Merging Magic and Machine

On Writing Fixing For Better Days, A Cyberpunk Fantasy

M.A. Essay for English: Literature, Culture and Media

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Abstract

The following MA thesis contains a novella, combining elements of both cyberpunk and fantasy settings and themes, along with an expository essay that delves into the creative process behind the story and the author’s choice of setting. The novella itself is close to 30,000 words in length, with the exposition piece accounting for a little over 4,000 words in addition to this.

The setting is one of traditional magic and myth turned on its head with the advent of the industrial revolution, and the subsequent technological upheaval that followed in its wake, creating a cyberpunk near-future akin to ours. The advances made have helped the races of this world make leaps and bounds forward in countless fields, but in turn the environmental cost has damaged the eco-system in ways that they could not have foreseen. Mana, the wellspring of magic, has begun to run out as a result of an erosion process that is slowly spreading across the world. In the fallout of this, multinational corporations gather strength to capitalize and etch out their own positions of power, creating megacorporations, while governments make ever-increasing compromises to maintain the peace and keep their populations under control. Amidst the power-struggle, ordinary people are left to fend for themselves, harrowed by unseen politics and corporate control seeping into every facet of their daily lives. All of this while trying to make sense of a system that feeds them its version of the truth, despite every facet of their own reality telling another story. With nobody to turn to but each other, local communities and neighbourhoods rely on Fixers, individuals willing to work both within and outside of the law to get results. The story follows one such Fixer as he navigates another job in a city where his life is at risk from magic and machine alike.
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Fixing For Better Days

I.

The sound of the deck of cards shuffling kept rhythm with the clack of the rail overhead, the metro car racing forward through the underground tunnel with its passengers. The man holding the stack didn’t need to look at cards while shifting them one over the other, cutting the deck and then starting over again. It was a practised, repeated motion that he’d nurtured all on his own, born out of necessity to survive and to keep his mind from slipping off into some dark and foreboding place. He looked around the almost deserted railcar from his seat. Honestly, the place looked as though it hadn’t seen a maintenance crew in over a decade: the floors were stained and sticky, graffiti dotted some of the metal walls that still dared to retain some of their original sheen, and the upholstery on the seats was tattered and frayed, with the foam padding poking out amidst the gaps. The advertisements were new, though, reliably added a less than a week ago, judging from the minimal vandalism applied to them: only one crude drawing over one of the smiling faces and merely three vulgar responses. The rest were gang symbols and threatening language. A woman slept on one of the seats on the other end of the car, curled up in worn out clothing that failed to ward off the sharp chill pumping in through the groaning, rattling air conditioning on the walls.

His name was Allegro – his mother’s pick. Apparently there was some kind of heritage or history behind naming members of their family to the tune of music, though he’d never much cared to find out the details before. That sentiment had changed recently however, Allegro acknowledged while looking out at the blackness of the metro tunnel. There was a break in the dark void as the railcar cleared the tunnel and gave way to the cityscape momentarily. High-rises that stretched for hundreds of floors, forged with steel and glass that reached into polluted clouds greeted him; the colossal jungle of concrete that blotted out the sun through the majority of the day serving only to cast a dull, yellow gloom over the city.

He cut the deck and started over.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the crystalline screen of the newscaster hanging from the ceiling, running the twenty-four hour feed of misery, woe and constant reminders of the world’s failings, old and new. The news anchor was an elven woman, her features suitably exaggerated to meet her race’s standards of beauty: gaudy,
excessive makeup in bright colours accompanied by bright, off-colour lavender hair to contrast – or rather to compensate – for her porcelain-white complexion. Albinism was the by-product of her race’s unnatural development and practices over the past decades, and it seemed to Allegro that the more time passed, the more the elves attempted to overcompensate for their appearance.

“In other news,” the anchor said, continuing her broadcast regardless of Allegro’s musings, “climatologists report another inbound mana storm in the coming weeks. The precise effects of this storm are still unknown, given previous storms’ unstable and unpredictable natures resulting in anything from acid rain, to lightning-charged hail. Authorities urge civilians to remain indoors during the storm.

“Today marks the thirtieth year since the Mana Erosion Climate became a global cause for concern following the Environmental and Energy Conservation Summit in Surlais where the Union publically acknowledged that no apparent solutions were as of yet available, although pledging themselves to work tirelessly towards a solution. Of course, as many know it was human developmental projects that lead to…”

Allegro tuned out the broadcast and instead focused on cutting the deck again. It didn’t help the nagging thought pecking him in the back of the head. It always came back to that: it was humanity’s fault that they were in this mess, the great scapegoat of the era. The group that allowed everyone else to pretend that they hadn’t stood at the front of the line like the rest to marvel and exploit magic as a commodity.

He stopped shuffling the deck, tucking it inside his coat pocket. It wasn’t helping his mood anymore. Looking out the window, he could see the faintest glimpse between the skyscrapers. It was a mere moment’s glance, but he could make out the skyline in that instant. A blue sky dyed with yellow, and the broken, fragmented planetary ring disappearing into the clouds overhead. And then darkness again, as the car entered another tunnel. A metallic voice droned over the intercom: “Now Arriving: Platform D-7. Prepare to Disembark.”

He braced himself by grabbing the nearest support pole. The metro golems were hardly known for their subtlety and grace, as evidenced by the sharp stop that threatened to throw him out of his seat. The sleeping woman wasn’t as lucky, as Allegro watched her get flung from the seats as though someone had thrown her out of bed. The railcar came to a grinding, screeching halt in front of the platform. Outside, the fluorescent
lights of the subway station mingled with the colours of its many ad-boards to create an appealing glamour through the dirty windows.

The intercom droned again with the sound of an empty tin can: “Platform D-7. Please Mind The Gap.”

The doors opened with a dull hiss, and whatever appeal the station had with its lights immediately evaporated thanks to the pungent smell that rushed into the car. Allegro’s eyes watered as the stench crept down the back of his throat, forcing him to make a conscious effort not to gag before stepping out of the car and onto Platform D-7. The doors slid shut behind him, and Allegro watched as the long line of cars powered forward, suspended from their monorail until they disappeared into the tunnel altogether, revealing the painted Metro Golem logo on the opposite wall. The platform was even worse off than the railcar, with graffiti covering almost every inch of the walls and signs. Trashcans lay kicked over on their side, some even looking as though they’d been bludgeoned with something – or used to bludgeon someone, judging from some of the red stains. The garbage spilled down into the half-pipe that lay below the suspended monorails, pooling up to create the station’s signature wretch-inducing aroma. Just like the railcar, the station was almost completely devoid of life, with a handful of questionable sorts huddled or grouped together. He didn’t want to stay there any longer than was necessary for fear of losing his breakfast – or his wallet.

* * *

Hurrying up the stairways that lead to the surface, Allegro paused at one of the upper floors to see another newscast screen – this one larger and wider, with a cracks spread out across its crystalline surface, so all that he could see was the news scroll beneath the anchors reading “One month until praetorian election day… Sen. Garyn Foltwhan to address drop in polls…” The sound was still working though, and Allegro could hear an admonishing voice rant over the speakers.

“I’m telling you, I am shocked, absolutely shocked and appalled that this is even happening.” The voice decried. Allegro could hear the venom dripping from it over the speakers. “A hate-monger like Flamel has absolutely no place in the election. Honestly, are we really going to allow this type of supremacist garbage, this, this… filth, into our benevolent society?”
There was a pause, and the angry voice was replaced by a calmer, more stoic voice.

“Strong words from Mr. Blargo, representative of the local Human Responsibility Association, on the human candidate, Senator Patricia Flamel. Senator Flamel, of course, is a well-known, controversial figure as a result of her persistent attempts at overruling the Hexablock Population Control Act. The senator claims that requiring specific racial quotas in each Hexablock merely incites and instigates tensions, as well as denying humans the same resources and outreach programs that non-human have. Critics of Senator Flamel, however, have other opinions on the matter. Joining us now is acclaimed dwarven actor, Brockmar Manningham.”

Allegro rolled his eyes, and started for the stairs. The moment they brought on a celebrity to voice their opinion was when you knew that there was nothing worth listening to on the new. As he headed towards the surface, he heard the actor’s voice echo behind him.

“Yes, well, as we all know, Senator Flamel is a liar, and a hateful woman, and…”

* * *

The streets were the very definition of neglect. If the metro station was to be considered an unpleasant sight, then the dirty sidewalks plastered with damp magazines and newspapers and populated by loose garbage rolling along on the breeze was just more of that same unpleasantness. While he strolled along, making sure not to step in any of the puddles from last night’s rain, Allegro looked to the side at the expansive street art and graffiti stretching across the single length of wall made of rusting steel and concrete. The colourful displays were broken up by spreads of old posters advertising musicians, the latest in magi-tech developments, and public service notices. One poster gave him reason to pause, if purely because of its oddity: an art gallery for something called The History of Puppetry. Odd, if simply because the idea of an art gallery being held in this part of the city seemed like an invitation for robbery. Allegro shrugged, and kept walking alongside the wall. It was a fairly long walk, as the stretch rolled on for the entire city block before rounding a corner at last. The entire block’s length wrapped up in a single building. Allegro’s gaze followed the base of the building, trailing higher and
higher until he was bending his back to try and see the top. He barely cleared half of the height.

They’d called them Hexablocks, hundreds of floors in a single block dedicated to housing an entire neighbourhood. Everything was provided within, from housing, to small-scale businesses that sold clothing and provisions. They even had clinics and simplistic schooling on some of the floors. Sign up for welfare, and you didn’t even need to pay for some of those things – you just needed to settle for receiving the lowest grade of care. But at least you were getting it for free, right? In fact, that was one reason the streets grew sparser each year. A person could live out their entire life inside of a Hexablock that way if they wanted to, and never once need to step outside. A body could, but a person? Not so much, at least by his reckoning. The Blocks made people complacent in his mind. Too much isolation, as he saw it. Too little talk between people who didn’t live in the same complex you lived in, heard the same things you heard, read the same books, or ate the same food as you. If all you knew was what the person sitting right next to you knew, how could either of you know if you were being lied to?

Allegro turned his gaze to the side, following the towering buildings one after the other. There were gaps in between, of course, where smaller, almost mundane buildings could be found – even if they were still packed into multiple floors as well. Cafes and diners, shopping malls and more never went away despite the Blocks providing for everyone. The only thing more consistent than complacency was greed, after all. On the roof of one of those smaller buildings, Allegro spied a lone metal structure, topped by a glowing, blue crystal – a signal tower, radiating like a beacon amidst the otherwise dull, lifeless grey. It was through those that everything from viewscreen broadcasts, to music, and the ethereal-network were relayed across the city. The ethernet solved some of those isolation issues; allowing people to communicate through their computers, though even that system ran through regulated and monitored channels.

He stepped in a puddle.

“Shit.”

As Allegro stopped to shake his leg clear of the dirty water, he noticed some movement from the corner of his eye. A person-sized lump huddled up amidst some
trash and unfolded cardboard boxes in a kind of makeshift bed, were it mated with a fort. Allegro approached the heap, stuffing his hands in his pockets and leaning over it.

“How’s the weather, old timer?”

The heap rustled until a head poked out, revealing the grey-skinned features and wiry beard of a homeless dwarf.

“Pissing rain’s ruined half my house, that’s how.”

“Keep tellin’ you to upgrade,” Allegro said loftily and shrugged.

“Oh, my apologies.” The dwarf’s nose wrinkled and he tossed some damp cardboard aside. “Didn’t know it were that simple. Just upgrade, eh? Maybe move into one ‘em fancy Blocks?”

“Hells no.” Allegro’s tone turned flat. “Not unless you like eating ration slop.”

“I like eating period, I’ll thank yeh kindly.” The dwarf spat in disgust, before scoffing and gesturing to his trash pile. “Which, if’n you may have noticed, isn’t a luxury for folk like me.”

“Yeah, yeah, point taken.” Allegro rolled his eyes before looking just a little further down the street to where a lone vending machine stood. “I’ll get right on it.”

Walking over to the machine, he fished around his pockets until he pulled out a single coin, about the size of a poker chip, were poker chips made from bronze and computer hardware and used to store credit. Slotting it into the vending machine, he looked at the buttons and frowned. The street artists had gotten to the machine, covering up all of the logos and markers, as well as the glass case in the front, effectively obscuring the vending machine’s contents, if there even were any left in there.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to see if we win the food lottery.”

Allegro punched a few buttons, and waited while a painful grinding and humming noise emitted from the vending machine. Eventually, there was an audible thunk sound around the bottom basket, followed by four others before the machine spat out his credit coin. Pocketing his money, Allegro reached into the basket, pulled out five food bars, and brought them over to the dwarf, who looked up at him with dubious eyes.

“So what’s on the menu today, lad?”

“Well, let’s see,” Allegro replied, holding up each bar and reciting their labels. “We’ve got one chocolate Mortin’s Munchables bar, two banana-and-pea Nutribits bar—“
“Blech!”

“Hey now, even hobos gotta eat their greens, right?” Allegro grinned and continued. “And then we’ve got one Caketon Cruncher, vanilla-flavoured, and finally one Snakit… eggplant-flavoured?”

“I’d murder for some jerky.” The dwarf sighed.

“Meat’s for folks who’ve got money, or so the saying goes.” Allegro shrugged and tossed the five foodbars onto the homeless dwarf’s lap. “So now that I’ve upheld my end…”

“Yeah, yeah, I know how the bleedin’ wheel turns.” The dwarf grumbled and started fiddling with the Caketon Cruncher wrapper. “The gangs’ve been playin’ it pretty mellow lately, if you’re wonderin’ about them.”

“Well, I guess we can chalk that one up to good fortune.”

“Mmh. Less shootin’ each other, more pimping and drugs.” The dwarf nodded once before ripping open the wrapper, and then tearing into the foodbar hungrily.

“It’s those small mercies that we live and hope for, huh?” Allegro dryly remarked, stuffing his hands back in his pockets and sighing while watching the dwarf wolf down on the stick of what was maybe, hopefully some kind of cake. They didn’t put the ingredients on the wrappers, after all, so what went into those things was anyone’s guess.

“So all quiet on the front then?” Allegro remarked, “I suppose I should be glad – no news is good news and all that.”

The dwarf swallowed, and shook his head.

“Nah, there’s shite brewin’, like always.”

“Of course there is. So what fresh misery’s afoot this time?”

The dwarf paused a moment, running his tongue around the inside of his mouth.

“Folks goin’ missing.”

“Okay?” Allegro shrugged. “Gonna need a little bit more than that.”

“I’m getting’ to it.” The dwarf let out a small grunt, staring at the half-eaten foodbar. “Folks’ve been disappearin’ for the past three months now, more and more of ‘em each time. This past month’s been especially bad, see.”

“I’ve not heard any of the usual commentaries on the newscasts, so I’m guessing the honchos haven’t got a clue as to who or what’s behind it?”
“Most likely, but from what I’ve been hearin’, they’re not even investigating.”

The dwarf took another bite from the mystery-cake gobbling it down. “None of the Enforcers’ve been to visit any families or anythin’ like that.”

“So they’re pretending that nothing’s going on, that it?”

“That’s about the sum of it.” The dwarf shrugged.

“Well, keep an eye – and ear – out for anything else.” Allegro sighed. If the Enforcers weren’t even trying to solve cases, that meant it’d fall on the local communities to try and fix things. That never ended well. “If we’re lucky maybe it’s just some new addict-den that needs shutting down.”

“Were it ever that simple, eh, lad?”

“Didn’t anyone tell you?” Allegro pushed the corners of his mouth into a smile. “This is the time of hope and prosperity.”

“Pfah.” The dwarf snorted. “Union drivel.”

“I’ll drop by with some coffee after work, eh?” Allegro offered while turning to start walking again.

“Better not get me any of that syrupy shite again.” The dwarf grunted and crossed his arms, drawing a grin from Allegro in response.

“Hey, I just figured you’d need a bit of sweetening up.”

This only brought about another snort of derision from the dwarf.

“The only thing that got sweet from that bile was the smell of my—“

“And that’ll be me leaving.” Allegro walked on, waving at the dwarf from over his shoulder. “Catch ya later, old timer.”

As he walked on, Allegro picked up the pace, ignoring the puddles in favour of making haste. His ass already on the line thanks to being late last week, Allegro really hoped he wouldn’t be late to work again.
“You’re late.” The foreman grunted in displeasure, following Allegro with his clipboard as the latter finished punching in at the clock, and stepped out onto the hot, muggy main floor of the factory. The broad man never seemed to smile, at least in Allegro’s experience in dealing with the guy, and he wore his hardhat with the kind of pride one might expect from a drill sergeant.

Allegro looked at the clock on the wall and made a face.

“By like… two minutes, c’mon.”

“Late’s late, Mabali.”

The foreman’s face reminded Allegro of a bulldog, the way the cheeks sagged. It was a punchable face. He scratched the back of his head, glancing around at the heavy machinery being worked on and pushed out on conveyor belts while sparks flew and metal grinded and whirred. The noise was piercing at times.

“What’d I say about that?” Allegro put on his best version of an amicable expression. “Just call me Allegro, Reg.”

“So long as I’m your boss, it’s Mabali,” Reg responded with a tone as dry as sandpaper. “For that matter, it’s Mr. Hardfax to you. We aren’t friends.”

“I’m sure you say that to everyone, Reg. Really, I’m actually certain you do in fact say that to everyone.”

“Just get to work, Mabali.” Reg rolled his eyes and gestured with his thumb towards the far side of the floor. “I’ve got problems with the crusher that needs someone to get inside and run maintenance.”

Allegro’s gaze followed the thumb’s path to look at the crusher. It was a behemoth of machinery that lived up to its name. Designed to take any leftover waste metals and scraps and crush them into manageable cubes that could then be taken and reused to build something else. The factory rarely wasted metal – even if that meant quality might drop as a result of the constant melting and recasting. He wasn’t a fan of working on that thing. Reg’s voice, however, brought him back to the conversation at hand.

“Or do I need to call your probation officer?” The foreman’s voice took a sharp tone.
Allegro narrowed his eyes intently at Reg, focusing very hard while the man spoke.

“After all,” Reg said, “I know that lowlifes like you need all the work they can get when they get out.”

Allegro leaned in a little, staring as hard as he could.
Reg frowned. “And why do you keep squinting?”
“I can actually, physically see it,” Allegro said in an awed tone of voice.
“See what?” Reg’s nose wrinkled in annoyance.
“How much of an asshole you are.” Allegro broke off the stare, blinking a few times to refocus his vision. “It’s like it’s radiating off of you.”

Reg pinched the bridge of his nose.
“Enough backchat, Mabali.”

“Something happen to make you an extra-strength dick today, Reg?” Allegro put on a concerned tone of voice. “Find the husband in bed with someone else?”

“First off, Marlon’s fine.” Reg shook his head. “Second, that’ll be thirty percent off your paycheck.”

“Woah, hey now, thirty?” Allegro cringed. “Usually you only knock off ten.”
“I added twenty for the snipe about Marlon.”
“Ah.”
“Now get your ass in the jumpsuit and into the machine, before I raise it to forty.”

Reg turned and walked off to talk to a group of workers carrying an engine, leaving the conversation on that note of finality. Allegro sighed and rubbed the back of his head. The heat of the factory was already making him sweat.

“You drive a hard bargain, Reg,” Allegro muttered to himself.

With nothing left to do, Allegro made his way to the locker room to change into his work clothes and strap on his tool belt. The jumpsuit felt cramped and stifling, but at least he knew it would protect him from burns. Minutes later, he was crawling into the crusher by way of the conveyor belt. The thing was a claustrophobe’s idea of hell if there ever was one. Cramped spaces surrounded by gears and slabs of metal designed to press and crush anything caught between them into three foot cubes of mangled
material. And him in the middle of it, only hoping that whatever idiot was at the controls remembered that he was inside and didn’t turn the damned thing on.

“Piece of…” Allegro muttered under his breath as his sleeve caught on one of the gears momentarily.

He crawled onward, further inside until he was able to squat inside of the machine’s innards. The stink of motor oil and the heat of the factory oppressed his senses, but in the midst of it all, he could feel something else. Like a dull pulsing sensation resounding from somewhere inside the machine, it felt almost like a heartbeat, but somehow less. And he knew where it was coming from. Allegro’s hand groped along the metal walls, feeling around for the source of that pulsing beat until… there. He felt it behind one of the metal plates covering some of the inner mechanisms. Using his tools, he unbolted the cover to reveal a series of circuitry and gears covered by sickly, green-white spores.

“Gremlins, go figure.” Allegro muttered to himself, reaching for the spray-canister on his belt, pausing to look at the label reading “FreeZ”. The only way to safely get rid of gremlin spores before they grew into cackling little bastards that tore apart machines from the inside was either burning them or freezing them – and the former didn’t go so well over with insurance companies. He pointed the nozzle at the cluster of spores and pulled the trigger, watching as a faint, blue mist poured out and covered the wall. A dull crackling noise filled the air as the spores frosted all the way through.

There was more than just chemistry at work there, Allegro knew: even something as mundane as a cryo-spray had mana stores implemented in order to further enhance the chemical reaction and produce that much more effective of a result. Just how much did they rely on the stuff?

His contemplation was disrupted by the sound of Reg yelling into the cruiser from one of the conveyor openings.

“Hey, Mabali, you got a visitor.”

Allegro hesitated to answer. People rarely came looking for him in person, at least not unless they were looking to exact some kind of payback.

“Who is it?”

“Hells if I know.” Reg sounded ever-more irritable. “Just get your ass out and talk to ‘em so they’ll get the hell outta my break room.”
“Fine.” Allegro sighed and took one last look at the gremlin spores. They were already beginning to crack and break apart, crumbling into diamond dust amidst the steel and oil. He took a deep breath, and began crawling out of the crusher.

* * *

The break room wasn’t much to look at, with only the one table, a few chairs and a fridge beside a counter playing host to a sink and coffee maker. Allegro knew that Reg had a whole conservation thing going on about not wasting money on things like comfortable chairs, vidscreens or replenishable food stores for workers to snack on. Frivolous, that’s what Reg had called them once when Allegro had brought it up. Since Reg was an even bigger hardass about workers taking breaks than he was about showing up on time, the place only saw use three or four times a day across both shifts.

Because of this, the visitor was the only person in there when Allegro walked in. She turned to face him, cocking her head to the side almost like he was some manner of curiosity to her.

“You must be Allegro Mabali,” she said.

“And you would be…?” Allegro wiped the sweat from his brow, internally cursing the jumpsuit while giving the visitor a scrutinizing look.

Back in the days before the Union, he’d been told, elves were mostly identified by their pointed ears and slender features. Nowadays, the ears were one of the last things people noticed. Completely white skin, like alabaster or porcelain, accompanied by equally white hair and red eyes were the defining traits of their kind now. The exact reason behind the albinism wasn’t something openly discussed – a touchy subject by all accounts – though to Allegro’s best understanding it had to do with the augmentation of their trees with magi-tech. As their lives were tied to those trees, the process had permanently left the elven race devoid of pigmentation.

“My name is Eryn,” the she-elf replied.

Allegro looked her over, noting her attire in particular. Hardly what one would call top-notch branding, the denim skirt and leggings, as well as the hoodie and jacket, they all looked like the sort of thing the clothes market in his own Block might sell. At a first glance, anyone might have taken her for any other urban, Block-dwelling elf. What gave Allegro reason for pause, however, was the quality of the clothing. It all looked too new, too clean and tidy, as if she’d bought the outfit and put it on just before coming
to see him. Her skin was the same. Too smooth and clean for someone living in the Blocks. Too nice to look at, in other words.

He broke his stare, and walked over to the coffee maker to pour himself a mug. He took his time doing so, trying to size up the situation.

“And you’re here because?” he eventually spoke, turning to look at the elf. His question was met with a smile from the visitor.

“I want to hire you.”

“Hire me?” Allegro made a face. “I’m pretty sure there’s plenty of other maintenance guys out there.”

“Oh, I’m sure too, but I’m not looking for someone in maintenance.” Eryn’s smile persisted. “I’m looking to hire someone who operates outside of the law – a Fixer.”

Allegro took a long sip from his coffee, hoping that the mug would hide his expression while his brain hurriedly tried to figure the woman out. After a pause, he lowered it again, while trying to maintain something of a poker face.

“I think you might have gotten your words mixed up,” he finally said. “Just because I fix machines, doesn’t mean I’m a Fixer.”

“Cute, but you don’t have to pretend.” Eryn’s smile turned into a grin, and she cocked her head to the side. “I did my research, after all. You’ve been working as a Fixer ever since you were released three months ago, right?”

“Well, that doesn’t sound intrusive or suspicious in the slightest.”

“You have nothing to fear from me when it comes to your illicit activities, Mr. Mabali. If I wanted to report you, I’d have done so already.”

“Oh, well that just makes me feel all kinds of comforted.” Allegro snorted.

“There’s compensation involved, of course.” The she-elf continued in a matter-of-fact kind of tone. “It’s a fair sum, plenty to help treat your mother’s condition. I understand she’s been diagnosed with Klavic’s Syndrome.”

Allegro’s grip on the coffee mug tightened at the mention of his mother.

“You’re pushing your luck.”

“I’m sorry?”

“If you want to twist my arm, that’s one thing,” he said, narrowing his eyes at the visitor, “but leave my mother out of the conversation.”
Eryn let out a frustrated sigh, and shook her head.

“I’m really not here to twist your arm, Mr. Mabali. I legitimately need your help.”


“I have a number of reasons, Mr. Mabali, but I would not like to share all of them here and now.” Eryn paused, her expression suggesting that she was trying to find a better answer than that. “The best I can give you at this very moment is that I thought you were the right person for the job.”

Allegro frowned and stared into his coffee mug. He swirled the contents around a few times, considering his options and just how much he could trust the stranger, not just on the matter of the job itself, but also to pay up at the end. Klavic’s Syndrome wasn’t a cheap condition to treat. He bit the side of his tongue. Finally, he looked up from the mug.

“What job do you need me for?”

“I have a friend that’s gone missing.” Eryn made a troubled face. “She disappeared around a week ago.”

“A lot of that going around, I hear. But it’s mostly people from the Blocks.”

“It might be related, then. My friend is from one of the district Blocks – Block 19, specifically.” Eryn reached into the pocket on her hoodie and took out a picture before crossing the room to show him. A young girl with porcelain skin and pointed ears extending out from under her brunette-dyed hair smiled back at him. “Her name’s Aife.”

“She’s an elf.” Allegro furrowed his brow in thought while staring at the picture. “Is that a problem?” Eryn’s tone hinted at a degree of offense.

“No.” Allegro looked back up from the photo. “Just wondering how an elf’s missing and you don’t have the Enforcers on it.”

“They’ve been alerted.” Eryn sighed and shook her head. “But they’ve also been tight-lipped about their progress.”

“How tight-lipped?”

“They haven’t heard of any Aifes living in Block 19.”

“Ah.” Allegro nodded. “That kind of tight-lipped.”
“I figured if I wanted answers, then I would need them myself.” Eryn put Aife’s picture back in her pocket. “But I need your expertise, as someone who knows his way around the district.”

“Fine, you don’t need to lather it on, I already said I’d help.”

Allegro took a deep breath, pausing to collect his thoughts. Usually, if the Enforcers didn’t care enough to investigate a case, they’d just make excuses along the lines of the case being worked on, or being lost amidst the paperwork. If they were actively denying things, then it warranted some looking into, at the very least.

“So what do we do?” Eryn asked, bringing him back to the matter at hand.

“First.” Allegro set the mug aside. He couldn’t wait to get out of the jumpsuit. “I tell Reg that I’ve got business to deal with and try not to get fired. And then we take the train.”

“Alright,” Eryn said. “I’ll follow your lead in the meantime.”

“Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Just call me Allegro. Mr. Mabali makes my skin crawl.”
Allegro leaned back in his seat. The train rattled in an unsafe-sounding manner, giving the impression of the whole car being on the verge of shaking apart. It felt like a fitting state to be in, considering his own circumstances. Reg hadn’t taken too kindly to his declaration of taking off from work less than an hour after getting in through the door, for one, so that left his job hanging in the balance. And then there was Eryn, sitting across from him, trying to look as though sitting in public transport didn’t make her feel out of place. He wasn’t a fan of going into situations with her kind. Usually he worked with people from the Blocks, and even then it was generally narrowed down to his own Block and the neighbouring ones. On top of that, he especially didn’t enjoy working blind. He needed to know more, of what it didn’t matter, just so long as it put him on some kind of level playing field with the situation.

“So how much?” he asked, breaking the silence that had accompanied them since they left the factory.

“How much what?” Eryn smiled, though it seemed restrained and practiced. At the same time, though, Allegro thought she seemed relieved to have something to distract her from the rattle of the train car.

“You said you did your research: how much do you know about me?”

“Does my knowing threaten you?” Eryn’s smile didn’t waver. She did, however, almost sound amused by the idea.

“Depends on what you know.” Allegro shrugged, taking a deep breath. If he looked like he was anxious, he needed to try and relax, if only to give the impression of having it all together. He put on a wry grin. “I need to know if I need to set fire to some boxes full of magazines and v-discs.”

“Nothing that personal, thankfully.” Eryn let out the slightest of chuckles, before raising an eyebrow at the implications. “For both our sakes.”

“Good.” Allegro gave a theatrical sigh of relief. “It took me a while to build that collection, you know.”

“I really don’t – nor do I want to.” Eryn shook her head, matching his own theatrics with an exaggerated shudder. After a pause, though, she put on that same, contained smile as before and spoke. “In any case, most of what I know is from public records, plus a few reports I was able to pay for from… sources.”
“You know pausing like that doesn’t help make it seem less shady, right?”

Eryn shook her head and chuckled again. “I know that neither of your parents are Union natives, and that your mother has been raising you since moving into Union territory when you were three. Your father’s whereabouts are unknown, though it’s assumed he’s still in Eastern-Vhatere.”

“A shame.” Allegro crossed his arms at that last bit. “I’d be half-intrigued if you’d actually figured out where the guy was.”

Ignoring the interjection, Eryn continued, as though reciting from memory. “You grew up relatively normal, excellent grades throughout your school years, and then you unrolled from the education system unexpectedly around the age of fifteen, taking up legitimate work while also being involved in petty theft until you were sentenced to three years in jail for selling stolen goods at seventeen.”

Allegro paused to digest Eryn’s words for a few moments. Having one’s life explained like it was just a checklist of events from a dossier was an odd experience. If he hadn’t lived it, the way it was presented made it sound like it was someone else’s life entirely. “Thorough,” he finally said, “but not entirely accurate.”

“Oh?” Eryn sounded intrigued. “What was I mistaken about?”

“I didn’t unroll. I was expelled.” Allegro said in a flat tone of voice.

“Strange.” Eryn’s brow furrowed in consideration of his response. “I’d imagine that if you did anything so drastic as to be expelled from a Union-sponsored school that it would appear on your record.”

Allegro shrugged. “That’s because they didn’t want to acknowledge what I got expelled for.”

“Which was?”

“I pointed out the lies being fed to us by the elves to my history teacher.”

Eryn tried not to laugh. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I thought so too.”

“No, I mean the assertion is ridiculous.” She shook her head, unable to hide the tickled expression she now wore. “Elves can’t lie. We physically are incapable of doing so.”
Allegro felt the corners of his lips twitch with the urge to turn into a vindictive smile. That was what they always said, after all. But he knew better. “Alright,” he said, “how about I tell you what the lie was, and you can tell me if it holds up.”

Eryn shrugged, looking quite confident in her own assertion. “Fine.”

He took a moment to gather his thoughts, recalling the cramped school room in his Block’s educational facility. The unstable chairs, the faulty air conditioning. The place had always felt stifling, both physically and mentally. “So my teacher feeds us the usual spin on history,” he finally said, “that us humans have waged the greatest number of wars out of all the races out there.”

“That’s correct.” Eryn nodded in agreement. “I believe they number in the hundreds by now – with some still being waged outside of the Union territory – while the second-most frequent starters of war are the orgo.”

“Sure.” Allegro rolled his eyes. “Then the teacher goes on to talk about how elves have started the least number, with only five wars to speak of during their entire history.”

“I’m still not seeing where the lie is.” Eryn gave him a curious look.

“Well,” Allegro continued, “the teacher then prattles on about how this could be taken as evidence of humanity’s naturally destructive nature, because of how easily we get into conflicts, whereas the elves could be seen as enlightened in comparison.” At that, he grinned. “‘cept there’s a big rub about that statement, isn’t there?”

“Well, I don’t necessarily agree with the assertion,” Eryn frowned, and Allegro would have been lying if he’d said he wasn’t a bit surprised by her look of discontent with his teacher’s words. “Based on those terms though,” she reluctantly said, “it’s easy to see how someone might come to that conclusion.”

“Only that human wars, while frequent, only last a couple of years to a few decades at best.” Allegro countered sharply. “Our longest war only lasted a little over a hundred years, and even then it dragged its heels a lot of the time because of the distance. But the elves, on the other hand…”

He paused to gauge Eryn’s reaction. The obvious disappointment on her face told him how she felt about what he was about to say. Despite himself, he couldn’t help but follow through. “Well, I’m sure I don’t need to tell you your own history, do I?”
About how each of those five wars lasted at least three to six millennia a piece? And how each war became bloodier than the last?"

“No, you don’t.” Eryn’s terse reply didn’t give him the satisfaction he’d hoped for. Rather, it just bristled and stirred up those sour feelings from all those years ago.

“So when an elf in a classroom tells me that his people are somehow morally superior to mine because he words things in a certain light and leaves out anything that contradicts him, I call that a lie.” Allegro could hear the spite in his own voice. At this point he wasn’t explaining things, he knew that much. He was just venting. But he couldn’t help it at the same time. How often did he have to keep his head down? To watch what he said just so the façade could keep rolling on. “So I did, and promptly got my ass kicked out of school – promoting opposition to the Union, they called it.”

Eryn didn’t say anything. Instead, she merely stared at the floor with a guilty-looking expression. Allegro felt a twinge of guilt all of his own. “Look,” he said, softer this time, “my point’s this: just because you guys can’t tell a lie, doesn’t mean that you’re always telling us the whole truth.”

The terse silence from before was back, and the rattle of the train began to fill in the emptiness left behind. Further down the car, Allegro could hear the newscast chime in:

“In the latest update on the Praetor electoral race, Senator Patricia Flamel faces potential compromise to her candidacy over recently leaked information which may tie Senator Flamel to incriminating circumstances. Senator Flamel, of course, a notoriously controversial figure due to her…”
IV.

From the outside, all of the Hexablocks looked the same. Towering, open-roofed monolithic structures of steel, concrete and glass, all built to the same specifications, using the same method, and the same materials. Too tall to see the top of from the street, the only thing that ultimately differentiated them externally from one another was their surroundings, and the massive painted number stretching across fifteen floors, designating the order by which they had been built. Internally, however, was another matter altogether, and Allegro quickly began to count up the ways in which Block 19 differed from his own Block. For one, it certainly looked a lot nicer, but one could argue that a lack of trashcan fires was a step up in any environment. It had the same kind of people, however. Dour faces, clothes that had been worn a few times too often, and a general look of distrust and resentment about them. As Allegro and Eryn passed through the open square on their way to the elevators, Allegro noticed a small group of men walk in pace with them from the other end, like a pack of hungry wolves stalking potential prey.

“They don’t seem very friendly,” Eryn murmured, but if she was wary, she made no outward show of it.

“Block life doesn’t exactly breed hospitality,” Allegro replied in an unsurprised tone.

“Oh?” Eryn raised a brow. “Another piece of societal observation from the wise Allegro?”

Allegro couldn’t be sure if her tone was merely teasing, or if there was a bit of an edge in the remark. He felt another twinge of regret over lecturing her in the train earlier.

“No, just common sense.” Allegro sighed, making a slight gesture with his hand at their surroundings. “Low income, low living standards, low expectations breeds low-lives.”

Eryn pursed her lips into a frown. “Things around here do seem a little…”

“Depressing?”

“Yeah.”
“This is one of the nicer Blocks for the district, I’d argue.” Allegro tried to sound sympathetic, but it didn’t come easy. The quality of life in the Hexablocks was almost as unfair and inconsistent a lottery as being born was.

Because different Blocks had access to different external resources, some suffered more than others — although this fact almost never seemed to make it into the public dialogue, Allegro often noticed — which in turn led to people finding their own means of making a living. Drug trade, prostitution, hired violence, all were viable means of income for those trapped in the Blocks. Sure, they could always enlist for welfare service, but more often than not such things were threadbare excuses for a solution. When everyone was poor, no amount of charity would be able to take care of every unfed mouth, every unclothed child. The only thing people in the Blocks were guaranteed was the education system, which was tantamount to the dark ages saying the only guarantee the peasantry had for respite was religion.

“I don’t think that’s something that deserves praise,” Eryn said, her frown deepening. Allegro had to wonder if she was seeing this all for the first time, considering her reactions. To most, even the elves — whether they lived in the Blocks or in the residential districts — this was just how things were, and had been for decades now. Still, he had to admit that he didn’t dislike her reactions. There was something about having someone else confirm what you already knew, but nobody else wanted to acknowledge: something was wrong with the world.

“I don’t think so either.” Allegro simply nodded, and picked up the pace. Once they reached the elevators, Allegro looked around to check on the group following them. They’d stopped at a safe, viewing distance. He said nothing, instead trying to ignore the fact that they weren’t staring at him while he waited for the elevator to arrive. No sooner did it do so than he and Eryn hurried inside. As the elevator doors closed, Allegro knew they needed to finish their business here fast. The way they kept glaring at Eryn didn’t bode well.

***

“Hey, open up!” Allegro yelled while beating on the steel door. According to Eryn, this was where Aife lived, but despite hammering away until his fist hurt, nobody had responded yet.
“Maybe nobody’s home,” Eryn suggested, walking over to try and see through one of the apartment’s windows. They were clumsily covered up with cardboard, however, and she frowned when she failed to catch a glimpse of anything through some of the gaps.

“Nah, he’s in there.” He could feel that same familiar pulsing sensation as he had earlier that day in the crusher. There was something alive inside of the apartment – large enough to be a person.

“How can you tell?”

“I just can. It’s a thing.”

“A thing?”

“A thing. Just take my word for it.” Allegro redoubled his efforts to bash his fist on the door. “Hey! Open the door or I’m knockin’ it down!”

“That thing’s made of steel, you know.”

“I didn’t say it was a legitimate threat.”

Allegro raised his hand to bang on the door once again, only to sigh in relief as it swung open. His fingers were really starting to throb. Standing in the doorway was a gaunt, malnourished elf with bags under his eyes and what was left of his thinning hair tangled into a rat’s nest. He wore a matching set of shirt and pants, both paper-thin and green ochre. The elf rubbed his bare foot against his calf, squinting at the light coming from outside.

“Who the Hells’re you?” the elf asked in a croaky voice. Allegro took a step back just in case the man vomited.

“I’m Allegro,” he replied, gesturing to his side, “and this is Eryn. We’re friends of your daughter’s. Well, she’s a friend of your daughter’s. I’m just… Allegro.”

“I don’t have a daughter.” The elf gave a phlegmy snort.

“Wow, she’s barely been gone a week and you’ve already disowned her?” Allegro tilted his head. “I’d have thought you’d at least hung onto the welfare check.”

“No, you idiot,” the elf replied, pausing for a moment as he choked back something, “she’s not my daughter because she’s my niece. And how the Hells do you know I’m on welfare?”

“Well, besides the pleasant stink of unemployment wafting from the apartment behind you,” Allegro said, wafting his hand a few times, “you’re wearing the oh-so
lovely, vomit-green clothing that gets churned out by clothes vendors. Vendors that only get installed in apartments on the welfare program – which is admittedly a lot lately, but unless you’re busting into other peoples’ apartments to steal clothes…”

“I get it, I get it.” The elf groaned and started to shudder violently. Allegro watched the pitiful sight as the man hugged himself to try and make it stop. “Do you really like the sound of your own voice that much?”

“He does,” Eryn interjected, shooting a grin Allegro’s way.

“I do, a little.” Allegro conceded with a shrug.

“Look, I’ll tell you the same shit I told the Enforcers,” the elf said, his expression turning into an impatient sneer, “I don’t know where she’s gone, and I really don’t care. Kid was a pain in my ass anyway, the fuckin’ junkie.”

“Aife isn’t a junkie,” Eryn retorted, and for a moment Allegro thought he might have to keep her from punching the guy.

“Sure she was.” The elf snorted back another wad of phlegm. “Addicted to that Dreamer of hers, wasn’t she? Always jacked into Dreamspace, didn’t go to school, didn’t lift a finger ‘round the house. Plus then she goes and sets herself up on her high-horse talkin’ about old artists or some trash like that.” He spat out a chortle. “Wants to get into doll-making, she says, as if I’m going to pay for that.”

“Look, I get it, you don’t care.” Allegro was starting to see the appeal in punching the guy himself. Instead, though, he nodded to Eryn. “But she does. So can we just check out Aife’s room, and then we’ll get lost?”

The elf paused for a few moments, and Allegro watched as he picked and pulled at his arms. Looking at where he was picking, Allegro could spy the needle marks.

“Y’know what, fuck it,” the elf finally said while stepping out of the way, “just don’t touch my shit, hhn?”

* * *

“Well, he was thoroughly unpleasant,” Eryn said while turning over some clothes on the bed. Aife’s room was small, like most rooms were in the Blocks, but like most that also didn’t stop its inhabitant from cramming it to the brim with their own belongings. Clothes piled up in corners, on chairs and everywhere else, lamps, posters on the wall and the likes made the room look like any other teenage girl’s.
“Oh, that guy? Never!” Allegro chuckled as he went through Aife’s desk, finding a handful of broken headphones and some notebooks with cheap poetry. “He must have just woken up on the miserable asshole side of bed this morning, that’s all.”

“See anything helpful?” Eryn sighed as she sifted through datadiscs stacked up on the shelves.

Allegro looked up from the drawer he was sifting through. There were some weird-looking figures made out of pencils and plastic straws, posed in motionless dance atop the desk. One of them was holding a ticket stub to something called The History of Puppetry. The date stamp marked it as a month old. He pocketed the stub, before grinning and nodding to a poster on his left, “Not unless pointing out that your friend has terrible taste in music helps.”

Eryn followed the gesture and chuckled as she spotted the poster depicting a group of four adolescent dwarves with their beards and hair gelled into spiky, stylish tips, with white and blue hair dye applied to the ends of both the beards and the hair.

“What’s wrong with the Toddy Boys?” she asked with a smirk.

“Besides everything?” Allegro shook his head before digging his head back into the desk. Eventually, he opened the bottom drawer and after shifting more notebooks around, pulled out a white and black headset with a fibreglass visor. Printed on the side were the words Dreamscaper Tridenta-08. “So this is her Dreamer.”

Eryn turned and came to his side, looking over the device. “Yeah, she said she got it at a flea market. It’s one of the cheaper, less reliable models.”

“We should bag it and take it with us,” Allegro said, looking around for something to stash the Dreamer in.

“Why?” Eryn raised an eyebrow.

“I know a guy.” Allegro snatched up a satchel bag, emptying its contents out onto the floor before stowing the Dreamer inside.

“A guy.”

“Yes, a guy.”

“First a thing, and now a guy.” Eryn crossed her arms and gave him an amused look. “Now who sounds shady and suspicious?”
“You mean the Fixer with a criminal record, who operates outside of the law in the first place, might have a few dodgy contacts and secrets?” Allegro balked with feigned shock. “Say it isn’t so.”

“Point taken.” Eryn chuckled and shook her head. “Anything else?”

Allegro briefly looked to the door out of Aife’s bedroom, where her uncle was. He frowned for a moment, repressing the gut instinct to do something stupid, and then looked to Eryn.

“No,” he said, “let’s get out of here.”

* * *

As they stepped back out into the balconied hallway, Allegro felt a mild breeze at his back as Aife’s uncle slammed the door behind them, the characteristic sound of a lock shunting into place. At least the asshole hadn’t questioned them about the satchel and its contents, though Allegro wasn’t entirely certain if the man even remembered that they hadn’t come in with it. Turning to head back to the elevators, he and Eryn stopped as someone stood in their path. An old woman, hunched over and leaning on a cane in that shrunken way the elderly sometimes became, looked at them from behind thick-framed glasses. Her orange-red skin and the tattoos on her wrinkled features made it easy to tell that she was an orgo. That and the fact that she was over six feet tall even when hunching.

“Are you looking for poor Aife?” the old woman asked in a deep voice.

“You know her, I take it?” Allegro said.

“Sweet girl.” The old orgo shook her head disappointedly. “Shame what happened.”

“Happened?” Eryn asked in a concerned voice.

“Block life can take its toll on the delicate ones, see.” The orgo woman looked over the balcony, where yelling, crying, loud music and more melded into the sounds of life from below. “About a month ago, Aife started acting… strange.”

“Strange how?” Allegro asked.

“Just strange.” The old woman clicked her tongue. “Like you’d look her in the eye and she’d seem confused and lost, and not altogether at peace with herself. She’d twitch, like someone was jabbing her with a fork.”
“She was on drugs?” Allegro tried to ignore the glare from Eryn as he asked the question.

“Aife?” The old woman chuckled and spat over the balcony. “Never. Hated the damned things, thanks to her deadbeat uncle and his Bliss addiction.”

“Bliss, huh? Guess that explains the fidgeting,” Allegro said. “So if it wasn’t drugs, then what?”

“I don’t know.” The orgo woman sighed helplessly. “She just seemed tired. Tired of living in the Blocks, tired of dealing with her uncle. I’d reckon just plain tired of the whole business. I’d hear her at night, ranting to herself about whoever knows what.”

Allegro frowned. If Aife had merely run away from home, then finding her would be even more difficult than a mere kidnapping. “Got any idea of where she might have gone?” he asked.

“Sadly, no. Poor girl kept to herself even before all of this,” the old woman said, her shoulders sagging, “I wish I could help you more.”


Stepping aside to let them pass, the old orgo gave them a beseeching look. “Do me a favour, child? Bring her home safe.”

* * *

Stepping out of the elevator, Allegro frowned and put his arm out to stop Eryn.

“Hang back a little,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Eryn questioned, looking down at Allegro’s outstretched arm. Allegro gestured with his head to the other side of the street, where the same group they’d seen earlier were still hanging around, clearly lying in wait. “Those guys up ahead,” he said for emphasis.

“The ones who’ve been looking at us like they want to kill us since we arrived?” Eryn said, making an unimpressed face while pushing Allegro’s arm down.

“Right. Those ones,” Allegro replied, and pulled his arm back. “Except they weren’t looking at us, they were looking at you.”

“So?”

“So I’ll go talk to them.”

“I’m not some damsel, you know.” Eryn shot him a doubtful look.
“I’m sure, but this is what you’re paying me for, right?” Allegro tried his best to sound diplomatic, though he wasn’t sure how well he was doing. “Navigating these situations?”

“I suppose.” Eryn crossed her arms, looking displeased with being asked to stand on the sidelines.

“Besides, I’d rather avoid things turning bloody – I’m still technically on probation, you know.”

“Fine, you’ve made your point.” Eryn sighed and rolled her eyes, before making a shooing motion at him. “Go talk – although if we’re being fair, the way you talk to people seems more likely to start a fight than stop one.”

“Duly noted.” Allegro took a deep breath, and hoped that he wasn’t about to do something stupid. Well, more stupid than usual.

He walked out onto the street. Thanks to the colossal height of the Block, the dull sunlight barely made it down from above, which only served to give the wide-open space the feeling of being underground. There were five of them altogether, some carrying steel pipes. Judging by the tattoos on their arms, Allegro counted at least three members of gangs that operated across multiple Blocks, none of them known to be fans of elves.

“Hi there, guys.” Allegro put on his best don’t-beat-me-with-sticks smile for the group. The group began to spread out, making little attempt to hide the fact that they were slowly beginning to surround him, while one of the taller thugs stepped up. Looking a little more closely, Allegro spotted the artificial eye in the thug’s left socket, the red dot acting as its pupil dilating and shrinking as it set its sights on him.

“Bring out the she-elf,” the thug with the cyber-eye ordered.

“Yeah, sorry,” Allegro maintained his smile as graciously as he could, “I really can’t do that.”

“Why’s that then,” one of the thugs behind him called out, “you some kind of elf-lover?”

“Well, I like to think I love everyone equally.” Allegro took a deep breath and tried to focus on the pulsing beats. There were so many all around, but he had to narrow it down to the five nearest. Two in front, two on either side. One behind him, slowly
approaching. “Or hate them all equally. It’s hard to tell sometimes. You ever had that feeling?”

“Quit the bullshit.” The thug with the cyber-eye barked the words at him.

“You’ve got one shot at walkin’ away, or else you’re as dead as the elf is.”

“Well, you know what I always—” Allegro started to reply, before he felt the pulse behind him close in fast. In that same instant, he felt a sharp, stabbing sensation like several dozen thorns had just dug into his skin and yanked hard on his shoulder. The violent pull threw him into a swerve, narrowly avoiding the swing of a metal pipe just in time for Allegro to blurt out, “whoops.”

The element of surprise lost, the thugs rushed right at him, with the cyber-eyed thug yelling “get ‘em!” and pulling out a switchblade.

So much for avoiding bloodshed. Allegro sighed, before being forced to step back from another swing by the pipe-wielding thug. Turning to face the thug proper, Allegro kicked off the ground in order to close the gap again, bringing his right hand up in a punch angled for the thug’s kidney. He felt a touch of resistance, and then heard the satisfying sound of the thug choking back air. Before giving his quarry the chance to recover, Allegro grabbed the thug by the shoulders and pulled down while throwing his knee up to nail his assailant in the gut. The thug slid to the ground, dropping the pipe with a dull clatter. Allegro braced himself, ready to deal with the remaining four, only to see a flash of blue shoot past his peripheral vision, and the thug with the cyber-eye drop one knee, clutching a smoking leg. The smell of cooked bacon began to waft into the air.

“Agh, my leg!” The thug howled, his organic eye tearing up while he glared past Allegro. “You bitch!”

The rest of the thugs had stopped dead in their tracks, their weapons still at the ready, though it looked as though now their posture had changed from offence to defence. Allegro looked over his shoulder to see Eryn approach with her left arm outstretched. He could see a bright, blue glow emanating from underneath her sleeve around the wrist, and the veins along her neck and face were illuminated.

“That was a warning shot.” Eryn’s voice was sharp like a razor’s edge. “A little more to the left and that bolt would have done permanent nerve damage. Unless you’d
like to limp for the rest of your life, I’d recommend seeing a doctor now, instead of pushing this.”

As if to emphasize her point, her features tightened in concentration, and Allegro could see sparks of electricity jump between her fingertips, ready to be launched at a moment’s notice. The remaining, uninjured thugs didn’t need much more than that. Just the sight alone of magic had clearly shaken them up. They threw their weapons on the ground and ran, while the one Allegro had kneed in the stomach croaked for air and started crawling away. The thug with the cyber-eye glared venomously at the both of them while his friends escaped.

“This ain’t over,” he said, his voice breaking a little as he tried to hobble on his injured leg, “not by a long shot.”

“Wait,” Allegro pondered aloud, “do thugs actually say things like that?”

“I guess these ones do.” Eryn kept her arm raised until the last thug was out of sight.

“Too many late night vids, I’d guess.” Allegro shrugged, only to wince at the deep, stabbing ache in his shoulder. “Ow.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, just…” He paused for a moment. “Twisted my shoulder a bit dodging. What about you? You never said you had magic.”

“I wasn’t expecting to have to use any so soon.”

“I take it that means you’ve got a Resonator.” Allegro looked at her left arm. The glow was already gone, and her veins had returned to normal. “Pretty impressive bit of tech – and expensive.”

“Speaking of things that are impressive,” Eryn replied, talking past the comment, “how were you able to move like that?”

“I… sort of knew the hit was coming.”

“You knew?” Eryn didn’t sound very convinced.

“Call it good instincts or whatever.”

“Those are some really good instincts, if that’s true.”

“Look,” Allegro said, hoping to avoid the topic a little longer, “we can talk about how impressive I am – and believe me, I’m all for that – or we can get that Dreamer to my pal.”
Eryn looked at him for a good, long moment, as if trying to decide to accept his attempt to divert the topic again, before crossing her arms and giving him an exasperated sigh. “Alright. And how do we do that?”

Allegro smiled. “We’re gonna hit Rock Bottom.”
V.
The bar was a bustling crowd of faces of every kind, the air heavy with cigarette smoke and the smell of booze. Music droned from a set of speakers in the back, though it was drowned out by the sound of chatting, arguing and gambling. Groups sat huddled around tables, throwing credit chips into piles while playing games of chance with dice and cards alike. The actual bar itself was nestled close by the entrance, the name “Rock Bottom” written out on the wall behind the bartender in neon lights. Nobody bothered to pay them any notice when Allegro and Eryn pushed past a few people on their way inside.

“Well, I’ll give the name some credit,” Eryn said, trying not to trip over the mess of chairs and people in her path. “This is what I would imagine when I think rock bottom.”

“What?” Allegro grinned. “Never been to a dive bar before?”

“No, not in this lifetime.”

“Remind me to ask about that sometime,” Allegro said, “for now, though, let’s go find my contact.”

Eryn looked around, as if doubtful that anybody could find anything amongst the incoherent crowd of faces.

“Are you even able to find him in a place like this?” she asked sceptically.

“Oh, sure.” Allegro shrugged confidently. “He stands out pretty easily, being a moglip and all.”

“Moglips are usually only three feet at the tallest.” Eryn frowned. “Shouldn’t he stand out less because of his size?”

“Clever,” Allegro replied, “but you’ll know what I mean if you spot him.”

“Well, I’ll keep an eye out while I look around, then.”

“Going to partake in the sinfest?”

“Maybe.” Eryn shot him a sly look. “Not exactly a lot of opportunities for this kind of experience in my usual life.”

“Something else to ask about. Just watch your back.” He warned. “The guys ‘round here care less about what you are than what you do, but if what you do pisses them off then things usually end up getting broken. A lot.”
With that, he stepped off into the crowd in search of a moglip. Knowing the one he was after, he was fairly certain he knew where to find them. Pressing on through the crowd, he made his way to the dice tables where, sure enough, there on a high-stool sat a moglip that stood out. His wide, fuzzy ears were clipped and turned with bite marks, and his hair stood out on end as though the little creature had been dropped in a bathtub with a toaster. Allegro stepped in close, throwing his arm around the moglip.

“Short-Out,” he said, leaning on the tiny figure, “you mangy runt.”

“Oi, that’s a jank thing to call a mate.” Short-Out’s wide, toothy mouth stretched into a crooked grin while his beady black eyes twinkled mischievously. “I ain’t had mange since I were a squibby toddler.”

“Figure of speech,” Allegro replied, quickly pulling away from the moglip while jokingly patting himself down, “but the fact that you actually had the mange is seven different sorts of worrying all the same.”

“I’m foine now, ya rotter.” The moglip scoffed, turning away from the dice table to squint up at Allegro. “But I’m guessin’ this is bizniss, since ya got them wrinkles on ya forehead. The ones that spell out ‘I’m about to ask me mate Short-Out to stick his neck out again’.”

“Hey now,” Allegro replied defensively, “it’s only a little bit of neck-sticking this time around.”

“Ya said that about the last time.” Short-Out stuffed a finger up his flat nose, poking around. “An’ the time afore that.”

“And you made it out okay, didn’t you?”

“Physically, maybe.” The moglip snorted and pulled out his finger, giving it a flick. “But havin’ to scriptbreak while bein’ shot at ain’t exactly my idea of spiritual well-bein’.”

“I didn’t take you for the spiritual sort.” Allegro grinned.

“Stick it, Ally.” Short-Out pumped his fist at him.

“Look,” Allegro said, leaning back in and cozying up to the moglip, “all I need is for you to sift through a Dreamer. That’s it.”

“Oh, just that, is it?” Short-Out rolled his eyes. “Nevermind the tear-ya-brain-out amounta safety protocols they cram into that lil’ headset, or the hours on hours of legwork siftin’ through psyche-logs.”
“If I didn’t think you could do it, I wouldn’t be asking.” Allegro nudged the moglip with his elbow. “Besides, you owe me. Remember Salfina?”

“Oh, we’re callin’ that one in now, are we?”

“Hey, you’re the one who decided to get himself into an arranged marriage with the daughter of a mob boss.”

“She was a mermaid.” Short-Out pulled on his ears. “A mermaid! Any bloke’d be tempted. And I didn’t know her pops was a mobster.”

“He literally runs the biggest smuggling ring in the city.” Allegro gave the moglip a doubting look. “How did you not know he had a daughter?”

“Alright, alright,” Short-Out said, groaning irritably, “I’ll do it, just stop talkin’ about it, ya git.”

“Great.” Allegro said, taking off his satchel and offering it to Short-Out. “Think you can start on it right now?”

“Right now?” The moglip groaned. “Are you kiddin’ me?”

“It’s important, Shorts.”

“Fine. Come see me tomorrow, when I might have somethin’.” Short-Out grumbled, snatching the satchel out of his hands. “My place, not here.”

“Thanks, Shorts.” Allegro smiled and gave the moglip another nudge. “I’m really glad you’re not sleeping with the fishes.”

“That’s an awful joke, just plain awful.” Short-Out shook his head and turned back to the dice table. “Like, three layers of bad.”

Allegro stepped away, looking around the bar. Though he’d come here to meet up with Short-Out, there was one other person that he wanted to get in touch with, if only because he knew they’d have a way better idea of whatever the hell was going on than he did. And just like with Short-Out, he had a pretty solid idea of where that person might be. Allegro made his way back over to the bar, and took the seat next to a squat old dwarf, nursing a steep glass of hard liquor in his cybernetic arm.

“Deep in the drinks already, geezer?” Allegro said.

“What’s it to a pissant like you?” The dwarf snorted, his machine digits whirring as gears moved and shifted into place while raising the drink to his lips.

“Just keepin’ an eye out for you, Paulkin,” Allegro said, “just like I promised.”

“Hrmph, Moore is it?” The dwarf smacked his lips. “I told ‘em I’m fine.”
“Hey, it’s only natural for someone to worry about their mentor.”
“I mentored a lot of Enforcers.” Paulkin scoffed dismissively. “Moore ain’t any
different from the rest.”
“I think we both know that’s not entirely true.”
“Whatever.” The dwarf let out a grunt, setting down his drink with an irritable
look on his face. “Is that all you’re here for? Naggin’ me?”
“I want your take on a case I’m working.”
“Hah, a case, he calls it.” Paulkin shorted in amusement. “Think you’re an
Enforcer now, Allegro?”
“Hells no.” Allegro scoffed. “I’m way too smart for that.”
“Pfah.”
Allegro looked around, before leaning in close.
“So, a sixteen year old elf girl from the Blocks goes missing,” he explained.
“Enforcers are tight-lipped about the proceedings. Her home life’s not exactly great,
with a junkie uncle, and a whole lotta hate for elves from the looks of it.”
“Sounds like your standard runaway.” Paulkin shrugged and took another sip of
his drink.
“Sure, but the way it sounds she already had an escape in the Dreamscape,”
Allegro reasoned, “and a runaway wouldn’t have left their Dreamer behind if it was
their only outlet. Plus there’s some other weird shit.”
“Plenty of weird shit in the world.” Paulkin furrowed his brow. “Gonna have to
be specific.”
“Well, her neighbour said she was acting twitchy, talking to herself a lot in that
way that makes the people close to you worried.” Allegro paused before adding,
“another thing too: if you spend all your time plugged into the Dreamscape, where you
can make anything you can imagine, why would you try to make dolls in the waking
world?”
“Dolls?” The dwarf’s nose wrinkled in confusion. “That’s a pretty outdated
hobby in this day and age.”
“Yeah. Seems our missing person had a big interest in it. Even went to a puppet
show.”
Paulkin lowered his drink again, slowly this time.
“Puppets, huh?”

Allegro narrowed his eyes, looking intently at the dwarf, “anything you’d like to share with the class, detective?”

“Not a detective anymore, you little…” Paulkin grumbled, and then sighed. “But yeah, I might.”

Allegro kept quiet, watching the dwarf knock back the entire contents of his glass in a single swig, before wiping his beard clean with his good arm.

“Was about forty years ago,” Paulkin said, “serial kidnapper was on the loose. Me and a team of other Enforcers were on the case. Took us months of narrowing down suspects, plotting disappearance patterns, and all the while the missing persons reports kept pilin’ up.”

The dwarf paused, pursing his lips while recounting the case.

“Eventually, though,” he continued, “we had a suspect: elf fellah by the name of Derwyd. Tracked him down to an abandoned warehouse on the east side. Had him cornered and everything. And then? Bastard just straight up kills himself.”

“What about the victims?” Allegro asked.

“Never found a one of ‘em.” Paulkin shrugged. “Only clue we had was a bunch of puppets.”

“Puppets?”

“Yeah, creepy damned things.” The dwarf made a face. “Looked like he’d modelled each one after his victims. He propped ‘em up in arrangements in one of the backrooms, like an altar or somethin’.”

Allegro sat and thought for a while. If the criminal was an elf, death wasn’t necessarily the end of their criminal lifestyle. Although not a commonly discussed topic, it was general knowledge that elves could recall past lives after reincarnating.

“There’s been a lot of missing persons cases stacking up lately,” Allegro said, “think Derwyd might have been reincarnated?”

“Doubtful.” Paulkin shook his head, stroking his beard. “He got DNER’d as soon as the case was closed. Then me and all the other Enforcers on the case got reassigned to comfortable desk jobs or training facilities.”

“I guess the top brass didn’t like the public image shakeup of an elf being a serial kidnapper.” Allegro mused aloud.
“Public image?” The dwarf cocked his head, thinking for a moment before scoffing. “Hah, I guess that might have happened had the case made it to air.”

“They choked the story?”

“Yeah. That’s also how I know they didn’t break the DNER.” Paulkin shrugged. “If they let Derwyd out, it’d wreak havoc on public relations between non-elves and the Union.”

“So what, then?”

“My best guess? Coincidence.” Paulkin scratched his nose. “But if you’re committed to finding a connection, could be it’s a copycat. Someone who read about the kidnappings and decided to play ‘em out again.”

“I don’t know,” Allegro said, frowning, “doesn’t explain why Aife’s missing then.”

“Maybe they’re in on it,” the dwarf replied, “you said it yourself, she didn’t seem too pleased with her life.”

“Maybe. All I know is that—” Allegro stopped, hearing a loud laugh roll over all the other sounds in the bar. He recognized the voice. “Ah Hells.”

“Hrm?” The dwarf grunted curiously.

“I gotta go.” Allegro sighed, patting the old dwarf on the shoulder. “Thanks for the intel, Paulkin.”

“Tell that idiot Moore that I’m fine!” Paulkin insisted with a grumble.

“Will do, geezer.”

Allegro walked away from the dwarf, and wandered about the bar, sidestepping waitresses and tough-looking bikers, looking for the source of the loud, laughing voice.

“Nuh, Uh’m fine. Really. Uh’m drunk, but Uh’m fine, sho let’s have another.”

He looked over towards the corner of bar where Eryn apparently sat in good company, surrounded by a group of bikers, who cheered her on as she downed what he assumed was her thirtieth shot of alchohol, judging by the stack of empty glasses at her side. He pushed in, ignoring the angry leers that the bikers gave him as he tapped Eryn on the shoulders and started pulling her away.

“Hey now, I think she’s had enough, actually.” He made sure not to turn his back on them while he withdrew, Eryn in tow. “Real sorry about that, guys, you have a good one.”
“D’you know they call thish stuff gutburner?” Eryn giggled. “Whatta funny name, right?”

“Hilarious.” Allegro rolled his eyes, walking her towards the exit. “C’mon, let’s get you home. I’m calling a cab.”

He took his phone out, and started messaging a taxi service with the bar’s address. He just hoped that it wouldn’t take long for the cab to arrive.

“I dun wan’ go home.” Eryn huffed and crossed her arms petulantly.

“Well, you can’t stay here,” he replied, “and there’s no room at my place.”

“Home shucks,” Eryn whined, “I dun get to be thuh real me at home.”

Allegro chuckled at that, looking at Eryn questioningly, as he walked her out of the bar and into the cold night air.

“And who is the real you, exactly?” he asked.

From up close, he could smell the liquor on her breath, but he could also smell her perfume. Lavender, he noted.

“You’re nice, Allegro,” she murmured cheerfully.

“And you’re extra-sloshed.”

“I am!” Eryn giggled.

“Look, I really think it’s best that you go home…” Allegro put on a stern tone, trying to stand the elf upright. “Or at least someplace where you can sleep this off.”

“Well…” Eryn pursed her lips sulkily.

“Eryn, really.”

“Wellll…” She sulked harder.

“I’m serious.”

“Fiiiiine.” She let out a childish whinge and stamped her foot. “I’ll jush, jush go sleep over at a friend’s… sh.”

Allegro had to keep her from wandering off for almost ten minutes, constantly pulling her back to the same spot on the sidewalk and reminding her that it was time to go home, before finally the taxi arrived.

“Okay, now watch your head.” Allegro instructed, helping Eryn into the car.

“Is she gonna be okay?” the taxi driver asked, looking doubtfully at the drunken elf in the backseat.
“I really don’t know.” Allegro sighed. “Just… take her to wherever it is she needs to go, okay?”

“Whatver,” the driver replied indifferently, “so long as I’m getting’ paid.”

“Guhnight, Allegro!” Eryn waved both hands while she flopped around in her seat.

He chuckled a bit, and shook his head. “Goodnight, Eryn.”

He watched the cab drive off to wherever it was that Eryn felt she could sleep peacefully and at ease. For him, there was only really one such place. He started walking back towards the subway station, ready to go home himself.
VI.

“I’m home!” Allegro called out, closing the door behind him. The apartment was silent, save for the loud hum of the refrigerator permeating from the kitchen space down the hall. The lights were off, but that didn’t stop the bright glow of the outside buildings from penetrating the thin curtains and illuminating the place. He walked a few steps from the door, entering the living room to the sight of his mother, curled up on the couch, asleep. Her blanket had slid off onto the floor, and so Allegro, quietly stepping around the adjacent coffee table, helped pull it back over her. Turning away from his sleeping mother, he tried his best to ignore the pill bottles left out on the table, and instead made his way to his own room.

The place had barely changed in the years he’d been in prison. A few posters on the wall from back when he was still interested in sports. A handful of books relating to machines and electronics from before his expulsion, when he’d still expected to work as an engineer. His desk still carrying his old, out of date computer – Short-Out had offered to hook him up with a new one, but he’d turned him down. Somehow he just didn’t feel right changing the place like that. The only truly new thing the room had to show since his return was a lone flower, with pink and white petals, sitting in a pot on the window sill beside his bed. Positioned above the flower was an artificial sun lamp, pouring nurturing light down onto the plant. Despite the flower looking delicate, Allegro noted the thick, yellow-green thorns growing out of the stem. Thorns that hadn’t been there when he’d left this morning. He rubbed his shoulder, before wandering over to sit on the bed. He reached into his pocket, picking out his deck of cards and started shuffling them.

“So today was another weird one,” he said, looking around the room, “some rich elf hired me. Don’t know what she’s all about yet. She does seem like she’s worried about her friend, so I can’t exactly fault her for that.”

He paused for a few seconds, cut the deck twice, and then started laying out cards face down on the bed, lining them up in a row.

“Got a bad feeling that it’s not gonna have a happy ending though.” He chuckled and shook his head. “Then again, when does anything ever have one, huh?”

He laid down the last of the cards, looking down at the four rows of thirteen and giving a nod of approval, before looking at the flower on the sill.
“Those thorns really hurt my shoulder, by the way,” he said, putting on a disapproving tone of voice.

There was a pause, before Allegro spotted the smallest hint of movement coming from behind the flowerpot. After another moment, Allegro watched as a tiny person, barely three inches tall, with big, black eyes and pink-white hair shuffled out into view wearing a dress of petals and a pout on her rosy-cheeked face. As she opened her mouth to speak, gossamer wings fluttered at her back.

“Pilly had to get-got Al-Al out of the way-way.” The little creature’s voice was a squeak, but high enough that Allegro could hear it. “Pilly did good-good.”

“Never said you didn’t.” Allegro smiled and reached out to ever-so-gently poke Pilly in her tummy. “Just, y’know, be a bit more gentle? Maybe not so rough.”

Allegro watched as Pilly’s wings started to beat rapidly, lifting her off the sill to hover down onto the bed, where she began to walk up and down the rows of cards. He went first, turning over a card – a King – and then another, offering a small tut as it didn’t match and he turned the cards back down again.

“Al-Al’s always plays rough-tough,” Pilly said, looking up at him and sticking her tongue out in defiance, “so Pilly needs to tug-pull hard-ard to keep him safe-safes.”

Allegro watched her turn over a card, trying not to smile at the sight of the tiny fairy-girl needing both hands to flip a single card. The fairy huffed as she looked at the card she’d turned – a Four – and then skipped up and down the rows to pick out a new one.

“I just don’t know if I can trust her,” he finally said after a while.

“The elf-elf?” Pilly heaved over another card, clapping her hands excitedly as she revealed another Four. “Yay! Pairsy-pears!”

“Yeah,” Allegro replied, watching the fairy roam the cards and pick out another one to flip over.

“Pilly trust-musts her.”

“You’ve never even met her.”

“But Pilly knows.” The fairy flipped over another card while talking, and clapped her hands triumphantly. “Pairsy-pears again! Pilly knows because she feel-feels it. Or don’t-wont’s feels it. Al-Al was with her all day-day, right-lights?”
“Yeah. I was.” Allegro leaned over onto his side, watching the fairy go up and down, flipping one card after another.

“Pairsy-pears!” She cheered. “Well, Pilly didn’t feel-feels any anger-danger pointy-pointing at him.”

“I guess you’ve got a pointy-point.” Allegro grinned and reached out a hand again, prodding at Pilly’s tiny cheek, making the fairy giggle and nearly topple over.

“Pilly wants to know-knows,” Pilly finally said, pushing his hand down, “what’ll Al-Al do neck-next?”

“Honestly, I need more info.” He sighed and shook his head. “I think I’m going to have to get Moore’s help.”

“Pilly like-likes Moore.” The fairy nodded eagerly, flipping another card. “Oh! Pairsy-pears!”

“I know you do.” Allegro chuckled, smiling down at her.

Looking away from the cards, he reached into his pocket and fished out his phone. Flipping it open, he sifted through his contacts list until he came across Moore’s name. He tapped away at the buttons, typing up a quick message: He had a missing person, he needed to talk, maybe they could exchange information – the usual business. He hit send and took a deep breath.

“There, all done,” he said, looking down at Pilly, who was turning over the very last card in the bunch.

“Pairsy-pears again!” The fairy cheered. “Pilly winny-wins!”

“What? The Hells’d you do that?”

“See-saw?” Pilly puffed up her chest with pride and giggled happily. “Pilly’s a smarty-smart.”

He opened his mouth to question the win, only for his phone to jingle and divert his attention. Checking his messages, the reply from Moore read: “Fine. We’ll meet. I’ll message you when and where tomorrow. You still owe me fifty credits.”

Allegro grinned and flipped the phone shut, setting it aside. At least tomorrow was looking promising. He’d have to contact Eryn and let her know where to meet, assuming she wasn’t too hungover from the bar. He looked down at Pilly, who smiled up at him in turn.
“We’re going again,” he said, reaching over to gather up the cards. “No way I’m losing to a pixie.”
Although the streets were practically empty, that didn’t mean they were quiet by any means. Hustle and bustle from the nearby Blocks always managed to carry down the roads, giving an atmosphere of a busy city, without the actual people crowding the sidewalks. It was just another one of those strange contradictions that the Blocks had brought about: excessive populations, yet barely any street traffic. More people living side by side than ever before, and yet nobody seemed to get along.

And sitting on a street corner, amidst all of this, was Rogg’s Meat Wagon: a lone food truck, roaming the streets, stopping by different Blocks to provide people with something other than processed food blocks and nutrition sludge for their meals. The mobile diner was never long in one place, and it seemed as though Rogg, the troll whose name was on the truck, never followed any set routine about where he came and went.

Allegro didn’t care, at least. Catching Rogg’s in the morning was one of those pleasant surprises, like when the weather forecast predicted toxic rain and instead you got clear skies. Sitting on a stool, he tore into his breakfast, cutting up bacon and mixing it up with tinned tomatoes before hungrily stuffing the forkload in his mouth. While he chewed, he looked up at the broad, eight foot mass of man that was the food truck’s owner, driver and only cook.

―Hey, Rogg,‖ Allegro said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “where’d you even get real meat anyway?”

Meat wasn’t exactly an easy thing to come by in the Union. Oh sure, they had meat-substitutes, made of processed, unknown ingredients that tasted like cardboard – maybe they were cardboard, even – but real meat? Short of paying out the nose on the license alone, real meat was something either the rich or the illicit got their hands on.

Rogg grinned, the rock-like growths on his dirt-brown features grinding against one another. “You really want to know?” the troll asked in a deep baritone rumble.

Allegro squinted at the troll, before looking at his bacon suspiciously.

“On second thought,” he said, stabbing the bacon with his fork, “I think I’d rather just enjoy the meal.”

“Smart.” Rogg chortled. It sounded like rocks falling down a well.

“I have my moments.”
“Sorry I’m late,” Eryn called out, drawing Allegro’s eyes from his plate and to the sidewalk where the elf hurriedly approached.

“Surprised you’re even up this early.” Allegro didn’t try to hide his surprise, looking her over. “Aren’t you hungover?”

“Not really. Elven biology filters toxins pretty quickly.” Eryn explained and climbed onto the stool beside Allegro. “I am famished though.”

“What’s up?” Rogg said with a grunt, attentive to the sound of a hungry customer.

“I guess I’ll have…” Eryn pursed her lips, looking at the menu scribbled on the wall behind Rogg. “A double helping of the sausage and scrambled eggs, four pieces of toast, an orange juice and some tea.”

“Are you sure?” Allegro lowered his fork in concern. “Rogg’s portions are troll-sized.”

“Of course.” Eryn smiled, perking up and adding, “oh, and can I get some bacon and a salad too?”

“Woman, where do you plan on putting all of that away?” Allegro looked at her hips as though expecting to detect some mystic power about them.

“Metabolism,” Eryn said with a confident grin. “So did you learn anything yesterday at the bar?”

“A bit.” Allegro took another hungry bite of his meal, before washing the food down. “A guy I know thinks it might be a copycat of a similar kidnapping incident forty years ago.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think there’s always more to it than that.” He glanced at Eryn. “Just like with you.”

“With me?” Eryn cocked her head to the side.

“I barely know anything about you.”

“Well, I’ve been up front with you so far.”

“Sure, about things that have to do with the case,” Allegro said, tapping his fork on his plate, “I don’t know a thing about the person hiring me though.”

“Well,” Eryn said, smiling in that same, relaxed manner he remembered from the night before, “what do you want to know?”
“Is your name actually Eryn?”

“I can’t lie, remember?” As Eryn spoke, Rogg slid an oversized platter with all of the food loaded onto it in front of her. “And yes, I remember, half-truths. But it’s hard to half-truth telling someone your name, especially if you were going to be using it on a regular basis.”

Picking up her knife and fork, Eryn hungrily began attacking the crowded plate.

“Fair enough,” Allegro conceded. “Fine then, how old are you?”

Eryn covered her mouth to finish chewing, before swallowing her mouthful.

Allegro still had a hard time believing she was going to eat all of that.

“Aren’t there some human customs about not asking a lady her age?” she said.

“Are you a lady?” Allegro chuckled.

“No.” Eryn pursed her lips thoughtfully. “No, I guess I’m not.”

“So how old are you?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“Really?”

“Again,” she said, “not a lot of room for interpretation on that one.”

Eryn smiled and shrugged, taking another bite out of her meal.

“It’s just hard to tell with elves sometimes.” Allegro explained. “I know you guys sort of slow down on the aging thing for a while once you hit a certain age.”

“That’s true, but even then the elven lifespan’s been greatly reduced ever since the altered reincarnation process.”

“Since you bring that up, I guess I should get some kind of first-hand confirmation, seeing as you’re giving me straight answers: do elves really remember past lives?”

“Sort of.” Eryn paused, turning over her food a few times as if they were her own thoughts, being rolled around and mulled over. “It comes to you in flashes, or most commonly in dreams. You relive old moments, feel everything fresh like it just happened to you in that very instant.”

“Sounds like it’d be an easy way to mess up a kid.”

“Well, thankfully, it doesn’t start happening until adolescence.”
“Oh, so it’s like puberty for you guys.” Allegro let out a slight chortle. “Just instead of raging hormones driving you insane, it’s past memories of whatever messed up life you might have been leading.”

Eryn pursed her lips, looking at her plate thoughtfully.

“I guess that’s one way to look at it,” she said.

“So who were you in a past life?” Allegro asked.

She paused again, before sighing and offering up an apologetic smile.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Eryn replied.

“Why not?”

“It’s personal.” Her expression turned awkward, and she pushed her food around the plate some more. “And I don’t just mean it’s personal just because I’m an elf. It’s personal for me.”

“Alright.”

“That’s it?” Eryn blinked, looking up at him.

“Yeah.” He smiled, turning back to his own meal.

“You dropped that rather quickly,” she said probingly.

“You were honest about it.” Allegro shrugged, and scooped some food onto his fork. “It would’ve been easy to sidestep the question entirely and give me some vaguely satisfying answer just to shut me up. You don’t want to talk about it, and you said so.”

With that said, he raised the fork to take another bite, only to be stopped by the tell-tale sound of jingling coming from his pocket.

“Ah, great.” He sighed and set the fork down, taking out his phone.

“What is it?” Eryn asked curiously.

Flipping the phone open, he studied the message before responding.

“A message from Moore to meet and talk about the case.”

“Moore?” Eryn raised an eyebrow. “That name sounds familiar.”

“It should, since you read my record.” Allegro replied, pocketing the phone.

“Moore’s the Enforcer that busted me three years ago.”

* * *

“A crime scene?” Eryn said, looking at the Enforcers lined up to form a perimeter, with stretches of orange tape between each of them. A small crowd had
already formed, trying to catch a glimpse of whatever latest misery they could tell their friends about. “Your Enforcer’s got a weird taste in meeting spots.”

“Moore’s busy ‘round the clock,” Allegro replied, looking at the different Enforcers in an attempt to see any familiar faces, “so these morbid little meet-ups are the only chances we have to swap notes.”

He spotted one, a lanky human with an unsuitably big nose, standing by the wayside and adjusting his belt as if fearful it wasn’t quite doing its job right. As Allegro approached, the Enforcer stiffened up and stood at attention, trying to look appropriately stern while putting his hand to the weapon on his hip – a mag-gun, effectively a firearm that used mana in place of bullets. They had the neat little trick of being able to switch between killing a target, and merely maiming or stunning them. It certainly made them a lot more versatile in doling out pain, that much Allegro knew from experience.

“Stand back, Allegro,” the Enforcer said, lips twitching.

“C’mon, Gherkins,” Allegro said in an imploring tone.

“Gherkins?” Eryn blinked.

“It’s restricted,” Gherkins said, trying and failing to sound strict, “I can’t let you through.”

“His name is Gherkins.” Eryn looked at Allegro for confirmation. “Really?”

“Look,” Allegro said, “I just need to get inside to talk to somebody and then I’m out, I swear.”

“Last time it was just a talk you made off with evidence.” The Enforcer bristled and looked at Eryn. “And it’s Officer Gherkins, actually.”

“Important evidence for my own investigation, Gherkins,” Allegro objected.

“You’re not an Enforcer,” Gherkins said, frowning, “you don’t do investigations, Allegro.”

“Look, I didn’t want to have to do this but you leave me no choice.” Allegro sighed, putting on a pained face for show. “I’ll put up the tickets to the Taurus/Vespard fight.”

“You mean my tickets.” Gherkins’ frown sagged deeper.

“That I won from you fair and square in a poker game,” Allegro replied, and stepped up beside the Enforcer, putting his arm over the man’s shoulders, “and I’ll be
happy to see them return to their rightful owner, provided that I get just ten minutes inside the cordon.”

Gherkins cringed and went red in the face. For a moment, conflict spread across his features like a battlefield. Only for a moment, however, as the next second the man’s shoulders sank.

“You know I paid seven hundred credits for those tickets?” Gherkins said despondently, “a whole four months of salary, saving up for it.”

“You’re a saint, Gherkins.”

“Officer.” Gherkins insisted. “Officer Gherkins. Now get lost, Allegro, before my superiors see us.”

Allegro grinned and pat the Enforcer on the back before quickly motioning to Eryn for her to follow him as he ducked beneath the orange tape, heading further into the crime scene.

* * *

Entering the scene of the crime, Allegro kept a look out for Moore. There were only a handful of Enforcers present at the actual scene of the crime, with a few lab techs standing around a gruesome-looking heap of human remains. It was just the one person, but they looked like they’d been savagely taken apart, with stray chunks of viscera spread around the main corpse. Allegro frowned as he saw the look of frozen terror on the victim’s face. And then he saw something else that made him frown even more. He stopped in his tracks and sighed.

Eryn followed his gaze, curiously tilting her head once she saw what he was looking at: a broad, pot-bellied man in a purple sports jacket, with glittering, scaly green skin and a hairless head adorned with fin-like ears and fat, sausage-like fish-lips.

“You never told me Moore was a merrow,” Eryn said, glancing at Allegro.

“That’s because she’s not.” Allegro’s frown only deepened as the fish-lipped man spotted them and started walking towards them with a grin.

“She?” Eryn questioned.

“Oh, lookie who it is,” the merrow man said. In his hand he held a lone plastic cup of coffee, that he took a long sip from.

“Ugh.” Allegro made no attempt to hide his contempt, even as he forced a smile for the man. “Hello, Phelps. Where’s your other, just-as-awful, half?”
“Hey, Linton!” Phelps ignored the remark, raising the cup of coffee over his head and waved it around while looking off to the side. “Lookie who it is!”

Following Phelps’ gaze, Allegro saw the merrow’s partner, an equally broad, but much taller orgo, wearing a matching jacket, and holding a large sandwich in film-wrap. Linton grinned and started towards them, taking a bite out of the sandwich while he walked.

“And there he is.” Allegro sighed.

“Aw, if it ain’t little Allegro,” Linton said, expertly speaking around the food in his mouth, “playing detective again.”

“Do you know these two?” Eryn asked, looking confused.

“Know is a strong word,” Allegro replied, “endure might be better?”

“So what brings you to our little crime-scene, Leggy?” Linton said, coming to a halt beside Phelps. Once beside one another, the two swapped the cup of coffee and the sandwich with one another, each partaking in the other’s food and drink in very audible fashion.

“Did they just—?” Eryn made a face.

“Yes. Yes, he did.” Allegro shook his head, trying to ignore the sounds of munching and slurping while looking at the two. “And I’m here to see Moore.”

“Moore?” Phelps replied, “she ain’t here.”

“I can see as much, where is she?”

“Reassigned to a collision on the other side of town,” Linton said, rubbing at a coffee spill on his shirt.

“She said to meet her here,” Allegro said, frowning.

“Yeah, we know.” Phelps snorted and rolled his eyes. “And so does the Chief.”

“Ah.” Allegro cursed inwardly.

“One of these days, you’re gonna get her fired, you know,” Linton commented while trading food and drink with his partner again.

“Well, fine,” Allegro said, ignoring the remark, “I guess I’ll have to settle for you two chumps then.”

Phelps and Linton looked at one another, and then burst out laughing.

“What makes you think we’d help a Fixer?” Linton said, wheezing between chuckles.
“Yeah,” Phelps added with a smug grin, “we like our job security, you know.”
“I don’t know, out of the kindness of your hearts,” Allegro said, nodding to the sandwich the two continued to pass between one another, “which I can only hope are as bottomless as your stomachs.”
“Hah, that’s a good one,” Phelps said, taking another slurp of coffee.
“Look, I’m just looking into a missing person’s case.” Allegro rolled his eyes. “Either of you heard of an elf girl from Block 19 going missing?”
“Nope.” Linton belched, giving his chest a firm thump.
“And even if we had,” Phelps added, “we still wouldn’t tell you.”
“Well, maybe we can trade or something?” Allegro offered, though internally he wished he could punch the smugness out of the two, “I help with your case, you help with mine.”
“Sure, why not.” Linton shrugged. “Not that it’ll help.”
“Yeah,” said Phelps, taking another bite out of Linton’s sandwich, “this one’s a pretty shut-and-closed case.”
“So you already have a suspect?” Eryn asked.
“Nope.” Phelps shrugged.
“The only eye-witness is a Grey,” Linton said.
“So what?” Allegro crossed his arms impatiently. “Greys still retain some memories if you catch them at the right moment.”
“Sure,” Phelps replied, “but this one’s clearly too tripped out to be worth a damn in terms of a testimony.”
“Keeps babbling on about the vic being killed by wooden dolls.” Linton shook his head. “Totally inadmissible.”
“Really?” Allegro retorted, “sounds like magic’d be the obvious culprit.”
“You’d think,” Linton countered, “but if a Resonator’d been used, it woulda left at least some kind of trace signature, even if the tracker was disabled.”
“No trace means no Resonator.” Phelps nodded in affirmation. “That means our witness is just your typical nutjob with a brain like melted cheese.”
“Mm.” Linton licked his lips. “Shall we try the cheese bar after work?”
“We really should.” Phelps nodded hungrily.
“Can I talk to the witness?” Allegro asked.
“The Hells’d we let you do that?” Linton shot him a nasty look. “We already told ya it’d be pointless.”

“So if it’s pointless, there’s no harm in it.” Allegro grit his teeth. This was starting to get tiresome.

“Just get lost already, Allegro,” Phelps said, making a shooing motion, “before we bust you for interfering with a crime scene.”

Linton joined in, the two Enforcers shooing Allegro away while chortling amongst one another. Allegro clenched his fists, but retreated for the time being with Eryn in tow. Stepping off to the side, he lowered his voice and leaned in close to talk to her.

“Okay, look,” he said, looking around shiftily, “I’m gonna need you to distract them.”

“Distract them how?” Eryn replied, looking doubtful.

“Well, I don’t know,” Allegro said, “use your womanly charms or something?”

“My womanly charms?” Eryn made a face. “I’m not even sure I have those.”

“Just… do something, okay?” Allegro sighed. “I need to get some time with the witness.”

Eryn paused for a moment, looking across to where the two Enforcers were chatting, and continued exchanging their food with one another. She cringed with revulsion and then looked back to Allegro. He smiled as sympathetically as he could.

“Ugh, fine.” She shook her head in dismay. “But this had better be worth it.”

“What, they’re two strapping, err, broad men.” Allegro smiled, trying to put a positive spin on things. “Although Linton is married, so…”

“Not helping your case.” Eryn shot him a dark look.

“Look, just get me as much time as you can,” Allegro said, “I’ll try to be quick.”

With one more look of utter dismay at the two Enforcers, Eryn put on a strained smile and began approaching the men. Allegro watched the elf talk to the two, seeing her laugh in an exaggerated manner at something that Phelps had said. Eventually, he watched her lead them off to the side, away from the center of the crime scene. That was his cue to start exploring.

* * *
It didn’t take long for Allegro to find the witness. Greys always had the unfortunate complexion of a sickly ashtray as a result of their Fugue abuse, which attributed to the moniker in the first place, and the woman in question was no different. The addict stood off to the side, looking dazed and confused, as though she wasn’t quite sure what it was she was doing there. When Allegro approached her, she seemed momentarily startled, and her expression shifted to one of worried anxiety.

“You’re not my florist,” she said. “Have you seen my florist?”

“Uh, no,” Allegro replied, “I’m here because of the murder you saw?”

“I saw a murder?” The woman’s tired eyes widened. “Gosh, that sounds like it would be traumatic.”

“I… would imagine it would be.”

“I should take my Fugue,” she said, looking around, “I left it in my purse.”

“Uh, if you don’t mind holding off on that until after I ask my questions?”

“But then I’d have to relive the horrible event.” The woman’s voice crawled, as though every word came with great effort. “I think it’d be better if I just forgot.”

“Well, I mean, even if you tell me now, you’ll forget having relived it and telling me about it anyway, right?”

“I guess that’s true.” The addict paused for a moment, her eyes losing focus. She blinked, and gave Allegro that same anxious, worried look as before. “Have you seen my florist? I’m putting together an expo of my art. It involves flowers.”

“Look, just… tell me what you saw, okay?”

“Okay.” The woman furrowed her brow, straining herself. “So I was on my way to see my florist. I’m putting together an expo of my art. It involves flowers.”

“Oh huh, go on.”

“So I was on my way to see my florist. And then I heard some shouting coming from the nearby alley.”

“Can you point me to which one?”

“Which one what?”

“Which alley?” Allegro took a deep breath, resisting the urge to yell. “The one you heard shouting from.”
“You mean that alley over there?” The addict pointed to an alley a few feet away. “Because I heard some shouting coming from there when I was on my way to see my florist. I’m putting together an expo of my art. It—”

“Okay, so you heard some shouting, and then what?”

“Oh, well, I went to hide over behind that dumpster. It sounded like things were starting to get kinda violent.” The woman frowned, staring off into space. “I don’t like violence much. I prefer my art. It involves flowers.”

“So the shouting turned violent,” Allegro said, trying to keep the addict on-topic, “and what happened next?”

“Well, this guy started screaming, and then he ran out of the alley,” the woman said, making an uncomfortable face, “but he was covered in these, like, dolls.”

“What kind of dolls?”

“You know. Dolls. Made out of wood.” The addict nodded, and narrowed her eyes as if she was watching the event all over again. “They were holding knives. Stabbing with them. And they kept crying.”

“Crying?”

“I once considered using dolls in my art. I’m putting together an expo, did you know?”

“Did you see anything else?” Allegro asked, trying to stay patient.

“Anything else?”

“Besides the man and the dolls. Was there anyone else there?”

“Oh. Well, I think I remember someone wearing a hoodie?”

“A hoodie.” Allegro frowned. That wasn’t exactly what he’d call a lead.

“Yeah, I couldn’t really see their face, but I did notice something else.”

“Really?” Allegro asked urgently, “what was it?”

The woman opened her mouth to speak, only to stop mid-breath. Her eyes lost focus again, and she stopped there, mouth agape for several seconds before relaxing once again. She blinked, looking around as if to reorient herself, before she settled her eyes on Allegro. He could tell just by looking at her expression that she didn’t recognize him.

“You’re not my florist. Have you seen my florist?”

* * *
Allegro walked over to the alley that the witness had pointed him towards. Sure enough, there were blood spatters on the pavement, leading out of the alley and towards the place where the victim had fallen dead. The murder had been recent. He could tell because the connection between Pilly and him, the one that allowed him to sense life, also allowed him to still sense the lingering echoes of life in the blood staining the ground. Oddly enough, the trail hadn’t led straight from the alley to the crime scene. There was more blood off to the side, amidst a series of overturned trashcans. He approached them, turning some of the garbage over with his shoe until he could reveal what was underneath: a long splinter of wood, and a key card, both covered in the victim’s blood.

“Sorry, Gherkins. Looks like I’m going to have to nab something after all.”

Allegro made sure that nobody was watching, before he reached down and picked up the two items. The exact nature of the splinter was impossible to surmise, though if nothing else it lent credibility to the addict’s story about puppets. The key card, on the other hand, was more helpful: it was a worker’s pass, belonging to one Devon Korr, of ENI Corporation. The photo on the card matched the victim. Allegro scrutinized the corporate logo; ENI Corp was one of those high-ranking organizations that chiefly serviced the elven population. Most notably, they were the ones in charge of managing the elf population’s reincarnation process. He had a hard time doubting that an ENI Corp employee turning up dead was unrelated to the conversation he’d had with Paulkin the night before. He just needed to more information.

He pocketed the splinter and the key card, and headed back to where he’d left Eryn. Just in time, no less, as it appeared that Phelps was leaning in a little too close for the elf’s comfort.

“You should come to dinner with me sometime,” the merrow said, his thick fish-lips spread into what he no doubt thought was an inviting grin.

“Hey, I could come along and bring the wife.” Linton snapped his fingers as though the idea was a great one. “We could finally do a double-date.”

“I’m really not looking to date anyone right now.” Eryn looked like she was fighting hard to maintain a polite smile. “Especially not right now.”

“Hey now, no need to be bashful,” Phelps said, “just give me a chance, eh?”
Allegro decided that now was a good time to intervene, as he called out to the elf, “Hey, Eryn! We’re leaving!”

“Ohh, did you hear that?” Eryn quickly looked to Allegro with a grateful expression, already starting to back away from the two Enforcers. “I absolutely have to go. It was… an experience, meeting you both.”

“Are you okay?” Allegro chuckled as he watched Eryn double-time towards him at an impressive speed. “You look like you’ve been put through some kind of torture camp.”

“Allegro,” she said with a tense voice, “you know how it seems a lot of people owe you favours?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, now you owe me one.”

“Ah.”

“A big one.”

“I’d argue, but I’d be demanding the same thing in your shoes.”

“Good.” Eryn sighed. “So did you get anything?”

“I got something.” Allegro nodded and patted the pocket with the worker’s pass in it. “I guess I’ll just have to pull on the string and see where it leads us. Speaking of leads, we should try Short-Out. He should at least have something for us.”

“Fine. Just so long as we get out of here.” Eryn shuddered. “It feels like he’s still eyeing me up.”

“I think he actually is.” Allegro leaned around Eryn to look back at Phelps and Linton.

“Okay,” she said promptly, “we’re leaving now.”

“He seemed to really like you, you know.” Allegro grinned.

“Leaving.” Eryn gave him a firm push for emphasis. “Now.”
VIII.

Stepping off the streets, Allegro led the way onto the site of a scrapyard. Piles upon piles of discarded electronics, trashed vehicles and more formed small hills and towering masses of torn metal and tangled wires. Eryn looked around, a look of scepticism crossing her face as she kicked a piece of wayward scrap aside.

“This is where he lives?” she asked doubtingly while keeping pace with Allegro.
“Well, it’s the best place for what he does.” He shrugged.
“I thought you said he was a scriptbreaker.”
“Well, he does that, and a few other things too.” Allegro scratched the back of his head, and turned a corner around a stack of cars piled on top of one another. “But all of those things are easier to do when you’re off the grid. And this is pretty off the grid for a base of operations in the city.”

“Where does he even get power?” Eryn looked around, pursing her lips in thought.

“Steals it from the neighbouring Blocks.” Allegro pointed at the base of one of the piles, singling out a thick bundle of cables held together by clamps. “See those cables disappearing in and out of the scrap? That’s where he’s funnelling it.”

“How has he not been caught by now?”

“Not a lot of folks who’d expect a scriptbreaker to be able to work a computer beneath ever-increasing piles of scrap metal and junk. Too much interference from the damaged harmonics.”

“If that’s true then how does he make it work?”

“If people could figure that out, there’d be a lot more Short-Outs.”

He rounded another corner, only to come to a dead halt whilst raising his hand up to stop Eryn as well. A good ten feet ahead of them, a cluttered heap of scrap metal rattled and was pushed aside as a banged-up old turret burst from hiding. It whirred and beeped a couple of times, before its barrel honed in on them, and the tell-tale sounds of clicking made it abundantly clear that it was ready to fire at any given moment. Allegro waited, cautiously appraising the turret, when the weapon began to bleep and make strange, swooning sounds, before a sexless, yet heavily accented voice emerged from some unseen part of the turret.
“Halt, mon darlings,” the turret ordered, its voice lacking the actual elements of femininity, yet still using an almost girlish inflection, “you vill not entrude. Take un more step and I shall shewt you deed.”

“Did that turret just speak with a Surlaisian accent?” Eryn asked, sounding like she had a hard time believing she had even asked such a question.

“Yeah, that’ll be Short-Out’s sense of humour…” Allegro replied. “He takes the persona-script from service golems, like vending machines or maids, and plants them in things like that.”

Eryn looked at him like he’d say something crazy, then at the turret, and then back to him. “But… why?"

“I think he said something about the irony of someone wishing you a pleasant day while shooting at you.”

“You know a lot of weird people,” Eryn said in a flat tone. “You know that, right?”

“I know.” Allegro smiled, taking a step forward and putting his hands up for the turret to see. “I’m here to talk to Short-Out.”

The turret paused for a few moments, making a whirring, bleeping sound, before responding. “And vut iz ze passverd?”

“Stomadons make the best fried shrimp,” Allegro said, while behind him he heard Eryn groan. For a moment, he wondered if Short-Out might have changed the password since the last time he’d visited, and neglected to inform him. The moglin sometimes forgot important things like keeping you informed of life-threatening details such as passwords, or remembering to turn off the timer of a bomb.

The turret made a series of bleeps, increasing in frequency as though building up to something. Allegro braced himself. Finally the bleeping stopped, and the turret’s aim lowered. “Please carry on,” the accent-heavy turret stated, before dropping back into hiding beneath the scrap. There was a whir of machinery, and one of the larger piles of scrap began to rattle and shake as some of it hoisted off the ground, revealing itself as a repurposed garage door posing as garbage. Allegro and Eryn approached the entrance. Beyond it, the way ahead turned to stairs leading someplace underground, where lights flashed and sparked in the distance. Without a word, Allegro and Eryn descended the steps.
The first thing Allegro did when he saw Short-Out, sitting in a high-legged chair and tinkering at his workbench, was walk right up to him to flick the moglip’s ear.

“Nice new security measure,” Allegro said in a prickly voice, crossing his arms.

“Oh, ya mean Roxy?” Short-Out grinned from ear to ear, looking up from a tangled mess of wires and electronics on his bench. “I got ‘er persona-script off this old geezer lookin’ to upgrade to somethin’ more intense. Traded Roxy for the turret’s original persona – a drill sergeant.”

“You implanted a Surlaisian maid-styled house golem,” Eryn said, trying to come to grips with the idea judging from the look on her face, “with a drill sergeant’s personality.”

“Bloke’s into some kinky old geezer stuff,” the moglip replied with a shrug and returned to his tinkering. “Ain’t my place to judge.”

Allegro looked around Short-Out’s workshop. Heaps upon heaps of machinery, gadgets and tech all piled up in some incomprehensible order that no doubt made perfect sense to the moglip, but defied reasoning for anyone else. On one end of the workshop, he spied a large, crystalline viewscreen with a series of numbers and words scrolling incessantly in an endless stream. Connected to the screen by a cable, he saw a familiar piece of white-black tech.

“So did you find anything on the Dreamer?” he asked Short-Out while approaching the screen.

“Just a bit.” The moglip let out a disgruntled tut. Setting his tools aside, he hopped down from his chair and wandered over to the screen and the Dreamer. “There’s a whole lotta Dreamscape hours logged on this thing. Runnin’ the empathic residue’s takin’ her sweet time.”

“Empathic residue?” Allegro asked, while he and Eryn followed the moglip.

“It’s sort of like a thumbprint on glass, or an arse-print on a chair.” Short-Out grinned, and tapped the side of his head. “Only it’s left behind by ya mind. Kind of like a thought smear. Which is actually the interestin’ thing about your girl’s Dreamer.”

“What do you mean?” asked Eryn, approaching the table with Aife’s Dreamer.

“Well, from the look of things,” Short-Out replied, crossing his arms, “she’s not the only one who’s been usin’ the Dreamer.”
“Well, it’s not like that’s rare,” Allegro reasoned. “People can borrow Dreamers normally in the first place.”

“Yeah, sure, but they can’t run it on ya personal frequency.” Short-Out dragged out a tall box, climbing on top of it so as to stand over the table, picking the device up and pressing some button on the underside. “The Dreamer adjusts its output to match ya own mind and thought patterns, see.”

On the screen, Allegro and Eryn watched as the stream of data turned to a display of two waves on a separate pair of graphs, apparently signifying Aife and whoever the other user had been. Aside from a few inconsistencies, Allegro noticed, the two waves looked identical.

“So what happens if someone tries to use a Dreamer on someone else’s frequency?” Allegro asked, looking from the screen and at Short-Out.

“Big ol’ brains-out-the-eyesockets situation and the smella cooked meat.” The moglip made an exploding gesture upside of his head. “At least unless you’re a skilled breaker.”

“So what’s that mean?” Eryn questioned, sounding anxious.

“Hells’n if I know.” Short-Out shrugged, looking between the two. “Just tellin’ ya what I know so far.”

“Anything else you can tell us?” Allegro sighed. So far there were still too many unknowns for his liking. He had his suspicions, but he couldn’t act on those alone.

“Not yet. Still got a few hours left to decompile the logs, and then I can start pickin’ away at ‘em properly.” Short-Out made a face. “Sorry, mate, but that’s whatcha get for short notice.”

“It’s fine.” Allegro shook his head. “I’ve got something else I want you to check out for me.”

“Alright, hit me.” Short-Out put on a grin, before immediately giving him a suspicious look. “Ya know, so long as it ain’t gonna get me killed or nothin’.”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Allegro smiled.

“Aw, don’t go sayin’ shit like that, Ally,” Short-Out said with a groan, pulling on his own ears. “It ruins my day when ya do.”

“I need you to look up whatever venue was hosting an event called The History of Puppetry.” Allegro pulled out the ticket stub he’d found in Aife’s room, handing it
over to the moglip. “And when you have the time, hit up your friends in Dreamtalk for anything to do with crying puppets.”

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Eryn tense up at the mention of crying puppets.

“Puppets?” Short-Out cringed. “Do I even wanna know?”

“It’d probably ruin your day further,” Allegro replied sympathetically.

“S’all I need to know.” The moglip shook his head and hopped off his box, wandering off to another part of his workshop where a large computer and a number of screens were set up. Allegro looked away from the scriptbreaker and to the elf instead. From the troubled look on her face, he got the feeling that if not for the albinism, she’d be looking pale.

“Something wrong, Eryn?”

“It’s nothing, just…” She frowned, looking uncertain. The jingled sound of an old pop song interrupted the momentary silence, as Allegro reached for his pockets.

“Hang on a second, it’s my phone,” he said apologetically, briefly marvelling at the fact that he could even get a signal down in this place. Seeing the caller ID, he immediately flipped the phone open and brought it to his ear.

“Moore? You don’t usually call.”

Moore’s voice, stern but soft, spoke in a matter of fact tone that Allegro had grown a little fond of over the years.

“I’d text,” she said, “but this is faster and I don’t have time to wait for any replies.”

“Everything alright?”

“Just the Chief and the others up top coming down on my ass.”

Allegro heard Moore sigh. She sounded tired.

“They’ve got me transferring old paperwork to the computers,” she continued, “by typing.”

“Eugh. Sounds like a fresh new kind of hell.”

“Tell me about it. Sadly, it also means I can’t meet to compare notes.”

“Nah, that’s fine, don’t worry about it.” Allegro thought for a moment.

“Actually, if you’ve got access to old paperwork and case files, you might be able to get me some information while you’re there.”
There was a pause on the other end of the call.

“Well,” Moore finally said, “at least it’d feel like I was doing real work, I suppose. What do you need?”

“I need some information on ENI Corp,” Allegro said, not failing to spot how the name caught Eryn’s attention, though he pretended not to notice. “Specifically, if they might have handled anything to do with a DNER case involving a guy named Derwyd about forty years ago.”

“Forty years ago? That’s pretty far down the pile,” Moore sounded doubtful for a few moments, before adding, “but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, Moore.” Allegro sighed. “Get in touch as soon as you find something.”

“Watch your back,” Moore simply said, hanging up abruptly.

“So I guess that for now we wait until either lead gives us something,” Allegro said to Eryn, pocketing his phone. Eryn’s expression, however, told him that she had plans besides waiting.

“I’ve got to go,” she said flatly, though he noted what sounded like doubt in her voice at the same time.

“Go where?”

“I’d rather not say, only that it’s important.” Eryn paused, and looked him in the eyes. “And I’ll explain when I can.”

“So just like that? You’re the one who hired me, remember.”

“I know,” Eryn replied, running her fingers through her white hair. She looked worried, conflicted even. “But this might actually help the case. I just need you to trust me on this.”

Allegro looked her in the eyes. Whatever was bothering her, it had her on edge. At the same time though, the look on her face made it clear that she wanted answers of her own.

“Alright, fine.” He nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ll keep digging in the meantime.”

Without another word, she hurried past him, making her way towards the stairs leading out of the moglip’s den. Allegro stood there for a while, silently pondering his next move. Stepping away from his computer, Short-Out looked his way.

“So ya want me to put on some coffee?” the mogul asked.

“Nah,” Allegro replied, shaking his head. He needed to clear his mind. Rearrange and reorganize the case in hopes of finding some other angle. “I’m heading out too. Need to think some stuff over as well. You—”

“Call ya if I find anythin’,” Short-Out interrupted, waving his hand dismissively, “I got it already. Just make sure to bring me back somethin’ when ya do wander back in, a bloke likes to eat too, ya know.”

“Sure.” Allegro chuckled. “I’ll get right on that.”

* * *

Sitting on the empty train, Allegro kept turning over the bloodied worker’s pass. He stared at the picture, at the company name, trying to figure out what a corp worker had been doing in the Block district in the first place. In the background, he could hear the newscast running another update.

“The latest in the developing scandal revolving around Senator Flamel: information that has been released by anonymous sources is now implicating key members of Flamel’s staff as being involved with the East-Vhaterean Republic,” the news anchor said in a dire voice. “If verified, this will undoubtedly result in charges of treason against the Flamel campaign staff, and possibly even Senator Flamel herself.”

Allegro’s phone jingled to the tune of a received message. It was from Short-Out, with the address to the puppetry event. At least now he had a lead to follow up on. He pursed his lips in thought. Somewhere in his gut, there was a sense of caution at the idea of heading out to the place. He needed to make a stop elsewhere before he went on to investigate. Meanwhile, the news continued droning on.

“Should this be confirmed by the ongoing investigation by Union officials, this will mark Senator Flamel and her fellow human collaborators as yet another example of human politicians being found guilty of criminal activity within the Union. As many no doubt remember the events of ten years ago when…”
Allegro stopped in front of a tall, old building of chiselled stone and painted glass. The Aramon Theatre was one of those ancient buildings that had survived the passage of time in a stubborn way. Several hundreds of years old, the pillars were cracked and chipped, and some of the windows had been replaced with plain, normal glass following some distant events causing them to be broken. This was the address that Short-Out had provided him with, although from the looks of the place it hadn’t seen any use since the puppetry event – the banners from a month ago were even still hanging over the doorway, which was locked shut by chain and padlock. A frontal assault wouldn’t work anyway. If there was anything worth hiding inside the place, they’d hardly tell some random guy walking in off the street about it, after all. He’d have to find another way in and do some exploring of his own from there. Before he did, however, he looked inside his jacket to make sure that his tagalong was doing alright.

“You okay in there, Pilly?” he asked, looking at the little pixie-sized bulge in his pocket. It rustled for a moment, before the fairy’s head peeked out to look up at him.

“Pilly-Pilly can-will be okay-kay,” she replied, smiling cheerfully.

“Just let me know if you get tired, okay?” he said. “I know you’re not used to this stuff.”

The pixie nodded, and slipped back into the pocket and out of sight. Allegro took a deep breath in preparation. Something about the whole situation put him on edge, enough so that he’d made the effort to go pick Pilly up as a precaution. He moved on to finding another way inside the theatre.

Stepping around the building, he ducked inside of an alley and followed the wall on the theatre’s side. Jackpot. Near the back of the building there was a service entrance. Though what gave Allegro reason to pause was the fact that the door was already wide open. He approached slowly, stepping gently so as to not make a sound. He poked his head inside the entrance. A series of wooden crates were stacked up inside of the storage space, along with a lone forklift. Nobody was there. Keeping quiet, he continued on inward, until eventually he heard a young voice echo over the boxes. Allegro kept his head down, but moved towards the source of the voice.

“Hey, you find anythin’ tweaked yet?” said the voice.
“Naw, man, just a buncha old dolls and shit,” another voice replied, “nothin’
tweaked.”

“Man, you shoulda grabbed some of them dolls, though.” A third voice joined in.

“Why? You wanna play dolly?” the second speaker chided.

“No, man, naw,” the third voice objected, sounding embarrassed. “Could sell
it. Probably to some kind of collector and shit, yeah? They’d want one, right?”

“Right, yeah,” the first speaker agreed. “That stuff would be well-tweaked.”

“Well-tweaked, man,” the third speaker reaffirmed.

“The hell are you talking about?” Allegro said, stepping out to see the trio. They
were all merrow boys, each probably barely into their adolescent years. They startled at
the sight of him, one of them even falling on his ass.

“Shit, man!” the second merrow yelled, looking around hastily and snatching up
a stray piece of piping. “It’s the Enfers!”

What was it with thugs and pipes? Allegro rolled his eyes.

“Put the damned pipe down,” he said. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Fuck you, Enfer!” The merrow boy swung, or rather flailed, the pipe around. “I
ain’t goin’ to jail!”

“Well, then you definitely put the pipe down, shouldn’t you?” Allegro replied.

“Huh?” The boy blinked, and looked to his friends for support. Neither of them
seemed sure of what to do.

“Because if you don’t,” Allegro explained, cracking his knuckles, “I’ll have to
snap your wrist and then arrest you for threatening an Enforcer, won’t I?”

“Uh…” The merrow twitched nervously.

“Maybe ya should listen to him, man.” The first merrow let out a whine. “I don’t
wanna go to jail.”

“Me neither,” agreed the third, “that’s pretty non-tweaked.”

“Very non-tweaked,” said the first.

“Listen to your buddies. Right now I’m just here to investigate a case, so I don’t
give a shit about you guys.” Allegro shrugged, making sure not to bat an eye while
staring down the teens. “So if you run along, nobody’s gotta worry about anybody
saying or doing anything stupid, you follow?”
“I follow.” The merrow gulped, tossing the pipe on the ground.
“Yeah, man, we follow,” said the third, “well-tweaked, right?”
“Well-tweaked, man,” the first agreed.
“Great.” Allegro gave the boys a cheerful smile, only to glare at them immediately after. “Now get lost.”

Without another word, the trio rushed past him, heading for the exit. Allegro sighed in relief once he was sure they were out of sight. With no other apparent distractions at hand, it was time to explore the theatre. It looked like there’d be a lot of ground to cover.

* * *

The theatre was creepy, that was for sure. Old buildings usually had that air about them, Allegro had come to find from past experiences with the places. He’d heard stories that a lot of memories lived in the woodwork, and the ghosts of past inhabitants made a point of hanging around from time to time. It sounded crazy, but as someone who had been playing cards with a flower fairy the night before, he wasn’t exactly inclined to dismiss those kinds of claims out of hand. Once he was out of the storage area, things seemed a little more… traditional. Where the storage had been cold concrete and beams housing crates, the hallway he now found himself in was made of polished and finely-crafted wood. The lights were out, but there was still enough daylight pouring in from outside to let him see where he was going. At the far end of the hallway was a door, leading further into the theatre. He took a step forward, when a loud crashing noise erupted behind him and caused him to spin on his heels, fist raised to punch… the kid with the pipe, though currently pipeless.

“Hells!” Allegro hissed, glaring at the merrow boy. “Are you trying to get me to beat your ass?”

“Sorry, man, sorry!” the teen said, arms raised to brace against a hit, “it’s just…”

“Just what?” Allegro glared. He didn’t have time for this.

“I thought ya could use some backup, man,” the boy sheepishly said.

Allegro blinked once, hard, wondering if he’d just heard that right.

“You thought what?”
“I was worried!” The merrow cringed, looking around the hallway with a skittish expression. “This place is major creeps, ya know? Seriously non-tweaked.”

“Well,” Allegro said, looking around at the dimly-lit décor, “I’ll agree with you on that much at least.”

“So I didn’t feel right leavin’ ya in here all solo, ya know?”

Allegro stared down the merrow for a good long while. The kid was tall, with long, strong arms like most merrow tended to have. Part of what made them such good swimmers. On the one hand, he really didn’t know what he’d find in this place. On the other hand, that was precisely why having some backup might not be such a bad idea. Allegro sighed, and shrugged.

“Just be ready to run like hell if things go sour,” he said.

“Oh, uh, sure.” The merrow lad nodded eagerly. “Ya can count on me, Enfer.”

“Uh huh.” Allegro turned and started back down the hallway. “I’m sure I can.”

Once he reached the door, he cautiously tapped the handle. He wasn’t sure why he did it. It was just instinct. Something about the whole place put him on edge. The merrow kid hadn’t been wrong when he’d described the place as “creeps.” The handle, thankfully, didn’t leap out and kill him when he touched it, however, and so Allegro opened the door, and stepped out into a wide open room. The lighting was a little darker in this place, but he could still see. Although what he saw wasn’t exactly making him feel comfortable: dozens upon dozens of puppets hanging from the ceiling, each looking surprisingly modern in their designs. There were puppets of every race, aside from elves, and many of them had hairstyles or outfits that resembled the latest trends and fashions.

Allegro frowned and took a step forward, only for another loud noise to startle both him and his tag-along, as a pop song erupted out of nowhere.

“Oh shit!” The merrow lad looked around frantically. “What’s that?”

“It’s just my phone, relax.” Allegro took a deep breath and pulled out his phone. It was Short-Out, according to the caller ID. “Shorts, whatcha got for me? Anything new on the Dreamer?”

“Nothin’ on the Dreamer front, mate,” replied the moglip, “but, I does got some real weirdo-beardo stuff about those crying puppets ya asked me to look inta.”
“Well, I’m surrounded by puppets right now,” Allegro said, looking around the room, “so if any of ‘em start crying I’d definitely want to know what to expect.”

“I’ll bet.” Short-Out snorted. “So here’s what I could find: there’s this old elf folky tale, couple hundred years old, about this point-ear sorcerer called Calamagh.”

“Calamagh?”

“Yeah. Guy wielded some real mystic mojo,” Short-Out said, “but the important bit is this artefact of his.”

“Artefact?” Allegro’s frown deepened. That didn’t sound good in any way, shape or form. Artefacts didn’t require magical energy to run the way that Resonators did. They produced their own, making them a rare and sought-out commodity. Museums paid out large fortunes just to protect the ones that they had on display.

“Yeah.” Short-Out continued. “Accordin’ to my sources in the Dreamtalk, this thing had the power to trap the soul inside a wooden puppet. Calamagh went around usin’ it to punish the enemies of elvenkind. They say folks stuck inside the puppets’re still alive, and cry out. Real creepy campfire tale kinda shit. Sorta like what my old mum told me for bedtime.”

“Your dysfunctional childhood aside, Shorts,” Allegro said, “any idea how anyone could stop something like that?”

“No idea. I’ll keep lookin’ into it,” Short-Out said. “Just figured I’d give ya what I knew so far.”

“Thanks, Shorts,” he replied, “it helps, even if it’s just a little.”

“Keep in touch, Ally.”

Allegro ended the call, pocketing his phone once more and decided to have a look around the room. In particular, he decided to check out the puppets. It was hard to make out any particular details in the dim light, but… there! On the far end of the room, he spotted a trio of puppets that hung separate from the rest. Moving in to inspect them, he noticed their clothes were spattered in some dark substance. In particular, one of the puppets’ arms appeared to be damaged, a chunk missing from it. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the splintered sliver of wood he’d found at the crime scene and held it up to—

“Do you hear that?” the merrow lad asked.

“Hear what?” Allegro replied annoyedly.
“It’s, like, music, man.” The merrow looked around anxiously. “Real non-tweaked, creepy music.”

Allegro paused for a moment, straining his ears. Maybe the merrow just had better hearing than him, since he couldn’t hear… no, there it was. A strange noise. Melodic, but not like any instrument he was familiar with.

“I think I can hear it.”

“Ya think?” the merrow said, rubbing his ears sorely, “man, it’s real loud, though, and— argh…”

Allegro turned in time to see the teen fall to his knees, clutching his head.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked, looking around for wherever the sound might be coming from. Nothing. At the same time, the merrow let out choked, strained attempts to speak, but to no avail.

“What’s wrong?” Allegro took a step closer, only to stop when he saw what was happening. The merrow’s normally glittering skin was turning dull and plain-looking; the scaly texture replaced by one of wood. The boy’s limbs creaked and rattled like they were hollow on the inside, and one by one, Allegro could see each joint become that of a doll’s, starting at the fingers and moving up to the wrists, and the forearm.

Hey,” Allegro called out, uncertain of what to do. “Talk to me, kid. Hey!”

The merrow’s face stiffened into a lifeless, blank expression. The lad’s mouth, now the carved and jointed fixture of a puppet’s, fell agape as the teen crumpled into an immobile heap and started to shrink...

“What the shit…” Allegro breathed sharply, reaching for his phone. His first thought was to call Moore. He pulled it out, flipped it open and brought up Moore’s name on his contact list. He managed to press the call button, only to feel a sharp pain in the back of his head. The world began to spin inward. He dropped his phone, the ground racing towards him before darkness clouded his sight.
X.

“Ugh.” Allegro groaned and reached up the rub the back of his head. He felt something warm and damp that stung like hell to the touch, and didn’t need a doctor to tell him the obvious news that he was bleeding. He tried looking around, needing a moment to let his vision come back into focus. His ears were ringing, and the more clearly he could see and think, the more prominent the pain in his head became. The pain quickly took a backseat, however, when he noticed he wasn’t alone.

A pair of wooden puppets, their dead expressions staring at him, stood on either side with knives pointed at him. Discouraged from moving too much, even if to make himself comfortable, Allegro looked around to try and figure out where he was.

Judging from the lights, and the chairs facing him in the distance, he guessed that he had to be up on the theatre’s main stage. And standing on the edge was a small, lean figure with a hoodie pulled up over its head. It twitched and spasmed in place, as though being zapped by electricity every few moments. In its hands it held a strange instrument made up of keys, strings and a crank, fingers dancing up and down the polished, wooden surface like spiders on a web. The figure’s skin was porcelain pale, but Allegro could see the dyed brunette locks hanging out from under the hood.

“Finally decided to show up, Derwyd?” Allegro said, groaning as moving his jaw only made the headache worse. “No, I guess I should call you Aife, after all, right?”

“Mmonkey, monkey’s talking, it is, it is,” the figure replied, its voice swaying from murmur to loud like the swing of a pendulum, “monkey’s close but not exact.”

Something in the person’s voice didn’t sound right. It had all the makings of a young girl’s voice, yet it was raspy and deep, like the vocal chords were being bent out of place to resemble something distinctly non-female. It sounded, no, felt unnatural. Like it didn’t belong to the throat it was coming out of.

“Monkey?” Allegro asked, wondering if he’d been hit a bit too hard on the head.

“Yes, yes, yes!” The figure tittered as though amused by something, its upper body weaving left to right as if independently of its lower half. “Mongrel, mongrel monkey made up of mangy mongrel beasts. Learned to walk and talk and act and yak and kill. But still definitely monkey. Still filthy, wretched, stinky… stinky-nasty filth.”

Allegro had heard stories like that from his mother growing up. The apparent origin of the human race was that they’d come from apes, while other species like trolls
and dwarves had grown from rocks and hills, the merrow from fish, and the elves from plants and trees.

“That’s nice and all,” Allegro replied, shifting his weight around and keeping one eye on the knife-brandishing puppets, “but you don’t see me calling you a cherry tree to your face, do you, Aife?”

“Ah, the monkey knows.” The hooded figure snorted and let out a keening sound. The puppets guarding Allegro lashed out with tiny swipes, nicking his face. “Knows his past, but doesn’t know his betters. No, no, never know their betters the monkeys don’t. But still only half-wrong, half-right, yes. The Aife is gone, yes, all gone.”

“Gone?”

“Oh, yes, yes, so very yes. So sad. Had to be sacrificed,” the figure said, turning to face Allegro. Its head cocked to and fro with the twitchiness of a clock-hand. “Oh, but she was a frail face, frail and sad and misery, yes. Better snuffed out, make room for better face. Older face. My face, yes…”

“So you are Derwyd after all.” Allegro clenched his jaw. So much for coincidences and copy-cats.

“Derwyd?” The not-Aife figure sneered derisively, only to break out into a cackling mess of throaty noises. “Hack, hem, hah! A stupid face! Little drone, working drone work, in a drone box, little, tiny, small life could never amount, not ever, to anything, no. None of them as worthy a face as me.”

“So if you’re neither Derwyd nor Aife, then you’re…”

The figure pulled back the hood. Allegro cringed at the unpleasantness that was the face leering back at him. What had once been Aife’s young, vibrant and girlish face had been warped into something completely different. A strong, angular jawline edged out her softer one, wrinkles and worry lines criss-crossed her features and her eyes were bloodshot and wild-looking. It almost looked as though Aife’s skin had been pulled across the framework of an old man’s face.

“Calamagh, yes,” the abominable elf said, her – or rather his – lips twisting into an unseemly, thin smile, “as your friend and you, you know the name, you figure it out quick, yes, yes.”
“So what,” Allegro scoffed, “you just had to come back to life to enjoy the latest brand of burgers and cinema, is that it?”

“Monkey makes jokes!” Calamagh’s features bent crooked and his body leaned at a weird angle. The puppets nicked at Allegro’s face again, and he grit his teeth against the sting of metal. “But still a smart monkey like you understands, yes, what is really going on.”

“Well, I am still only a monkey.” Allegro rolled his eyes. “Maybe I need one of you superior tree-people to walk me through it.”

Calamagh hissed like an angry serpent and stormed across the stage towards him, stopping a couple of feet away. The elf’s wild eyes seemed to almost spin around in his skull before focusing on Allegro. The puppets brought their knives dangerously close to his throat, and Allegro had to tense up just to avoid accidentally cutting himself.

“You mock your betters, monkey,” the elf said, his warped voice quivering with barely-contained bile, “but it has been long, so very long, since this face, this me, has had someone to talk to, yes. I suppose I can indulge, yes, indulge the stupid monkey with some talking.”

“I’d have thought with all the abductions you’d have plenty of people to listen to you.” Allegro glanced at the puppets again, remembering the merrow back in the storeroom.

“Only listening isn’t talking, monkey must agree, yes.” Calamagh tittered, his tone taking on a fanatical edge. Allegro grimaced as it reminded him of the politester from the day before. “And so rare, yes, so very rare, to find one who understands this good work, you understand, yes. Already failed twice, but not this time, no. This time there are others. Others who want to see the good work finished, yes, yes.”

Calamagh let out an almost ecstatic sigh at the notion, hugging the stringed instrument close to his chest whilst humming gleefully.

“You mean people who’ll enable your parasitic behaviour.” Allegro glared accusingly at the deranged elf.

“The monkey dared say what?” Calamagh twitched, their face contorting unnaturally as it tried to make Aife’s face resemble a scowl, but only half-succeeded.

“You heard me. You’re a parasite, worming your way into other peoples’ lives.” Allegro tried to ignore the knives still pointed at him, instead focusing all of his ire and
frustrations on the elf in front of him. “You brag about your great work while talking shit about people like Derwyd and Aife, when all you’ve done is steal their lives, all to keep pushing your own failed agenda.”

Calamagh’s face contorted again, twisting as Allegro could hear the bones crack in places as their expression desperately tried to match the elf’s feelings.

“How… you dare—!” The elf gargled and moaned, squeezing his instrument while writhing at his words in a display that almost defied physical sense.

“In the first place, the whole point of reincarnation is for the previous generation to pass down something worthwhile to the next.” Allegro took a deep breath. His voice was shaking. In his head he thought about breakfast earlier that day with Eryn. He thought about Aife, and the old orgo woman’s words. She’d been scared and lost. No idea what was happening to her.

“Instead, all you’re doing is holding people back by crippling them and burying them beneath your centuries-old grudge and inability to move on.” Allegro spat. “You’re a fester. A disease.”

Calamagh’s face twisted, crackled and bent out of shape. His spider-like fingers danced up and down the instrument and the elf writhed and writhed like a frantic tree in the middle of a storm.

“Disgusting, wretched, filthy pig-monkey, I should—” The elf stomped ever closer, bringing his foot up in preparation to stomp on Allegro’s face, only to stop short.

“No.” Calamagh shook his head over and over again like he was trying to hurl the thoughts out of it. “No, no, no, will not allow a mangy mongrel to do that. Not to talk to this face, this face of the elder races, that way. We walked the lands, the forests, the lakes, yes, millennia, we did, before monkeys knew how to smash rocks!”

“And for all of that time, you did about as pathetically as the rest of us ever did.” Allegro spat at the elf’s feet.

“You bore me, monkey. Bore me, tire me, annoy me, yes.” Calamagh’s features bent themselves into a parody of a smile. “Time now, little monkey, time to join the flock.”

Allegro watched as the elf started turning the crank, working the instrument as an eerie noise began to creep out and fill the air. He recognized it as the same sound he’d heard before, back in the room with the puppets, only closer now, more distinct.
He felt a sudden stiffness in his right hand, followed by numbness. Allegro looked
down and saw that it was already turning into that of a puppet’s. The numbness crept up
his arm, reaching his shoulder and stretching down from there. His whole body on the
right side went numb, and Allegro gasped for breath with increased difficulty as one of
his lungs appeared to go rigid within his chest.

He heard Calamagh cackle at the sight, echoing throughout the theatre space,
and Allegro braced himself for the numbness to spread throughout the rest of his
extremities. But nothing happened. The numbness never spread beyond his right side. In
fact, it never made it higher than his shoulder, leaving his head completely intact.
Calamagh’s laughter died.

“But… how?” The elf snarled.

Allegro felt a few pokes coming from the inner pocket on his jacket, and looked
down to see the rosy-cheeked look of determination on Pilly’s face staring back at him
from inside. She nodded assertively, and Allegro felt all the more relieved he’d made
that detour back home before coming to this place.

“Guess this monkey’s not as easy prey as the rest,” he said, forcing himself to
smirk back at the elf.

“No matter, no, no!” Calamagh shrieked. “Will just slice you, yes, cut you into
ribbons, I will.”

Allegro braced himself as the puppets pulled their arms back in preparation to
stab, only for a burst of wind to hurtle straight past him, knocking the puppets aside. He
blinked in confusion, and looked towards where the burst had come from. There stood
Eryn, her arm aglow again, staring down the creature wearing her friend’s body.

“Calamagh!” she called out. “Stop this now!”

“Eryn, what’re you even…?” Allegro wheezed, his one lung working over-time
to keep him going.

“I got the address from Short-Out,” Eryn replied, her eyes never leaving
Calamagh. “You do not belong in this time, Calamagh. This era, that body, neither of
them belongs to you.”

“Recall you, yes, we do, little Aife’s friend, the sympathizer.” Calamagh
sneered, turning to face her with his eyes rolling back in his head. “Was going to purge
the filth, the wretched, before weeding the garden of Ai’Loren, yes, weed it, cleanse it
of those who would side with the filth. Exceptions, though, yes, will be made for you, so repugnant you are.”

Calamagh began playing his strange song once again, though this time it was Eryn who fell to the ground, clutching her head. Allegro watched as whatever enchantment worked by the instrument didn’t appear to be working as well on Eryn, but how long that would hold out he couldn’t say. He turned his attention back to the fairy in his pocket.

“Pilly,” Allegro said, taking a deep breath to fill his one lung, “I need you to use your thorns.”

“Pilly understands-sands.” The fairy nodded and closed her eyes tight in concentration. Allegro watched on as vines covered in thorns spread from his pocket and began to creep over his shoulder, down his arm and wrap around them. More stretched downward, ensnaring his leg as well.

“This guy wants a puppet show,” Allegro said, putting his weight on his good leg and pushing himself off the ground, “we’ll give him one.”

With Pilly supporting his wooden leg, he lunged at Calamagh, throwing his good arm out to smack the instrument from the elf’s hands. The blow connected, sending the strange artefact skidding across the stage towards Eryn. Calamagh whirled about, maddened fury filling his bulging eyes.

“You?” The elf sounded like they might choke on their rage. “You dare still…?”

“I know, right? I’m kinda frustrating like that.” Allegro shrugged. Or rather tried to, instead only shrugging the one shoulder. “By the way, there’s something on your face.”

He threw an awkward punch, but it was enough to knock Calamagh back a few more steps. The elf wailed violently, pulling at his hair.

“Bastard! Wretched, filthy monkey bastard, I’ll—”

“Eryn!” Allegro ignored the tantrum, tackling Calamagh to the ground while glancing her way. “Can you use that thing?”

“I think so…” Eryn breathed harshly. From the looks of her, nothing had been transformed yet. She scrambled and snatched up the instrument, calling out as she did so. “You’ll need to keep him busy!”
“Oh, is that all, then?” Allegro muttered, as Calamagh flailed and tried to bite his good arm. Allegro pulled back, as the elf crawled back to his feet.

“Al-Al,” Pilly warned in a weak voice, “Pilly isn’t sure she can-can keep-keep…”

“It’s okay, Pilly,” Allegro reassured the fairy. “Just a little longer, I promise.”

He strode forward, readying his transformed arm with Pilly’s aid, and threw a hard punch at the elf. There was a rattling, snapping sound of wood breaking, and Calamagh was sent hurtling off the stage and into the seats below. Allegro looked at his right arm, wrecked with fractures and breaks in the hand. He felt really glad that he couldn’t feel that.

“Filthy, disgusting…” Calamagh raved and muttered while flailing on the ground, “unclean, unclean… must cleanse…”

“Are you okay, there?” Allegro called down from the stage. “You’re getting your ass kicked by a guy with a wooden arm, you know.”

“I will not be taken,” Calamagh wailed and kicked like a child throwing a tantrum. “My work… the good work must continue, some way, any way!”

The elf turned and scrambled into a run, though whatever dysfunction made it hard for Aife’s face to match Calamagh’s features was also making it difficult for them to run properly as well.

“Ah crap, why do they always run?” Allegro complained, looking off to the side, “Eryn!”

“I’m still working on it…!” she yelled back, messing with the crank and the strings in an attempt to find the right sounds.

“Well, work faster!” Allegro grit his teeth and climbed down from the stage to give chase.

* * *

Allegro cursed under his breath as he watched Calamagh hobble and wriggle ahead of him. Between his wooden leg and only the one lung, he was going to lose the chase at this rate. Calamagh burst through one of the doors, marked Maintenance, with Allegro continuing his pursuit as best he could.

He made it a few more steps before he suddenly inhaled sharply, gasping for air as his right lung desperately tried to fill with oxygen. At the same time, the sensation
returned to his leg and— pain. Screaming, throttling pain racked up his entire right arm as shattered bone and torn flesh sent pain signals streaking up to his brain. He clenched his teeth hard, attempting to push the pain down while using his regained limbs to chase down Calamagh. With both legs working, it proved far easier, as Allegro cornered the elf next to a heap of dirty curtains and industrial chemicals that he’d surrounded himself with.

“Dead end, Calamagh,” Allegro said, slowly approaching the wild-eyed elf, “no way out now.”

“There’s always an escape, monkey.” Calamagh cackled and pulled out a lighter. “The flesh, see, is but another barrier, yes. This face can cross it with ease.”

“Wait, don’t—” Allegro broke into a run. Calamagh dropped the lighter, and the pile burst into a fiery blaze, spreading rapidly thanks to the chemicals drenching the floor and walls. Allegro grit his teeth against the pain in his arm. He wasn’t going to make it in time. And even then, how was he going to wrestle that lunatic with only one good arm?

“Yes… the fire shall burn the forest, and a new tree shall arise…” the elf raved in a manic voice, “stronger, greater than before… Greater than any—”

The sound of static raced past Allegro’s head, and he saw a balled cluster of vibrant energy rush ahead of him. It struck Calamagh straight in the chest, throwing the maddened elf several feet back and out of the rapidly spreading fire. Allegro span about to see where the blast had come from, and smiled when he was met with the familiar sight of an Enforcer with dyed-blonde hair, pulled back over her pointed ears into a ponytail, and wearing an annoyed frown whilst staring back at him.

“Just once, I’d like it if you got a job that doesn’t drag me into your crazy mess.” Moore holstered her mag-gun, hurrying over to the unconscious Calamagh. “None of your street gangs, or your maniacal blood-vendettas. That’d be nice.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Allegro replied and hastily joined her.

The feeling victory was short-lived, however, as the remaining flames quickly began to spread, flaring out and following the trails of chemicals that the mad elf had spread around. The fire grew rapidly, latching onto the old, wooden architecture. Allegro cursed under his breath and grabbed hold of Calamagh’s arm, with Moore grabbing the other arm as the two hoisted the unconscious maniac up and carried him
out of the room. Around them the flames roared and continued quickly went out of control, fire alarms ringing loudly overhead.

“How’d you even find me?” Allegro said, his eyes watering from the chemical-laced fumes filling the air.

“Your phone,” Moore replied. “It wasn’t hard to trace the call. Although I definitely am gonna get chewed out for ditching my paperwork.”

“Glad you did anyway.” Allegro chuckled, and instantly regretted it as he choked on the smoke. “Just don’t ask me to help with said paperwork.”

“Knowing the way you talk more than work, it’d just take longer anyway.”

“Hey now, that stings.” Allegro shot her an exaggerated look of hurt.

“Truth usually does.”

They burst through the door back into the main audience area, just in time to see the fire stretching overhead and into the balconies. Apparently old wood burned real easy, who knew?

“Allegro!” Eryn called out from the stage, backing away from the fire and towards the backstage exit with Calamagh’s instrument.

“I’m okay,” he called back to her. “Just… did it work?”

“The puppets all reverted back to their previous forms.” Eryn nodded. “They made for the exit as soon as the fire alarms started.”

“Sounds like they’ve got the right idea,” Moore said, nodding to the fire exit across from them.

There was a sudden burst as the fire spread to some of the more flammable parts of the stage. Eryn cried out and threw her arms up to protect her face, dropping the instrument.

“The artefact,” she called out, reaching for it.

“Leave it!” Allegro shook his head. “Just get out of there. One less hold-up from the past dragging us down!”

Eryn took one last look at the artefact, steeling her expression and nodding, before disappearing backstage. All around them, the fire was spreading and growing out of control, closing in on all sides. Allegro and Moore made haste carrying Calamagh towards the exit. In the distance, over the loud ringing of the alarms, Allegro thought he heard the sound of sirens.
XI.

“Ow.” Allegro tensed up while the medic wrapped up his arm with bandages and regenerative gels. He’d made it out of the building, and now sat beside Moore in an ambulance a dozen feet away while the fire fighters tried to save what was left of the theatre. The whole place was crawling with Enforcers, as Allegro and Moore watched them trying to round up all the people who had escaped from Calamagh’s spell. A number of them had injuries brought on by their long stint as puppets, while others had inhaled a bit too much smoke.

The medic frowned as she finished her work, shaking her head.

“You are incredibly lucky,” she said. “This type of injury, you could have easily ruined your arm for life.”

“Well, that’s good.” Allegro smiled. “I can’t exactly afford to get augmented on a maintenance wage.”

Moore shot him a disapproving look, “Augmentation doesn’t cover for stupid stunts like yours anyway.”

“They’re not stupid. They’re spontaneous.”

“Like how you were nearly spontaneous combusted until I showed up?”

“Put it on my tab.”

“You don’t have a tab.”

“Then let me buy you lunch for compensation.” Allegro grinned. “Token of my appreciation and all that.”

“Still not happening.” Moore rolled her eyes.

Allegro perked up as he saw Eryn slip out of the crowd of survivors and Enforcers and head towards them.

“Glad you made it out in one piece,” he said before grinning and looking at his wrapped up arm, “unlike me, that is.”

Eryn sighed, “I’m just glad that I could revert the spell before you smashed it up even worse,” she said.

“I’m glad you showed up, period,” Allegro said. “Almost got peeled like an apple.”

“And right after that you run off to try and get immolated,” Moore interjected with a frown.
“All part of the job.” He shrugged.
“I’d have a better time defending my association with you if your so-called job didn’t end up getting a historic building burned down, you know,” Moore replied.
“Speaking of which,” Allegro said, “hope you don’t get into too much trouble over this.”
“Well,” Moore replied, crossing her arms while frowning, “before you called I managed to poke a few hives over at ENI Corp and convinced the Chief to put some pressure on them over a potential lawsuit involving a DNER breach. When that happened, this whole thing suddenly became a high-priority case. So they’ll probably overlook my running ahead, at least to some degree.”
“Go figure.” Allegro sighed. “So it’s clean-up and cover-up, is what you’re saying?”
“ENI Corp’s story is that a slip-up during maintenance caused a glitch in their systems and took Derwyd off the DNER list.” Moore replied.
“A slip-up? Really?” Allegro said. “They expect that to fly?”
“It’s what’s going on the newscast.” Moore shrugged, looking none too happy about it herself. “As far as the general public’s concerned, that’ll be all they need to know.”
“What about him? Or her. Calamagh, that is.” Allegro looked at Eryn, and then back to Moore. “What happens to them?”
“They’ll be taking him into custody, and giving him treatment. Hopefully we’ll be able to subdue his presence.”
“So you think they might be able to restore Aife?” Eryn asked, sounding hopeful.
“It’s possible, but hard to say.” Moore shook her head, offering a sympathetic look before taking a deep breath. “Anyway, I’ve got about several dozen of victim reports to go over, so I’ll keep in touch with you later. You can tell me the whole thing.”
As Moore stepped aside and walked over to one of the clusters of survivors, Eryn looked at Allegro quizzically.
“You never mentioned that she was an elf,” she said.
―I didn’t think I had to.‖ Allegro shrugged. “She’s a friend, and that’s what counts.”

“The way you talk about elves,” Eryn said, hesitating for a moment, “it gave me the impression you wouldn’t call one of us a friend.”

Allegro took a deep breath, and leaned back against the ambulance stretcher. “Sorry.” Eryn said after a long pause, waiting for the medic to move onto her other patients before she continued. “I left because I suspected that this might have had something to do with Calamagh and my peoples’ history after all.”

“And you couldn’t tell me before I went in and nearly got turned into a puppet-slash-carving ornament?”

“I couldn’t be sure.” Eryn frowned guiltily, “I wanted to be sure, so I used my family’s resources to do some digging into the reincarnation procedures after you brought up Derwyd and the DNER.”

“Your family’s resources, huh?” Allegro sighed. “I think that’s the first time you’ve even mentioned them in passing.”

“I don’t like to talk about them. I still don’t…”

“But?”

“But you deserve to know at least this much,” Eryn said, her expression hardening. “They’re one of the higher-ranked families in the megacorps. I won’t say which one, but… they would definitely have known something about Calamagh. I just need to find how much they knew.”

Allegro sat there quietly, taking it all in.

“I imagine that me hiding this from you doesn’t really help with your distrust of elves.” Eryn sighed.

“Life’s more complicated than hating people just because of what they were born as,” Allegro finally said, staring out at the streets. “Tell me, who do you think runs the Union?”

“Us, for the most part. The elves, that is.” Eryn paused, frowning. “People like my family.”

“That’s where my grudge is at, the ones in charge.” Allegro shrugged. “They just happen to be mostly elves, that’s all.”
“Grudges are a dangerous thing to carry. I think Calamagh proved that to me more than anything today.” Eryn looked at him intently. “You called him a disease.”

“You heard all that, huh?” Allegro shifted a little, feeling awkward at the reminder.

“I don’t think you were entirely wrong,” Eryn said with a solemn look. “There’s a sickness in my people, and it lies in our ability to inherit our past lives. We receive everything from the people we were before: memories, ideas, inspiration.”

She paused, looking troubled, but determined nonetheless.

“But we also receive their grudges, their prejudices.” She sighed. “Perhaps that’s why we waged those long, long wars of ours.”

“You don’t seem like that, at least,” Allegro said, “I’d imagine that by now you’ve had plenty of time to receive and be influenced by whoever you used to be in a past life. So why don’t you hold any grudges?”

Eryn chuckled at that, looking ruefully out at the tall buildings across the streets.

“Whoever said that I don’t?” she said. “Perhaps it’s just that my grudge is against more than mere people.”

Allegro opened his mouth to speak, before the sound of a high-pitched, squeaky yawn drew his attention back to his jacket pocket.

“Is your little friend alright?” Eryn asked, looking down there too.

“You can see her?” Allegro blinked.

“It’s possible for those with magic to see spirits,” Eryn said, smiling as she added, “if we’re lucky.”

Allegro pulled his jacket open to look at the flower fairy, who rubbed her eyes.

“Pilly is sleepy-peeps,” the fairy complained.

“I need to get her home soon,” Allegro explained, “if she’s away from her flower for too long, well…”

He reached into his jacket and petted the fairy gently on the head.

“Sorry, Pilly,” he said softly, “that was a lot rougher than I was expecting it to be.”

“Pilly help-helped?” the fairy murmured tiredly

“Yeah, Pilly help-helped.” He nodded, looking up at Eryn. “So… I guess this means the job’s done?”
“I suppose it does,” Eryn said.
“I’m hoping that payment you promised is the real deal,” Allegro teased,
“especially now that I know you’re part of some big-wig family.”
“Oh, of course.” Eryn grinned. “Maybe come see me at Rogg’s tomorrow? I
should have the money then.”
“Sure.” Allegro smiled. “And, well, maybe we could make it a regular thing.
Breakfast that is.”
Eryn blinked, before her expression softened. She nodded, smiling back at him.
“I’d like that,” she said.

The two sat there like that for a while longer. In the distance, between the
narrow gaps of the crowded high-rises, Allegro could see the cloudy skies dyed golden.
The sun was setting. Tomorrow would be another day and, for once, he didn’t feel like
it would be so hard to face the next one. Perhaps it would even be better. In the end,
trying to do lighten up the next day was all anyone could do in the Blocks. If nothing
else, he’d do that much: try and make the next day better.
On Writing *Fixing For Better Days*

I. Introduction

When writing a story, one never can be absolutely certain of where it will go. You start with an idea, or more appropriately you start with too many ideas and through the process of elimination you begin to weed out the ones that work from the ones that do not, and marry off the successes until a cohesive seed of an idea is left standing. At which point you either nurture it to fruition and watch it grow, or botch the entire process and find yourself back at square one. That is simply the nature of writing for most, unless they are among those strange and blessed few to whom writing comes as naturally as breathing. Fortunately, this author is not counted among those happy few – the reason for this being a fortuitous thing being largely attributed to my fondness of changing and developing stories, and of being surprised. Not to be taken with a disdain for consistency or coherency in writing, this fondness more pertains to the experimental nature that writing can sometimes provide. Sitting in a workshop, or discussing ideas or theories amongst fellow lovers of literature and fiction, these all contribute to an ever-growing, ever-changing wellspring of ideas that continuously influence and inform one another. And it is this interplay that leads to the development or growth of pre-existing ideas as well.

Which brings us to the story of *Fixing For Better Days*. As both reader and writer, I will confess to having spent the greater majority of my time immersed in works almost purely dedicated to fantasy. I have read books about faeries, elves, trolls, monsters and men, sword and sorcery. This ranged anywhere from books, to films and for the greater majority of my time, gaming. It wasn’t until my late teens that I began to develop a growing appreciation for more modern forms of fiction, in particular science-fiction, with the more niche genre of cyberpunk making its way into my well of knowledge and ideas sometime around that time as well. And with its addition, the ideas and concepts that I was willing to entertain were expanded upon, often times intermingling. Amongst my stories of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth I now had *Blade Runner* (1982), with its dark skies and rain-soaked streets contrasted against neon lights. And eventually I discovered other inspirations, ones that took the melding of ideas even further: Ragnar Tornquist’s *The Longest Journey* series, and the *Shadowrun* tabletop game (1989) alike, introduced the interaction of fantasy and cyberpunk, which served as
being among the chief inspirations for the story in the first place. But before the story can be properly addressed, the two elements comprising its central themes need to be touched on first, starting with cyberpunk itself.
II. Merging Worlds of Magic and Machine: The World of Cyberpunk

Gaining prevalence in the 80s, the cyberpunk genre came about as a form of counterculture in the wake of the information age. Terence Whalen discusses this extensively, where he points towards the idealistic beliefs surrounding the information age, and the possibilities that this might offer. He cites various sources, painting a positive future vision where information becomes the new form of power and currency within the world, and opens the door up to new freedoms (75-76), whilst also pointing out that the cyberpunk genre acted as a counter to this, utilizing post-modernism and “non-progressive politics” (75) to cite a darker possible future that could stem from this revolutionary new age. In cyberpunk, this power granted to information does create a new social hierarchy, but one that eventually becomes exploited and controlled by the powerful. A new social class, a knowledge class, effectively gains governance and holds power over both common civilian and politician alike. (77)

It was a big hit. The themes of disillusionment and the questioning of one’s on reality and future played perfectly to the uncertain time that the 80s embodied in the wake of the technological revolution. Indeed, in Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative Claire Sponsler’s description of the genre, as per the writing of author William Gibson, is almost the exact image of fear for the future that was deeply embedded in the period, describing a world where “multinational corporations control global economies, urban blight has devoured the country-side, crime and violence are inescapable events of urban life, and technology has shaped new modes of consciousness and behaviour” (626). However, as time went on and it became evident that the immediate future of the 90s would not be the wasteland that cyberpunk’s counterculture predicted, much of its sway began to wane. In particular to this waning, Neil Easterbrook writes of it in The Arc of Our Destruction, claiming that “cyberpunk is dead” and cites the then-current situation and development of the 90s as evidence of its apparent irrelevance. (378-380). Perhaps in a bitter twist of irony, however, the reasons that he lists for cyberpunk’s lack of bite or relevance in the 90s make a huge comeback following the turn of the millennia, and the past decade alone: ideological influence under technology as was predicted in cyberpunk is a burgeoning, if not already-existing, reality in the modern age where social media informs every individual’s political, religious and societal disposition, and there is ever-lessening accountability for the
misuse of the currency that is information, whether it be abuse at the hands of the individual, or by corporations that control the media. In many ways, the cyberpunk genre never died, but merely lay dormant until it regained relevance as a counterculture once again.

**The World of Fantasy**

In many ways, in fact, the dismissal of cyberpunk is not unlike the initial disparagement that the fantasy genre underwent for many years until breaking into the mainstream, where it is now almost a staple of fiction. As mentioned before, the world of fantasy played a large part in my formulating years in terms of creative content. In fact, the vast majority of my creative writing tends to centre around fantasy as a genre with its various themes, playing around with philosophical dilemmas in physical form. Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* books being a prime example of the kind of stories that attracted my attention best: sardonic, often satirical takes on the mundane and modern but viewed through the fantastical lens. On the other side of that is Andrzej Sapkowski’s *Witcher* books which take a similarly satirical approach to things, but instead of viewing the modern through a fantastical lens for the satire, Sapkowski’s work rather looks at the fantastical through the mundane lense, depicting a world where common folk do not awe in wonder at the mystical and magical beings of their world, but are rather forced to tolerate them as they upend their daily lives. In both works, monsters and fairy tales are part of the daily grind for people, which informs much of the satire that results from this.

**World-Building and Striking a Balance**

With these two genres in hand, it was the goal of this story to marry the two and create something that could be considered interesting and worth exploring. The key to this was where to set the stage of the story. While *The Longest Journey* and *Shadowrun* series both boast having a mixture of magic and cyberpunk in them, both of those stories suffer from a singular flaw that marks every occasion of magic-infused modernity that I have encountered thusfar: they all happen on our Earth. Though *The Longest Journey* features two worlds, one of magic and one of science, called Arcadia and Stark respectively, the problem at hand is that the world of Stark is in reality our world,
having undergone a cyberpunk development. The name Stark, rather, merely accounts for our dimension’s name, rather than any unique location. Meanwhile, Shadowrun’s narrative is that of an alternative history to our world, wherein magic returns alongside of the cyberpunk upheaval to create a dizzying mixture of magic and technological anarchy. In both cases, we never leave the familiarity of our own modern world. Other stories do similar, be it the Harry Potter or Percy Jackson novels, a variety of comic books, and television shows involving vampires, werewolves and other assorted monsters, none of these amount to anything more than a hidden world, part of our own but merely kept from public awareness.

The intent, then, was this: to create a fleshed out world of fantasy not unlike Tolkien’s Middle Earth, Pratchett’s Discworld, or Sapkowski’s Northern Kingdoms, where the whole setting is saturated with myth, fairy tale and magic as much an ordinary and consistent part of a typical fantasy story as any other, but then to apply the passage of time, of cultural and scientific growth to that world. The aforementioned three worlds all have the common theme of being set in worlds that resemble a medieval time period, so the matter at hand was to view the history of a medieval fantasy world in the same ways as our own history developed from that period: religious war, scientific and philosophical endeavour, industrial development, and too many wars to speak of, and within a few hundred years even a fantastical realm may find itself sporting the first steam engine, the first pistols, the first telegram.

In many ways, that world began to resemble that of the one featured in the 2001 game Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura, which told a similar story of a fantasy world on the cusp of industrial revolution. But in order for the setting to reach that of cyberpunk things had to progress further still, until it began to face the same problems that modern society faces with overpopulation, pollution, media frenzies and more, only with that same countercultural spin applied to it. The end result is the world that appears in Fixing For Better Days: a world where technology has exhausted the limits of magic, where entire populations are hoarded into colossal apartment complexes meant to take care of their every need, but failing to give them purpose or satisfaction in life, where racial biases and historic grudges frame the interactions at hand between not only fellow humans, but other, fantastical races as well.
III. Writing the Story: Mixing in the Themes

Something that Stanley Schmidt has talked about is the value of having a good idea for a story; in fact his article on the topic is named “Good Writing Is Not Enough”. Specifically, that it isn’t just enough to be able to put words on paper in the right order, but also that those words need to have a point to them, a driving concept or theme that carries throughout the story as a whole. A concrete idea is vital to a story, because it dictates everything from its atmosphere, to its characters, and its conflict and resolution. Furthermore, as Schmidt makes a point of mentioning, if that idea pertains to science fiction then it becomes necessary for that story’s elements to harbour some level of consistency and sense with relation to actual science. It needn’t be a wholly faithful scientific idea, but at the very least one that is plausible in some sense of the setting where it takes place. In tandem with this there is Tolkien with similar advice, only from the fantastical side of the debate. In his article “On Fairy Stories”, Tolkien writes about the importance of rules within even a world of magic, of a consistent order, even when dealing with something as chaotic and incomprehensible as magical forces. This is where the creation of a cyberpunk fantasy world becomes both exhaustive and also enthralling, as both fantasy and science-fiction both ask the same thing of the author, regardless of their differing reliance on scientific reality: make it make sense to the reader. If the reader cannot read a story and find themselves acknowledging the possibility of what appears on the page, whether through suspension of disbelief, the object being consistent with what the series has already shown, or merely being scientifically sound, then that story is in trouble.

The reason why this becomes an exhausting effort is because whilst normally one only has to rationalize one or the other – the science of science-fiction, and the magic of fantasy – when married to one another as a cyberpunk fantasy story is, the writer now must create rules that make sense for both the science and the magic, whilst explaining with twice the amount of effort and fidelity to the reader why these things are consistent within the setting. The danger here is that of falling into the trap of dumping information and exposition on the reader, effectively boring them to death when there is a story that needs telling. The only solution here is to sharpen those rules and make them capable of interacting with one another, and then to speak of them with
authority. If the story sounds confident of its own assertions, the reader will ultimately follow – provided that the assertions continue to make sense.
IV. Characterization: Crafting Convincing Figures

When writing about cyberpunk, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay talks a lot about some of the elements that appear all too often in cyberpunk. Ranging from the self-destructive, yet surprisingly gifted protagonist, to the antagonist featured almost entirely by a domineering, corrupt government or corporate entity, or even the depictions of cities and their inhabitants themselves, Ronay makes a point that many of these depictions are effectively old hat (268-269). They are repetitive, but in turn they are largely necessary because they make up the underpinnings of the cyberpunk setting itself. The matter at hand, then, was to try and toe that line between creating characters that fit into the cyberpunk genre, whilst also providing them with more variety and possible depth of personality. This would in turn be counter-balanced against the advice of those such as James Patrick Kelly, who encourages the creation of characters who follow their own motivations and ideals (38-41). It is not enough to merely have a hero who goes forth to save the day because it is the heroic thing to do, or to have some moustache-twirling villain, or cardboard cut-outs for the side characters – the world needs to live and breathe with its own life, its own biases and conflicts of interest. And most importantly, the story needs its characters to have their own voices. Isaac Asimov discourages against writing characters who merely “speak like a book” (33) when they should be speaking in a matter that fits where they live and breathe and thrive (35). This encouragement to write characters who speak in a natural fashion is similarly echoed by Stephen King, further emphasizing the importance that having dialogue that sounds natural (180-182), which leads the way to characters that appear as though they could actually exist in some form or fashion.

In this regard, the addition of the fantasy elements to the story play a large part in creating that variety: in a world where humans are not the only sentient race, cultures and dialects and social attitudes all come into play, which plays into influencing another aspect of cyberpunk’s atmosphere, according to Jane Chi Hyun Park: the anxiety in the wake of losing identity markers (61). Because of the homogenous nature of human suffering and misery in cyberpunk, and the oversaturating of media across all cultures, individuals begin to lose their identities on a cultural level. Add to this the integration of technology replacing parts of the human body and even the individuality of the flesh becomes trivialized. This aspect of lacking cultural identity is also picked up on by
Jillana Enteen, though it is painted in a more negative light as criticism of the genre’s apparent lack of multiculturalism (262-264). Enteen’s interpretation may, however, come from a point of failure to understand the anxiety that Park describes, and the reasons behind it as part of the aforementioned loss of flesh and culture in the information age.

Both interpretations, however, find common ground within the story, as something akin to a subtle culture war plays out in the background, between the elves and humanity: the former already victims of their own cultural identity being degraded and subverted, with elves in a position of power subsequently using humanity’s own resources against them in an act of revenge. Humanity, despite being the architect of the cyberpunk era of their world, benefits least from it, instead being labelled the go-to scapegoat amongst all the other races – who paradoxically continue to make use of and benefit from humanity’s contributions all the same.

Characters: The Good, the Bad and the Punk

One of the things that Stephen King talks about in relation to creating characters with a modicum of depth is the aspect of them developing as the story progresses (190), with their amassed experiences resulting in a new outlook or perspective for those characters. While it is often common for writers to make use of this with the protagonist, in this regard the development is subverted to a certain degree with the character of Allegro. In Allegro’s case, he does not actually undergo any major changes in his outlook and perspective throughout the course of the story. This is because, as the earlier chapters show and explain, Allegro has already undergone something of a drastic change in his own life: from a questioning and curious teenager, to one feeling betrayed and inevitably imprisoned at a young age by a society that he dared to call out, he is the product of the society and circumstances that lead to the character depicted in the story.

The catch, however, is that we do not get to see the full depth of Allegro’s motivations and actual opinions until the very end: throughout the story he seems to indicate that he has a level of disdain for elves, until it becomes readily apparent that much of his actual disdain comes for figures of authority: the two Enforcers, Phelps and Linton, are not elves, and yet he shows open disdain for them because of their arrogance, whereas he is on amicable terms of a former Enforcer, the dwarf Paulkin. He
even considers the elf, Moore, his friend, despite her being the Enforcer responsible for his going to jail. His anger towards the antagonist, Calamagh, then is ultimately about the elf’s control and victimization of Aife; an anger that can then be seen back with Aife’s uncle, a drug addict who relies solely on the welfare system in place to sustain and enable his lifestyle through inactivity. Allegro’s development, then, does not come from an apparent change in his ideals, but rather the slow revelation of the actual truth and reality of those ideals when faced with an unjust world, which in turn is part of what drives his actions as a Fixer in the first place. His job combines elements of both playing detective as well as general problem-solver, where the role of a Fixer is, as the name implies, to fix the things that are broken in the Hexablocks, whether it be getting the power back online, or fixing a broken home. While these are actions that, on their face, appear simple or well within the bounds of the law, in the wake of gangs, monsters and a corrupt, uncaring government, the tendency for these jobs to turn violent – or, as is the case in Allegro’s story, burning buildings – becomes rather frequent.

In James N. Frey’s explanation of the detective character as being the modern mythic hero (3-5), the detective is the one who arrives to help those suffering from the woes of an uncaring society, where law and government has failed to protect them (7-9). As a Fixer, Allegro’s job entails doing just that and, being part of a world that is both modernized and fantastical at the same time, he exists as an almost amalgam of that mythic hero, shown through the jaded lens of the cyberpunk genre. Contrast this against the character of Eryn, who does see some measure of change to her character, however subtle that it is. Born to a wealthy, noble family of elves who are part of the governing body of megacorporations that control the Union with their influence, it is easy to see how Eryn may have been sheltered from many of the hardships that the rest of the city’s population faces in the Hexablocks. However, despite her being sheltered, she is not wholly ignorant, nor is she naïve: Eryn understands that there is something fundamentally wrong with the society that they live in, and although initially reserved and reluctant to trust others with her secret, she finds an ally in Allegro, enough so to reveal her ties to the megacorporations to him.

Frey also talks about the various elements of characterization in utilizing the elements of the traditional fantasy story in a detective story (79-82), which results in a strange amalgam of themes crossing over when one considers the different elements.
From the flower fairy, Pilly, serving as Allegro’s mystical ally in the very literal sense, Short-Out’s turrets playing the role of a strange and bizarre guardian to an underground realm, and to the more noir, detective-like interaction between Allegro and the stern, gruff veteran cop in Paulkin, the merger of fantasy and cyberpunk allows the different themes to not only coexist, but to play off of one another to create even greater varieties.
V. Conclusion: Final Thoughts, Ending the Story and the Future

It would be a lie to say that there was not more that could have been said in Allegro’s story. When creating characters with motivations and backstories, it becomes a natural inclination for a writer to look beyond the story that is on the paper and towards what could be. Ending a story becomes one of the harder things to do in that regard, finding that fine balance between being too abrupt or dragging on for too long because of things left unsaid. For that matter, the city that Allegro lives in, and the world itself, is so much bigger than something that can be merely fitted into thirty-thousand words of prose. There are questions that demand answers, ideas that need to be explored, and in a city as huge as Allegro’s, the story barely even scratches the surface of the people and places there – let alone their own stories. Addicts, criminals, businessmen, everyday people looking to make an honest living, all have a tale to tell in a world like that. Some of them might be magical, involving the erosion crisis and the efforts of the various magi attempting to deal with it, while others might be monstrous, lurking in the dark alleys and sewers in a world covered in neon lights and cameras, making it so that creatures who once ruled the night have nowhere left to turn. These are but some of the stories that could have easily taken place during Allegro’s two-day job in *Fixing For Better Days*, and it is only natural to want to see them appear someday. In order for that to happen, at least, a story needs to be written, ideas weeded out, married to one another, and for the writer to keep trying to grow that seed of an idea into something worthwhile.
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