

The Internal Clock

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"I would grind all the Gothic arches in the world to powder to save
the sanity of a single human soul"

- Father Brown in The Doom of the Darnaways, G.K. Chesterton.

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Darkness

projected an icy cold towards S's fingers. Not an overbearing cold - just a tingling. A tingling that was annoyingly exacerbated by a lack of visual stimuli. She'd been there long enough for the coloured spots in front of her eyes to go away. Just blackness. But that in itself was a comfort as it meant nothing had to be done yet. So S sat. And sat.

There are many ways to alleviate boredom and frustration. S tapped her fingers against her knees. Soon, she could feel a slight pulse in the fingertips - they were after all the only part of her body that moved. I wonder how nervous I am. S decided to measure her pulse. The time between the first and the second beat was about 50/57th of a second. Good. Pretty normal. The next one was 52/57th, then 53, then somewhere in between 51 and 52 - she couldn't decide which. Nothing drastic - guess I'm fine. Unless I've merely convinced myself of the fact.

S wondered if her sense improved by being still and in the dark. She was about to try and measure her heartbeat with a more adventurous unit (say, a 114th) when her train-going-to-nowhere of thoughts was upturned by the sound of at least one being entering the room. S silently dashed to the hole, almost grinding her ear into it with eagerness.

Two sets of footsteps were heard approaching, along with an infinitely-dim light coming from a slightly-open door. S thought she could just make out the planks of the inside of her box along with the straw. Alternatively, it could be her over-inflated imagination. A polished, confident male voice broke her sense of being in a capsule...

"...and then we have the folks who try to bring in questionable things: Baronial turkeys or ducks, shells, wool, you know the rest. So I've had to open up every box looking for things. Every shipment means a loss of sl--- uh, bloody work hauling ass around these boxes."

He was answered by a coarser voice, belonging to a man who (S was sure of it!) was past middle-age, middle-weight and middle-coordination. "Sure, contraband's always a problem. People do what's profitable as they have been since...immemorial...memory, and no number of Baronial generations will change that, bless him."

"You said it! Still, it's annoying."

"That's why you're the trade oversee.. Hey listen - have you ever had people try to smuggle things slightly more...illegal?" This was asked with the honest simplicity of the simpleton trying to be subtle.

"Such as..?"

"Umm...like..." (S mentally giggled at the idea of the man sweating in angst) "...clocks?"

"Mr. Director of Supplies!" bellowed the smooth voice with just the right level of indignation. "I get paid good money to uphold Baronial rule, and I don't appreciate blasphemous insinuations."

"Of course, of course. Still, all kinds of people in this world."

"Just get the labourers, I wanna move something today. Say, those four boxes."

"Of course. Certainly. No, really, you're doing a great job," said the coarse voice whilst diminishing. It was a given the weasel was backing away respectfully while bobbing his head up and down in a placating manner. Still trying to smooth over his blunder.

She was left alone with the smooth-voiced man.

"How's it holding up, kid? I didn't make you wait too long?"

"Screw you! I'm not a kid. And you better show some respect -- or I might accidentally cough when they're moving my box and then it's you in the Room."

"Oh, I apologise, your Dozing Highness. Allow me to rephrase myself. Did I cause thee distress by my tactless and inexcusable delay?"

"Slightly better. I'm fine. You were only gone six hours." She could feel his eyes light up.

"I bet you can probably tell me the minutes, seconds, crowns and hilts as well. I'm really starting to believe in my plan."

"I bet I could, but I'm no performing primate. Besides since when is it your plan?..Clever thing you did with the supply guy though, mentioning the idea of smuggling and then turning the suspicion of blasphemy on him."

"Thank you! he's from the fifth floor though, they all have the yearning for the Art. Supply people and the rest of the business occupations - they've never quite accepted the Chestnut. Non-allegiance is in their bone marrow even if none of them have been aware of it for centuries. In fact-"

"In fact you should shut up and concentrate on surviving the evening. Or do you have some ulterior profit motive for smuggling me in?" The last sentence was a crescendoing accusation. "I admit, profit has something to do with it-. Feisty are we? The Council will love you - the last of the Masters left, and she's a woman with the tongue the likes of which none of them have encountered in their usual lives!"

"Well I'm sorry, somehow I missed the Tower School for Ladies in my formative years-- quiet, they're coming"

"Certainly, my gracious eminence."

S smiled as she pictured T doing the mock salute she's seen so much of ever since the great Plan to save the tower was formed.

Exactly half an hour later, her box was carried by four men through the streets of the eighth floor. S hated being every second in every public thoroughfare or open space. It was being trapped in an all-pervasive ball of oppression made worse by the fact that she was one of the few that actually felt it. That and the unnatural smell of the social atmosphere that most nostrils missed. Even with her vision obscured by the fact of her being in a wooden box meant for chickens (complete with straw), it was still bad enough. She looked through the hole. Pockets of people lined the streets, walking, speaking, doing their crafts outside their habitations; eating, giving, receiving, roasting and consuming Chestnuts; raising children, getting married, divorced, hired, dismissed; handling small animals, building, disassembling. Hah! What people? This wasn't even organized or purposeful enough to be called a rabble. A bee hive, ant colony or termite hill had more humanity through the trait of organization. These people had no organization at all, and little humanity expressed through individuality. S guessed that most of the figures she saw through the peephole haven't had a clear head for over ten generations. A mass without a purpose. There was no life-span. They may say hell lasts an eternity but this existence turned out to be as close to the scenario as possible. All were like fabled moths that live for but a day. Except unlike moths that day was excruciatingly long and more pointless. They were born at the proverbial 9 am (as most lived till 60 so there is a fairly neat scaling factor), taught till 2 pm (meaning it took eight years until something basic like a craft sunk in), married at 3 pm (meaning their initials were selected by the matchmaker randomly -- what point was there in matching people by character if there was little opportunity to develop some kind of human character?!), kids at 3:30 (a pregnancy being the greatest moment of clarity in a woman's life in the Tower - how unlucky the men were!), retirement at 7 and at last, midnight signaling both the end of the Day Most Pointless and a fading into the second oblivion. S saw everyone on this level of the Tower, at all stages in their day - all the times and rhythms of the world mixed into a stew of nothingness.

She saw a smithie bent over his anvil right on the street, churning out some clamp-like things. There were over a hundred scattered around him. About half were good, the rest were unfinished who-knows-whats; knotted bits of wire and intermeshed slabs of sheet metal. 'Twas almost as if he didn't know what he was making while in the midst of making it.

She saw a woman hesitating in front of a food shop, as if unsure if she were hungry or not. The woman was clearly lost and somewhat disoriented, but the scariest thing was that she seemed blank. She wasn't even distressed at or aware of being disoriented. S shivered.

She saw an elderly pair of twins sitting on crates. They were both in their thin and frail years, with most of the lines in the image S saw being vertical, originating from the long creases in the clothes around their limbs. However they were different to the other elderly folk in the street, for they held themselves up quite well both in terms of physical posture and the demeanour in their eyes. While they seemed as if they could be snapped at any point in time, their eyes revealed that there was still something behind the facade, unlike the usual emptiness under the walking corpse. Both men had small and well-trimmed pointy beards, another almost-unique aspect of appearance in the Tower. These twins S knew from before - they were very well known to all Masters as the only ones of the ordinary people who have had a reasonable life. Their two favourite pastimes were playing Gonta and philosophizing. All the Masters admired them - most collapse completely from the world of self-awareness upon retirement, but these would meet and play a set number of games (nine). This would last about three hours and then the brothers would part. This little eccentricity of theirs was salvation itself. S looked again and sighed. They weren't playing now; rather, they were involved in a debate. This meant they could be there for anything between one and a hundred hours. Still, their minds were sharp and S, catching a fragment, thought this was more coherent than anything she'd ever heard from the masses by some orders of magnitude. They were debating cosmology - namely what, if anything, was beyond the limits of the Tower, and whether even the idea of an Outside was impossible. S smiled.

She saw a table with a woman and a man (married?) painting something and her countenance fell, as if nothing good and true ever existed in the world. The couple were painting wooden egg-shaped objects. Heads. Of Puppets. Immediately S was a bloodhound, baring her fangs. Enough of this. She went back to the wall of the box. Bastards. Bastards and their tools.

Bastardly

looking up from the feast table, W put down the goose neck to express yet another laudable witticism.

"Maybe for tomorrow the goose isn't enough - we should get something with a longer neck" said W alluding to the Baron R's recent argument with his nephew E (the etymology of E's initial of course having the same root as the word giraffe).

"Chuckle chuckle, how you do crack me up! Stick to puppeteering thanks," R answered,

"speaking of which, what's today's performance about?"

"But sire, I really am interested about the issue with your neph-"

"Oh, that thing! He's getting far too head-strong for me - for us all - to handle. Now he wanted to try some Chestnuts! Of course I told him that the whole Tower takes them so that none of us have to. But -- but at this stage, he questions everything. So I was- I simply strictly forbade him."

"Surely you can explain everything to him though, or take him to the Room, or-"

"Nonsense! He'll probably conjure up some moral objections to it - you know how idealistic the young are. Probably will insist that everyone has some indivisible soul, self or...hmm...personal identity. And that it's --- inviolable!" That last word was spoken by R as if he'd just surprised himself and stumbled on a dodo while rummaging through his mental vocabulary. "I think it's all your performances, instilling them with - - -." He faded off, not wishing to venture on another expedition into his mind.

A course of rabbit in plum and orange sauce was served. "To return to the performance: what's on for after dinner?"

W smiled, letting just a photon of pride shine through.

"I haven't supervised it myself so can't remember for sure. But it's the end of the trilogy the first two parts of which you've seen last week. This part's about some steward and a king and some battle in the dark."

"Oh, interesting. I wanted to see the end of that one. But the one I was more eager for, for some reason, was the continuation of the story of that nation who were about to reconquer their ancestral home last month when the lovely 5th division performed with their unique crowd-puppets. Now that was a magnificent extended battle scene!"

"That one will be done shortly - they're still making the extra puppets and the boulders. But today's one should be great - I've heard they've made excellent use of side strings - and the puppets bleed and their limbs chop off properly - AND -"

They were interrupted by a messenger about a concluded trial. Every day at dinner, if there was a trial, R listened to the outcome and heard - and denied - the petition of the condemned. This was to be no exception. They brought in the woman, held by the arms on both sides, still in shock. She was frightened enough by the ordeal to actually look tired - yes, tired; something W pointed out to R later. Rather than simply pleading, dropping to her knees, issuing various bellowing cries and recounting her loving family and how they'd be lost without her, she stared calmly. Nor did she deny the charge, as did all. It was almost as if she wanted to challenge him and went out of her way to do it. R lifted an eyebrow in wonder. What will her petition be? He took the paper, read it, looked at her, looked at the paper again and so forth, for a few minutes of awed silence. Not bad - attractive and seems independent, spirited. In fact, someone I'd rather have in my court as opposed to the Endless Toil of the room. But what to do, what to do? I can't just let her go thereby setting a precedent. R was always, always mindful of appearances. Maybe I'll just harass her quite strongly and if she backs down she's not worth it - and if she doesn't-!

"K, citizeness of the fifth level of this Great Tower, you have been condemned of blasphemy and high treason after a fair trial conducted by this great court. A court I have tremendous faith in. Furthermore, upon perusal of the summary of the proceedings, I see no legal issues within your trial that are to your benefit. The words of N, respected teacher of reading, about how you described a certain vase as 'the gift of your dreams' are irrefutable. Even if we forego treason, they certainly establish blasphemy. And a Baron certainly lacks the...the-- (he almost said it but 'twould have certainly made a mockery of her being condemned!) -resources to listen to every base and chimerical petition. Verily, do not test my patience as your place in the Room is certain. What have you to counteract your monstrous charges?" By now, R was shouting, enough to make most people in the room tremble.

But K stood silent - almost catatonic. It was like she'd frozen as a being - but that was impossible - she hadn't been in the Room yet! The silence--

--was broken as she spoke up. She was clear and had but a slight respect in her tone. No, she denies nothing. Yes it was all true. But it was something she did because it was her natural inclination to do so. After the word natural was pronounced, her voice soared - a mighty hawk escaping the pettiness of the wretched beasts at ground level. Jump as the beasts may, once the hawk has taken off she is out of their reach. No, she regrets nothing. She thinks if something that all want is called treason, then the problem is certainly not with her. Only the majority are too 'milk-sop-ish' (yes, she said it, even looking at some officials!) to admit it.

R's jaw dropped and he smiled. Such...delightful insolence! He had an opening. Standing up, he declared in front of all the witnesses that there was no denying the woman was mad. Clinically insane were his precise words. As the law is just, 'twould be a travesty to execute her. Rather, R personally, was to see that K be placed in the best facility of mental care. All applauded.

R looked at W - a look which meant "what I actually want is for her to be one of my Puppeteers - take her and train her". W nodded, the baronly court left, the dinner continued, the puppet show commenced.

Myriads

of puppets abounded - in all colours - wearing everything from triangular jesters' hats to hunting cloaks. R marveled at the intricacy of their costumes: individualized buttons, every finger moving separately, some even juggled for real. What a fine group of Puppetmasters W had trained recently! It was some sort of army preparing for something. Under the slight din of battle machinery, R heard a hissing sound. He wondered what it was, and walked several enormous steps (of several miles in length) to see what it was.

The sound was that of a gorgeous mountain stream rushing by, or at least it was moving so fast it seemed like a sentient being that rushed by due to being detached from the ground. The stream had a jigsaw puzzle of rocks in it. There were pebbles, stones and boulders of all different sizes, from the minutest grain of sand to whole worlds. A balagan of colours hit R - ones that no artist would choose, as every dot and tittle of the spectrum was represented. The stones were scattered, sticking out of the river, but in a chaotic manner. It was completely unplanned, and caused the flow of the river to be broken up into a trillion streamlets, which would proceed to intertwine and mingle organically; water mixing into water and splashes creating sound waves and interference patterns. There was also a divine regularity to the whole scene despite the seeming chaos. The whole entity pulsed at ordered intervals that weren't too pedantic. The sounds were also spaced in natural proportions that weren't "nice" from exactness but they were real. Life, that's what the scene spelled out in essence. The whole river was me-an-de-ring through the boulders.

What travesty be this? A truly-gorgeous stream like such should be forceful and fast-flowing. The rocks merely impede the path of least resistance. Indeed, they mar the simplicity of the stream.

Away, away then, with th'accursed superfluous objects! Army...

The puppets came in their ranks to R's call, turning into strong workers as they started clearing out the rocks. The countless boulders were gone in an instant - the workers performed some magic. R stared at the creation with no small satisfaction. Gone were the old twists and turns and uneven distributions of currents - instead, a crisp, straight-flowing river with enough force to knock down an amphitheatre. Which was of course the whole goal.

However, R became aware of a new feature - the boulders hid the fact that the stream was full of snakes. Now that the waters were clean, he could see that they swirled around, slightly altering the simple flow of the river. Of course, their bodies were insignificant compared to the overall streamflow that was present before R ordered the army to take to it. But - and this was the horrid part - the new perturbations of the water were as complex as those of the original boulders, though less in amplitude. In fact, their small scale made it more of a marvel - it was like a new multi-dimensional mesh woven by the snakes every second. R screamed. He ordered some heavyset spiked shoes to be fetched and started running around stomping - all the while screaming. He dug his heels into the heads and bodies of snakes whilst experiencing a child-like feeling of delight at the skulls of his belly-crawling foes under the weight of his heel. After what seemed like hours, he bent over a bit and put his hands on his knees to regain his breath, having probably become woozy from the intoxicating smell of the waves of snakes' blood coming from under his feet. The snakes' swirls weren't visible now (most have been killed) and a satisfyingly-blue-black colour was lifted up into the river from the bodies. R nodded - at last the flow of the river will be at its maximum.

As he was waking up from the dream, his mind was given one last image from within the blood in the water, the corpses and the scurrying of survivors - one of the very large snakes still alive, coiled up and staring at him from afar - being very very calm and deliberate, yet without arrogance, just swaying to and fro.

Two beings awoke almost simultaneously in the Tower. To both of them, it was probably the most enjoyable part of the day. The relaxed reclination within a comfy bed, the drifting in and out of sleep, the momentary lapse of the temporal, the welcome of the torches set to a glowing softness, the completely cocooning warmth that yelled out "the big bad world shan't reach you here", the barely perceptible din of the rest of the household; the recollection of the past evening's dreams: the reliving of the joys, shuddering at the sorrows and the occasional wiping away of tears from the pillow after a particularly poignantly-stabbing-the-heart one; all was treasured because it was enjoyable and human and childlike, and because it was something that did not diminish with age nor emotional or intellectual development - and finally, the knowledge that this was a luxury bestowed on the few - made the moment all the more precious to both people.

The first of the two beings was in a fairly cluttered room which was used for the storage of the various items belonging to her husband D. In the household, they needed as much storage space as they could get and then some. As a result, the room had space for just one bed used by F, her husband D and their two children in shifts. F's gaze covered the walls and floor. But it was a look of innocence; for she didn't know what most of the objects were. The brick walls had little gaps which she perceived because she knew that more complex and clandestine stuff was in there - to an outsider's eye, they were simply walls. In the middle of the room stood a shelf, at the top of which was the engraving of a coiled-up snake. The finely-etched scales made an optical illusion - as if the snake was shifting to and fro at an amazing regularity like a metronome. The top half of the shelf was stacked with metal things - mostly coils - tied, twisted, arranged and rearranged. They were of different colours, some looking like perfect spirals, others like a chaotic, monstrous knot. The bottom half of the shelf had stones - finely polished into mathematical-looking shapes. There seemed to be hundreds of them with no two being the same size. The rest of the room had scattered around it various wooden spheres, metal bars, triangular bits of wax and things F would never bother to describe. Rather than being simply on the floor, they covered the room at times reaching knee depth. Tired of looking around, F drifted back to sleep momentarily.

She was awakened by her daughter who told her to get ready and awake and arise as D was to start work shortly. She tiptoed out and closed the door. F knew this meant she had 5 minutes before her husband would, as he'd refer to it, "indignantly eject" her from the room, which in turn meant gently picking her up and carrying her out while plastering a layer of conciliatory kisses onto her face. She folded up her clothes and put the shiny conical thing inside a crack in the wall, placed the appropriately-shaped brick over it and slowly twisted it in until the wall was flat, while at the same time noticing that this was an action she's done for hundreds, nay, thousands of times and she had no idea what it was for - nor did she notice it. There were dozens of miniscule, inexplicable tasks that D taught her to do since their marriage, and it was no use protesting. She knew it was Important - and that was that. She also knew that this was how her father got her to conclude her sleep and before that her grandfather, both being members of the Art. However she only reached the stage-of-questioning this morning.

D walked in at that minute and cast his gaze over his wife. He gently inquired as to how she slept, which was a code for "I'm about to start now so clear off". The family were not to watch D while he was doing his work, while he had his meetings, while he arranged, created, improved, imagined and destroyed things that F had no concept of. Every once in a while, she'd collect her forces of bluntness to ask about the Art (something, anything), but it always ended in D making a nervous wisecrack and alluding to the possibility of an Eventual Revelation. Today, like every day, D closed the door with an almost-infuriating tactfulness and she saw her husband bound up in various and copious volumes, steeped in them, entrenched amongst them. And it wasn't the idea of jealousy, or the clichéd notion of him being "married to the Art" that saddened F. Rather, it was the mere fact that here was someone she adored, engaging in something she knew was essential to their lives and the future of the people of the Tower - he was the head of the Council

for the stars' sake! - and yet that enormous well of skill, knowledge and motion was something they couldn't share - all because of the fact that it was so Traditional and Proper, and only possessors of a penis were supposed to engage in it.

However, F was in a better mood today, as the possibility of the revelation had suddenly soared. The meeting D was to attend today held much promise. After all, it was the only event related to the Work that D talked about since the purge. And since the purge was spoken of in a hushed sadness and she knew how horrible it really was, the fact that the upcoming meeting was mentioned with a twist of hope made her think of it as a possible redemption. So, finally things are moving towards the good of everyone including me - F thought as D completed the closing of the door and she went back to her painting, back to putting more strokes on the magnificent feathers of the hawk.

The other soul that woke up simultaneously with F was E, the nephew of the Baron R. Although they were an obviously rich family, E slept in a refreshingly frugal room. While R liked extravagance at public displays, he showed more restraint towards those closest to him. Like F, E enjoyed the minutes of hovering in and out of sleep whilst scanning the room.

He had his own bedroom, although it lacked a bed. He slept on a soft cushion-like structure just larger than his body. When his friends came to play, they sat on the other cuddly paraphernalia and marvelled at its non-lavish nature. There were some wooden objects with drawers and on them and inside them were stored the beginnings of a young Puppetry apprentice. The side of the room had a swarm of raw materials - wood, cloth, unground paint, strings - that he practiced his skills on. Then, moving on to the middle of the room were the various heads, arms, torsos, props, costumes and other limbs that would eventually have the life of the Art breathed into them, and then - E thought while looking - they would become so much more than toys or entertainment. He turned to watch the results: the completed puppets that he'd made himself. They were sitting on the cupboard closest to his bed. The ones he was most proud of anyway. It was great having little extensions of himself that he had breathed and bled over watching over him while he slept and protecting him from the curses of pain, boredom and banality that occasionally cluttered his waking hours. A scholar of symbolism would look at the puppets and see archetypes: the king representing the Ruler, the two-headed Knight as Brothers-In-Arms and the lady as Womanly Virtue Personified. A scholar of the psyche would doubtless comment on the educational value of a child making their own toys. But E saw them as just being there - and commented only on how successful (or not) he was in conveying character to the figurines of merchants, dragons, beggars, monks, monkeys, donkeys, nymphs and ethereal beings. He had just reached out for one when R came in.

"My dear nephew, how are you?"

"Fine." A cactus made of ice with a robot inside it would have answered in a more welcoming or human tone.

"Oh, come on - still puffed up about yesterday? I've come to make up. You wanted to try a Chestnut?" R opened his large palm to reveal a brown shapely bulb. E's eyes lit up as he reached out and took it, still not believing. R smiled and nodded in a way that would remain in E's mind forever no matter what - E was still young and impressionable enough to be moved by the kindly image of his uncle making peace. He put it in his mouth and broke it in half with a deliberate crunch of the jaw. Immediately, his tear ducts burst out in supplication but whether it was the flavour of the Chestnut (they truly were an acquired taste) or of the moment itself, is unknown. As the chewing continued E began to savor the deliciously-bitter nut. What one could definitely say was it woke you up. The puppets all jumped out at him as he could ascertain each individual twist of the ropes. He reached out, genuinely surprised at the fact that his hand didn't stretch all the way to the basket with the puppet baby. E felt powerful and alive - the room wasn't exactly swimming before him but still he stared hypnotically for who knows how long.

"What does it taste like?"

E laughed at the question. "Awful! But I sense things differently. It's like -"

"I know. Well you got your wish - you know what it's like to be on the other side. And you won't sleep for a cycle or two. But I suggest you don't repeat the experiment."

"Oh no, I won't. I just wanted to know - besides if virtually everyone else has to-"

"-my dear nephew, I'm sorry if this is hurtful to hear, but your ideas of egalitarianism and equality are misplaced. You'll understand better sometime but what- what I want to say to you now is that we are not equal. Just look at members of our own family that are your age. Are they all like you? Are they all concerned for others, or anything outside their immediate sphere?"

"Well, no but-"

"-you're a smart, virtuous boy" R said slowly and E's blush of satisfaction bore excellent testimony to how rare such a comment was. "You already understand that not everyone is born good. Actually, very few. Amongst our subjects, the number is also small, as can be expected, and if left to their own devices they'd--- not only would they destroy us and tear us to bits, they'd become geniuses at hurting each other. Today, thanks to the Chestnut, they're merely fools at it. Fortunately. One day, I'll tell you about the kingdom before the Chestnut, but as a spoiler, it was horrible."

"So how does the Chestnut help?"

"Well, by turning people's potential destructiveness into profit for the kingdom. With no sleep and no way to keep track of time, they are kept out of mischief, at least for most of the time."

"But that's not fair!"

"Unfortunately, it's the best option. Do you really think the world's like- like this?"

R cast his hand around the room and E's head retreated into his shoulders in a rapid turtle-ish motion. At once, he understood and for a split second, his puppets seemed childish. He saw their smiles, their happiness, their total susceptibility to his control. His world was a benevolent dictatorship, where he ensured that Knight would rescue Lady and slay Ghoul, and even when tragedy struck, it was for the sake of a lesson, some higher purpose that he wanted to communicate to his audience. Like we said, E was very bright for a boy of his age, and especially when compared to most boys his age in the Barony of the Tower.

"I know you understand now. In this world, there's currently not enough to go round - and if we gave our beloved citizens their complete unadulterated liberty, all would be lost. If people didn't have the ability to work for 100 hours straight without knowing it, there'd be an average of a single crust of bread per household. Husband would rise against wife, beloved would kill beloved like a beast, for the purpose of food. Your look betrays you - you think I exaggerate?"

"I do. I mean, sure, there might be more problems, but total chaos?"

"Not chaos, hell. There is a difference. I'll prove it to you some time."

There was a moment of sad, reflective silence. "But that's enough of you hearing the rantings of an old fart - show me your puppets. And be assured that it is important work - luckily some have managed to survive and be human! What are you working on?"

"This scene where two serpents are fighting and they keep eating each other and crawling out of each other's mouth."

"That right? Let's see."

E took the figurines out, gladly putting away his serious side for a while - after all, it was a fun scene. And R watched, listened, nodded, advised, listened, helped, narrated, joked and generally pampered his nephew. This was one of the positive things about a system from which time has been removed - R could spend hours with E and the whole court would necessarily wait without even being aware of it.

Two beings awoke almost simultaneously in the Tower. It was fitting for their situations in life that F painted a hawk alone and E manipulated serpents with his uncle.

Silence

reigned over the room full of Elders. D sat on a rough straw chair and supported his head, no doubt thinking he should have been better to his wife in terms of making her a part of things in the last months. But after the Purge, things were especially cumbersome. There was a multitude of others in the room, gathered for the council. Everyone knew the event for which they had descended from their respective work schedules had to be crucial but no-one knew how or whence: T simply came to D two days ago and asked to schedule the meeting. The Elders were beyond murmuring though. Everyone mistrusted the smuggler to an extent, however all knew that he was devoted to their cause and could get things done. And indeed there he was, standing in the very ego-centre of their attention, with a large wooden crate beside and a perpetual smugness on his face. D scanned the smuggler's body up and down and detected T's usual confidence. Please. He can't help engage in primate-like theatrics even if he had a Solution inside that box. He'll talk it up and get everyone's hearts and minds behind it but it may just be one of his usual substance-less schemes. Well, I shan't fall for it.

"Well, it would seem everyone is here so let's begin. What have you, honourable member of the Fraternity, that would interest us all so?"

T smiled and bowed with an extravagance "My friend, you do me the honour."

T naturally missed a beat for drama's sake before continuing. "Even though I'm ignorant of the practical matters of the Art, I know what a terrible setback the Purge was. Could you tell me exactly what was lost?"

"I beg your pardon? You know well."

"Please recount the personnel. It's for the benefit of the meeting that we need a reckoning proper."

D started, attempting not to sound too grave thereby giving away extra emotional ammunition.

"In the Tragedy, they killed

3 senior Timekeepers,

4 parts Procurers,

1 Assembly man,

6 book-keeper Librarians,

2 Chart Composers and

4 interpreter Coordinators,

20 in total

of the highest and most irreplaceable rank."

"I agree with the first clause but not the second, for I can, have and shall replace them, if not in memory then at least in skill, if not in token at least in type," said T in his casual thrusting tone and opened the side of the box to reveal S sitting down tiredly.

D smiled. "It seems my friend that the boxes got entangled or otherwise mixed up, for this contains a girl and not your mythological replacement."

"I assure you she is the replacement. And she can take the place of all who were lost and more. She will bring it all to Fruition!"

By this time about 5 elders could not contain themselves and stood up. "Do you realise the gravity of your sayings?" said one. "What you suggest is a logical impossibility: how can a woman Know about..?" D added. "Hmm - she was taught. Taught like the rest of you." Murmurs. "Only better - infinitely better in fact". The murmurs turned to shouts.

"That's enough! Who'd dare break with the tradition? Why even the thought seems - I know what we have isn't a cult but- well, blasphemous!" Nods of approval.

"Maybe you'll all rethink your prejudices when you find out the rule was broken by one as respected as her father the Keeper of the Library who taught her from birth until his demise 2 years ago."

This was it, not the last straw but the last cannonball that dropped amidst the meeting's restraint and attempt at decorum. The din of contradiction exploded and T felt like a con artist who is at the point where he can clearly see that he is about to be mobbed and he has a small and ever-closing window of opportunity to slip away. Only there was a slight problem with that scenario: there wasn't an actual con.

"Elders! Please! Why is this so hard to believe and accept?"

"Because it goes against such fundamental principles. If the Keeper could have gone astray so much, how could we possibly trust what he taught her?"

"Obviously he did the right thing as here we are, with the art on the precipice of extinction and we can recover and overtake."

"Overtake?" fumed D, "what can a child possibly know? Suppose she was quite clever and picked up 5 or 6 skills or facts. What then? Did you really think this would be a substitute for learning in a group, under the guidance of the Elders? She is certain to even be unable to cut the correct length of string for the fire-clock. Little life experience and the ups and downs of her recent adolescence and her father's death - which by the way I'm very sorry about, girl - shall she really remember a summary of the Codex? If, that is, she even knows what it is. And you expect to receive some sort of commission for handing us over into the rule of someone not qualified so we can be ruined. A woman having the concentration and organization to train and guide us? Right! She's probably too timid to even-"

"Timid?"

D jumped back, startled as he turned his countenance a mere minute of arc to discover S perched magnificently over him and the whole conversation like a cobra but without the deadness. This was indeed her first word and the room quieted with inexplicable awe.

"Look, I know this is hard for all. But let me outline the facts. One: although yes, it is technically illegal to teach women by your tradition, that's what my father did. He (and I) believed it was a silly ego-driven regulation that has nothing to do with the Craft and more with the petty human factor. Of course, you're still hurt and surprised at him, which is understandable. But it had a purpose, which brings me to point two: I'm currently the best fit for leadership. While I'm probably not better than everyone at each aspect of the art, overall I am far superior. How I came to be so is something I've no time or wish to currently communicate. And thirdly: I have a plan which I finished formulating a week ago, hence the timing of my arrival. It's more ambitious than you think. To be blunt, I hope for us all to end the Baron's regime and free the inhabitants within a year. Again, I only expect you to trust me once I've given reason to, but I shall. 'Twill all involve a year of the most intense training, study and preparation you've seen. Under me - and I will be a bitch."

Laughter resounded around the room at this ending to the soliloquy-turned-monologue. "Well surely your admission that you're not going to be pleasant is not something in your favour" said D but from his voice, it was clear that she did make the appropriate impact. "I have your attention now. Time is of the essence, no pun intended: test me."

Three hours later, a triumphant S sat in a chair opposite a table with three clocks on it. The theory went superbly - she answered more than those questioning knew, more than they thought was possible to know or even be aware of. Her practical time-measurement and construction were impeccable as she demolished their whole belief in the exclusive quality of their education in ten minutes (or at least she thought so). Not came the most challenging test.

The three clocks were taken from various repositories and were the most complex ones in the possession of the Elders. She had to stop them all without making contact. How? When a person jumps up and down, the floor reverberates. When a few do, the movement increases dramatically but when it's also in time with the floor's own natural vibrations the further increase in the vibration's amplitude can cause the floor to break. So too here, S had to, without opening up the clocks, from looking, figure out the ratios and intricacies of the inner mechanisms and with a stick tap a rhythm that would create the necessary vibrations to specifically unbalance the clocks.

One's timing in beating the rhythm had to be within a hundredth of a second in terms of accuracy. The volume had to be exact. Such was the final test to become an Elder. Usually, one simple clock was used and it took an average of two hours examination and one hour of attempts at making the rhythm to break it. S had three complex clocks and after staring for five minutes, she took the stick and hit the table 5 times in a confident, almost mocking tone and all three stopped. Infinitely deafening was the lack of noise and the presence of shock that came - no-one expected her to find one pattern to break all three simultaneously. 'Twas such a simple one too! The people felt like children in front of a divine being, T beamed and D knelt before S, whispering just loud enough for his words to resound in the room.

"We are yours."

Together

sat the men who formerly considered themselves elders. S liked to arrange them in various formations, not just boring rows, and after the few months of her not-so-subtle guidance, they were all used to it. Each had a different mechanism in his hand and was tying a length of rope into various contortions onto the mechanism.

"About to come round so finish up" S pronounced looking around. She noticed D fiddling impatiently and called out "Bored are we? So sorry to keep you from your high level pursuits with my simplistics." D actually blushed for a seventh of a second, smiled and lifted up his finished mechanism. "Good. Listen everyone. I know this isn't what you're all used to. But it's my method that everyone, even the researchers, internalise the beats and times inside themselves perfectly before we do anything else. With an internal clock, we can do anything and everything from scratch and even maintain some level of humanity; but without it, no external mechanism can possibly help. And we'll become like the other waking dead. Speaking of external mechanisms, I can see they're not that good. Yet. Gather"

The men came right up to her and sat, childlike, on the floor. They were used to it by now: her perfectionism, willingness to adapt super-spontaneously and her total disregard for the formal differences in their former ranks. As one of D's friends mentioned to him, she had a truly egalitarian disregard for all.

"How long did it take you to master the internal clock?" asked one from the less shy end of the spectrum.

"Well, less than you lot! But at the start that's all I did. Also, I have the advantage (and it's about time you all realised it, along with my father's plan) of being a woman. The most obvious thing is menstruation which the Nut still tolerates, much as it does in your beloved ones' bodies. Unfortunately, it's too late to teach them from scratch. However with your backgrounds you can learn. But you MUST listen to your bodies. We'll do as per yesterday: try get all processes synchronised. That means heartbeats and breathing. Go!"

As they'd done numerous times before, 80 pairs of eyes relaxed and stopped looking at anything in particular. 80 pairs of hands dropped with relaxed shoulders turned out and 80 backs leaned against their respective cushions. They listened away for S's decisive drumming on the table signalling stage one: one beat per breath to synchronise breathing. Subconsciously, they were counting too. They had to - the internal clock's not just a beat but a reckoning and woe to the poor bastard who didn't know the magic number at the end.

After 2700 counts precisely, S switched to section two: each beat signifying a heartbeat of the collective beast. This was obviously more difficult but not impossible once their breaths were in tune. Most of them found the whole thing quite enjoyable actually. Upon entering stage two, their awareness already expanded to include the whole room and every slightly shallow or deep breath, every twitch of muscle from any of them was known and broadcast to all by means of the marvel

of the focused mind. Then they felt that magic moment of togetherness whereby the myriad streams of breaths, vein movements, postures, sinew alignments and thoughts flowed into one river directed by S and her drum for 5000 more beats. And then (unlike previous times) she stopped in a manner that redefined abruptness.

"The beat should keep on going inside you for a while. Keep counting. What I want is for you to gently re-affirm it each time it strikes in your mind. Keep it up as long as you can, till tomorrow. Go on with your life and keep it in the background. Tomorrow, only a few will be able to tell me exactly how many beats have come to pass. But that's why we have the next time. And the next." They slowly started moving, stupefied at the mental beat. It was like there was a subtext under the quiet of the room and everyone understood what it was.

"That's right, it has begun. The seeds of your own internal clock. And I also hope the seeds of realization that what we do is not about timekeeping but the use of it to remain human after so much has been taken away. Now you can really listen to and regulate yourselves... OK, let's put it in the background, time for a change! Questions. About anything, something else."

A small silence of 7 beats occurred but how exciting for everyone to know it was 7! All tried their darned hardest not to start giggling as a delighted toddler would when it was able to take even a few steps without a tumble.

"I have one. Much of our calculations and research is based on sun and moon cycles. But what would they actually look like?" S nodded at the question, seemingly appreciating it as a thoughtful one. She remembered...

She sat in her youthful entrancement in their hovel, staring at the fire. Her father only introduced it to her a few weeks ago, what with its forbidden nature and all. Every spare moment she had that wasn't spent on chores, eating and sleeping, she watched the orangey-white flicker of the flame of their torch. Never before had S seen such unpredictable movement; everything else in life was motionless, timeless. Of course, her father had already begun to explain to her the cause of that timelessness. But there was still something inexplicable in its dance - regular and yet chaotic, where each whole second, tenth of a second and hundredth of a second, the flame died and was reborn in a shape somehow not completely causally related to its previous shape. If she stared closely, it was a creepily detailed fractal that she couldn't pin down no matter with how much magnification she'd be able to view it. But if she stepped back and let her perspective blur a bit, relaxing her fine-detail perception, there was a certain beat to it whereby the flame would reach maximum exactness with astonishing regularity.

It was in this trance that her father found her, oblivious to most things that weren't the flame. He rested his hand on the top of her hair for a brief moment and produced a folded piece of paper, keeping it tilted like a skilled magician who doesn't show the essence of a trick to the audience.

"Well - what is it?"

"You'll find out in a second. Now tell me about the sun and moon."

She paused and smiled remembering the joy of their sessions and the feeling of her father's expansiveness in teaching her at her age (and gender). "The sun is a source of tremendous light and heat that moves in the Sky and the moon of a lesser degree of light and heat."

"Good. What shape and size?"

"We don't know; but for time calculations, we assume both to be spheres a quarter of the earth's diameter, though that's probably bullshit." She loved it when he didn't mind her swearing.

S's father paused a bit and unfolded the paper to reveal a series of concentric circles with one in the middle. S gasped in instant realization. This was a very detailed map of the hypothetical so-called Sky the most detailed she'd ever seen in fact, including stars and moon phases, all with basic degrees and calculations, the various meridians and sub-divisions of the sky, the great River along which all the major celestial objects were said to move, the Point which never moved, the second River where objects moved the most and so forth. She ran up to the paper and asked and asked and asked about it while he answered for what was a lifetime. Then, she stopped. "But this is still nothing compared to what we'd be able to see were we outside."

He paused for a minute. "You're right. We've been sealed off quite ingeniously. But I've been somewhat slow and tardy (with good reason I believe) in relating you what we know of our history. Would you like that now?" S flashed him a look that told of how trivial the answer to that phatic pre-narrative question was.

"Good...Our Tower is (we think) located at 37 degrees left axis, 219 degrees up axis in the wider world. We are about 3 kilometres from a river. The Tower has 7 levels, each 20 metres high. It is a 1300 by 1300 metre square, meaning its shape isn't really like a regular tower at all. It has been in existence for 12 generations which is about 311 years - that's the age of the Barony as we estimate."

"So how did it all start?"

He looked at her for a beat while nodding with appreciation as to how his daughter has grown up and was so mature in accepting ideas most in the Tower had no concept of.

"About 350 years ago, there were economic problems within the Baronies around the current site of the tower. There was a terrible corn famine and many deaths abounded, followed by a plague (as is often the case in this world of ours). Tens of thousands carked it, but unlike most such calamities, it did not only strike the peasantry and serfs but also thinkers, craftsmen, artisans. The nearby states all ground to a halt, with few professionals and few laborers. The Barons dealt with this largely by allocating the menial work to everyone, including the so called thinkers in order for the cogs of society to soldier on. So, my dear daughter, what do you think happened?"

"The artisans got bored chopping wood and herding sheep."

"Right. But not just bored. Immensely, suicidally, homicidally bored. Especially in areas with large concentrations of thinkers. They just couldn't take it. They went literally mad with frustration. Crime rose a hundredfold in some tucked away city quarters where only a few years ago most there would be engaged in study and creative work. And guess which area had one of the highest number of intellectuals?"

"You're kidding!"

"No"

"No!"

"Yes"

"What those personifications of ignorance around us?-"

"-descended from some of the most cosmopolitan people in the world. Anyway, the Barons were quite keen about quelling the congestion. They tried

monetary,
prestige and
sexual incentives,
the standard gallows
(as well as various other less pleasant forms of torture
which despite relieving boredom did nothing about unrest),
ostracism,
forced starvation,
entertainment performed during the work drives
(this worked a tad while Baron-supported plays and concerts
had any semblance of originality, meaning it
quickly failed),
exile and
just being asses.

However, none of those had a significant impact on anything."

"What to do?"

"What indeed. For the next few months, all was awful. One day, however, a shepherdess came out of a meadow with a basket full of chestnuts of a strange colour-" S jumped with a start of

realisation "-and after having a few, seemed alert and agitated and unable to sleep. When asked about the course of her indisposal, all she could come up with as an explanation were those nuts." "Fame of the chestnut spread and soon, many of the night-watchmen were unblissfully sipping the bitter concoction to stay awake. It would however seem that it had no impact on the bulk of the populace until the Baron found out. Immediately the entire grove and forest where the shepherdess found the Chestnuts were mysteriously cut down overnight. On a completely unrelated matter, the next day, all the Barony's granaries were emptied of grain and filled with something else."

"Then, things started improving at least from the Barony's point of view. Riots dropped sharply as did unrest vanish almost immediately. Production doubled, as people worked for longer hours. No-one knew why."

"They introduced the Chestnut Mandate?"

"No. Not at this stage. At this stage, the people of our country still had minds and spirits. They would never have agreed to a walking, waking death. Instead, the Baron decided to lead them to the slaughter, seeing they weren't yet in a state to lead themselves."

"He made them take it by stealth!"

"That's my girl! By adding it to all foods, which he had access to and control of. So, the results?"

"Sleep ceased, as did restlessness as well as did their humanity."

"Oh that's where you're wrong!"

He could talk like this for ages without seeming patronising to her.

"What? What happened then?"

"Everything. Not only did production increase and economic recovery occur completely (making the Baron the richest in the whole area) but intellectual and creative work went up too from its several-years-of-a-forced-vacation."

"Why is that?"

"Well, the people involved in such projects were eccentric usually and would have worked at odd hours anyway. Now they could physically labour all day and do other stuff all night, so they did. With the extra time spent labouring they all had more money on their hands so they were more secure and confident in their good (and bad) works."

"Neat. The Baron must have preferred that to famine, plague and riots..."

"Actually he did! So the next stage was the Mandate. He knew from the initial analysis by his specialists that the Chestnut was addictive. So, he simply waited until almost all were hooked and then announced what they've been eating and made all take mandatory daily doses."

"He further introduced quotas of work at a high benchmark, with slackness punishable by an unpleasant death. Instantly, the populace was up in arms again. But this time, they didn't go crazy thanks to the Nut's ability to control such outbursts. And they realised they had to do the work and live. Their only available protest was to make a mockery of the Baron by doing all the work just to the amount required and no more, but then using all their spare time to make and do other things that would completely dwarf their slave labour tasks."

"The Baron felt, with good reason, immediately insulted. After all, his subjects were in open defiance despite technically doing all they were meant to. Furthermore, he had gotten comfortable with the idea of a productivity rate that surpassed the pre-plague one by several orders of magnitude. And he knew that as long as day followed night and autumn alternated with spring, they would listen to themselves, their bodies, the stars, seasons and natural fluctuations - and manage their efforts into a coordinated rhythm, a rhythm which was not wholly devoted to working for the Baron's benefit."

"I don't know exactly how the fiendish combination of the two factors occurred to him. Must have been a joyous realisation, a triumph of the intellect, for him to realise that without an external point of reference, the people's sense of time would literally disappear. Good-bye protest through creativity, welcome maximal productivity."

"So, in less than a year since the Mandate's start, our ancestors were building what eventually became the tower, our Tower. They were oblivious, as the baron made this one of 3 or 4 major building projects so as few people as possible would realise anything by solely examining his motives regarding the Tower. What he probably didn't realise or possibly did but pushed it into the recesses of his psyche was that a more tangible protest was taking shape. The roots of the Art were establishing and my dear daughter, it is with great pride that I inform you that our family played a major role."

"From the time people stopped sleeping, those who did not develop the symptoms as early (and thus were freer in their analysis of the situation) realised that a major calamity was brewing. Unfortunately, due to the Baron's bastardliness, the case was concealed until most were hooked. Besides, the few who had suspicions that it was the food were hardly in a position to stop eating, and the Baron DID control all the produce. So, the most strong-willed decided, upon the Mandate's establishment, to overcome their addiction-"

At this point, a freak movement of the air blew out the torch beside them and their conversation (or her father's monologue) receded into darkness. He faltered for but a brief moment and went on and S smiled at the change in atmosphere and standing in the room full of Elders recollecting the day smiled again. She plunged back for another dip into the time they were in the dark and thus no longer positioned in physical space but simply sharing a moment.

After the flicker and subsequent darkness, he resumed. "As I was saying, they decided to cure themselves. There were only 100 in the beginning: both men and women. Many a month passed in self-torture, vomiting, disorientation, but they were taking a slowly receding dose until all 100 were secretly throwing away their entire daily Chestnut ration."

"Realising the importance of the body and environmental clock in maintaining life and humanity after being temporarily diminished in both, our ancestors went on to formulate an expansive Art in the relationship between the two clocks and the development of both in one's life. That was the most fortuitous decision in the history of the Barony, as the Tower plan came to reveal."

"As I said, the plan of the Baron was to remove the environmental clock so that the internal one would be infinitely more manipulable. I don't know to what extent the then-established elders suspected this. In all probability, most had a bad inkling but none knew it would really come so soon. But such is the way of history: a month after the Tower's completion came the day. The entire Barony was asked to come and join in the celebration of the Tower's inauguration. It was when the elders saw the immense crowd being shoved into a building which could contain them all that they realised."

"Obviously, it was too late to stop anything but amidst the crowd, they used the last few minutes under the sky as the crowd slowly went in, to take notice of as much about the world clock as humanly possible so as to be able to keep track of it Inside, and live and remain human. Then the doors were shut. The Baron welcomed all to their new abode."

"From then on came the split of the first generation. The Elders wrote down all they knew using the plentitude of time they had between the labour. Still, it took decades. They built the clocks and used them so that their families could live their lives. But it was also here that the gender roles split, as the women were giving birth to as many unaddicted children as they could while the men refined the work and planned the day of reckoning. Of course, things were very different with the sleepless populace."

"At first, things were much like life under the clouds. The Chestnut still existed and that meant lots of work, productivity and action - none of which ever ceased. Even then, there were problems as people from the same household would lose track of each other with no external point of reference. Then, people could still relate to themselves and each other as they could remember the concepts of rhythm, change and cessation. Nevertheless, almost 90% of families broke down after 10 years (whilst at the same time, productivity increased every year)."

"This truly puzzled and disturbed the Baron. He did not expect this, but was even more shaken by the next generation. It came only after 15 years of the Exile, because the rulers realised that they

now needed to control relationships, families and reproduction as people's competence at complex tasks that we consider unique to people was being brought to naught."

"The second generation was affected in a way that made the first seem normal. Dozens of thousands of Tower citizens have never seen any manifestations of the organic cycles. Gone was any form of long term meaning or planning. People recognised each other and things they learnt and possibly quite a few incidents from the past. There was just no context, no sense of scale, order or point. While we all construct the events of our lives as stories with narrative elements to make sense of things they could not - and today the situation remains. An eternal spiritual amnesia. And here we are, trying desperately to preserve and maintain, with still a glimmer of the word overthrow in our imaginations."

He finished and S felt the horror of the darkness and silence. 'Twas basically everything she'd subconsciously known and feared all her life suddenly wrenched out into an indescribable open. She knew that this would be the start of her unique life, that she was on a completely different path after this talk. She looked back at her father's sky chart and felt the cringe of unreality and inexperience (after all, she realised just how far they were removed from the world) that has remained with her.

S looked up, ceasing her momentary contemplations. The Elders were staring at her as she realised that she'd been actionless for a quarter of a minute. "Well, the sun is a source of tremendous heat and light and the moon less so. We assume they're a quarter of the earth's diameter and are spherical but beyond that, we've no idea, being where we are..."

"--End of lesson," she added hastily.

Attempting

to connect with S was a fairly chaotic procedure for D. He wanted to see in her and her thoughts the great and terrible abyss that represented the essence of the Art - if indeed there was one. But her reaction fluctuated between seeming enthusiasm, indifference and the occasional categorical opposition. Every few days after her lesson, he'd approach her for a dose of conversation, which ranged from a few remarks to almost an hour. It was during one of the more lengthy exchanges that he asked her to dinner with his family. Acceptance and mirth followed as she became a semi-regular guest of D & F, establishing an understanding with them. At least they didn't hang onto their traditional questioning of both her role and her methods (like some elders have - S could see it in everything from their bodily gestures to the way they learnt, despite the fact that no-one voiced anything). D on the other hand was extremely comfortable with the idea and practice of her leadership. But not so much so as to become something of a suspicion to S - he had a healthy amount of skepticism. Still, a far cry from the man who slightly ago considered her unfit for being a woman. F on the other hand instantly built up a camaraderie of expression with S. It was explicable by the fact that she had nothing to do with the Art - so instead of S having to carry herself with the expectation of her each word carrying the profundity of the whole Teaching, with F, she just laughed, observed, joked about the silly males and their idiosyncrasies. Such was the state of affairs three months into the plan.

Three months and one day into the plan, S knocked on the door of the D/F residence as had been planned for several days. This time whilst she walked, greeted and took her seat, something popped up at her. It was the suspicion of pretense. Of course, she couldn't tell how F & D related to each other outside her presence. Still, something was the matter and it turned out that once she thought it, she realised it was something she always subconsciously noticed around them as a couple.

"We've both known you for a while now," D said leaning forward as the conversation completed its initial non-consequential phase, "but now I must ask you something I've been meaning to, also for a while."

"...oh well, then I confess. I loved the elders' goodies: their mushrooms, tobacco, artichokes and the like once I tried them! It was the only reason I supplanted you and the others, not this silly Plan."

D smiled as if he expected no less as a response. "Good to know! But what I really had in mind was how you took the hardship of your education?"

"Hardship?"

"Eh - well- having to learn so much and maintaining a life, the conflict between your gender and the tradition, the clandestine nature of it all, you know...Did - did you develop some kind of connexion to the Art to keep you going?"

S paused thinking and digesting the quiver from F that she caught from the corner of her visual field as her husband spoke the last sentence. Just what does she really think about it all including my plan? Outside the giggling of course.

"I reckon connexion is overstating it. For all of its splendour, the Art ain't a human being with which there can be a connexion." S glanced at F during her triumphant delivery and again there was a reaction. She decided not to probe further for now but to continue. "Certainly there were motivational aides. For starters, the novelty factor. I was the only individual doing those types of things, not to mention the only girl."

"Did you see yourself as an open challenge to the tradition?" F asked.

"Actually, not so much in terms of gender. After all, the roles in the Resistance come from a fairly arbitrary origin. The need to have babies does not automatically swallow up other involvement in the Art. Neither does our system of rigging the matchmaker for each woman from the families of the Art to choose a husband also involved in the Art. They do spend much time on that but that's not all there is. So no: rather, it was good to find new meaning in things, which is why I'm for including the unexpected in what we're currently doing."

"Unexpected people or ideas?"

"Both. But mainly unexpected people with unexpected ideas. Like, one night, I realised that the rhythms of speech - good speech especially - can be used to set the basis for the canonical 3-clock apparatus. Sorry F, I'm being too technical."

"Perfectly fine, I'm used to informed oblivion." Reaction the second.

"Anyway, instead of pinning it down to theory I played with it and related it to natural speech, from which we actually obtain the 2 3-clock apparatuses we've recently been examining."

The couple stared at S openly now, unable to bring their expression of admiration of her versatility within "acceptable" bounds. Amused, she decided to let her guard down and reveal more.

"It wasn't the content or anything but the fact that I got so wrapped up in it. I'd spend days locked in my room drinking Gonda and writing down my explorations in the area after listening to some natural speech on the st-- street. I even got a proper quill (smuggled from a goose's back on the third floor). It was like the opportunity to live another life in the midst of the mundane. Here's my connexion - I always insisted on bringing myself into it, not the other way around. And I pushed it into directions I wanted it to go."

She surveyed the two and could tell she was succeeding in further and further inspiring the wife and making uncomfortable the husband: whilst D slumped imperceptibly as if something in himself was exposed, F's shoulder blades spread forth. After a short gap, F asked:

"But wasn't it debilitating that when you were doing and thinking those things, you had no-one to share it with? Wasn't it-- lonely?"

"Sure, sometimes. Sometimes I'd have loved to have someone who'd - if not understand - at least misunderstand appropriately. I think misunderstanding is very underrated."

"And how did your father fit into the scheme of those who could understand? I mean at least he knew having taught you the basics-"

"After a while, I moved on from his take on it. Of course, it doesn't mean I surpassed him or went to a higher level, just a different one. So there really was no-one. Eventually, I did get used to the non-sharing. I came to the conclusion that not everything is to be naturally shared and I guess my Art was - and is - one of those things."

"That's a depressing conclusion" F noticed.

"Maybe. It was the best I can hold onto though. It's either that or constantly yearn for some (at least for my situation) probably non-existent things and connexions at the expense of real people and very real connexions here and now. I didn't want to do that. And after I made this decision, it didn't turn out so bad. Always, there'd be the great joy that I'm a part of something absolutely unique. A joy that has followed me into the darkest of places - and one that's made me appreciate the world a great deal more."

She realised her mood has lifted tremendously. The bunch of them continued eating amidst the mild light of the flame in silence for the next few minutes. It was D who broke the contemplation.

"But surely now you would have obtained at least a portion of understanding? You've been ushered amidst all the other practitioners after being for so long in hiding, being the only one in your world to do the kind of things you do."

S stopped quite calmly but trembling on the inside and smiled.

"No, not at all. I'm being blunt but with you I hardly think I need permission. It's quite the opposite. Now, I feel ever more separated from the understanding of others - at least with respect to the art. It's like this: before, there used to be a potential, a possibility if you will. I did everything with full energy and zeal whilst clinging to the possibility that eventually, yes, there will be someone who will Realise. Again, I'm not certain that that's exactly what I wanted but it would have been a welcome change methinks."

"But now I know for sure that - well, no. Of course, I don't know for sure. But I'm as certain of it as I am of anything else that's certain...that there is no-one and there couldn't be - at least in this immediate context: in this life, in this Tower, in this endless exile, or should I say Inisle for that's what it really is, which is worse than exile. And I can feel it most when I'm with the brightest sparks of the elders, including you I must say." She smiled shyly.

"I didn't expect to be telling you all this - ever - but I'm sure you can take it appropriately. It's that there's an end - an abyss between me and anyone I've seen here. And I'm sure you understand I'm not trying to be immodest - rather it's my assessment of the situation after years of thinking it and living it."

"It's not even that what I'm trying to transmit to y'all in terms of my Plan is like the tip of the iceberg. It's more like a droplet on the tip of the tip of the tip- well you get the idea. Not in terms of the breadth of knowledge but the depth and connexions therein. There are things that I've been involved in that will never ever ever be passed down to anyone. That's the greatest tragedy from one perspective. There's simply not enough time, skill, motivation, resources and yes, luck, to even begin most things. So everything I know will die with me with the exception of some trivial tautologies (trivial only in comparison to the real depths, obviously) that I haven't been too incompetent to fail passing on."

"But here lies my source of strength. All of us face endless monotony in our lives in the Tower. A kind of drone-ism. Many of us even find it hard to treat the Sleepless as humans, so far has their identity been Sodomised. Many of our habits too are inescapably influenced by the mechanism of the Baronial humanity-theft-and-efficiency-boosting machine. So everyone, more than ever now that we're in the Tower for all these generations, must find something unique in themselves. Something to justify their identity and almost prove it. Prove that they're human. Well, this is my uniqueness. Many of the things I've thought and done for years have never been thought of by anyone - nor will they."

A silence brought S back to reality as she realised F & D sat dumbfounded, not even daring to breathe.

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to darken the mood. It's not as grand as that...Anyway, we have to think from the practical side - there's lots to do and thinking about what may or may not be lost will only detract us from the real objective of applying our feet to Baronial buttocks in a non-friendly manner!" She laughed it off and the visit continued but only for a few minutes, she realised it was still just too intense. S excused herself and went home, not failing to notice the profound undercurrents between the couple at the end.

About an hour later, it was D's turn to sleep so F entered the room just as he was settling in.

"She's quite something, your boss."

"Yeah. And you know, while her talk today has made me more depressed about my chances of ever fulfilling anything like that in my life, it has strengthened my belief in her Plan even more."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, and I truly-ruly think we'll see freedom within her set timeframe, which means very soon."

"Listen, I always wanted to ask you. What will happen when or if we liberate?"

"Sorry?"

"Uh - I mean, how will we do it?"

"That's something I don't even know for sure - there's a series of parts but she hasn't told us how things connect."

"And-"

"Listen, I can't tell you. You know that perfectly well my adversarial and inquisitorial love."

"Fine then! Would you like a deep tissue massage before I go and perform my slave duties to do with our hovel?"

"That I can answer!"

After she walked out, F went to the room where her cabinet stood. She pulled out what looked like a doll's head, toyed with it as if toying with the idea of destroying it, then shook her head and replaced it. Her husband meanwhile drifted off to sleep, but not before staring for some time at a piece of paper upon which he neatly wrote out S's full name...

Rings

of Elders surrounded the table, sticking as close to it as possible. They were in complete concentration in their august meeting room. Only it looked like there's been a major brawl in it just a few minutes ago. Hundreds of papers with incomprehensible symbols and scribbles were fluttering around the edges and middle of the room. There was probably more paper there than the rest of the Tower had combined - which would have made a casual observer in the room wonder if they've lost their mind: if the wrong person were to walk in, no pretences at all were possible. Fortunately, that casual observer was T the smuggler, and he eyed everything with complete seriousness, his notepad's thickness and non-emptiness revealing that even he was involved.

The table itself contained drawings of straight lines in different colours, all parallel and some models of completely bizarre shapes. They weren't even standing - most were concocted into a meaningless heap towards one of the ends of the table. The elders themselves were busy discussing something animatedly - each with his neighbour, with T occasionally contributing to a number of conversations by his usual voice projection technique of self-importance. Through the din, no particular conversation could at all be heard, yet it was clear each one was of tremendous importance. In the midst of this chaotic collaboration was D, explaining something to 4 or 5

elders using for visual aids whichever of the models he could reach and grab from his half-twisted sitting position.

At once S appeared through the door and at once everybody ceased. They eyed her each movement as she preceded to stand in the middle of the table - with an awe that was generally far from their original suspicions and contempt. Certainly amidst the stares were a few still resentful, even to an extreme, but overall they were sitting forward and eager, both physically and in terms of their now-almost-synchronous body clock.

Now that all could see and hear her, S broke the silence and inquired about the Plan's progress. She then went through each of the small groups that were till recently polishing their mental and planning acrobatics and inquired. Each group related to her in private the current state of their part of the plan, as she went around the room. It is needless to say, almost trivial in fact, that she was no respecter of persons - quite the reverse. The higher ranking ones were the ones she was most critical of, thinking of more and more things that could go wrong and pointing out more and more potential problems in their planlet. D copped a fair bit and so did all the seniors. But this was still the beginning. S always emphasized the success of the plan coming from every unit working independently, with little knowledge of the overall framework (to avoid clouding everyone's local judgement). This time though, she pointed out common elements between groups so each group could see which ones they were immediately connected to, and how. As everyone's awareness rose up a level so did their admiration of her plan. It was apparent that the plan had elements of psychology in it, taking advantage of the strength of the adversary and the weakness of those opposing. Still, no-one as of yet had any tangible clue as to the high level workings of S's brain to figure out an actual framework. Despite the constant uncertainty, the talk resumed in an approving din of praise. All relaxed once more as they could see their preparation going somewhere. Even T was impressed, standing up to make a short address.

Just as he opened his mouth, the door opened and in walked a patrolman. Immediately, so many things occurred that it would be simply infeasible to even imagine (let alone describe) them all. Everything was made unsuspecting in a matter of about 3/5ths of a second (everyone counted with glee). Of course, the council was prepared for such interruptions - were they to just sit around waiting to be arrested and tortured and killed? The patrolman who walked in did notice something but it was all over too quick - and his sleepless brain failed to transfer an occurrence lasting for so short a period to long term memory, so after his long breath of semi-amazement, it was as if no commotion happened at all.

How exactly did S manage this? No-one knew for sure. She obviously had to pull some lever when the door opened and as soon as she had an atom's weight of suspicion. And the papers had to have disappeared through the mechanical holes in the floor. But the models that were so calmly and haphazardly sitting on top of the table? This indeed was a mystery as they weren't anywhere near a wall or the floor. In either case, something must have scooped them up with tremendous efficiency (much like all of the pursuits of S, actually). The room was now fully cleansed of the taint of the plan. To the outside world, they must have been simply a bunch of individuals like the rest of the Tower, completely disconnected from each other in mind and purpose.

This must have been the patrolman's impression as he started the routine inspection.

"Oh, a gathering. Who?"

It was the smuggler who took on the duty of answering.

"The eighth floor millers' group."

"Purpose?"

"We're discussing new ways of transferring shipments to our floor for milling."

"Very well. Any items contrary to the laws of the Barony?"

"Of course not" said T visibly reddening.

"Just a routine question" apologised the patrol man, "and a routine inspection so I'll just be on my-". He paused and looked at one of the elders. There was an uncomfortable silence as he stared at the man's face as if trying to recollect something whilst the discomfort of everyone in the room

steadily increased. The patrolman looked from this and that angle, saying nothing but then coughed and asked a simple question that caused almost a gasp to be emitted from all present. He opened his mouth and uttered in a voice almost unsure of himself: "Haven't I seen you before, elsewhere?"

As often happens in these cases, time slowed down as the true gravity of the situation was grasped. If he had seen the man before, it would probably mean at another patrol - another front used by the practitioners, which meant the patrolman's bound to become suspicious even at his sleepless cognitive state. After all, one can't legitimately be a citizen on the Tower AND have two professions.

"That's right! You were on another floor, with another guild if I'm not mistaken."

"Really?" T started thinking that everything wasn't lost just yet. "But how can that be seeing that this man is clearly a member of our guild?"

"I don't know, I'm trying to piece it together."

"Well- but- a person can't legitimately be a citizen of the Tower AND have two professions! This means he can't possibly have another profession and hence, you are mistaken doesn't it?" said T without the slightest sense of irony. "I mean if he did, he'd be a criminal, but since he isn't then he couldn't have...right?"

"Yes but - oh wait a minute. I'm lost. I sometimes get a bit confused" he said almost with a blush.

"We all do" T answered but the patrolman said it didn't look to him like anyone in the room was confused in the slightest (excepting himself of course).

Things were starting to take a sinister turn. And S felt sorry for the man. And she stepped up to him with a reassuring smile. "It's OK! Everything's fine. There's nothing wrong with you at all. Now if you would sit down, someone can get you a drink and we'll figure it all out."

He did and the drink was fetched. She watched him while he sipped and placed her hand on the border between his forehead and temple. He's burning up in apathy - I can feel it. His brain is on its last legs, just going through the shadow of a shadow of the proper motions. He's soon to die.

As soon as she had thought this, an incredible sadness finally caught up with her. It's been ages since she had been up close to the end result of the chestnut. "You shouldn't have made fun of him like that" she said to T later when it was over. While he was still here though, she merely radiated her calm rhythm and transferred the monotony of the pulsar contractions of her veins to his temple. He slowly became better, more alert as if he had regained touch with a beat of some sort.

"Now let's go over this again. If you did see this man in another guild, this is a serious charge" S said softly. "It would mean he did not follow the Barony's law. But he denies it, isn't that right?"

A grateful nod from the unfortunate elder revealed that in their eyes S had already dealt with the situation. "So, let me ask you: are you sure that this is the same man you saw with another guild?"

He tilted his head as if searching for something and then behold: a look of delight! as he stumbled on it. "No. I'm not. I see - to arrest him, I would need to be sure. But I'm not. So he's not under any kind of arrest." "That's right. Now go home and get some...uh, some nice warm drink and sip it slowly and you'll be better. When you're feeling like you were before again, come to my street on the sixth floor." "And you'll do the-?" he said miming her healing (but not supernatural) touch of several minutes ago. "Oh yes" she said with another smile.

The patrolman stood up and took his leave after some final farewells and left an utterly stunned room. S walked back to her spot with a distinct see-what-you-get-with-understanding?-we-shouldn't-fight-our-enslaved-siblings-but-try-to-help-them look that everyone understood.

"No more meetings," she began, "ever. It's just too risky. After the purge, they're trying desperately to find out who the remaining members are and obviously someone on rostering screwed up. We can't afford to have one of our fronts blown with a double-up like today's. We can't afford to lose a single Executor of the plan. We'll have to do everything through private meetings of 3 or less. Unfortunately this means erecting a non-flat hierarchy but so be it. We must." Thus ended their public sessions with them all sharing the same space.

Cogs turned and spun, hundreds of them. They weren't in unison but slightly off. All were connected to each other and each one had about a third of its circumference painted red. Looking at the top of the fiendish machine, there was a mesh of reds as some cogs had the red at the top at one time and others at another. The same went for the bottoms of the cogs. As a result, S could see the reflected red on all the walls of the room at all times. It was a harsh colour and she witnessed the destruction of many an ant (that the walls abounded with) upon contact with the red. They didn't burst into flames nor explode; their life slowly seeped out upon each contact with the red until they could no longer move. Then they lay, still wiggling their extremities. Then the wiggling slowed and they expired.

What amazing symbolism my subconscious has! S's exclamation was due to the fact that she was aware of her dreaming. She was no poor, unfortunate person (like most of those who could afford sleep) who dreamt without knowing it. Hers were often lucid like this one, purposeful like this one, and heartwarmingly psychotic like this one.

Rather than dolefully watching the cogs, red light and ants, S proceeded with a plan. She looked at the cogs (squinting as they went around) and judged. A blur of red and non-red streaks stood before her eyes as she scanned for patterns and a way out. After an indeterminate period of time, she had the answer. S took out a medium-length stick with a sharp point she had brought precisely for this divine purpose. It glistened in her hand like a magic spear - an anthropology journal would have had pages to waffle on about totemism and fetish but in her hands, 'twas no mere fertility symbol or instrument to drive away evil spirits. For S started to poke the stick at the cogs with a frightening precision. She scratched, tapped, scrapped and trapped the gears as they turned about in their all-consuming redness. The brilliance of the plan was that each time the stick made contact, the cog it struck was halted or changed speed by a bit.

S continued attacking the machine with earnestness. There was a degree of passion in her actions - a hatred of the cruelty of the spikes between the cogs and the unwelcoming redness present therein. Despite the ill feeling towards the cogs, S's actions were subtle and silent. She closed her eyes and realised that without watching herself, she had no idea that anything was happening, she was that smooth in the movements. Good. Stealth makes this even more worthwhile.

When she finished, she saw that the nature of the cogs had changed. Thanks to her readjustments, all were spinning in unison. The part of the cogs that was red rotated to the top of each cog at the same time which meant that looking from any angle, one could see the red as not constant but pulsating. There were breaks in the harsh colour - pieces of time that abounded in dark nothingness, which is exactly what S wanted. Looking at the ants, she experienced them dying at a slower rate with more of them escaping. Great. Now onto part two. Which should pose no problems now that I have my gaps of darkness.

S went right up to the wall and she was alone now because the ants had scattered. She touched the wall and her fingertips witnessed the incredible vibrancy of the wall's vibrations. It wasn't merely as if the wall was some living thing - this would have been too ordinary an observation - but that it seemed to be a living thing that possessed a complexity that was on par with that of other living things she'd seen. Each beat made the wall shake and reveal another manifestation of the collective vitality of the whole building's contents. But each beat was different to the previous. There was also a sublime sensation on the fingertips as if S's nerves grew beyond the fingers and branched out into the wall, creating a tangle of all-pervasive roots that felt the whole wall, room and building. Continuing to listen to her surroundings, S's hand was embedded in the wall as she stood, literally unable to move it. It was petrified not in terms of fear but in terms of being so utterly relaxed that no movement was required.

When she had fathomed the intricacies, the nerves retracted into her fingers stealthily as if she had never penetrated the wall with her touch. Having gathered the necessary data, she conjured a mechanism out of nowhere into her hands. It was strikingly simple, especially when compared to

some other ones she had dealt with: a box with a spinning wheel half sticking out and some contraption inside to adjust the rotation. The wheel itself had a groove meaning with each turn there was a click and the mechanism shook. This, this was to be the whole Solution to it all! The whole thing came down quickly, almost disappointingly so. She fiddled with some of the contraption's inner sancta until the speed of the wheel changed almost imperceptibly. She leaned it against the wall and its own clicks miraculously coincided with the wall's natural vibration. It was as if S herself had listened to the wall and changed the beat accordingly - almost as if she repeated that very test by the elders that originally placed the Plan into her hands. Of course that's exactly what happened.

The wall emitted a drizzling sound as the mechanism reinforced the shaking. This became louder and louder until the edges of the wall and cracks in the stone became blurred to the organ of sight, for they were undergoing a very fine, quick but visible vibration. After a minute of this shaking, the amplitude increased and small bits of stone were being dislodged. Still, S pressed on quite literally. She dug the instrument into the wall with an incredibly determined expression verging on ruthlessness. Well, this was her dream so she couldn't exactly see her own expression but she lived it and felt it through her control of the wall.

It was over - the amplitude increased a hundredfold in a few seconds and she stepped back, watching the whole room crash down in a sound more frightening in its immediacy than was ever heard in the room before. Her view of the cogs and the redness, the ants and the corpses was obscured for minutes and her lungs were irritated by the crumbling mass of rock that was being pulverized from the endless series of impacts. As soon as this concluded, her retinas retreated like whimpering turtles as a grand light hit her from the Outside. After much adjustment, her gaze sunk its starving fangs into her surroundings.

S was on top of a huge grey brick. The brick was what seemed like a hundred paces in all dimensions. It was corrugated but not so much so as to seem fractal-like. Rather, it gave the appearance of something originally designed as smooth that was imperfected by several generations of time and the fact that no work had been done on it, at least on the outside. S's gaze drifted immediately upward and outward for the rest of the landscape was as deliciously gloomy. This didn't matter in the slightest as S's brain salivated at beholding in practice what she'd known all her life in theory. She knew it was winter and midday when the Plan was to be put into place, but nothing prepared her for the richness of the landscape. A richness that was rich in its unmistakable poverty and simplicity - far beyond the brick she was on top of stretched a plane of flatness in an infinite length in all directions. Furthermore, there were even less colours around than during her life inside the fiendish brick. It was all grayscale - grey sky, grey skeletons of trees with no blooming thereon, dark grey clouds and lighter grey lumps of snow and rocks. And yet, this was all so much more real than all she were used to.

S adored the harshness, the biting cold. Looking up, she smiled to discover the sun was exactly where she had predicted it would be. So, the Art wasn't hideously wrong at least in that respect. Time to expand, I guess. As soon as the aforementioned two thoughts (or at least their likeness) were born through the perturbations of S's neurons, she realised she was utterly alone in her dream. How and why? She never imagined this would be done only by her. And where were all the inhabitants that were meant to have been freed? A scan of her stark surroundings highlighted her aloneness (though not actual loneliness).

Immediately, she felt a gaze behind and turned to see a figure standing in the hole that led back to the ruins of the brick. From the angle of the sun behind the figure, she could not tell who it was. Some sinister vibe did cross the distance between S and the figure. Something duplicitous, possessive, militant. S felt a slight shudder, more at her dream having an unexpected and unpleasant plot twist than the figure itself. Who was it though? She didn't approach it as it would only distract her from the purpose of the dream. Instead, she decided to wake up but not before noticing the figure had some feature, something not Definable that she would remember in the

next few weeks, when the symbolism of her otherwise-flawless planning dream was to become transformed into hopefully-Glorious Reality.

Gatherings were extremely rare in the life of the masses in the Tower, with one major exception. One remnant was left by the Baron, in fact instituted by him. We may be cynical about the purpose and say that this was to further the regime's real grip on the lives of the inhabitants by providing a miniscule outlet so the barrel wouldn't burst. And this is true. But it was an outlet nonetheless.

The place of gathering was a dumpling store where the multitude were able to buy food and even sit at tables conversing. A far cry from any kind of intellectual or bohemian hotbed (because of the greatly diminished capacity for conversation or human thought by most people) but it did bring some colour into the terrible one-day life of the Tower's subjects. This was the closest men came to a rhythmical pattern because it was naturally open all the time and the cooking of the various batches of dumplings - in front of everyone too! and not in precious secrecy - provided some kind of reference frame. It may not have been as internalised as menstruation or pregnancy but still, those who frequented the place were generally more clear-headed than the rest. In fact the two old twins that were famous throughout the Elders had retained some sort of humanity and drive largely because of spending many thousands of hours there at all phases of their life. Like all the other points in time over the last few generations the shop was a-buzzing when T and D strolled in. There were about fifteen tables there, all circular and arranged semi-regularly. Like most places open to the public, this was all in the street (ie. the corridor), in level two; the actual kitchen being inside a series of carved-away niches. Chefs could be seen through the windows, slaving away for who knows how many hours. At least in this industry there was a way of telling when you have worked for over ten hours: the skin started to shrivel from the constant steam rubbing up against it for the millionth time and the usual feeling of dizziness became simply unbearable. As a result these chefs had some of the most regular working hours in the whole Barony and consequently the best lives. Some even had the presence of mind to actually know their spouses and children for their character and other features that were over and above the usual identification of loved ones by matching the senses to a corporeal structure from one's memory that the others had to stick to. Of course that's as far as it went. An extended family was impractical for any consumer of the Chestnut, even a chef at the dumpling kitchen. The kitchen was self-service like everything else in the Tower, the Barony not really being a consumer society. The food made was the most delicious in the Tower with the exception of the food prepared by the Baron's court of course. Again the reason was that it was done consciously and with purpose down to the ratios of egg and sugar in the dough or the spices on the eel fillets - nothing was completely mechanical like all the other occupations in the Tower. There was a sense of every instance of preparing the dumplings being different. Each dumpling was placed on a linear time scale in the minds of the chefs and customers. Speaking of which, T picked a relatively quiet time with there being only six others scattered around the various tables. Even then, some conversation could be heard. Any observer from the outside world would have been astounded by the contrast between the tables and the regular street just a few metres away. The normal street was zombiehood (de)personified whilst the eatery was the closest thing to the centre of some kind of counterculture to the Barony (with the exception of the Art of course). They occupied the table that was their de-facto headquarters for the last few months, ever since they went even more underground than before as a result of the incursion. The dumplings were fresh as always, this time with salted and peppered pheasant inside.

"I may not be in a position to have ever seen pepper in its natural form, much like all of these people, but I can at least appreciate the fact that it came from afar and is a kind of gourmet currency" said T.

"What, it doesn't come from the Tower?" asked D, genuinely surprised as only a man forever wrapped up in his own universe would be.

"Of course not! See, all my years of smuggling goods between the various floors weren't just about profit. I managed to learn something of biology. For instance this sun your charts speak of is actually crucial in the growing of all forms of vegetation. So it's all imported from the Outside. It's things that can be made in the dark catacombs that this Tower has an abundance of that we make and then the Baron sells it to other kingdoms."

"But we're always told that the Tower is self suf--"

"Hey guess what? Some of the things the Baron has been telling the people have been in slight misalignment with the truth."

"True. When he bothers to tell people anything at all that is - most of the t--- it's not necessary as nobody has desire for information."

"So, what news?"

D laughed. "A most amusing thing happened a few hours ago. A woman came to me, one from an ordinary family. She lives in my street and the people there know that I can fix things occasionally although of course they aren't aware of the full extent of it. Anyway, she brought me something she found on the street. It was a small cl---."

T's jaw dropped open, although the action smoothly transitioned into him shoveling a dumpling into the orifice. This was akin to being casually presented with the most pernicious illegal substance. "One of ours?"

"What else would it be? Not one of the Baron's ones that's for sure. Naturally my breath was taken away. I told her it was imperative that she either leave it with me or destroy it. She didn't even know it was a cl--- - how could she have? But that wasn't the most fascinating part. She started speculating. She told me she was convinced there was something like an advanced civilisation: either here in the Tower or in the Outside. I've never heard any commoner speculating about anything like this or anything at all for that matter. She said she couldn't conceive of this object (that's what she called it) in all its intricacies just appearing out of nowhere. She said there had to be a maker, one who is 'far better with his or her hands than anyone I know'. Well I was blown away."

"How intricate was the cl---?"

"Absolute rubbish. The most basic level of difficulty imaginable. But I can forgive her for thinking it intricate when compared to everything she's ever seen."

"What did you do?"

"I told her she was right - there had to be a maker, and that I will personally examine it to see if I can come up with some idea as to who or what could possibly have made it. She even made me promise to visit her if I get anywhere. Of course that's out of the question but I know where she lives and she's amazing enough to prove useful if the Tower's ever unlocked. Still, there's one gap: I didn't manage to get her name."

"Her what?" Even T was astounded despite having heard and seen it all, or so he may have imagined at one point.

"Her name. They all have ones. Just like us. They just never get to use them. Also just like us, except we do this to imitate them so as to avoid an obvious marker of our Craft. It's just become a habit recently (in the last few generations) so it's as if we don't have them either."

"You're kidding. Every single one of these people has a n---?" T said lifting his head and scanning the people at the neighbouring tables as if to point out how ludicrous this idea was.

"Of course they do. And you know what else I heard? On the Outside, they used to use them freely. This was how they called people. The degree of human differentiation was that advanced that they could associate a name with a particular person. Even if several shared the same name it

would take little effort to disambiguate the reference. Perhaps one day we too will be able to do this. Imagine it: calling your beloved by her name." T's dreamy expression gave away that he was open to new ideas if they were worthwhile. But D continued, "and whispering it into her ear before the both of you fall asl--- together. In each other's arms."

It was natural to cut off such a key word: despite the place being uncrowded it was still public. But together? "What? What do you mean together...like at the same t---? Why?"

"Mr Smuggler, looks like you're not so worldly after all. Apparently this is also quite common out there. And why shouldn't it be? If you could, wouldn't you share this most precious gift with a loved one, especially if it did not come at the potential cost of your sanity and then life?"

"And I thought I was the radical one! You and your wife must have lots of amazing stuff to share together that no-one else kn-"

"--she- I haven't... I couldn't... Anyway, it's only a hypothetical future, this sharing with the beloved, as first we have to-"

At this point S walked into their line of sight from the street and headed for the table. This was after all meant to be a meeting to finalise parts of the plan before it's executed sometime in the next few weeks. Still, T was shocked at how much D retreated into himself as soon as he saw her. It was like he was afraid that she could read his innermost thoughts and that these thoughts were of a more private nature than he led T to believe.

"Hello my minions. How's it progressing?" she asked after sitting.

"Splendidly," D answered for both of them. "We're ready for the extra instructions. And after we will get them done the Plan can go ahead."

They briefly discussed the plan. By this stage, everyone involved knew the basic overall structure. Firstly there was the synchronisation of the Baron's clocks. This was the subtle phase that was to start soon and would allow for the manipulation of the court's day-to-day patterns in order to maximise gaps between times when the authorities were watching. The second, more active stage was the actual evacuation, sealing off and destruction of the walls. Still, despite the simplicity there were hundreds of specifics that were known only by the smallest individual units. S explained to D and T how they were to start phase one. They were both unit leaders and so wouldn't be doing any of the actual work themselves. But they needed to know when they would start, which units were to be dispatched where and which contingency plans had priority.

They told her the clock story. "So?" she replied. "How much humanity do you think the people have lost? A lot. I know. But not all. Plus it was a woman, and like I've been saying all along they've had it better in the Tower. Like that guard that wondered into our session, no woman would have a brain start decaying like that, and that early in life. Plus there may be some kind of inexplicable reversal of the downturn through the generations. In all cases, it signifies one thing: the t--- to start is ripe. In fact it makes me think we should start this t--- tomorrow. We've had virtually a year to be cautious, now I'd like some fruition as would all involved no doubt."

Wow T noticed. He's not even paying attention to what she's saying. I wonder if he knows her n- Before he could finish that thought, the final addition to their table arrived: F. Finally they had no time at all for anything not directly related to the matter at hand and so the business nature of the gathering escalated and overtook... An hour later they finished up and D took off to begin the final preparations but not before making shooting an uncomfortable glance at his wife that also did not escape the smuggler.

"I can't believe it will soon be over. If everything goes to plan that is" said F after the extended silence that followed D's departure.

"If...I suppose. It's more of an all-or-nothing situation though," S mumbled, her thoughts seemingly elsewhere, "because in a few days nothing will ever be the same again, whether we all end up dead or in the Room or free agents. But it will be all worth it if we get to destroy the puppetry guild of the Baron."

"I've noticed you've kept harping about the puppets many a t--- over the last while," said T. "I mean I know they're part of the Baron's court and therefore must be evil and satanic and everything. But there's more isn't there?"

"Oh yes. This was part of what my father taught me when he related me the story of the Tower and some of the pre-Tower history of our land. You see, the puppeteers were always the natural enemy of our guild ever since the conception of both. But I don't want to bore you two."

"No no, please tell," F said with almost a desperation in her voice and her nails digging into the table. "We need to know everything we can about the enemy in all its manifestations."

"You're right sweetie...where to start? I hope you know about the fact that the cl---makers guild started some t--- before we were herded into the Tower, right from the t--- the Mandate of the Chestnut was introduced." Both T and F nodded. "As soon as our ancestors realised they needed to control their own body cl--- if they, if we, had any chance of survival, they devised the whole intricate system. It developed very quickly over just a few years simply because the Chestnut worked to our advantage. At that t--- we still had the physical advantage of more waking hours but tempered with the external reference point which was the world. So most of the foundational leaps were made then. At the same t--- period, the Baron's court became richer due to the mandate. Barrels of gold and jewellery were rolling into the baronial coffers. And he was quite the hedonist too. First came the lavish meals but this wasn't enough. So, the puppeteering guild was born."

"So the two started at the same t---, several y---- before the Tower?"

"Yes. However things were completely reversed when compared to other lands. Usually it was the cl---makers guild that was oppressive. It represented craftsmen and artisans that would make commissions for the wealthy. It was they who were building extravagant water-cl---s and ones which did entire performances on the hour, with hundreds of figurines, music-boxes, thousands of levers and dials. All of this was mostly for idol entertainment rather than a worthwhile purpose. Most of the advances were in wiring and little attention was paid to the heart and soul of the Art, the t---keeping part itself, making things easy for the real people who needed the cl---s. The gentry didn't need to watch the hours: for them every day was a holiday. The less well off did. Their lives indeed depended on this. But few could afford real cl---s, ones which had the very essence of the Art, because the guild was only interested in the ones they could sell to various Countesses, ones that would become centrepieces of a dinner conversation. The puppetry guild was the opposite. They would be hounded by the authorities because they were the voice of the oppressed. They provided an outlet for all the enormous injustices that all the ordinary inhabitants of the baronies were subject to. Slapstick and crude jokes often masked some brutal satire on the lords and ladies above them. It was a noble blade that devoured every layer of society, leaving nothing untouched. The art of the people: its guild members were often executed by the authorities for being too clever in their mockery. They had to contend with making puppets out of the most base materials. But because of the physical and social deprivation of the Art, they made the most of it in terms of heart. Oh, it would be worth everything if we just got out to see one of those performances! They were by real people and for real people."

"So basically the opposite to what we have in the Tower" F noted with an almost-quivering voice.

"Indeed. In our barony it was the puppetmasters guild that was established to serve the elite. They entertained at lavish parties and spent all their efforts into the most technically brilliant puppets and figurines. But of course the content of the performances was empty because the Baron and his court were empty people and the guild naturally tailored for that. It was us and our guild that was the true herald of the people. We were on the verge of making some real breakthroughs and were about to disseminate them when the Tower came. Then we had to go underground even more than before. But we're still the snake, biting at the heel of the Tower whenever we can. And come now, we will release our venom."

"So there was no direct rivalry between the two guilds?"

S spat out a quick laugh. "Depends on what you mean. No, puppetmasters in the Tower never joined in the baronial raids on us and they weren't present at the purge. They were too busy making the court forget their troubles. But there is rivalry in that they're the very antithesis of what we should be about. Two very similar things if you think about it, but done with two very different attitudes."

"But-but, can't it become something better? Can't they be used for good?" F asked.

S nodded in an emphatic affirmative but then expressed doubts as to whether this will actually happen any time soon. When the Plan is executed they will probably all perish with the court because they will join it in fighting the people and the guild of the Art. T and S both noticed F's low mood during their discussion of puppetry. It was as if it held some kind of key to her recent apparent unhappiness.

"Don't worry. We'll show the court" said T reassuringly. "We'll show them and as to the puppet guild only t--- will tell. The only thing that matters is that the audience must be defeated so we can all finally say good night. Plus if the puppet shows have made them into softened hedonists, they'll be easier to defeat."

"Yeah" smiled F. "They're probably all milksops."

The Room

was tucked away in the upper recesses of the Tower. So much for the ideal of a tyrant performing their tortures in some far away dungeon: it was right next to the court rooms. Of course the entire Tower was in effect a dungeon. There was however another reason for the placement. Most torture rooms would be inappropriate to have near ladies and children as the noise pollution would simply be overwhelming to delicate countenances. The Baron's room lacked this feature though. Not a sound ever emerged from it.

This is because the rack and knives and boiling were considered crude in the Tower, not to mention impractical. It was through the mind that the baron controlled the populace and it was through the mind that he punished it too. And all knew this and despite no ordinary person having a clear conception of what went in this room, they were scared to death of the mere idea of it. Despite losing the essential human processes, the general population never lost the broader process called fear.

The room was totally dark from within and nothing could be seen until the door was opened for what must have been the hundred thousandth time. Immediately a line of light slid along the interior bringing it to the attention of those who entered. There were three people excluding guards: the baron R, his new puppeteering apprentice K and an unknown man set to be executed here. The baron was there to see the man be locked in the room and to say his last goodbye and K accompanied him as she often had in the last months, the baron being increasingly impressed with her skills. But naturally it was the condemned man himself that was most interested in the room's interior and peered into it with the necessary trepidation.

Nothing special. Just ordinary walls and an ordinary floor. And even tables. With food on them: they were practically breaking from it! Good food too, much better than he would ever have eaten in his Towerly life. There were stacks of plates with mounds of fresh fruit and vegetables in their original colours (the majority in the Tower were pickled or preserved), various rolls and breads, and fancy desserts and wines. This was completely unbelievable. The man had expected anything. In fact he almost preferred a saw that was meant for his limbs. At least that would be over quickly. He'd also lose consciousness fairly soon from the pain if he was lucky. But what was this? The light expanded and he gasped again and practically started shaking. The full opening of the door revealed yet another element to the room. It was... but no, it couldn't be! It was unthinkable. It was some structure that was large and rectangular with a flat, soft top that had

some cushions on it. There was also some cloth on top of it as well as the softest of petals. The whole strange piece of furniture could have had no other purpose, the man concluded, than to lie down on. And not for a temporary amount of time too, it was permanent. It was--- a piece of furniture made for sleeping!

So this was the punishment for drifting off, something as close to the imagined heaven of an anti-baronial heretic as can be. The man was no longer afraid because this was too much. He also noticed that there were no chestnuts to be found anywhere. Could this be? In vain he pinched himself as the guard shoved him in and closed the door on the man forever. The baron and the apprentice however could still see the man through a small secure window in the door. They saw him moving around the room, still in disbelief, having been virtually knocked out by the grandness and improbability of it all.

"What now?" K whispered to R.

"Oh there's no need to whisper. He can't hear us now."

"Right. What happens then?"

"Wanting to find out what fate you so narrowly avoided?"

"Something like that."

"Well it's not some ironic reversal or anything. There's no light at the end of the tunnel. He will die in a few days. They will be the longest of his life."

"What, starvation?"

"No no. As you can see he is amply provided for. In fact I suppose there is an element of irony in the punishment. All his life he has been craving for something like this. But now, he has it but can never enjoy it which only exacerbates the suffering before death. See, there's a reason there aren't any Chestnuts in the Room. We don't want him taking any. That's the punishment: he finally gets what he wanted. He is taken off the nut."

"You mean forced off... and because it's such a drastic step and because his whole life his body has been used to--"

"Exactly. He will never be able to sleep because his brain does not know how, and it certainly can't learn when being taken off the nut this quick. But sleep he must because without the nut the body functions return to those of a regular human. So he will die from lack of sleep. He will be more tired and thirsty for it in the most craving way imaginable than anyone ever has but the more the mallets of insomnia pound at his head the further he will be from a break. He will slowly lose all cognitive processes. His head and limbs will feel heavier than the densest lead and granite no matter how much he relaxes his muscles, no matter how deep he digs into his luxurious petal-covered bed. What's more, when he was under the influence of the chestnut there was some regularity in his life due to contact with the outside world. This means he could still piece events together on some kind of timescale. But here, The Room is static. Meaning--"

"-he will feel like he's been there forever, amidst the wakefulness, right up until he is dead," whispered K in horror that had a natural hint of admiration for the pure evil genius of the scheme.

"Yes. Come on now. Let's go. We will come back in a few days when he will have realised what's in store for him and when the dying process begins."

"But--"

"I insist that we do."

They turned around and left the condemned to keep smiling and wondering as to what the creature comforts of the room could possibly mean. At this point the baron questioned K about the next puppet show she was performing in. This was indeed a special occasion because she began to personally instruct E (R's nephew) due to her lightning-fast learning curve. It was important to R that E be given the best training to take his mind off the recent experience he had with him (several more followed since the time E wanted to try the nut). How fortunate, that these two beings have been united in the Tower, despite their differences in age and background, all by the love of puppeteering, thought the baron. They reached the end of the corridor and opened the door that led back to the court, to rehearsals and extravagance.

Meanwhile if one was to remain in the dank corridor and peer into the walls while squinting from the harshness of the stingy orange light, they would see a single cockroach shuffle along the edge of the wall. The cockroach was unexpectedly energetic, veering around in a curved path that avoided the tiny cracks in the floor. The alternating light and shadows of the dungeon ensured that the cockroach's figure would flicker, appearing when it was in the light and disappearing when it passed under a shadow. This sight itself would have been quite surprising to an observer. What was a cockroach doing here, in the Tower? Of course there were creatures in the endless catacombs that weren't entirely human but in every den and corridor, even a cockroach seemed out of place. It was like the stone walls were an architectural marvel with a harsh, almost Gothic quality to them that was designed to keep anything outside the Baron's control (even a cockroach) away. And out. Every pocket was in fact a marvel of engineering that testified just what a high level of achievement the Barony was at when the people built this edifice before they knew they were constructing their waking grave. The result was a perfect arrangement for sterilisation, whereby the unnatural light and the bumpiness of the stones melded together to create some semblance of design. Needless to say, a human being would have been even more out of place in these corridors to one who had never visited the Tower before. They would have been inappropriate even as a prisoner, not because the mere walls were so cruel that even a prisoner could not possibly be placed in there but simply because the whole scene was so bare that any placement of a human at all seemed pointless. But remain in place they all did, especially the man in the Room and the cockroach he shared his sterile section of the crypt with.

Flickers

of fire echoed across S's room. Other than that, it was bare and stripped down. In fact it resembled a cell more than the Room did. And S was there, having voluntarily confined herself to it in order to wind down before the last sleep in this status-quo, unchanged Tower. The next day, it would begin. After a week of the minutest fiddling with the Baron's court clocks through either tiny holes in walls or simple substitution or tapping (much like S did for her entry "exam") they were in sync. No more staggering of guards and patrols through all hours. Slowly but surely, the entire court and their foot soldiers of sorts were sleeping to the same central clock. This means that for the first time in over ten generations tomorrow all the guards, the baron, his family and the rest would be sleeping simultaneously. The populace would obviously be untouched, which gave more room to manoeuvre providing them with a small window until the guards realise and wake.

S's achievement may seem trivial thus far: how hard could it have been to synchronise all the clocks, even remotely? After all she knew how to alter virtually any clock mechanism in existence according to her whim. Rest assured though that this was not the crux of the task, difficult as the actual fiddling turned out to be. The real mastery came in knowing how much to move each clock by. It had to be the greatest time possible towards the mean time but also it had to be small enough so as not to be noticed. This means every clock (and there were over a hundred in the inner chambers of the tower) had to be altered in many, many stages. Not only that but this had to be coordinated so that everyone was as far away as possible from the clock when it was changed. When two clocks were changed they were also to be as far apart as possible to minimise the chance of someone realising. And yet somehow in a very short timeframe they were all set. In short, the achievement of the woman and the whole guild was worthy of a prize in the mathematics of scheduling. The entire operation required the closest surveillance of the entire court for months. But it was done.

S smiled as she remembered another time she was in a room with a flame flickering. However her memory did wander forward from that happy recollection, to the last time she saw her father. He

was taken a few years before the great purge in another purge of a smaller scale. He knew they would take him for they captured enough people to increase the chances of forcing at least one to open up his deepest secrets to 1. There was no point running though: he needed to spend as much of his last days in this earth getting as far ahead in his work as possible so that his inevitable death would not completely extinguish his work. This of course involved spending much extra time with S, keeping her up to speed. Each word he spoke to her was received by S with a conflict of emotions. She greedily devoured it and tattooed it in her brain and imprinted in her heart and mind for all eternity, such that she could recite them all in any order at any point in time even all those years later. At the same time each word he spoke to her then increased the lump in her throat. She built clocks for him that went beyond anything she'd ever done, anything he had ever done too, in all probability; but in front of eyes the most salient images were those of his essence undergoing the most hideous calamities in the near future. She didn't need to tell him any of this: he understood perfectly and spared both of them the impossibility of discussing it openly and opening the floodgates of despair. So instead they just got on with it, which was as fitting a goodbye as he could have given S. No forced jokes, just a smile. All the way to the point where they both heard the footsteps of the enemy, packed their clandestine items away and watched the door open and then he was gone. She was too young then but she realised just how brilliant he was in dealing with her on that day to wear down the trauma as much as he could. This was in her old room, in another floor, before T smuggled into this floor and her new life began. But something about the light here reminded her of that last meeting of theirs. It was probably just the fact that the meeting was one of the sharpest memories of her life. And she was about to enter into another.

A drawer was opened by an almost quivering hand and a large rolled-up piece of paper was taken out. It had signs of tremendous age: it wasn't dirty, it didn't have crumpled corners but somehow it just projected the fact that it was constantly consulted for years and years. And with a burning admiration for all it represented. She unrolled it once more and took breath. To see this in reality! To finally be rid of this roof over her head and be sent into the open, under the domain of the celestial objects! Into uncertainty, she heard her stream of consciousness whisper. What will I do if this- ONCE this happens? Somehow I see myself leaving the entire area. There'll be so much to see and experience, and frankly I want to be in an environment that's missing everyone I've been preparing over the year. Not that she was sick of them. Being sick of someone implies you weren't at some prior point. This was simply a continued infuriation and disappointment with them. Not as guild members. They were making great progress in that, and it's not like they were hopeless before. It was as people that she resented most of them. Especially D. He just represents everything that's been wrong with the guild all these generations. All the close-mindedness, hypertraditionalism and elitism for non-members and their own wives(!). It may still cost us. Much. I haven't succeeded in transforming attitudes. Besides it's not like I'm in any position to even presume to teach humanity to them.

The greatest shame were the women of the guild. Pregnancy was a blessing in disguise for the commoners. It was the one time in her life a woman could mark off as an event, with a Before, During and After. No matter how painful the During was, the one carrying a child would always reap benefits that lasted a lifetime, at least because of the chestnut mandate. But even this thing was tainted for the women of the guild. Because their pregnancies had an ulterior purpose: making more babies for the specific purpose of becoming guild members. She remembered F telling her of her two children being born: there were none of the extra perks her sleepless neighbours had. Of course she loved her kids but S still saw her and the rest as cheated. How fortunate that if I choose this path it will be in an environment where there's no need to look for extra benefits. The lifestyle benefits will be there anyway, child or not, touching my skin with every moonrise and every movement of every blade of grass.

She still smiled. It did not matter ultimately. They could all perish tomorrow along with all the inhabitants in the tower. But at least it would be a change, at least everyone will experience one

human moment. S did not think this in terms of a paternalistic shoving of freedom down the throats of the tower. It came from living among these people all her life and knowing that they themselves weren't even in a position to judge that anything was wrong. That and she KNEW she was right.

Well here goes. I trust I've trained myself enough over the years to be able to fall asleep on command, even on a night like this. She blew out the flickers that flailed and highlighted the yellow-brown hues of the walls. Her room was slowly submerged into a refreshing darkness.

Dreaming

was bliss. The sacred dreameress plunged into an uncontrolled frolic in a pasture. No conscious dreaming or lucidity there, - just the event itself. Of course she had to improvise most things, especially the colour scheme. There was no grass in the Tower, no sky. Still, she did a fairly good job at it when you consider her lack of information. The grass was prickly and the colour of the preserved vegetables she had eaten all her life, so it was a more dead and dehydrated green. And the sky, the sky was a whitish, reddish orange: a bit like some elements of the sunrise or sunset. It would also have reminded a third party of the backdrops of the puppet shows which had this very coloured sky by an "amazing coincidence".

She was alone for the moment. Not that she wanted to be. In fact she craved human companionship and staring at the empty horizon only increased this craving of anticipation and future joy of having realised these cravings. Her children were somewhere in the dream as concepts, but not in the actual vicinity. She merely felt them, which was more than could be said about her husband. He was hardly there in concept. She could sense the idea of a husband and of his essence but the whole thought had a question mark superimposed over it. F didn't know if he were here or there and even the question itself somehow didn't make sense in that place, in that time.

What made sense was her positioning herself on her back, staring up at the reddish nothingness. The grass was slightly prickly (again like the preserved vegetables) but that was fine because it only provided her with an extra massage. She turned her shoulders out in the most relaxed position imaginable and spread her limbs as far away from her centre of gravity as she could. It seems hours or days passed: she did not know. Everything remained the same as she looked up at the cloud formations. She had learnt that this activity existed in the Outside from the smuggler so it was no surprise that her brain wanted to take her for a ride there and to pacify her artistic side. The clouds were of various colours and irrelevant shapes. She did not try very hard to name them or apply her imagery skills; it was enough to just take them in as the shapes they were, without interpretation. Indeed, what need was there for interpretation if the mere fact that she was there was the most vivid and elaborate interpretation she had mustered?

Something clicked and F got up and started running, having had a sudden burst of energy. Fatigue was unheard of - the only thing she experienced was euphoria. She ran up and down hills (which all had tops flat as tables) and through dirty puddles and didn't mind a bit that her clothing and demeanour looked less dignified with every second. Where am I going though? I'm not just running around. She looked back and saw proof of this as her footsteps traced a straight line to the place she started, somewhere far back. She had been running in a certain direction and she continued, not knowing what was in store. Whatever it is I better brace myself, for this foreboding feeling isn't just something I ate.

It came quite quickly: she was still running but having seen that she was no longer Outside. She was in a corridor made by two parallel walls stretching as far in both directions as she could see. The ceiling was somewhere off in the lofty heights of the building but the walls were only a few metres high so she could see their tops. Did the other thing-- the outside- even exist? Was I even

there? Or is this before and I've just undergone a bit of time travel? There were no answers. It might be added that her questions, while seeming as strange ones to ask during a dream, weren't that peculiar to anyone in the Tower who slept, and certainly not for F.

She knew she had to keep running though and picked up the pace. Pretty soon she understood why: the walls were very slowly coming towards each other. The corridor she was running through was narrowing at a catastrophically slow pace but the exit (if any) was nowhere in sight. Strangely enough, there was no fear tangible within her ribcage. Either F knew she'd make it or she didn't care or---. There seemed to be no end to her acceleration as she came flying past each stretch of wall, noticing every brick, every bump and every crack filled with dust as individual and essential elements. Plus the walls were both under a metre away from her by then. Although she didn't feel afraid she saw that the two walls weren't particularly friendly ones. There was nothing in their immediate appearance that shouted Coldness, but she knew that they would both damage her. Not only if I'm squashed between the two, but even if I'm dashed against either one. As soon as she had that vision pop in her head she tripped from loss of concentration and stacked it. For the first time she felt a sense of some panic at her sudden break in movement. Or was that lactic acid build-up? Before picking herself up off the ground she looked up and realised the reason immediately. They were standing on the walls. One on the left wall, one on the right. She did not know which side was which and it was ridiculously unimportant anyway. One was her husband, the other was the baron. She knew this despite their figures not resembling their living counterparts in any significant way. What the figures showed was a deep stare: they were standing right opposite each other staring in each other's eyes. These were the only facial features that stood out. As the walls got closer, which they continued to do not waiting for F to get up, the two figures approached each other with a grim linearity.

Right. So this is how it is? Well I shan't scale either wall in order to help the Cause. Not anymore. No aiding of one or hindering the other, not directly. I'll still fulfill my plan but on my terms. Now flee you loafer! She was up and at a top speed that far exceeded her previous one in a beat. Nothing mattered anymore. K knew she WILL get out of there so the fact that there was no light at the end of the tunnel (meaning she was really really far from the exit still) and that the walls were almost touching her skin by now were a mere trifle. She raced through the darkness, the two walls helping her get tunnel vision of her single-minded goal. Kicking up great volumes of dust and small rocks at each step, such was her energy, she flew.

Violence

began immediately after the water rushed in. Straightaway the guards employed by the baron knew something was wrong because a partial flood in the Tower could not be hidden even from their perfectly synchronised sleeping pattern. No sooner had the water reached knee depth on the outer perimeter of the fourth and seventh floors that the guards appeared and it began. Various members of the clockmaker guild were on one side of the flooded perimeter. These included some elders but not many since most had more elaborate and specific tasks for this momentous day. Rather, the bulk were footsoldiers - people that were part of the guild through being part of the family of some elder and people who had no specific knowledge of the Art. "It's better this way" S would often say during their planning sessions. All in all this included several hundred children of the elders that were over sixteen. And women. This was a sticking point for S but she had not revealed to the others that she planned to involve the elders' wives. But so it was. And most of them desperately wanted to. The end result was a fairly organised rabble armed with metal pipes, large rocks and even a sword or two for the more proficient ones. The other side of the perimeter had guards. Not too many: this was part of the plan. Despite the fact that they came quickly it certainly took longer than a second to rouse the

entire corps, so at the start they were up against only a few and outnumbered them four or five to one. But the guards all had arms of steel and of course the numbers advantage was shrinking moment by moment as new ones arrived.

There was nothing special about the confrontation at first. All they needed to do was buy time for all the elders and S to act. This meant the civilian army largely stalled the guards through taunts and throwing objects across the miniscule stretch of water that the guards had not yet begun to cross. S watched the beginning of conflict for but a few seconds - she had to go and actually make use of the time she was buying with her people's lives. There'll be time to wallow in the unpleasantness of this whole situation later, if there in fact was a later. S began to walk through the perimeter to get to the room that was at the edge of the Tower. In vain she looked for F's place in the ranks.

A few hours earlier they evacuated the perimeters of the necessary floors. This wasn't terribly difficult: it's not as if anyone had to be awakened. Furthermore, most common people did not have enough of a will of their own to resist leaving their rooms and heading towards some of the "city squares" in the middle. At first, passing by S noticed that some of the folk had indeed mustered some semblance of resistance probably due to the highly unusual situation that was unravelling. Some could be seen on her side joining in with the guild. Others were next to guards. Neither were performing much in terms of action but even in the few minutes it took S to walk along the perimeter, she could see the rising tension - not in the guards or clockmakers but the insomniac masses.

The floor shook in a sound that could only be described as a very subdued explosion. A second wave of flooding occurred, and a literal wave too for it swept across the perimeter causing the water level to rise to about a metre. The ranks of the foes closest to each other were standing in the water, up to their waist. Others were further back and further up. This was coincidentally the breaking point; the side of the guards rushed in through the water and started attacking - not to kill at first but just to beat the shit out of. S shivered a little because she knew it wasn't the guards that initiated the charge, it was in fact the people. Her suspicions were confirmed as she saw some on her own side of the artificial river turn against an enclave that was someone's private room. They smashed the door open and she knew they were about to start looting. But S knew she must not think about the fact that the darker side of human nature has just been unleashed at her behest. She had to get out of there and go on to do what needed to be done. Besides, this would be the first human emotion some of these people have experienced, so well was the leash on their minds kept up all these centuries. It wasn't such a shock that they didn't know exactly how to deal with the idea that something out of control was happening and that they had a certain amount of angst amidst the chaos.

S ducked as a rock crashed against the wall missing where her head was but a second ago. There was no time to see if this was catapulted by the arms of the guards or some baker or stonemason. S just disappeared into the opening that led towards one of the outer walls of the Tower. But one person did see. And he had much time to dwell on things. Hidden in a small pocket in one of the walls, E witnessed the people finally get some ambition and purpose. Unfortunately the purpose was that of an angry crowd. At last there was a sense of organisation as the ant colony metaphor became apt to an extent, but it was a violent colony. E watched them turn on a family that lived just near the perimeter, on the inside so they weren't evacuated. This meant they were the closest to the fighting and hence the logical target for the populace to smash open the door and pull them out. Very very soon there were a hundred people in their apartment, rummaging through their belongings for whatever could be found. The extra irony was that in the Tower, material possessions could only get you so far: outside the extravagance of the court there was little practical point in looting. But of course E didn't know this having been embubbled for so much of his life. Well, seems my uncle's predictions about me finally getting to see the true nature of his subjects have come true. But he didn't feel that his uncle or the regime were vindicated in his

eyes, rather it was all just very sad to watch that's all. Like virtually all the great statesmen throughout history when faced with such problems, the youth lacked a solution, for the moment. To exaggerate the degree of the crowd's mobness would be a mistake. There was no raping of the aforementioned family, no throats slashed, no three year old girls doused with petrol and set alight. It wasn't deadly, just ugly.

Having escaped the ugliness, S arrived at the end room. Between them and the outside world was about a metre of masonry. But that wasn't a problem. O, one of the other senior elders, was already there with the device. S nodded and stepped up to it while O retreated to watch in justifiable trepidation. The device was the same as in her dream, as if by coincidence. A simple mechanism: a box with a spinning wheel half coming out. This was meant to bring down not only the wall inside her dream but all the real outer walls of the Tower. Of course this wasn't the only instance of the device, just the largest and most important one. Fifteen replicas were scattered around strategic points in the Tower. The patterns of wall layout were pre-calculated and the best rhythms for the mechanisms to vibrate at were already set. All S had to do was come up to the wall and feel it with a tapping stick one last time to work out the most advantageous placing for the device. This she did and having pressed it against the wall with all her might and pushed one of the many many levers she could feel the wall vibrate slowly. It was imperceptible at first but in a minute there was definitely an audible drone coming from the wall. S breathed a relief sigh. Showtime. This had to hold up for probably a few hours, and if the others were working, the walls would tumble in that timeframe. If, that is, the army of the meek could hold the perimeter. S couldn't help them because she had to monitor the device at all times, moving it around a bit when she could sense from the quality of the vibrations that it was necessary. She was about to when she felt a heavy hand gently touch her shoulder.

Seconds later she was tied up. O was already gone by the time she turned around. There were no guards in the room: the ones who reached this room must have taken O away before she even turned around. She looked at the one who had tied her and having never seen the baron before face to face, she knew him instantly.

"So, watching all those puppet shows made you an expert at knots, eh?"

"Oh, you do me too much honour. Rather I'm a successful amateur."

"What now?"

"Are you inquiring if I'm going to drag you off into the Room or something? I haven't decided. What happens now is up to you, really. And circumstance."

She looked at the wall to find that in her amazement the device was still working. R hasn't switched it off. Of course he probably didn't know how to but he didn't even smash it or pull it away from the wall. Was this an oversight? she wondered. It couldn't be but then again he couldn't have any reason to keep it in action either.

"So tell me how it depends on me...and how on circumstance."

He began after a brief silence. "There is a deal out there, believe it or not. See, I found you but I've no idea where your comrades in arms are. Sure, guards are searching but there's the commotion you created: the riots and the flooding. Did you think this would stop the guards?"

"Of course not, don't insult me. It was just to maximise our advantage. After all, it IS slowing you down."

"That, you're right about. So as you can see, I'm in a pickle. I'd love nothing better than to collapse all the tortures of the Room on your insolent corpse-to-be, and then some. But realistically there's still a chance of defeat if all the other...contraptions you have going work. I assume they're to bring down the walls. So that's why I haven't turned it off. As long as it's going, the others can probably tell that it is, and therefore they think everything's all right. The deal is this: you must give up all the others with all the devices. We leave this room and you direct me to all of them, one by one whereby my guards capture each person involved in the scheme. This we do quickly, within the hour, before the work of your hands actually does its job."

"And what to we receive for this?"

"Your lives for starters. Everyone will be stripped of all possessions and their apartments will be searched. Then they will all bypass the Room and be moved to my quarters where they will become puppeteers. No punishment."

"Well it is somewhat worse than death so it is a punishment of sorts..."

"Idealistic aren't we? Oh and you will get your total freedom. You'll get to disappear anywhere in the Tower. You can start again. You can even teach new people and create a new scheme, one that will defeat me. Or at least you can try for I shan't monitor you. This is the greatest gift I can give you here and now: the chance to confront and possibly defeat me again, after this attempt has largely failed. What say you? Wait-- before you respond let me give you the alternative. You refuse. I drag you into the Room, which will have actual torture instruments because depriving you of the Chestnut doesn't do the trick. Then I will tell the guards to go hard. They will find your friends and crush anyone who stands in the way. The restraint will be gone. Thousands killed. Possibly tens of thousands. And for what? Using brute force I can sweep the Tower floor by floor. Sure, there's an infinitesimal chance that you will succeed before I find enough people. But all I have to do is switch this one off and find another two or three to destroy and your whole Scheme is out of balance. What will you do then?"

"Choose the second option."

R laughed, genuinely. "I was asking rhetorically but I see you couldn't resist giving the answer right here. Fine. I have one more thing to show you before stomping on the populace with my proverbial heels. Something I hope will change your mind. Be back shortly. But here's some food for thought while you're alone: how did I find you here? I mean there are thousands of enclaves like this one on this floor alone and your flood blocked them all. I'm sure you made the plan so that nobody would know of your whereabouts except for a small few. So how did I know?"

He paced away casually, leaving S shaking of exasperation. Was this truly it? Defeat? Fuck the humiliation, it was the fact that they were supposed to be a guild of the people! She was supposed to free them! Despite the purge, despite her father's death, despite the downturn in the quality of the art, she was supposed to succeed, and for a damn good cause too. The feeling of it slipping away was the worst part, not anything practical that may have followed.

Still, she couldn't help wondering what her options were now. It was too much to rely on the luck of the devices working before the baron's arm clutches them. The schedule was just too close: they needed a few more hours to bring the walls down and the baron needed a few more hours to find everyone and everything. If it did happen it would of course be a bonus but S had to prepare herself for alternatives. The alternative was a gruesome death for her and everyone. It also meant the end of the Art, for the few who were sitting in safehouses at the moment didn't have a millionth of S's (or even the elders') knowledge. This meant an indefinitely long, scorching summer for the mindsets of the Tower barony. They would have to rely on outside help. The same outside that hadn't helped despite centuries having passed. Who knows that on earth's going on in the Tower's immediate area? The situation might be such that nobody else knows about the tower, or it might be at the centre of an uninhabited region hundreds of kilometres in diameter. The other solution was to scavenge what she could of the elders. She'd have to escape and fight fiercely, to much death. Such was the current state of this all-or-nothing game they'd been playing. But even there the baron could oppose her. He did locate her. How? How? And who? The answer was revealed a few minutes later when R strutted in holding a terrified F (a.k.a. K). She had her hands bound and was gagged but every twitch screamed the obvious fact that she was desperately trying to tell S something. All the while R smiled and pointed to his information source turned hostage. He was virtually winking to S.

As soon as she saw who had sold her out her heart fell. This truly was the end of the road. Obviously from a practical point of view, things were bad because she would have known so much. It didn't even matter that F wasn't proficient in the Art, all they needed were locations, times etc. And these not even D managed to keep from his wife. But of course the most most most devastating thing was how demoralising it was, to feel betrayal from one who S was sure

understood the most. They had shared so much together and it was a collection of lies-- no, not even lies but a complete farce where nothing is what it seems and everything is for some hidden clandestine purpose.

"That's right, here's my source. And I'll throw in sparing her with the deal I want you to take-- hang on a minute! I see something in your eyes! Sorry to have miscalculated how serious you were about the plan. I meant I'll throw in her death if you agree. If you refuse you'll at least know that my actions in the next few hours will be anything but a blind sweeping of the tower floor by floor."

S's brain exploded in worry and confusion. She wasn't sure of F's betrayal yet. She was devastated but she wasn't sure, so she wasn't convinced she should want her dead. On the other hand she also wasn't sure how this scene could have been possible if not for F's total and unflinching betrayal. She sunk even lower into the ground realising she blindly held the keys to the plan, and yet both doors led to annihilation.

An instance before S was pushed over some breaking point (and later, she didn't want to think where that point would have led to), something unexpected and a tad ridiculous happened. There were footsteps in the corridor and lo-and-behold, D walked in, on his tiptoes. Both women read something calculating in his face, something unlike the usual D they knew. However the look of coldness he had when he scanned the room disappeared in an instance when he saw the situation in all its force. Certainly he didn't expect to find his wife and the baron there, for there was a double shock. His face hardened and he picked up a heavy stick. Two gasps could be heard then. The first was from the baron, for his guards did not return yet and he was unarmed and most unproficient. His response was a rather cool lamentation at losing such an overwhelming advantage. The second gasp was from S as she realised what D was so calculating about when he walked in and who he expected to find there.

It was D who blinked first, rushing in at R with the stick over his arm bent menacingly. The baron looked at the exit and took off, after assessing the merits of each course of action with lightning accuracy.

The elder was left alone with the two women both of whom looked at him. It then became clear to S that only she understood the full extent of the situation. This was no time for subtlety, she had to tell them immediately if there was any chance of salvaging the plan.

"Stop" she called out to D who took his first step towards her, ready to untie her.

"What's the matter?"

"Isn't it ironic? You both betrayed each other. And me. But whereas one betrayal destroyed the Plan, the other might just save it. Before you untie me though, listen, oh great elder and be warned that your face is crying out for a fist in it."

"What? Betrayals?"

"Fuck you. Do you think I haven't realised what you were here for? I thought you had some agenda but I didn't realise you were a common sexual predator. Were you here to seduce me or rape me? Mind you, I'll react equally bad no matter what you say so you might as well be frank. I guess the instincts know no bounds of ideology or education. Lucky for you your wife betrayed us both before. This means your sliminess, and I mean that as both a description and title, was actually useful or we'd both still be under the custody of his Greatness the Baron."

"My wife?"

"Look at her!!"

F was quivering almost to the point of kicking. She still had her desperation to speak but there was a twist of outrage at her husband. It was then that D realised his wife's alleged role in all this.

This was natural, for she wasn't the woman he was paying the most attention to when he first entered the room.

"Do you mean to say that-"

"How do you think the baron found his way here? Although I must say I understand her. See, you've got an amazing spouse there and you know it. But it's not like you were willing to bend the tradition at all to involve her. The stars forbid, a non-male should be involved in the art. It's bad enough for you that I'm running the show and you and the others weren't about to let their families follow suit. Well here's the result. A traitor in our midst. Not to mention the fact that the women who you so preciously wanted to protect are currently implementing the most dangerous part of the plan."

"Look, we can sort this out later. If there is a later. Let's just get out of here."

He untied S and got two or three gloriously deserved smacks across the face as promised. Then S untied F, but not before giving her a few as well. There was no point figuring out who had betrayed S more deeply. She probably wouldn't have made that comparison anyway. It was all just there in its horridness.

F moaned and cried and finally broke into a long rant as soon as her mouth was free, as if all the words she'd been trying to say over the past half hour bubbled up to the surface straight away.

"Wait, wait! If you want the plan to still succeed you must listen to me now not later. Yes I did betray you both to an extent but not like you think. I wanted to help the plan. I mean this was before you even revealed the plan to the elders but I wanted to help somehow with a plan of my own. You're right of course. Of course I was constantly frustrated at not being involved. So I tried to infiltrate the baron's court. I took an unforgivable risk: I let myself be caught and tried and sentenced to death, all because I heard a rumour that the baron likes feisty women in his puppeteers guild. But it was a desperate time... So at the sentencing I let some steam off and I was taken in. And all this time I juggled my life between the two guilds."

The two were stunned: they thought they had enough sensory and brain overloads for the hour but here was a shock that was probably superior to all the other shocks of before. Not knowing what to do, S came up to F and patted her on the head, apologising for her physical outburst.

"But if you didn't tell, how did-?"

"Oh. I guess he had some suspicions in the last few days. It took months for them to surface but they did. He must have put some things together and followed me or something. He obtained the info with me unaware, I promise! And then he grabs me and drags me down here, telling me that he knows everything but you don't and that therefore I was the perfect pawn."

"He played me... knowing that I'd immediately think you betrayed us. Might have worked too."

She hung her head. The whole situation was nothing but compressed awkwardness. There was still the tension between D and everyone.

"Hey," F began, "I might have inadvertently got your plan in this mess but I've also gained some usefulness during my time as puppetmaster. Perhaps I can help."

"How?"

"Well we need more numbers. A general revolt would be great. If we had that, the walls are almost certainly coming down."

"True, but a revolt from the masses-"

"Not them! I meant ones who actually get some sleep. Let's go: the other guild awaits."

Finally they reached the side entrance to the quarters of the court on the upper level.

At least there was one advantage to R's discovery of the plan: the court corridors were completely empty of guards. Unfortunately this indicated that all of them were dispersed among the various floors on a search and destroy mission with her co-conspirators as the targets. But none of the unlikely trio had time to think of this, it was a thought so horrible that to merely ponder it would have meant freezing under its weight. So they all pushed the thought down, down to the bottom of their heels so they would tread on it with every step.

Did it seem that preposterous? The two guilds joining? The puppeteers' guild turning from serving the baron? S didn't think so, besides this would have been one of their last chances to seize initiative.

Entering, they saw the various stages for the puppet shows all in the same room. This was the main rehearsal room and there were about seven stages. Interestingly enough, all were prepared for action, as if the show was about to begin. The backdrops were glued together and freshly repainted. The puppets hung off the top beam that went across each mini-stage, in an arrangement traditional to this guild. They were arranged in such a way as to leave all the strings hanging loosely and to have the limbs of the puppets stretching out with gravity so the puppets would be more supple during the upcoming performances. The three were assaulted with colours, not an array or army but a whole battalion, as every imaginable shade of the rainbow and then some could be found in a toenail, a hat, a moustache or a purse on one of the puppets. D and S, having never been inside this room before, were also completely taken aback by the diversity of the puppets. Not the mythical creatures, this was expected and neither batted an eyelid at a single dragon, unicorn, cockatrice or mythical snake. What was of interest were the people: they had all different types of clothing, different physical features, different shades of skin. All the people in the Tower had very similar features. This style human of puppets must have survived from the Outside, and this must be what the different peoples in the world were! These puppets look like ones of people who had names, D thought. His gaze fell from the hanging figures to the piles of musical instruments prepared for the show. Just gazing was enough to imagine all seven performances as being about to start.

What outrageous microcosm did these people live in? Weren't they aware of what was going on? The question was answered when F rang some bell she picked out of the hundreds of similar ones and within seconds over a hundred people surrounded them. "These are the elders of the guild" S heard her sister-in-battles whisper. They weren't menacing, just fine-tuned and an obvious product of hundreds of years of comforts of the most astounding decadence. Still, our three could see that a great deal of them could be very useful in these upcoming hours. They could mean the difference between the Room and the world beyond these worn-out walls.

"Friends, here I am once more. I come back with a secret to reveal. I had an ulterior motive in being here and participating in all the marvellous rehearsals and shows. Which I adored by the way and still do." From her vantage point, S could see that F was telling the unabridged and uncensored truth in each of her utterances. "So who was I? I was the wife of an elder for another guild. One you may have heard of: the clockmakers." There were nods of recognition along with amazement and fear. "Yes we were strongly disapproved of by the baron. We were in opposition to him, and still are, especially on this night. I know it's night for we have kept track of all the times of the Outside world to enable us to sleep just like you can. So, this night we're breaking down these walls so the populace can finally be free by morning. And we need your help. I hope you've seen enough of the life of the people to realise that this isn't good. We can end this right away."

They didn't bite because they didn't know much of anything about the people. Turns out the artist within them was more cloistered than even F thought. At least they didn't try to kill them or call the baron, which was already a victory of sorts. So the three prepared for long tedious

deliberations and disputes, while every second was not just crucial but fatal to someone. The need for such unpleasantness disappeared though as a short figure drifted silently from the underbelly of the back chambers of the court to the room they were in and eventually to the centre. It was E, the nephew of the tyrant.

It was he who spoke up. He told them about the lives of the people. About what he had seen as a young child during the few times he had gotten a glimpse of the street. About the inner life of his uncle and how he dispensed justice as a totally arbitrary thing, controlled by his whim, not out of an inherent maliciousness but simply to keep the tightest possible grip around each and every life in the tower. He told them about his experience with the Chestnut and what it does to the body.

This was followed by a long silence: a nephew of the baron trying the Chestnut out? F took advantage of this however and related her vision of the Room, which was followed by an even longer silence. He told them of everything he knew about the people, especially what he had seen just now amidst the fighting. But it wasn't the pessimistic conclusion his uncle had supposed. E didn't deny the ugliness but he was sure that this was the first outbreak of humanity and that it showed that the tower surely had a yearning and right to break through. The whole process took no more than half an hour.

The response was quick, by a senior elder. "Fellow guild members, we need to act now. This boy who we've all known for years has prepared a little surprise for us. He showed us that we were fools who have been led around for generations, whereas he had seen. Rather than be shocked or ponder our future and that of our own Art, let's all do it proud by finishing this. Then we can all return to what we love with the ability to sleep at night. Ladies, gentlemen, shall we?"

Relief

came to the perimeter rather quickly. There were hundreds of puppeteers which joined the ranks of the now-failing families of the guild. In some corridors this effectively tripled the number of people fighting for the destruction of the tower. The guards were overwhelmed pretty quickly and pushed back having to regroup, but this was only the beginning.

Reinforcements had to be directed to the lower levels as soon as could be: that's where the devices were and that's where most of the trouble was. However it didn't take long to secure those either: the newly enthused army (to which joined a few hundred ordinary civilians) filtered down level by level. S and D personally went by inspecting every device.

They encountered much hardship along the way. All in all, there would have been no more than twenty dead. However even one was a tragedy in these circumstances. Fifteen of those were women and children of the elders who formed the bulk of the defenders. S lamented at each corpse, thinking that she had from a certain perspective failed already. Or it was the Art that failed, for had it been less pig-headed and more egalitarian she would not have had to make such ridiculous arrangements. And then of course there were five elders. Each were murdered individually, all in rooms where they had devices infiltrating the wall. This means the enemy had reached a third of the contraptions by the time they were stopped. S switched each one back on in turn and every time she was stabbed by the irony of how easy it was to reanimate a piece of metal and wood right next to a piece of meat that was forever still.

Having lost about an hour from the switch-offs, the elders got the system back up and gathered at the top floor where the walls were to come down. In the meantime the last of the self-styled militia were chasing down the guards and rounding them up for capture. The baron was captured and whisked away somewhere, S cared not where for the moment. So was W his unremarkable assistant and chief of puppetmasters. She did have one more item on her list before she could sit and wait for the fruition.

"There's a member of the elders we unfortunately need arrested."

All heads turned to S in wonder, shifted to her outstretched arm and pointing finger, and followed the imaginary straight line to D's increasingly uncomfortable demeanour.

"But-- but I saved--"

"You did," S answered calmly "which will probably reduce your sentence for attempted assault and rape. Congratulations: you will not be executed."

In vain did he search his wife's eyes for support. As a response, F smiled bitterly and got a crumpled piece of paper out of her pocket. She didn't have to unfold it all the way before D's heart hope and ego deflated: it was from his drawer, the scribble of S's full name. Who knows how he found it out? But he couldn't help scribbling down the essence of the object of his "affections".

"Yes my dear. I can open a drawer. Even in a time of crisis. I just happened to be going past our dwelling during the fighting when it occurred to me."

There was no arguing. During the baron's reign the paper would have been enough for him to be executed in a manner most brutal. Even in this interim regime, whatever it was, he had broken one of the biggest taboos of the society that the tower had molded. If he had broken it for good perhaps people would open their minds since changes were already happening, but since he did it for reasons nobody accepted there was no hope of support from anyone. Hanging his head, D followed the newly-appointed guard, leaving behind the most fascinating leader, clockmaker and woman he'd ever encountered, the one who to him represented the whole essence of the Art at last, even if this essence was much more searing than he would have thought.

With nothing left but to wait, S sat on the floor, still in disbelief that it had all worked, despite everything. Many sobs bubbled up to the surface, but even death did not mar the moment. This was it! She showed them that she was capable. This was no longer some victory for women as potential members of the guild. This was a victory for general openness within any pursuit the nation will undertake. It was never about the Art: the Art was dead now. No longer needed. With those thoughts came the first cracks and then the familiar shaking of the walls and crumbling of rocks. Soon the world and every eager soul in the room disappeared behind a fine layer of impenetrable white dust...

An eternity later (S let go of her internal timer for the first time since acquiring it in early teens) everything settled and they could see Out, also for the first time. S and the rest greedily peered catching their first horizon, which despite being a simple horizontal line was nothing like they'd imagined it. There was a problem though. It was dark all around the Tower, not daybreak like the Art predicted. Immediately many an elder started shaking. It was night-time. The calculations were off! To make matters worse there was a bright white round object in the sky that lit up the horizon and the splashing of the waves.

They could not believe it. Rushing up to the very edge of the top of the tower and peering down revealed an ocean, all around the tower. The sea level was also above the third floor, which meant there was a high chance that the lower three floors would be flooded, now that the walls were breached. But how? The tower was meant to be in the midst of land! Why the geographical change? And the shiny object in the sky? What was it? It wasn't part of their catalogue of sky objects. A new one that sprang up so recently? Or did they just waste their whole lives in pursuit of a faulty Art? This was the most unbearable question. Finally there were the practical ones of how on earth they'd get everyone out of this island fortress.

Hearing a wail of uncertainty and dismay rise up from so many, S left the crowd to come closer to the edge. She sat on it with her legs dangling over, just eighty or so metres from the endless crashing of the waves. They just didn't get it. Not the situation and not the art. It wasn't their skill level that was lacking, it was attitude. S knew that all those who were wailing had the completely wrong idea about some sacredness of the Art. This was what got them into trouble in the first place, and it probably delayed this day for many decades. Incidentally this also confirmed her decision to part from this nation as soon as she could. The immediate problems didn't matter to

her though, not the uncertainty of getting over the sea (as if that was a problem!), not the unexpected presence of the water, and certainly not the unusual astronomical state of the world. The wail faded out in S's mind as she stopped concentrating on it. Rather, she continued sitting over the edge carelessly dangled her feet, basking in the glorious moonlight and getting used to the enormous expanses. Compared to the real thing, her prophetic dreams of the Outside were nothing more than claustrophobic shadows. So lost she was in her reverie that she didn't notice that F and T joined her, also having the sense to leave the mediocrity of the current lamentations. They sat for a while. "You know the best thing about this?" S asked them. "I can name a few but you tell me," answered F. "This is the first night of my life I'll be able to sleep with grace". T and F nodded, seeing that this was true on so many levels.