said, carefully holding the thing. “You rigged a knife into a mechanic’s wrench.”

“I’ll show you. Hold this bag of marbles.”

“Where do you get—“

“Won them off of a kid inside. He plays for keeps.”

“So do you, right?”

“Hold the marbles. Pretend that it’s money or something.”

“Fine,” I agreed, taking the bag. “I am holding the marbles.”

“All right.” With a delicate push of his finger, Kitt retracted the wrench-blade back into its hideaway slot and spun the weapon with gusto in his palm. “Now pretend to be walking.”

“Why?”

“Just do it,” he eagerly insisted. “Walk in place.”

I started walking in place as I clung onto a bag of marbles and felt like the world’s greatest idiot. Kitt strolled up beside me and matched my pantomime.

“Good afternoon, sir!” he said in a false tone. “Lovely weather we are having!”

“Uh…right. Lovely weather. Perfect for…loitering on a viewing deck.”

“Yes, yes! It is! Good day to you!”

“And to you.” I took a step forward. Kitt seized this opportunity to duck to my side and swing his wrench toward the bag. The blade popped out and sliced it clean. The bulk of the sack plopped and fell onto the floor as I moved ahead.

“I hate to continue interrupting this story, Pocket.”

“Go ahead, Alan.”

“I mean, that’s pretty clever. The hideaway blade.”

“I agree.”

“ Sneakier way for a cutpurse to cut a purse. They never see the knife coming.”

“Right.”

“But why build it into a wrench of all things?”

“I’ll get to that.”

“Still, as I said, pretty clever.”

“Sure. Impressive.”

“You don’t seem that impressed.”

“Oh, I was, when it happened. Somewhat. I probably would’ve been more so if Kitt hadn’t just cut open a bag full of marbles.”

“Ohhhhh...”

The bag fell to the floor with a clack and a hundred colorful balls of glass started rolling in every direction across the deck.

“Kitt!” I barked, pivoting my foot to keep from tripping on them.

“It’s okay,” he responded. “I’ll pick them up.”

“No! I mean...” I stopped myself. Too late. Dozens of marbles slipped beneath the railing and rolled right off of the ship. Kitt and I ran to the rails and watched as they fell. Marbles raining from the sky.

“Wow, look at that,” Kitt said. “Marbles from the sky.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Kind of beautiful in a way.”

We watched in quiet appreciation as the little things fell to Earth. How they glistened in the sun like little pieces of hard candy. How they cut through the clouds and slid through the sky. How they

violently punctured the ground, causing people to run and drop and hide and cover to keep from having their skulls cracked.

Ah.

“Watch your heads!” Kitt yelled. “Renegade marbles!”

“I don't think they can hear you from there.”

We watched, frozen to our spot, as people ran for cover under the fast-falling glass rain.

Citizens ducked and dodged. A man extended his umbrella moments before he would've been popped in the forehead. A frantic baker began swinging a thick loaf to the sky, swatting them away.

Finally, the coast seemed clear, and apart from a few angry fists pointed in our direction, the danger seemed to be over. Kitt slowly relaxed and let his heel rest on a larger shooter marble.

“That could have been bad,” he said, and with a breath and, I suspect, hardly half a thought, eased his foot and let the shooter roll out over the edge.

“Kitt!” I immediately piped.

“What?” he momentarily wondered before gasping. “Oh, Hell!”

Fortunately, by that point our zeppelin was passing over an empty backstreet behind, eh, I think it was a billiard hall. *Unfortunately*, the back door of said parlor swung open and, in an act of rotten timing, a blond man exited into the street and stepped directly into the marble's path.

There was a faint crash. We couldn't get a clear view of what had happened.

“Did that hit him?” Kitt asked, panicking.

“I don't know.”

“If he's hurt, then we're in deep trouble! Really, really—“

“Wait a minute, I see him! I think he's okay!”

“Really?”

“He's standing. I can't imagine I would be if I got hit like that.”

“Binoculars,” Kitt decreed.

“Right!”

We both picked an eyehole and focused. Our view was magnified, but we couldn't see much more than the basic shape of the blond man pacing. And yelling. Pacing and yelling. We couldn't hear the gentleman, but his expressions were exaggerated enough that we had no problem reading the words, mostly cursing, from his lips.

“Damn it!” he shouted from below.

“We're sorry!” Kitt shouted back.

“He can't hear you,” I said.

With almost magical timing, the blond looked directly up to the sky. He must've caught our ship, because he raised an angry fist in our direction.

“That could've killed me!” he shouted.

“We know! And we apologize!” Kitt needlessly responded.

“Who throws a marble off of a ship?!? Seriously!”

“It was an accident!”

“Damn it! I...just, damn it!”

“I said, we're sorry! We did try to warn you!”

I tried once more to interject. “Kitt, he can't—“

“We would've warned you if we could've!”

I gave up trying and sat down. Eventually, the zeppelin floated away from the irritated gentleman's alley and Kitt was forced to let the matter be. He turned his attention to the remaining marbles rolling around the deck. He quickly gathered them up, and tied off the torn bag.

“That was an ordeal,” he said, sitting down.

“Yeah.”

“Do you think...do you think that guy wants to punch us?”

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. “I couldn't say.”

Kitt started laughing too.

And then, as if Lady Fate had noticed that we were feeling relaxed again, a siren moaned loudly throughout the ship. The clamor of flustered passengers banging around inside made Kitt and I shut our eyes, ignoring for a moment the inevitable.

“Should we go in now?” Kitt asked.

“Hang on. A second more,” I said, briefly inhaling the sky. “All right. Let’s go.”

The aisles were crowded. People pushed and jerked back and forth in a bit of a frenzy while the evening gown matron tried her best to soothe the mob with a bit of enunciated assurance that they we all were in no great danger. When we had finally gotten back to our seats, we found the Doll sitting with a small golden tube.

“Where have you been?” she asked as the matron hurried down the aisle, pushing against our backs.

“In your seats!” the matron demanded.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

“Small engine issue. We request that all passengers remain in the proper seating until the issue is resolved.”

“Yeah, but—“

“Into your seats, sirs!”

We were soon belted into our cushions as the siren continued its song.

“Is there a problem?” the Doll asked.

“Eh...” I mumbled. “Possibly.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Kitt said. “Probably nothing.”

“What makes you so sure?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Hopeful thinking.”

“Great.”

“She said it was a small problem.”

“This is noisy,” the Doll said. “Make it stop!”

“I don't...wait...”

The siren stopped. The mobs hushed.

“Thank you,” the Doll said to no one in particular.

“See,” Kitt added. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah...” I looked around the cabin with cautious relief. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Across the path, a honey blonde mother with tightly-pulled hair dragged her young son into a pair of seats and promptly scolded him for losing all of his shiny new marbles.

Ug. I wasn't sure what I needed, but I fairly sure it came in a tall glass, sun still up or not. I pulled an old watch and chain from my pocket and checked the time. 3:33. It was going to be a long day.

Hours later, I found myself in a different seat under a different patch of sky with the same watch and chain in my hand. I scraped up some dirt with my heels and looked at the clock face.

3:33.

Right. It had broken months ago. Why do I always forget little significances like that?

I rolled my head backward and popped my neck. I was sitting on a bench in the middle of a clearing where once stood a rather elegant park, a place of golden autumns and bicycling. Apparently more time had passed than I thought since I'd last visited, because the place was now little more than a half-wet dirt hole, the golds and reds of the trees replaced by chocolate browns. Mud. Kitt and the Doll made strings of footprints as they ran through it, fanciful, looping, little designs. There was a little snow on the ground, sure, but not enough to cover the dirt. The meeting of the seasons in England is an interesting thing. I've learned to keep a trained eye to it. There is a moment where the grand final crash of autumn meets with the subtle oncoming of winter. About this time, when snow begins falling in the dead of night, blanketing the ground and keeping the ribs of unlucky bastards from cracking when they

are thrown out of bars into bottle-seizing fox men. Every so many years or so, I actually catch snow frosting on top of a few toughened autumn leaves before they drop from their branches. I tell you, if you want a sight that really sticks to you, forgo the theaters and the brothels and find yourself a frosted leaf. Find the reddened fire boiling under the smooth and crispy white skin. Find the transition of time captured in a piece of lovely Miss Nature and tell me there's no meaning in this world. And hey, let's see the King's industry replicate a feeling as satisfying as that.

Anyhow, I'm off track. There was nothing like that around because the clearing was mud. Kitt led the Doll around, pointing out trees and squirrels to her. I took in some air.

“What's got you down down, my boy boy?”

A man in rags had appeared from God knows where next to me on the bench, his legs squeezed together and his forehead wrapped in bandages.

“Eh?” I said, addressing him. “Who said I was down?”

“Your face did, boy boy!”

I smiled at the odd beggar. He started sniffing in the air.

“Double trouble, boy boy,” he said, smelling...I don't know...life?

“Trouble?”

I wasn't in the mood for this.

“Be thou now an adventurer?” he asked.

“I wouldn't know.”

“One should always know what one is, yo, ho!”

“Mmm...” My thoughts drifted for the moment to the Frenchman. I ought to introduce this kook...

“Hey hoo!” he said. “I know what you need! Direction!”

“Direction?”

“Direction of the spirit! The spirit!”

“Oh. So you're...what? A member of the clergy?”

“Ha and ha, boy boy! I'm a seer extraordinaire!”

“Are you?”

“Indeed, I am, I am! An old hand in the ethereal arts! For a small fee, I can find in any lost soul a path forward to fruition! Would you care to be shown the way?”

Small fee. I get it now. Fortune teller.

“Sure, I could use a few wise words.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“You've got money?”

“I've got this.”

I handed over the only coinage I had, the imitation silver token I had received as a proof of purchase for the zeppelin tour. He held it close to his eye, inspected the etched image of a rosy-cheeked, smiling airship, and then flipped it on his thumb.

“That works.”

He pressed his hand against my forehead, closed his eyes, and started humming some unknown song. This went on for about a minute, then he promptly stopped, nodded, handed me a slip of paper from his pocket, and scurried away without another word.

Stupefied, I remained on the bench, alone and slowly playing with the slip of paper in my hand. Finally I got bored enough and unfolded the scrap.

TRUST THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN BEARD.

Golden beard?

It seemed a rather vague and altogether pointless way to pinpoint one's path to a glorious tomorrow. I balled it up.

Across the way, I watched the Doll slowly inch herself closer to a fat-faced squirrel on a rock. She was within reaching distance when Kitt clamored up behind her and scared it away. I checked my watch. 3:33. This day was moving slow.

“You okay?” Kitt asked, the two returning to the bench for a breather. Well, for him a breather and for the Doll, uh, whatever she does to rest.

“I’m supposed to find a yellow beard,” I explained.

“What?”

I showed them the scrap. The Doll wrinkled her nose at it.

“Skeptical,” she said.

I shrugged and watched as she again took out a small, golden tube.

“What is that?” I asked. “I saw you with it on the tour.”

She pulled off the top and revealed a fresh roll of lipstick.

“A gift,” she proudly said.

“Where’d you get it?”

“Woman in the sky.”

“I wouldn’t use it.”

“Of course. You’re a boy.”

“I mean, *you* shouldn’t use it, Dolly.”

“Why not? It’s pretty.”

“It came from someone else. How clean do you think it is?”

“She said it was brand new.”

“Just the same...”

The Watchmaker’s Doll went ahead and ignored me, pursing her lips and lifting the tube to them.

“Dolly—“ I began.

“Hush. Now, hold still. I need your face.”

“Eh?”

She pushed one of her small hands against my cheek, steadying my head, and leaned forward to me. I realized she was peering into my green half-glass. Or rather, her reflection in it. Then, studying the mirrored image, Dolly took her lipstick and began painting. Softly, like a baker drawing lines of frosting across the top of a great cake, she traced the girlish shape of her lips and puckered once, then twice.

“How do I look?” she asked me.

“Fine,” I said, looking at my boots. “Um, pretty nice.”

She puckered again and then let out a soft moan.

“I'm bored,” she announced.

“Me too,” Kitt agreed.

“This place is muddy.”

“A little bit,” I admitted. “You want to move on?”

“To where?” Dolly asked.

I shrugged again. She moaned again. Kitt rolled his head.

“Someone lost their balloons,” he said, looking up at the sky. I glanced skyward. An entire cluster of hydrogen-filled, toy balloons, blue with yellow stars, were floating above our heads.

“Flock of 'loons,” the Doll said to her own amusement.

“Where do you think they came from?” I asked.

“There's some kind of caravan on the other side of the park,” Kitt said. “Looks like they were selling things.”

The Doll perked up and gave Kitt a hopeful stare.

“Do you suppose they sell 'loons?”

The fox grinned.

“Perhaps... Don't know...but perhaps...”

“Say Pocket...”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind taking an intermission for a minute? I've gotta run these old glasses to the back.”

“I can talk pretty loud. You'd probably be able to hear from back there.”

“Eh, don't wanna risk it. It'll be just a minute, I swear.”

“Sigh...fine. Oh. Hey, Alan. There's someone knocking on the front door.”

“Tell them we're closed.”

“I don't work here.”

“Pocket, I've got my hands a little full at the moment.”

“All right. I'll handle it. Just—Hang on! I'm coming for the door! One moment! Let me get it—ah! There we are. Hello?”

“...hello...”

“Hello, miss. I'm sorry, but we've already closed for the night.”

“...closed...but I...”

“Yes. Afraid so. Bad timing.”

“...oh...I see...”

“Probably best that you head back from where you came. Shelter up. Get out of the weather.”

“...suppose I should...”

“Uh, are you all right, miss? Miss, I...what...excuse me, what are you—“

“Goodnight.”

“Um, goodnight to you, madame...huh...odd...”

“Pocket?”

“Yes, Alan?”

“What was that about?”

“I’m not sure. Some woman looking for a drink. Told her we were closed and she started whistling in my ear.”

“Whistling?”

“Isn’t that the damndest thing?”

“Probably a drunk at this time of night.”

“Right...”

“Come on. Back to the bar and sit down. Get on with that story.”

“Uh...sure...I mean, right, of course. Where was I?”

“The Dolly wants some balloons.”

“Mmm...”

“Pocket?”

“Right! Sorry, Alan. I was...that whistling, something about that tune that—“

“Pocket.”

“What?”

“Balloons.”

“Right, right.”

The caravan Kitt had noticed was parked on its red-and-mud-painted wagon wheels on the other side of the clearing. Fold-out shelves revealed numerous knick-knacks and contraptions while a large banner was hung above the whole operation. “THE MARVELOUS MARINS' MODERN CURIOSITY SHOP AND CURE-ALL TRAVELING PHARMACY,” it read.

Medicine peddlers. No thanks.

A hissing sound was heard from the side of the caravan and the Doll hurried over without thought. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and grudgingly followed behind.

A round-faced man with a wild look in his eyes sat bent over a set of small steps that led up to a breakaway wooden stage that had been erected and slammed against the wagon. A cluster of yellow-on-blue balloons were bunched together and tied by their strings around the man's left shoe.

A long, yellow beard flowed from his chin.

Under his arms was a large, and noticeably rusty, canister with a coiled nozzle springing from the end. He was in the act of stretching a deflated balloon over the nozzle with one hand while turning a valve with the other. It squeaked at his touch and the balloon began to expand.

“That's pretty neat,” Kitt said. The man turned his eyes on him and the balloon popped off of the nozzle, the air inside firing it like a shot into the trees.

“Oh...” Kitt said. “I'm sorry. Do you need some help with that?”

The man just gave a wild grin and began to giggle. A second voice came from inside the wagon.

“The good doctor is a modern man!” the voice from within shouted. “He needs no assistance with the grapples of technology!”

Grapples of technology?

“Let him be with his craft! Let him be!”

We looked at the man, the “doctor,” for confirmation of this claim. He widened his grin and puffed up his cheeks.

“My brother is excitable,” the yellow-beard chortled, reaching for a fresh balloon. “What do you need from me?”

“Nothing,” I tried to say over the Doll's persisting questions.

“You are the keeper of the balloons?” she asked. “Are they for sale?”

He somehow managed to widen his grin even further.

“Everything is for sale.”

He launched into an excited pitch into the simple wonder of balloons, such a subtle luxury for our day and age. He recalled a hunting expedition he claimed he had once led through the frozen Arctic at the ends of the world. He spoke of rolling over ice-coated fields, spearing mammoths and polar bears from his perch upon a large, gas-powered traveler's balloon.

“You can balloon through the Arctic?” I asked dryly.

He giggled again and tipped his toes toward us, moving the cluster of inflated balloons for the Doll to view. She bent forward and softly poked her finger into the middle of a yellow star. The group bounced against each other.

“I had another bunch,” the doctor said, referring to the flock in the sky. “But they must've jumped ship.”

I was tempted run off into the distance as quickly as my legs could take me, but then the strange balloonist began stroking his yellow beard and I remembered my fortune. Surely it must be a coincidence, but as a man of stories and limericks, of legend and myth and tales grand, I was compelled to...no, actually, I still wasn't buying into it.

But regardless...

I planted myself and listened to what he had to say, which was surprisingly little. He spoke in brief statements and chuckles, letting his gazes and gestures instead do the telling. I was waiting for the inevitable moment when he would start throwing price tags at the Doll, whose deep eyes would turn on me or Kitt in inquiry of how such a glorious thing as a balloon could be in her sweet possession.

Before that scene was able to play out, however, the voice from the wagon decided to return.

“Brother!” it shouted. “The frog's loose again!”

The doctor sighed and twisted his neck towards the wagon.

“Well, put a bit of cheese in his cage and he'll wander back!”

“I did!”

“Which cheese?”

“The yellow!”

“Not that cheese! The *good* cheese! Are you trying to insult him? The whiter bits.”

“Fine!”

A man kicked open a door and stomped out of the caravan, picking rags off of his body. The rags were instantly recognizable to me and I began grinding my teeth. The would-be beggar from the park plucked off his impoverished costume, revealing a rather stately, albeit slightly beaten and torn, waistcoat monogrammed with a capital “P” over the breast pocket.

“Though if you ask me, the frog should start pulling his weight around here if he expects to dine upon...oh...hello.”

He had caught sight of me. I crossed my arms and frowned.

“Trust the golden beard, right?”

The doctor giggled at his brother and let another balloon off into the sky.

“So I see you met the Marin boys.”

“You know them, Alan?”

“You joking? You can't get away from them in this city. They drive that heap around, shouting about the progress of society and the mechanical future, and sell you soap.”

“That seems about right.”

“They told me they were financial opportunists, riding the—”

“The wave of tomorrow on the back of innovation.”

“Right. You didn't buy anything off of them, did you Pocket?”

“No. To keep me quiet about the fortune teller scam, they gave the Doll a clump of balloons free of charge. Why, have you?”

“Miracle soap.”

“How'd it work out?”

“Turned my toes three colors I didn't know existed.”

“Miraculous.”

“Exactly.”

The Doll sat and admired her acquisition as the Marvelous Marins formally introduced themselves. The man with the balloons and the maniac's grin stood, bowed, and peeled the false horsehair beard off of his actual naked chin. He was wearing a jacket, similar to his brother's, monogrammed with a “D” but in slightly better wear. D. Oswald Marin, or Doctor D, as he dubbed himself, was the self-described “eyes” of the peddling outfit. Speaking of outfits, his was a sight. Every piece of clothing he was dressed in was tagged and priced, as the man was literally quite eager to sell the shirt from his back. And it wasn't just clothing that he wore. Draped across his entire person were pieces of available merchandise. Slightly-used pots and pans hung from his waist on ropes, as did shoes, cutlery, teacups on a string, and even children's toys. He was a storefront on two legs, an ornament of seller's tags.

His twin brother, the quite vocal P. Cosgrove Marin, alias Doctor P, was the self-proclaimed and obviously-evident “voice” of the operation. Doctor P was the proverbial silver-tongued merchant, singing in the streets to man and woman, elder and child, dog and cat, whoever would listen and stood a chance at buying what his brother had gathered to sell. Doctor P was also never above putting his own safety on the line to clinch a sale, as when he once donned wheeled skates and...heh, well, I'll get to that later.

The Marin boys specialized in peddling rare potions, creams, balms...

“Soaps...”

“Soaps, right. Thank you, Alan.”

...random amenities of house and home, and what they considered “modern gadgetry.” They painted a verbal picture of me and Kitt ascending to a position of men of industry, leading Britain in its march toward a technological era of prosperity.

“These guys are sounding like the King with a worse shave job,” Kitt whispered to me.

“Not interested in progress, Kitt?”

“Oh sure, I am. I guess. How does one, uh, progress to an era of prosperity?”

“Best I can figure, by buying their junk.”

“Are you being sarcastic, Pocket?”

“Yes I am, Kitt.”

The Marins also tried to build up the Doll with the idea of becoming a modern woman, but she ignored them, much more taken with playing with her balloons. I apologize, reader, listener, Alan, or whoever, if my narrative representation of her is striking you as overtly childlike. I am aware that she has these tendencies, but I can assure you...well...she is also so much more.

Anyhow, the Marins insisted that we look about their mobile shop before leaving the park. They simply wouldn't take “no” for an answer, which is unfortunate, as I wasn't prepared to offer anything else. But they seemed altogether harmless so I smiled and let them show me their shop. Weird gadgets lined their shelves. They appeared to be small machines, but different from the machines that I had found strewn throughout the watchmaker's basement in that the watchmaker's devices appeared to be functional. Kitt picked up an apple-shaped contraption and rubbed some grease off of it.

“That's eight pounds,” Doctor P said.

“Weight or price?” Kitt asked.

“Hrmmm...” He shot a look to his brother who made a string of silent hand signals back.

“Both.”

“What does it do?”

“It cures madness.”

“Madness?”

“Yes. Revolutionary thing. Cobbled by a Swiss mathematician who dabbled in these things.”

“Dabbled in what now?”

“The device, quite ingeniously, reads your fingershapes.”

“Prints.”

“Reads your fingerprints and calculates from the shape the very nature of your mental instability, you know, finger pattern, brain pattern, and radiates a certain pheromone, it's invisible and odorless, don't try to detect it, radiates a pheromone that when taken in through the nostrils adjusts your mental chemistry to that of a completely normal state.”

“And it works?”

“Of course it works! Think I'd sell it if it didn't?”

“Well...”

“And it's legal, sure, just new. Society always scoffs at the new at first. That's why you don't read about these in the papers. Innovation is always controversial, am I right? Right. But only a matter of time, days, I'd wager, until you see these things in every hospital and asylum and birthing room in London. Best to snag one now while the price is cheap!”

“But...” Kitt continued, determined to take this seriously. “If it releases a pheromone, couldn't someone nearby the...crazy person...risk sniffing and injecting the wrong chemical calculation?”

“Agh! Questions, questions! That's all progress ever gets! Look, that's why you don't stand by people with devices and go sniffing at them! Poor manners as well!”

“Very poor,” I added with a laugh.

“Thank you, yes. See, your friend with the spoon in his hat understands sensibilities.”

“I don't know,” Kitt said.

“Then put it down and try another. Watch. Do you see this?”

He was clenching a long, metal, pump and nozzle device.

“Now,” he said. “What do you suppose this is?”

The Doll looked up and began running her eyes over the piece.

“No idea,” Kitt said.

“Well!” the doctor said, tossing it in his hands. “What if I was to tell you that this component, when attached to the underside of any standard electric carriage, *any* standard one, creates a scientific field of human energy...”

“Human energy...”

“...that's right, a powerful field of science that allows the vehicle and its passengers to travel forwards and backwards across the whole of time itself? What if I was to tell you that?”

“It's a steam injector,” the Doll said, returning her interest to her balloons. We all stared at her. She noticed and said, “You know. Like from a steam engine. It coverts...um...fluid pressure. Some of these balloons are bigger than the others. I enjoy that.”

How could...

Kitt and I shared an unspoken conversation on this odd girl, and then, desperate not to lose the moment, Doctor P grabbed the fox boy and continued.

“Well, yes, sure, you can use it for that too, I suppose. If you want to be mundane. You know what? Forget it. I've got better. How about this? This one chews your food for you. Save precious minutes and years of cheek decay.”

I sat down with the Doll and watched Kitt play with “progress” for a bit. Then an idea struck me.

“Mister Marin?” I called.

“Doctor.”

“Right, sure. Why not? Doctor D then, was it?” I asked, as the man's brother talked Kitt's head off.

“Yes.”

“I understand you gather these oddities from across the globe.”

“I do,” he proudly replied. “And I have never found an oddity or curio that I have refused to sell.”

“Really?” I began to smile. “Then perhaps I can interest you in another acquisition.”

I'll skip the oncoming disaster. The Marins refused to purchase my bottle of faerie juice, despite much banter and begging on my part, on Doctor D's rule that “a wise man does not peddle what he cannot sample.”

“So why not let him taste the stuff?”

“Because...ug...I couldn't.”

“Why?”

“Because I've...eh...never been able to remove the cork.”

“What?”

“From the bottle.”

“Ever?!?”

“I've tried. A lot. Nearly broke my thumb once.”

“And that's why you've never—”

“Never tried it. That's correct. And stop laughing.”

After trying in vain for a good twenty minutes to remove the cork from my bottle, I gave up and asked once more if the gentlemen would reconsider buying it on good word.

“A wise salesman does not peddle what he cannot sample,” Doctor D repeated.

I sighed and noticed that beside me the Doll was frowning again. Apparently she took this as some great insult to my person. I scratched my head and gave the pitch one last effort.

“Did I mention that it...supposedly...contains my eternal essence?”

“Big deal,” Doctor P said, opening a cabinet. “So do those.”

The shelves were stacked with rounded, capped jars. They were empty, or so, in the words of the Marins, they would appear.

“Phantasmal entrapment!” said Doctor D.

“Specters under glass!” said Doctor P.

“But these jars look empty,” Kitt said, taking one and unscrewing the lid.

“No!” the Marins both shouted. Kitt dropped the jar and the merchants began hopping across the stage, cupping their hands and swinging at thin air like a child trying to catch butterflies.

“You've done it now!” Doctor P shouted, climbing onto the roof of the caravan. “You've released the King!”

“The King?” Kitt said. “Which king?”

“His honor, Henry V!”

“Henry V?!?” Kitt repeated, exasperated.

“Back to your quarters, sire!” Doctor P shouted.

“Come Hal!” Doctor D shouted.

“I'm sorry,” Kitt said. “I always thought the dead were all around us.”

“They are *now*, thank you!” Doctor D grabbed the open jar and started swinging it. “Back, sire! Back!”

“I think we should go now,” the Doll said, gripping her balloons.

“I agree with Dolly,” Kitt said.

“All right, just one moment,” I said. I took a step and called out to the king catchers.

“Gentlemen! Are you sure you might not reconsider—“

“Hang on, brother!” Doctor P shouted, hanging backward off of the roof. “Over here, I've got him cornered and pinned!”

“Yeah, let's go.” I said.

Turning on our heels, the three of us hurried from the spectacle. Leaving the park, I gripped the glass that was hanging by my side. Looking down, I could see the exaggerated reflection of my face in it. My mirrored nose bent and swelled above my closed mouth. I exhaled, fogging the glass.

“You say something, Pocket?” Kitt asked.

“No. Just thinking,” I said, rubbing away the fog. “Just thinking.”

And that is the story of how my unlucky bottle of goop became the first and only oddity, curio, or collectible not to be collected by the Marvelous Marins's Curiosity Shop and Cure-All Traveling Pharmacy.

Not to boast.

“Charming little day for you, wasn't it?”

“Almost, Alan.”

“Almost?”

“The day's end was a bit...sigh. Would you hate me if I asked you to open a barrel and fill a glass for me?”

“Come on. I'm trying to close here.”

“You could've done that an hour ago.”

“You've had enough, haven't you?”

“Well...”

“Sigh. I'll have to add it to your tab, Pocket.”

“Fair enough. I'll just add an extra chapter.”

“I don't know. Do you *have* an extra chapter?”

“Uh...let me think...yes! Sure, I can throw in this bit with me and Gren and a windmill. It's a little silly, but you'd like it.”

“Who's Gren?”

“Oh, right. I haven't mentioned...well, we'll get there, Alan. We'll get there. Now how about that drink?”

“Fine...just keep talking.”

The sun was dipping and shading the sky orange by the time we made our way through the back alleys that led to the abandoned watch shop. Kitt stretched his back and ran his fingers against the brick and stone on each side as he walked. The Doll followed behind him through the passage with me bringing up the rear.

“Not a bad picnic,” Kitt said, relaxed.

“Although we never actually picnicked,” I pointed out.

The Doll nodded and pulled from her basket a few cans of tinned fruit she had gathered from uninterested passengers on the zeppelin.

“Thanks,” Kitt said, sucking back preserved peaches. I joined them, chewing tabs of apple mush as we walked.

“Not a bad little meal,” I said. The Doll smiled back at me.

“I told you I could go outside,” she beamed.

“Yes, I stand completely corrected. Although I'm a little surprised it went so well.”

“I'm not,” she said with a matter-of-fact tone. “I took my key out, remember.”

“Sure, but you still have that spinning screw in your stomach.”

“Only one lady in the sky noticed. Asked me if it was some sort of new jewelry.”

“Oh? And what did you say?”

Another smile. “Broach!”

A little low to wear a broach, but I let it be and retrieved the turnkey from my coat.

“I suppose I should return this,” I said, popping the collapsed hinges back into shape.

“We're not there yet. Keep it a little longer.”

“Eh? All right.” I held it at my side like a sheathed sword and felt, and I realize this is a quite silly confession, momentarily knightly. A few more steps and I admired the engraving again.

“Two weeks,” I said out loud. The Doll turned her head back and gave me a startling look. It was a deep, somber look I was not yet accustomed to seeing from her and her eyes seemed almost to lose much of their color, the vibrant hues replaced with a dulled shine.

“Two weeks,” she said, barely above a whisper. Her voice was cold, deadened but not lifeless, pleading but not expectant. “Two weeks. Never forget.”

I stopped moving for a minute and then, propelled by the sincerity on her face, I nodded. She smiled a little, but the coldness was still there. I resumed my pace. We walked in silence for the remainder of the journey.

“There,” Kitt said, turning a corner. The large paper clock face revealed itself above the rooftops in the distance. “Almost home, Dolly.”

She didn't respond.

It was strange, but as we approached our destination I realized that I was a little sad that this whole little episode was coming to a close. These two had become more than a handful, but all and all no trouble came of it, and they weren't terrible traveling companions. Perhaps if that idiot Magnate had hesitated before chucking me into the night, I would've only spent it sitting alone in the dark. Ah well, I remember thinking as we approached the shop, more fodder for stories.

I closed my eyes and stretched my arms behind my head.

Ah well. All good things must come to an end.

Thud. I ran into the Doll who ran into Kitt who stumbled over his feet.

“Pocket...” he said quite quietly.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry,” I said, opening my eyes, “I'll watch where I'm...oh.”

The three picnickers stood on a mound before a shop. A shop once opened by a watchmaker, later closed, later broken into, and later abandoned by a turnkey girl and her escorts.

And currently surrounded, nay, swarmed with British officers. Each redfaced and bristled and clinging to quick-triggered rifles. And each muttering words like “villainy” and “grand theft.”

And “shoot on sight.”

By the next morning, the British monarchy had officially named Will Pocket and Kitt Sunner as enemies to the Crown, and released a price for our heads that contained more zeros than I thought existed.

All good things...

