



# Plaguewalkers

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## ONE: THE FRUIT

"It was only an apple!" Tolimo protested, as the guards dragged him towards his death.

Neither of the leather clad men even bothered to look at him. They had heard too many protests from criminals before, and bristled with metal studs, cudgels, and hostility. They hauled him onwards, passing pipework and grills that hissed steam like angry snakes.

It had only been a few hours since that city watchman had caught him, but that was all it took for the Morbetzia's wheels of justice to turn. Some over-rich person's idea of justice, anyway. Street children like Tolimo couldn't afford not to steal – he and his friends would starve if they didn't.

This was the consequence of daring to live. He had no allies here in this timber tower set with cold metal. No one to speak up for him. He had to try anyway.

"Please!" Tolimo gasped, turning his face to his captors, doing his best to look like someone deserving of mercy – but the plea, like all his others, fell on deaf ears. If he hadn't dropped his talisman when they caught him - a little wood block cut with an unreadable prayer in the language of the old religion - he would be clutching it hoping its words meant something. Not that they would have let him keep it.

They hadn't left him with anything, not his coin purse - that had likely gone to some greedy guard's pocket - nor his tools of the thieving trade. Those were probably destined for the incinerator, which was a kinder fate than he was going to get. They had even relieved him of his shoes, leaving his bare feet to clatter on the metal floor as he was dragged along in his dirty, stinking street urchin's clothes.

Where did they think he was going to run? The Spire of Justice stood four storeys above everything around it, and the guards had pulled Tolimo up almost all of its many steps. He had stopped fighting long before they reached this floor. The final floor.

A part of him stupidly wished that the other orphans could be here with him. They had been Tolimo adoptive family, and the only people that seemed ever to truly care for him since the fire took his parents. Tolimo, Lybella, Orso and Pellita had kept each other alive on the streets, but even if any of them had seen him get pinched, they couldn't help him now. It was best they were not here, that they couldn't see what was about to happen to him. Maybe one of them would at least find his prayer block, and get better luck out of it than Tolimo had.

A ratling suddenly scuttled out of a shadow and through the feet of one of the guards, the greyish-blue thing squeaking as it fled. The scaly rodent-like creatures were common in the city. They were also normally killed on sight, but the guards were more interested in hauling Tolimo on. One of them swore at the vermin as they turned the corner. Nothing out of the ordinary – just dragging a child to their death.

The last corridor ended with a round metal chamber, its studded walls thick, heavy and embedded with glass that looked just as dense. The whole place looked like a team of people with hammers couldn't put a dent in it with a week to work.

Tolimo was pulled inside, through a door covered in wheels and bolts, any one of which looked like it could seal the place on its own. Not a breath would escape the chamber once it was shut – and Tolimo knew that was for good reason.

His shackles were chained to a well-used ring on the floor at the centre of a metal circle. The guards then locked him in place with a heavy padlock, leaving Tolimo slightly hunched over and pulling on his bonds in terror. Many people had stood there before. The scars in the metal ring showed how they too had struggled fruitlessly to escape. Tolimo would still have fought despite that, but he had already used up much of his strength. Years picking pockets on the street had left him wiry and tough, but thin, and twelve-year olds were no match for well-fed city watch.

Without the guards holding him up, Tolimo felt like his quivering legs might buckle under him at any moment. Though their grip on his arms was hard enough to leave bruises, Tolimo dreaded them leaving. He knew what came when they did.

As with his pleas, his wishes did nothing to stop the soldiers from abandoning him to the mercies of the chamber, and those operating it. Tolimo strained on his chains again, but could not follow.

The men hurried from the room, their fear obvious from the way they stayed away from any surface, taking great care to touch nothing until they had fled out the heavy chamber door. A moment later, that door clanged shut behind them and Tolimo heard the sound of heavy bolts being thrown. He was sealed into his fate.

He could only stand and shake, waiting for the worst to happen. Murmurs came to his ears from somewhere outside the chamber, and Tolimo strained his eyes looking through the distorting windows, searching for any kind of hope.

There were watchers beyond the glass, their faces and outlines slightly blurred. As best as Tolimo could make out, they were all dressed in finery, silks, lace, gold chains and jewellery draped over bodies that had barely done a day's work in their lives. None of that mattered though. All that was important was that these people, nobles of the fine city of Morbetzia, were Tolimo's only slim chance of survival.

Each of them wore a different kind of mask – birds, cats, grinning fools and weird mystical beings were all represented in those twisted, frozen faces. There was no pity on them, but Tolimo had to hope that there might be some underneath, however unlikely that might be.

They all watched with hidden eyes as two of their number approached right up to the chamber's glass. Tolimo's heart pounded harder as he saw that one of them wore not a mask, but a black, featureless hood. He knew what job that man had. He focused on the other, fighting off a building, crippling terror.

Tolimo knew that other man too, not by recognising the fat body or the curtains of grey-black greasy hair that spilled down the sides of his mask, but by the mask itself. It was a simple thing in comparison to the ornate pieces most of the others wore - a blank and featureless face half in black and half in white, the dividing line down the centre a pattern in gold. There was only one person allowed to wear such a mask, as a mark of their office.

The city's voice in matters of justice. The Authority of Morbetzia.

His officious voice came through slightly muffled through the thick glass, but Tolimo's attention was so focused that he heard every word clearly.

"You have been found guilty of the crime of thievery," the Authority's awful pronouncement began, "The victim, one upstanding Citizen Chesio was this very morning deprived of his property..."

"An apple!" Tolimo yelled at the glass. The Authority ignored him and continued,

"And did destroy said property before it could be recovered by the lawful justice officers of the city of Morbetzia."

"I ate it!"

"And did wilfully admit to said destruction before witnesses, including this very Authority. As per city ordinance seven hundred and thirteen, your life is now forfeit, and will be given in service to its people. Sentence will be carried out in this chamber at the operator's earliest convenience."

Tolimo's fate was pronounced with almost lazy boredom, as though the Authority had given the same instruction uncounted times before. Likely he had.

"No!" Tolimo yelled, feeling his eyes start to sting with tears of horror and rage at the injustice. He would have beaten his fists on the glass if he could reach it, but he could only clank pointlessly with his shackles as the Authority gave a small gesture to the man at his side. The meaning was clear – proceed.

Immediately, the hooded man put burly hands to a large crank set into the external chamber wall. He hauled the wheel round to the awful sound of pressure escaping. It was coming for Tolimo, writhing under the floor through the pipes of the chamber, ready to take his last heartbeats.

The Plague. Capital 'P' plague, no other name necessary. In Morbetzia, it was how most died, either in its cramped, twisting streets - or if you were caught doing something you shouldn't, in chambers like this.

Years ago, it had come to the city, coiling out of its underbelly. Soon after the people had abandoned the under city to the Plague, the ratlings and whatever other vermin stalked the pestilence filled darkness.

Now the whole city was sick, in its streets and in its minds. It had been quarantined off from the world for decades, and had festered. None of that made any difference to Tolimo now. He was going to die in this chamber, as almost everyone that entered it did.

With a pang that cut through his terror, Tolimo realised that he was never going to see the others again. Orso's stupid laugh. Lybella's sensible practicality. Pellita and her off-key singing. They were all lost to him.

Terror replaced those regrets as tendrils of Plague began to wisp out of the chamber's grills, luminous green and hungry for a new victim. The stuff wanted him, like it was a predator seeking prey. A vile magic suffused it, and just the sight was enough to make Tolimo's skin crawl. The

slightest touch would be enough to end him, and he knew that those falling into the Plague's clutches never ended well.

He pulled on his bonds so hard that he thought his arms might pop off. The metal bit into his wrists, cutting the flesh and drawing blood. Then, just as the pain was getting too much, Tolimo's grip slipped, and he fell backwards, crashing into the metal floor.

The sting of it didn't stop him from continuing to fight but, of course, none of it was any use. The Plague would find him wherever he was in the chamber, chained down or no. Its tendrils coiled up at him, clutching and hungry. Tolimo pulled back until he reached the limits of his shackles, but still the green horror inched towards him. The blurred faces of the nobles stared in at him through the glass, inhuman, uncaring.

He bent backwards, stretching everything he could for another second away from the Plague, but the cloud reached him all the same, swirling first around his legs, teasing its way up his torso, until finally its fingers found his face. Tolimo screamed and shut his eyes.

This was it, the last moment before madness and fever descended on him. He could taste the stuff in his mouth. It tasted like despair and nightmares, if such things had a flavour, and Tolimo was sure he had taken his last breath. A second or two more would confirm it.

Would he be covered in boils when he finally looked? Blood? Oozing pustules? The Plague affected people differently, though it always killed in the end. Unable to postpone his fate, Tolimo opened tear filled eyes.

His hand looked just as it always had, with dirt and grime pasted over his olive skin. Tolimo didn't dare to move – not even to breathe, fearing deadly coughing, or something worse. He couldn't hold it forever though, and lack of air forced him to take in another Plague poisoned lungful.

Seconds ticked by, and still nothing afflicted him.

No wretched up bile. No decaying nails. No rot setting in anywhere, as far as he could tell. He stood up, and took more experimental breaths, and despite the roiling green vileness around him, each still tasted sweet.

Tolimo couldn't believe it. He was going to live! But, that meant...

"Pump it out and make the boy ready!" the Authority ordered, and surprised guards shuffled to obey. The hooded man turned the Plague crank all the way back round, and with another clank of machinery, the tendrils of Plague began to retreat, still trying to clutch at Tolimo as they were sucked away, back into the pipes until they were used on some other poor person.

He couldn't speak. He felt almost as though he should be thanking these people for his life, though they had done nothing to save him and everything to try and murder him. Tolimo's mouth worked up and down, but the only word it choked out was a slow, dumb sounding,

"What?"

No expression could be seen through the Authority's black and white mask, but Tolimo could have sworn he was grinning evilly as he stalked right up to the glass and told his prisoner,

"You're lucky - you have immunity, boy. And so, by city ordinance seven hundred and thirteen, subsection A, your life is the property of Morbetzia. You're a Plagewalker now. Take him away!"

That last was yelled to his minion, still at the chamber's controls. The hooded man pulled a lever, and the metal disc under Tolimo's feet instantly fell away.

Tolimo fell with it, his chains pulling him down, plunging him into darkness.

## **TWO: RULE**

They burned Tolimo's clothes, and that was just for starters.

After the grubby street things had been taken away by people in the long-beaked bird masks of doctors, Tolimo was left to shiver naked and alone in a stark, chamber uncomfortably like the one he had just been in. The prickling sounds of an incinerator flickered outside.

Normally, Tolimo was one of the more upbeat of his friends, despite their place on the bottom of society's shoe, but he couldn't muster up a smile now, let alone a sarcastic quip. Now, without even his own clothes left to him, he truly had nothing.

Once again he was glad that he had dropped his little wooden prayer block, rather than lose it to the flames. He hoped Lybella or one of the others had indeed found it – they had been close by when he was caught, maybe close enough to hear his cries of alarm.

Each of his siblings in thievery had their talismans too, their hopes for a better life. Lybella had her braided peace cord, one of several cords in her hair. Orso had his little telescope and Pellita her toy catapult.

The objects meant something to them that nothing else would ever replace. They were symbols, of family, or friends, or just a dream of the future. Tolimo's was a reminder of his past, and had been for as long as he could remember. It had been his mother's, before the house fire had taken both her and his father.

His remembering was interrupted by jets of foul smelling liquid erupting from the walls, impacting Tolimo like punches. The liquid - probably cleaning fluid of some kind - stung his eyes and burned in his nostrils. The whole experience was about the most embarrassing thing he had ever gone through, but at least it was over quickly. The last of it drained away after a few minutes to leave Tolimo dripping and cold as sickly-sweet incense was squirted into the room, replacing one foul smell with another.

After several minutes of waiting, more of the bird masked doctors came in. One threw an itchy blanket over him, and the other unlocked Tolimo's shackles. Both darted away before he could react, leaving him to dry and wrap himself with the blanket before padding slowly across the freezing, grated floor towards the now open door. The beak masks waited for him there.

As he reached them, the blanket too was whipped away from him, and thrown into the open incinerator that his clothes had already fuelled. Then one of the beaks thrust something at Tolimo. He flinched before he noticed that it was just a bundle of fresh clothes – a white tunic and trousers. Tolimo pulled them on quickly, glad of anything that covered his embarrassment.

“Come with us. The Authority always meets with new Plaguewalkers.” he was told by one of a pair of newly arrived guards the moment he was dressed. Each was dressed in very silly baggy trousers and a floppy hat. The black and white uniforms and their ornate pikes showed them to be part of the Authority’s personal guard. They were not giving Tolimo a choice, so he fell in between them.

"Nice hat," he said sarcastically to one, the bare hint of his usual humour returning now that death didn't seem so imminent. The soldier just grunted in annoyance, but Tolimo was happy with that. Annoying these people was about all he could do to resist them.

He was marched up yet another set of stairs, these ones spiralling to the very top of the creaking spire. This was the highest building Tolimo had ever been up, and it was strange to see the sprawling mess that was Morbetzia out the little windows they passed.

At the staircase’s end was an oak door so heavy that Tolimo couldn’t imagine how anyone had been convinced to haul it up the spire’s steps. Through it lay an extravagant office lined with artwork, the scent of fine wooden furniture and entirely too much gold.

In the centre of his office, the Authority sat behind a sturdy, heavily adorned desk. The fancy patterning alone would have fed Tolimo and his friends for months if they had ever got the chance to chisel it apart and fence the pieces.

"You understand what is now expected of you, I trust?" the man said through his black and white mask by way of greeting. Tolimo came to a halt before the desk, guards on his heels.

“I’m guessing that I’m expected to be a slave to the city nobility for life,” he said defiantly.

His brush with death had left him feeling bolder than was wise. The Authority did not order him beaten for insolence, or even any other punishment. Instead, the masked noble just laughed at Tolimo without humour, turned and said,

“Our new Plaguewalker. You’ll have to watch your step with this one, Felissa.”

The Authority was not speaking to Tolimo, but to someone stood at the side of the desk. The woman was old, spindly and with grey hair that was rapidly turning to white. She wore simple clothes of plain white, and wore a metal pin on her collar shaped like a golden beating heart – the colours and symbol of a Plaguewalker. The Authority saw Tolimo turn his eyes towards the woman and as if it explained everything said,

"This is Felissa. Do what she says."

The woman didn’t exactly look intimidating. She looked more like a good gust of wind might snap something. Tolimo wondered what she had done to deserve this fate. Maybe she had just

lost concentration and somehow wandered into a Plague tendril. Old people did that kind of thing, right? She didn't seem in any shape to be committing any crimes.

"What if I don't?"

It was only after Tolimo spoke that it occurred to him that he probably shouldn't have. The Authority didn't seem all that outraged though, despite his lack of respect.

"Then you'll probably not survive long," the voice from behind the mask said, levelly, "But more to the point, I suggest you keep Plaguewalker's Charter, article ten in mind – something that became necessary due to people failing to act in the city's best interests."

"And that is?" Tolimo questioned. He didn't know the wording of a single city ordinance. He just knew what would get you pinched by the watch, and what wouldn't.

"Every Plaguewalker is paired off," said the Authority, "The crimes of one – desertion, for example – become the crimes of both. Like it or not, that is the law. If you escape, her life is forfeit. I'd make it a slow end for you too when we caught you. Felissa is very valuable to me." He paused, thought and added, "She has been the city's most dutiful Plaguewalker for many a year."

That wasn't that impressive in Tolimo's eyes. He didn't intend to do anything for these people that he wasn't forced to.

"What would a noble know about duty?" he blurted out, to the obvious shock of Felissa.

There he went again, speaking before thinking. The Authority did no more than shift his head slightly – in amusement perhaps? It was impossible to know through the mask.

"Felissa, take it from here," he said, ignoring Tolimo and gesturing to the woman. He had already looked back to the paperwork upon his desk, and no longer seemed interested in speaking. Tolimo allowed himself to be shuffled from the room by Felissa, who did so without a word and with the stiffness of age.

The guards left them to descend the stairs alone, and in silence they did so. Felissa didn't seem to be an especially chatty person, and Tolimo was happy not to make conversation. He would just have found a way to get himself into even more trouble. Besides, he had to think, to plot some way out of this mess.

They made it all the way to the bottom and back into the spire's main corridors before Felissa stopped quite suddenly in front of Tolimo, her thin, bony frame seeming to sway as she turned to face him.

Her expression was that of someone having remembered something important, and she slowly reached out towards Tolimo. A golden image of a human heart sat in her palm, its flat metallic shape glinting in the lamplight.

"I don't care about that," said Tolimo, tempted to knock the thing out of her hand, only stopping himself when he imagined Lybella telling him not to be so childish.



The old woman thrust her hand closer.

“Important,” she said quietly, tightening gnarled fingers on the little emblem. Tolimo could see that Felissa believed that, from the way her own badge gleamed from frequent polishing.

“Why?” Tolimo asked. It was just a piece of metal. A mark of what he was being forced to become.

“Chosen. It means we are chosen to help this city. It is an important position.”

She seemed sincere. Tolimo wondered if she had been paying attention to the city at all in recent years. Maybe Plaguewalker had been a respected position once, but not now. The nobles in their spires barely saw regular citizens as people. Tolimo suspected that they saw Plaguewalkers as nothing more than possessions of the city these days – things to be expended as their whims demanded.

He reached out and took the golden heart from the insistent Felissa, regarding it with suspicion. Not only did it mark him a Plaguewalker, but that fine gold colour was a reminder of the greed that had ruined his life a second time, even before this third.

After the fire, Tolimo had been sent to the House of Unexpected Burdens. In the time of Plague, the place took in new children regularly. Too many. Costs went up, profits went down, and the orphanage hit on hard times. So, the wizened old couple that ran it hit upon a plan.

They had decided to expose children that got old enough to the Plague. If the children lived, the couple would collect the tidy sum paid for turning them over to the authorities to become Plaguewalkers.

If they died, well, one less mouth to feed.

Tolimo and his friends had run from the orphanage the very night they had overheard the plan. Others had not been lucky enough to get away. People he had known. It haunted him to think that the place was still open now, five years later. He pinned the heart to his white collar, as it was on Felissa’s. That way at least he didn’t have to look at it any more.

Just as he finished, a clanging rang out somewhere below, reminding Tolimo of the deserted bell tower he had lived in with his friends up until this fateful morning. He didn’t move – the noise was meaningless to him. Didn’t nobles ring for servants all the time? Still, it was a strangely loud and jarring noise for that.

It seemed to mean something to Felissa though, for she jumped to action so quickly that Tolimo feared it might break her old bones. She actually managed to run down the corridor, though with a slightly painful looking gait.

Tolimo jogged to keep up, though he had no idea where they were going. Soon, Felissa led him around one of the spire’s many twists, to a corridor that at a stairwell down. Other figures in white were already there, and guards too, all hustling towards the same place.

A uniformed city messenger came rushing out before they could reach it, breathless and obviously at the end of a long run. She paused for a moment to catch it, and spotted the Plaguewalkers before her.

“Signal light in the bay! Cargo ship’s early,” she announced when she was able.

Tolimo wasn’t sure precisely what that meant, but he knew that new supplies for the city were important, what with the quarantine. The sound of footsteps behind heralded more people arriving to listen.

More than a few people ran up in the next few moments - even a few masked nobles. Apparently, this was important enough to stir even those as idle as them.

Maybe there would be an opportunity to escape in the midst of all the excitement. Felissa would suffer for it if he did, but what choice was there? Tolimo had heard that Plaguewalkers didn’t last all that long, and he was not going to die for the sake of someone loyal to the city and its so-called noble rulers.

Tolimo shot a look at the woman, and found her listening at rapt attention. The messenger finished relaying more details about where Plaguewalkers were needed, and Felissa immediately began acting upon them. Others were moving too, and the messenger moved off shouting her news to anyone else within earshot.

There was no way to slip away from the crowd here. All Tolimo could do was go along with the flow, and hope a chance would present itself. He put all his effort into making his voice sound light and cheerful, hoping that it might make him seem less worthy of suspicion.

“Time to get to work!” he said, before starting after the other Plaguewalkers at Felissa’s side.

### **THREE: PORT IN A STORM**

Saltwater sprayed the cobbles as another wave splashed in.

Tolimo had been brought down to the city docks with several dozen other Plaguewalkers. It had taken a while, shuffling across the shoddily built walkways that had been built above street level in the years since the Plague's arrival.

At Felissa’s side, Tolimo trooped out to one of the creaking old wooden piers, hoping not to be thrown into the tossing sea by the snapping of a rotten plank. The waters were in the mood for taking victims, stirred up by the rushing winds, yet Tolimo still didn’t fear them as much as the green Plague glow that veiled the city.

People had built the city upwards in that same fear, adding rickety sleeping attics to already unsteady timber homes. It usually didn't worm its way under doors, but usually was not the same as never. The city’s many spires were extensions of the idea, where the rich and powerful had constructed sturdier buildings, but ones no less founded on fear. Such decisions had left Morbetzia looking like a city gone mad, as well as being one. Wooden extensions sprouted all over it in places

they shouldn't, filling in gaps in the skyline. The white-robed people on the docks had just as much variety.

There were all kinds of faces among them, from boys and girls younger than him, to muscled men that actually looked well suited to working the docks, to the infirm and frail, some of whom looked to be struggling more than Felissa. One old man actually had a stump in place of one of his legs, and needed a crutch to get about.

The city had to take what it could get, Tolimo guessed. The Plaguewalkers were few in number - it wasn't like anyone volunteered to test whether they were immune.

Green light was everywhere in the darkness of the night. Tolimo hadn't realised that it had gotten so late until he stepped out from the Spire of Justice, but it seemed that the Plague had already crawled its way through the city's cracks and spread out along the streets. Morbetzia's veins pulsed with the sickness, and everyone with any sense was inside and as high up as they could afford to be.

The Plague on the docks was not like it had been back that horrible chamber. That had been much thicker, like a creature imprisoned in there with Tolimo. Here it was wispy and spectral, like ghosts being torn apart by the storm winds.

"This is madness," Tolimo muttered.

"No," Felissa told him, "Necessary."

Tolimo thought about it, and realised it was true. Without the port, Morbetzia would starve. No one would risk delivering supplies to the city over land. Even ships refused to stay anchored near the disease-ridden city for long, and none of their crew ever set foot on the shore. With the docks being one of the lowest parts of the sprawling city, the Plague often hung about the place searching for victims. That meant Plaguewalkers unloaded everything, or there was no food for anyone.

Tolimo neared the end of the pier, where other Plaguewalkers waited by a heavy winching system that was slowly carrying bobbing box shapes over waves that were doing their best to leap up and claim the cargo.

The ship that brought them sat on the other end of the line, a massive menacing shadow moored to a buoy. It, like all the others that visited the city sat out there wreathed in fog, its lanterns making its sails and hull look eerie in the darkness. They might as well be ghost ships. Ghost ships for the ghost city that Morbetzia was decaying into.

One of the crates made it to the dock, and was swarmed by Plaguewalkers. They got it unhooked with practised ease, and Felissa gestured for Tolimo to pick it up, bobbing her head in encouragement. The box was wider than Tolimo's chest and almost made him fall of the pier with its weight.

Other Plaguewalkers moved towards him, clearly panicked that Tolimo would drop the valuable cargo, but he yelled out over the sound of the sea and storm,

"I got it!" though without being sure that he actually did. He began lurching back to the shore in an attempt to prove it, and heard Felissa shuffling behind him. Tolimo hoped that she had been given

something lighter than he had, or she'd probably topple off the pier. Tolimo couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for her being forced into a life that was clearly not appropriate for her.

Carrying his box only got harder as he struggled off the pier and back onto dry-ish land. Salty spray pushed him a few steps further, but then he had to stop and rest for fear of dropping his charge. Leaning his burden carefully on the ground, Tolimo looked up the slope Morbetzia was built on at the half ruin of the city, its haphazard wooden buildings damaged by decades of neglect.

One good fire in the under city, and the spires would all end up a lot shorter, and more burned. Their noble occupants would do everything to avoid that of course, including making Plaguewalkers run into burning buildings to put out any city threatening fires.

Tolimo looked up to a platform built onto one of the closest rooftops, where masked people in rich clothing watched their white robed minions at work, and city guardsmen with crossbows enforced their instructions. Did nobles have to become Plaguewalkers, if they were discovered to be immune? Tolimo doubted it.

"Not worth the cloth their masks are made of," he muttered darkly.

Before he could get to saying anything stronger, Felissa arrived beside him, handling a smaller box, but with less difficulty than Tolimo was having. Embarrassed, he immediately lifted his load and continued on, following the stream of other white-clothed people up steps and across cobbles.

He was conscious of those above watching him, particularly the cat-masked man at the front, who wore the black robes of a preacher. As Tolimo got closer to the building he realised that he was reading from The Book of Canon in a dull tone.

"In the shade they tread, these unfortunate people, their actions their own reward. Their own hand has born them to this place only by their hand shall their lives be redeemed."

Tolimo wanted to sling his crate up at the man, despite how heavy it was, but he kept a lid on his anger and trudged faster, doing his best not to listen to the supposedly righteous speech.

"May those who have sinned be forever studious in their duties," the man said as Tolimo reached a knot of people by one of the winches that took people to and from the high platforms, "May they ever be watchful for the return of their grievous desires, their ruinous thoughts, the dark shadow over their soul. Warned are we of the black stone that can take men's hearts."

The preacher continued his drone constantly as Tolimo waited in mounting annoyance. He had spent too many nights watching the streets swell green with Plague to think that words or ritual could keep the pestilence at bay. Being devout was no defence, and the preacher surely knew that. Up there, swinging his smelly censer, he certainly wasn't taking any chances.

It was still all Tolimo could do not to shiver as he carried his crate through the shifting Plague. The other Plaguewalkers, more used to their fate, barely even seemed to notice the green fog at their feet. Their white clothes made them look ghostly in the dancing light of the Plague tendrils. It was appropriate, given that each one of them could fall down dead at any moment.

Being a Plaguewalker was no guarantee of safety – not forever at least. No one understood how immunity worked, which was why Tolimo had found himself in that chamber in the first place. There was no safe test. People did know that a lot of children were immune, but as with everyone else, it didn't often last.

Immunity could desert you at any point, and no one could predict when. One day, Tolimo knew, he would find whatever defended him against the sickness gone, and succumb at the next touch of the Plague. For a Plaguewalker, it was a matter of when, not if.

Tolimo was snapped out of his awful thoughts as Felissa nudged into him, steering him around towards another Plaguewalker, this one a young woman with a clipboard that seemed to be directing the chaos of milling people. She had eyeglasses on, and squinted through them at a series of tiny marks on her papers as the two of them came to a halt in front of her.

"New one, Felissa?" she asked without looking up. Felissa nodded her grey-haired head in reply.

"Rather not be," Tolimo said sullenly, and received a glare for his trouble.

"You'll do well to get that tongue in order," the woman said sternly, "We all have to deal with the way things are – no need to take it out on us. And treat Felissa well, she's one of the good ones, no matter how she started out. Now, let's get on with this."

She jabbed her clipboard at the crate Tolimo was carrying, peered over to read the manifest label, and then gestured at another Plaguewalker to hand over a prybar from a bundle of similar tools. As Felissa received one too, the woman peered over her eyeglasses and told Tolimo,

"Open it and make sure it matches what's written on the crate. You *can* read and count, right?"

Tolimo nodded. The orphanage hadn't taught them much more than the basics, but his father had been a bookkeeper, and had taught a few things before the fire. He could manage well enough. He set to working the bar under the wooden lid, but was immediately interrupted.

"Not here!" the clipboard woman chided, as if talking to someone very stupid, "Take it over there, out of the way. Now, Felissa, let's see what you've got."

Tolimo bit back a reply, tucked the prybar under one arm and carried the crate off, looking for an empty space to complete his work. There didn't seem much point in arguing, especially when he didn't know what punishment it might earn.

He found a place near a pair of men stacking larger crates, and laid his burden down, thinking he might be able to dawdle here a little while and think. If only there weren't so many people about, then he might be able to make his escape.

The two white-clothed men, like many of the long term Plaguewalkers, had been honed by hard work. Their thick arm muscles hardly seemed to strain as they heaved cargo around. They were talking to each other while they worked over the crash of waves, seemingly at ease despite the potential death all around.

“You heard? There was a message in the documents crate,” the first said, “Plague’s in Romoria now, and the quarantine in Casmaran failed.”

“The whole world will be sick soon,” the other agreed gruffly, hefting a precious sack of grain.

Tolimo had heard of Casmaran’s difficulties. His friend Lybella was from there, before her parents’ trade ship had sunk outside the harbour. Her city, a long way down the coast from Morbetzia, had gotten the Plague a few years back, but had somehow kept it contained – until now, it seemed.

One of them noticed Tolimo standing there, and gestured angrily at him, clearly wanting him gone. The other yelled at him,

“Stop dawdling – back to work!”

Tolimo scurried to obey. These were other Plaguwalkers like him, but that didn’t seem to have made them any more sympathetic to a street kid. He opened the crate, finding it full of salted fish as the label stated, and then returned it the clipboard woman, who directed it to a pile of similar boxes. Then, back Tolimo went to the pier for another heavy load – with many more to follow throughout the night.

It was hard work, and harder for the constant fear the wisps of Plague caused. They didn’t seem to bother the other Plaguwalkers, but they had been immune a lot longer than Tolimo. He was still conditioned to jump at the first glimpse of green, and every time a gust of wind kicked some of the foul glow into his eye line, he froze in instinctual fear.

He soon lost track first of Felissa, then of time itself, then of the last point his arms had felt like real limbs rather than numb imitations. The boxes and crates seemed never ending, and Tolimo’s mind grew weary with the counting of their contents. Eventually, just when his legs seemed about to give up for the night, like this box would have to be the last he moved no matter what punishment he got for slacking, Tolimo lifted his tired eyes towards the now heavily laden winching platform that was the way back to the rooftops, and safety.

The Plaguwalkers that had been working there were not where they had been.

Looking up, Tolimo saw the woman with the clipboard climbing the timbers of a nearby building, her movements desperately quick, the winch platform below abandoned. Others had already found their way to the walkways and platforms at the top, where guards were actually helping them onto the same floors walked by the nobles. Tolimo had half expected any attempt to get up there to be met with sharpened pikes and violence.

Then he saw what had spooked them.

Coming around the side of the building, was the Plague. Its sickly fog was thick, not like the weak questing tendrils Tolimo had seen so far this night. It bloomed up to head height, and it was difficult to see anything through it as it filled the end of the street.

For a moment he was caught between inaction and panic, but didn’t understand why. Then it hit him – like him, the other Plaguwalkers were immune, but they were fleeing all the same. This shouldn’t

be a threat to them, yet clearly they thought otherwise – and Tolimo was beginning to believe the same.

Yet Tolimo did not pursue the others. He should have, he knew. It would be safer, but he had spent so many nights seeing the Plague from above, watching it ooze across the city, strangling it with its unknowable magic. Now he had the chance to learn something about it, and it couldn't hurt him anymore. What was the use of immunity if he didn't make use of it?

In fact, he realised with a jolt that this might just be a way out – if he could make it through the thick Plague fog he could escape life as a Plaguewalker after less than a night under the nobles' fat thumbs. Tolimo only wondered why that hadn't been his first thought. Why wasn't it every Plaguewalkers' thought?

Something flitted across the end of the street that the Plague was blowing in from, and Tolimo's eyes locked wide, heart pumping.

There was a shadow in the vile fog. Some people said that ghosts made the Plague, bringing it back with them from the land of the dead to punish those that had wronged them in life. Was this one of them?

Death had touched Tolimo's life too often. His parents, in the fire that had left him in the orphanage's care at the age of five. The girl that had lead the escape from that horrific place – she had been caught by the owners, and exposed to the Plague soon after. She had not been a Plaguewalker.

Would any of them be willing to curse this city, and its people?

He should have run, like the others. He should have decided that such knowledge was not worth his life. He should have taken the risk and fled the nobles and Plaguewalkers both. He didn't.

Tolimo had to know. What was it that had made him into the pawn of nobles? What was it that had made the city into a maze of horror?

One step away from the docks, leaving his box behind. Two, and into the street, following that brief glimpse of a shadow. Three, and he broke into a stealthy jog.

It wasn't going to escape him, Tolimo thought, trying not to think about just how he was going to escape it.

#### **FOUR: PAST GHOSTS**

The phantom moved along at an unhurried pace. If it knew Tolimo was there, it didn't fear him. Why would it? The thing was wreathed in Plague after all. Anything that was at home in that stuff didn't need to fear anything, least of all a scared boy.

Following it was madness, but Tolimo crept along the street in its wake anyway. The cobbles were invisible under the thick Plague fog, and it was denser still near to the thing ahead, as if the stuff was

billowing out of it. Tolimo wondered if he had somehow lost his immunity, and the Plague was affecting him. It would explain his actions.

He saw the shape pass around a corner, and pursued, pushing through the uncomfortably writhing greenness in a stealthy jog. He had been a thief long enough to know how to move quietly, though would it be of any use on something like this? Did a phantom need to hear you to sense you? Best not to guess.

Reaching the corner that it had disappeared behind, Tolimo pressed up against the cold bricks and slowly poked his head out. With one eye he caught the sight of another street filling up with Plague, the figure gliding on down it at an unhurried pace.

He waited for a moment for it to get a touch further away, and then started forward again, knowing that it was stupid, but hypnotised by his own curiosity. He peered through the thickening greenness, trying to make out what it was he followed.

It wasn't just a shade within the gas, but some kind of form, Tolimo thought. A person, robed and hooded perhaps? Did a ghost really need to wrap up warm? Could it be someone he knew, returned from the beyond - maybe one of the orphans that hadn't made it out with Tolimo and his friends?

Scurrying from alcove to alleyway, he got closer and closer without learning anything more, except that his heart wasn't going to pound through his ribcage no matter how hard it tried. Then, there was a sudden shift in the currents of the Plague cloud. The shape was turning. In fright, Tolimo's instincts took over. In a fraction of a second, he had moved into the mouth of an alley, breath sucked in and eyes wide.

He listened, not sure if he should be hearing footsteps or not. Did ghosts need to make noise to walk? All he could hear was a strange rhythmic clinking, like the chains of the damned, though oddly muffled.

Nothing changed for long moments, and Tolimo was torn between the sensible choice of continuing to stay hidden, and his curiosity. It had beaten his better judgement once, and gradually did so again, until he felt compelled to poke one eye out and see whether the danger had passed.

The figure had not disappeared. It had stopped in the middle of the street, though through the Plague Tolimo could not tell which way it was facing. Whatever the case, it was enough to make him freeze in place, not daring to risk moving any further.

His terror was like nothing he had felt before, save for the two horrors of the Plague chamber, and night that had claimed his parents' lives. The night when the city's attempts to purge Plague stricken sections of city had burned them up, consuming everything of Tolimo's but his life.

But for that fire, he could be living a life where his parents were still safe, where he had never needed to turn to thieving to survive, where he had never ended up in that chamber, the tendrils of Plague forcing him to wear white for the rest of his perhaps short life. He still feared those flames, but he had closer things to fear now.

He shouldn't be here. He should be with the other bell tower orphans, running the rooftops and stealing from anyone that was foolish enough to leave their valuables unguarded. Following Lybella's



orders. Listening to little Orso complain. Instead he was here, chasing his curiosity, and he was never going to see them again. He should have run when he had the chance.

The breaths had stretched out during his remembrance, but time snapped back to its normal speed when several ratlings scurried past Tolimo. Still he didn't move a muscle. He didn't want even the little vermin to notice he was there. Their little claws echoed away across the cobbles, leaving him once more in silence with the monster in front of him.

Then a ratling nudged against his feet and to Tolimo's horror, he heard himself release a tiny squeak. He did everything short of clamping a hand over a hand over his mouth to make sure that it was the only thing he did to give himself away.

Tolimo's breath caught as the shadow turned slightly. Did it see him? He stayed frozen, save for his eyes, which flicked around, searching for any sign of what the shape would do.

A glint drew his eye, and he saw that the Plague seemed to be coming from its outstretched arm, or somewhere below it at least. It was creating it, Tolimo realised, cursing the city it walked. No wonder the other Plaguewalkers had fled, if they had known that this was what stalked the night. It wasn't just a ghost of the Plague, summoned by the power of the city's uncounted deaths – it was causing them!

A foolish impulse gripped him to call out, to demand to know why the creature was doing this to Morbetzia and its people. How dare it do so much harm to so many, whatever supernatural grudge it held?

Then something grabbed him, pulling him fully back into the alley, and Tolimo's heart near stopped.

He whipped around, expecting to see some kind of skeletal monster, but despite her bony frame, Felissa was no creature of the Plague. Her claw of a hand still gripped his shoulder harder than Tolimo would have believed, holding him in place. He glanced back to where the thing had been, and saw only the whip of cloth disappearing behind a building. It was gone, and Tolimo realised that he had still been intending to follow it, despite his fear.

What had he been thinking? Felissa's expression told him how foolish he had been. She shook her head, fear written deeply into her wrinkles and pulled at his shoulder.

"What..." he began to ask as they padded along, but she only shook her head again. Not something Plaguewalkers liked to talk of, Tolimo guessed. He didn't blame them. It had only been a minute since seeing that thing, and already his dread of the streets had increased tenfold. The idea of working them for the rest of his life was not one he was up to considering at that moment.

He had heard stories before of course, but to see one of those things for himself? That was quite different. Before they were just stories between children trying to scare one another on a stormy night while the old bell tolled gently in the wind. Now they were real.

Tolimo wondered for a moment what the thudding noise in his ears was, before realising that it was his own heartbeat. His shock had masked how shaken he was until now. His legs felt wobbly, like they weren't meant to be carrying his weight.

“Can’t do things like that,” he heard Felissa say through a foggy haze, “Dangerous.”

Tolimo just looked at her, hoping that his expression was enough to convey his meaning – words just weren’t coming. Whether she understood or not, she did answer his unspoken question.

"People disappear going into Plague plumes. Or lose immunity. Bad things in there. You saw."

That fully explained the other Plaguewalkers’ fear – all besides Felissa had not been willing to risk themselves to save the hapless new boy from his own idiocy. Why had she? Perhaps Felissa had been worried that he really would escape and had found the threat of the Authority’s wrath more awful than whatever the Plague spirit might do. Then again...

“I... What... That...” he managed to croak out, making very little sense, and beginning to feel a surge of gratitude towards her.

“Back to docks,” Felissa whispered in non-answer, “Then Spire of Justice. Work is nearly done.”

Was she just going to pretend that she hadn’t seen that thing? Tolimo might have liked to, but he couldn’t. With every slow step back out of the green fog he saw another flash of its dark, hunched robe in his mind.

He felt his feet moving, impacting on the uneven cobble, but only through a haze. It wasn’t just how tired he was after the night’s work – though that was a part of it.

Something else was pulling at him, not a hand on his shoulder, but a finger of thought hooked into his mind. Despite how afraid Tolimo still was, it seemed that he hadn’t quite learned his lesson.

He still wanted to know what that thing was, and his curiosity was needling him to find out.

## **FIVE: TOP OF THE WORLD**

Tolimo lay in bed, failing to sleep, staring at the ceiling of the Plaguewalker barracks and thinking about how his life had changed. Though tired and aching from the work and the trudge back to the Spire of Justice, he just could not drift off.

It was strange being in an actual bed. The mattress, though so lumpy it could only barely be called one, was far too soft to someone used to sleeping on straw. Tolimo rolled one way, and then the other, and finally pushed back the sheet in frustration.

Perhaps it was more the big room’s similarity to the one he had slept in at the House of Unexpected Burdens that was keeping him on edge. A part of him was expecting Mama Tezia to come bursting in at any minute, declaring that it was time for chores – or worse, time for a little ‘test’. It wouldn’t hurt. Might help. Didn’t they want to help the House? Tolimo shuddered a little at the memory.

The present gave him other things to shudder at too. That thing in the Plague plume. If that was what he was going to have to survive every day of his now lifelong sentence, Tolimo didn’t expect to last long.

If he had been a more optimistic sort, he'd have believed that his encounter was just bad luck, but a lifetime on the streets had beaten that kind of positive thinking out of him. If the world could find a way to kick you while you were down it would – and maybe spit on you when it was done.

The white uniform he still wore was the symbol of that. The Plague hadn't been able to finish him off, so life had found another way to drip into the sewer. He had to find a way out of this, Tolimo thought, fingers fiddling anxiously with the badge, still pinned to his collar.

"What a joke," he muttered as he did so. That golden heart was supposed to be symbol of life, but it didn't do anything for those wearing them. He had survived the chamber, but being a Plagewalker felt like a death sentence nonetheless.

Either the Plague would take him, its phantoms would, or he would be the servant of the nobles for the rest of his life. Tolimo had no desire to end up like Felissa, old and grey with nothing but her duty to sustain her.

He could still run of course – except they didn't just let Plagewalkers go. The immune were far too valuable. That was what kept them from being mistreated too badly by those that oversaw them. You didn't damage your prize cattle.

What kept him sort of safe here would not serve him so well out in the city. His face was known. If Tolimo tried to pass through a market invisible as he had used to, picking pockets as he went, some guard would spot him easily. With the quarantine, he couldn't even flee Morbetzia. The gates were all sealed, the marshland beyond was treacherous and the roads were patrolled by soldiers of neighbouring cities. Then he thought again of his family of orphans, and suddenly none of it mattered. He couldn't stay here.

"Be in this moment," Tolimo told himself under his breath, "Get out now, consequences later."

It was good rule for a thief to remember when things went bad, one Lybella had drilled into him in the bell tower orphans' early heists, and with it solidly in mind, Tolimo swung himself silently out of bed.

No one stirred immediately, and Tolimo listened to the various snores for a moment to make sure before padding towards the door. The floorboards were creaky, but Tolimo had practise in moving stealthily, and it seemed like Plagewalkers tended to be heavy sleepers. He repeated Lybella's mantra in his head until he had reached the exit and bumped the door's external latch by slotting his Plagewalker's badge through the gap between door and frame.

Once outside, he softly closed the door, and found himself alone with his thoughts in the empty corridor. This was foolish. Every entrance to the spire would be guarded, and he was a long way from any of them. He hadn't been spotted yet, but that could change at any moment.

Besides, even if he were to somehow escape without trace, there was Felissa to consider. He had not cared before, but that was before she had – probably - saved his life. It didn't feel right to repay that by getting her executed for his crime. No easy answers. On the other hand, consequences later. Tolimo walked on.

He saw no guards, and guessed that they must be set at the bottom of staircases – save for the Authority's personal black-and-white soldiers, of course. They'd be at their master's door. Tolimo was thankful for that. It meant that as long as he didn't roam too far, he'd probably not get caught. He had no desire to take a caning for being up and around so late though, so he stayed quiet and careful as he crept along.

He was more casing the area than anything truly planned, but as he moved to the end of the corridor and neared one of the outer walls of the Spire of Justice, Tolimo found something that just might deliver him some justice of his own. A window, and one big enough for a twelve-year-old boy to easily fit through, especially one as thin as Tolimo. Without any better ideas, Tolimo once more looked about for witnesses, and then padded up to the window.

The thing was easy to open, even without tools. He'd long since lost count of the number of latches, catches and locks he'd learned to defeat. It swung open with barely a creak. Then Tolimo stuck his head out and saw just how far down it was, found that his escape wasn't going to be easy after all.

The street, illuminated by a few light wisps of Plague, was a dizzying way down. Though he might be able to survive those tendrils now, dropping that distance was another story. There were other buildings around, several even quite close by, but the nearest was far enough away that the idea of trying to jump was a bad joke.

This had been foolish. Freedom wasn't worth near certain death. At least here as a Plagewalker he had a bed, and what approximated food. That was better than he'd sometimes got on the streets, especially before the orphans had found their new home.

He was about to give up and go back to restless sleep, when a sound chipped at his thoughts. Outside on the wall of the spire. A raven coming home to roost maybe. He would have ignored it, but then,

"Tol!"

Again something cracked off the wall nearby. Not a bird. Not unless it had learned his name, and copied his friend's voice. Tolimo eagerly leaned out of the window, forgetting for a moment how high he was, and peered down more carefully into the darkness.

There they were, like out of a dream, standing on a rooftop grinning back at him. All three of the other bell tower orphans. Pellita and Orso, younger and looking like the siblings they were. Lybella, her lighter brown hair with its meaning-filled braids marking her Casmara heritage. It was the first of them that had called out, and the others were glaring at the young girl for making even that much noise. For her part, her catapult - most prized of her few possessions - was still raised, and she looked pleased to have made such an accurate shot.

Tolimo beamed. The bell tower orphans, his family, had found him.

"We thought you were done for!" said Lybella, the oldest of the group. Her voice was difficult to make out – she was trying to talk in a way combining a shout and a whisper.

"I kind of still am," he hissed back, thinking of how much trouble he was still in – not to mention his brush with death down by the docks.

"Time to get out of there!" she shout-whispered again. Tolimo looked her in the eye, and then pointedly looked downward into the cavernous drop. It didn't seem likely.

He heard Orso laugh and the younger boy's snickering noise, normally a source of annoyance, brought warmth to Tolimo's heart instead. Even if he couldn't go home, them being here for him was amazing all by itself. The other orphans however, were not content with merely cheering him up. As always, they were playing for keeps.

Tolimo saw them bend down and heft up a ladder that seemed fashioned from any old things they had been able to lay their hands on. He could swear there was an oar lashed somewhere in the mass of misshapen rungs.

They couldn't seriously be expecting him to set foot onto that, could they? Except yes, from the way the three were moving to the end of the roof and sliding it slowly out into empty space toward Tolimo, that must be their insane plan.

The end wobbling wildly, the ladder extended out and up to him until its tips bumped into the windowsill just slightly too loudly. A chorus of hissing erupted below as the orphans quietly but strongly disagreed about whose fault it was, until Tolimo added a shushing sound to the mix that silenced them.

"Come on over!" Lybella ordered when they were all sure that no one was running to investigate, and Tolimo reached out dubiously towards the improvised ladder. It was the work of a few awkward moments to squeeze through the window and stand upright, one foot on the ledge and one on the ladder's top rung.

It creaked dangerously under his weight, and Tolimo thought twice about standing up. Down on his hands and knees, the thing was much more stable, but it also left Tolimo a much better view of how poorly constructed it was. Looking at the hastily tied knots was a good way to start quaking in fear, so instead Tolimo looked at anything but that as he shuffled along. He even took a glance back at where he had come from, checking that no one had happened upon the open window.

No one had, but Tolimo did notice that lights were on in windows higher up the spire, and that made him do his best to push on faster. Up there was where the Authority lived, as well as his underlings. Tolimo prayed that neither the black and white masked man nor anyone else was looking out of any window this side of the spire.

"How'd you know I was still alive?" he said, trying to avoid thinking of the drop.

"What, were you worried we'd leave you to rot?"

Lybella, leader of the bell tower orphans, not that any of them said so out loud. Out of all of them, she always managed to look the least like a street urchin, and not only because she took more care to stay clean. She always projected confidence, though Tolimo was old enough now to know that she didn't always entirely mean it.

"Never... never doubted you," Tolimo breathed, over the sound of his pounding heart.

“We’ve been out here every night for the last three,” Lybella added, “These two said you were too stubborn to let the plague chamber kill you. Didn’t have the heart to tell them otherwise.”

From her tone it might have been a joke, but Tolimo sensed something more underneath. Lybella had not been so confident that Tolimo had survived. He didn’t blame her – it was a surprise to him too.

With another minute of climbing, Tolimo got close enough to the other end that he could be helped onto the flat rooftop, legs shaking slightly. If it had not been for Lybella’s brief embrace, Tolimo didn’t know if he would have stayed upright.

“Found this,” Lybella said, as they broke apart. In it was Tolimo’s wooden talisman. Its inscrutable prayer was no more meaningful to him now, but as he put its string back around his neck where it belonged Tolimo found a little faith that things would turn out alright.

A moment later, his mood was still further improved when the small forms of Orso and Pellita slammed hugs into him from either side, gripping on and showing no signs of letting go. Orso, ever managing to get himself dirtier than the rest of them, left a dark smudge on Tolimo’s white clothes.

“Good to see you too,” Tolimo breathed, smiling.

“Hey,” said Lybella, “Time for that when we’re gone.”

She was right, as usual. The ladder got lashed to a nearby rooftop, one hidden from any eyes that might have spied it from the spire, and then they were away under starlight, over tiles and slats, daring the green glow below to try and take them. Tolimo loved every second of it.

The rooftops were a familiar playground to them all. To the untrained eye, it would have appeared dangerous, almost suicidal to be wandering around on such steep surfaces. They all used to slip, with jumping hearts and skidding feet, but now each of the bell tower orphans was light as a cat, and nearly as silent.

Though he had to be as mindful of his footing as always, Tolimo found himself calmer than he had been since that fateful apple made him a Plaguewalker. This was where he belonged, with his family of orphans, and these were the streets he should be walking, over the Plague-filled alleys beneath. Safe, or not, he had no desire to go down there.

Often there would be newly made corpses below, consumed by boils or convulsions or another of the flavours of agony the Plague inflicted on those too poor to buy living space in a spire. Always it was different, sometimes taking hours or even days to run its course, but always it was deadly.

Only Plaguewalkers could resist it. People like the lady with the clipboard, and the muscle-bound cargo men. And Felissa. And Tolimo.

No, he thought. Wearing white didn’t make him a Plaguewalker. Being immune didn’t either. He was free again, away into the night with his friends. He didn’t have to think about that life anymore.

Consequences later.

## **SIX: ALL THEY SURVEY**

Crossing the city got easier as they went. Tolimo's feet began remembering what it was like to move over roofs sheltering sleepers blissfully ignorant of the thieves above.

For a wonderful, brief time he was able to forget the terror of the Plague chamber, and everything that had come from entering it, pushing it back with the sight of the others running and climbing beside him.

As they got closer to their lair in the lower part of the city, the buildings became progressively less well maintained. Spires could be kept in good condition by the Plaguewalkers they housed, but these decaying homes were another matter. Many had hasty constructions built on top of them, though some had collapsed under the strain of the attempted extensions. The city was all turning to ruin and rubble, year upon year – and some bits of it faster than others.

The old bell tower that they had made their home in had been abandoned long before the orphans stumbled on it, to judge by the decay that had set into its wooden bones. Beams were split with rot, and any paint that had once decorated its walls had long since flaked off.

Every door lock remained rusted shut, just as they had been on that first day. The bell tower orphans didn't need doors to get into their home. Instead of using more proper entrances, the orphans made their way up the side of the tower after first crossing from the nearest rooftop. They had to carefully shuffle around to the far side of it, where was possible to get in through a wide crack in the boards.

Following the others along the ledge, Tolimo found the rough wood under his fingers as familiar as his own hands. Lybella, leading the way as usual, pulled aside a flap of canvas the orphans had artfully draped over the crack, making it look like it had just come loose from the bell level above. She squeezed in, her extra few years making it particularly difficult for her. Orso and Pellita followed.

Finally, Tolimo slipped through into the building within, strangely ill at ease given how often he had done this before. It felt wrong to be both wearing white and in the bell tower at the same time, like the oddest of dreams.

He shook his head, clearing the mental cobwebs. Home. This was home. Tolimo wanted to focus only on that, to forget how things had changed, but still found it more difficult than he expected.

The bell tower wasn't especially cosy. Their possessions were few, but all the more valuable for it. Blankets and straw bedding. Two quality lanterns, taken in one of the orphans' most difficult thefts. A few books – adventure stories used to escape the horror story of Morbetzia's every day. Bags of ill-gotten gains, mostly food but also a few candlesticks and bits of silverware – hard earned savings.

"Yeah!" said Orso, bouncing around the room they had entered, "Take that, Authority!"

They all laughed. They used to curse that noble's name, and now here they were slipping through his fingers despite one of them wearing white. Tolimo's smile soon faded though. There was something tugging on his mind, bringing his thoughts back to the Spire of Justice and what he had left there. If only it hadn't been for that apple, and those watchmen, everything would still be normal.

To think, they had all run from people that had planned to give them to the Plague, only for Tolimo to find his way into it anyway. Maybe he was always cursed to end up wearing white. He looked down at his clothes, grubby after clambering across rooftops. Well, wearing grey at least.

“Come on, we got to celebrate!” said Pellita, and made a dash for the wooden ladder up to the level above. As Tolimo followed, the familiar old creak of the wood under his hands and feet helped to put him at ease. Cool night air lifted his hair as he reached the top, and clambered out to a view of the entire city. This was the level where people might once have come to fit and maintain the great brass bell, before they gave up years before.

The bell itself wasn’t usable, the rope up to it having rotted away long ago. Not that they ever would have wanted to ring it. The orphans had no need to draw attention to their home. The others creaked their way up the ladder behind Tolimo, and found places to sit on the crumbling ledge.

As Pellita rustled around under a canvas looking for something, the rest of them looked out over the broken rooftops. Despite the disrepair, the city had a certain something about it, especially at times like these when it was illuminated from below by the sickly Plague light.

It would be pretty, Tolimo thought, if you didn’t know what that green light meant. It wasn’t just the death it represented, but it seemed to him that the Plague had been just the opportunity the nobles needed to take away the last of the average citizen’s power.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face, for when Pellita was done, she put on an over the top smile as if demonstrating what Tolimo should be doing, fixed him with a very commanding stare for a girl as small as she and said,

“Hey, this is the time for cheering – for singing!”

“No!” the Tolimo and the rest chorused. They had all heard what Pellita’s singing sounded like, and didn’t want to repeat the experience.

“Fine,” Pellita said, scowling, as was common for her, and thrust out her hand with what she had found. She held a bag of Mrs. Saffolina’s Blueberry Muffins, pinched from the most famed bakery still operating in Morbetzia, its cakes and pastries incredibly valuable luxuries purchased only by the richest of nobles. They had been saving the special confections for a special occasion and this was apparently it.

“We beat them! And Tolimo’s safe from the Plague now – think what we can do with that!” said Pellita, shaking the bag slightly as her eyes danced with possibilities. A thief that could walk the streets at night would have a big advantage. The idea didn’t bring Tolimo nearly the same joy as his younger friends though. Lybella merely smiled, and motioned for Pellita to dole out the goods.

Everyone took a muffin, and then one more besides until they were all shared out. As he did so, Tolimo found his gaze wandering back down to the streets, and canals, green lines snaking through the city in the night.

Of course, days in the city were not much brighter, and not much safer. The Plague no longer plumed, instead clinging on to the streets in thin, deadly patches, but at least at night you could see the Plague’s glow coming.



Orso returned with drinks, and with them and the muffins together, the orphans began to feast. The sweet, fluffy treats were like nothing Tolimo had tasted before, and he chose to savour every bite especially the veins of blueberry that marbled their way through the middle.

Lybella chose to do the same, but Orso, ever incapable of patience, devoured both of his before the others could finish the first. As he began trying to beg more out of the others, Pellita pointed and laughed at her brother through a mouth stuffed with muffin.

Hours passed, the four of them slipping back into their old ways – joking, and laughing in the face of the world. After a while Pellita began using her little catapult – a gift from their mother – to flick stones down into the abandoned square below. Orso helped, pointing out targets for his sister with the little architect's telescope he had inherited from their father. They began squabbling after a while, when Pellita started mocking his almost bald head – they'd had to shave it, as Orso always came back so dirty that they feared what bugs he might be carrying in his grimy hair.

"They don't change," Lybella said, startling Tolimo. He realised that he'd gotten quiet. Reserved.

"Just remembering," he replied. The older girl took hold one of the coloured cords braided in her light brown hair and began running her fingers down it. She'd told him what they all meant once – some Casmaran tradition – but that yellow-gold one was the only one he ever recalled. It was for peace.

"It's not easy, you know," she said, "I thought... I really thought we'd lost you, Tol. Orso always – somehow – thinks that everything's going to be fine, even Morbetzia itself! Pellita just gets angry when the world won't go her way. Me... I think I see things how they are. I think you do too."

"And how do you see them?" Tolimo asked.

"Bad, and worse to come. This city's done, it just hasn't quite given up yet. Won't be long though."

She was right – and Tolimo hated it. Despite everything, this city of canals and masks and rickety wood meant something to him. He'd do anything to go back to the old days, before it got bad. Maybe even just to a year or two ago, when they'd finally got properly settled into a life as the bell tower orphans.

Except in those days, none of them had worn white. None of them had a golden heart pinned on their collar, as Tolimo did now.

"Orso!" he called out, wanting a way out of such a serious discussion, "Want to know what it's like up in the Spire of Justice?"

"Yeah!" the boy said, forgetting his conflict with his sister. Pellita too came over, not wanting to appear too interested, but giving herself away by forgetting to scowl. Lybella just nodded to herself, and let it happen.

They asked him so many questions. What was it like to be immune? What had he been up to? He told them everything, from the awful moments in the chamber when the Authority had sentenced him to die, to the strange phantom in the Plague plume at the docks.

They oohed and aahed exactly at the right moments, Lybella asking thoughtful questions soon after. The younger two followed up with more, the words gushing out in a rush. The talk didn't bring Tolimo any peace – the details kept sticking in his head. The dedication of some of those wearing white. The woman that had likely saved his life.

Being here in the bell tower wasn't as simple as he wanted it to be. How it should be.

The Plaguewalkers were not his people. They were the servants of nobles – the enemy! He had no responsibility to those people, and certainly not to the Authority and his so-called justice. That part Tolimo could convince himself of. If only that was the whole of it.

He had seen the work Plaguewalkers did, how dangerous it could be, and how necessary it was. Without their simple labour, Morbetzia would starve. If they all selfishly ran, it wouldn't be long before the Plague claimed the entire city.

One wouldn't be missed, surely? It was a lie, and Tolimo knew it. Every pair of hands counted, or the Authority wouldn't be making the old or the crippled carry cargo. People like that man on crutches at the docks, or Felissa, whose life hung on Tolimo's decisions.

"I've got to go back," he said, suddenly enough to startle even himself.

Silence landed heavily on the group, the other three orphans staring at Tolimo, mouths agape.

"What?" Lybella demanded, and Tolimo found himself compelled to stammer out,

"It's... I can't... I wish I could stay."

"No one's saying you can't except you."

She was right of course. It wasn't fair. Why did he have to be the one to work for the city, and for people he hated in particular? He didn't want the responsibility. Unfortunately, it was more complicated than that. For much of Tolimo's life, he had been called an 'Unexpected Burden', and when he had broken free, he'd become an actual one on the city.

He had no regrets about stealing – that was about survival, and if the nobles wanted their purses to remain uncut, they should have made sure people like Tolimo had other roads to take. However, his parents had taught him differently before they died. A bookmaker and a seamstress, they had been normal, upstanding citizens before the fire. Maybe they would have understood him becoming a criminal, but they wouldn't have wanted it.

"It's not like I want to," he said, "It's just that, well, if I do stay here, people will suffer for it. There's no food for us to steal if the Plaguewalkers didn't bring it in from the supply ships."

Conscience had never been a problem for Tolimo before. It hadn't raised its ugly head as he pilfered coin and valuables from the wealthy, nor when taking what food he needed to live. He'd had nothing. It seemed only fair.

Now Tolimo found himself valuable. He'd never expected to be in a position to want to have less to offer. Yet, just like Felissa, he had duties to perform.

"It's not so bad," he said, trying to explain his feelings aloud, "They make us work hard, but they don't torture us or anything."

"But that sounds rubbish!" Orso exclaimed, "I know we have to work hard too, but at least we get to be together! Someone else can do that stuff."

Tolimo couldn't help but be a little amused by the younger boy's honesty. He was right - being a Plaguewalker was rubbish.

"If it gets bad enough there, I'll be begging for you to come back and get me," he said, fixing what he hoped was an unconcerned smile on his face. It was not enough to convince Pellita, whose face became a storm and burst out,

"You're not seriously going back to the Plaguewalkers?"

There was no good answer to that, not when his mind was so close to made up. Tolimo's expression remained stony, and he didn't say anything. He couldn't even meet Pellita's eyes.

"Don't do it Tol, we need you here. Don't go!" Orso demanded, going so far as to latch on to Tolimo's waist with his little arms. It cracked Tolimo's resolve. It would be so easy to give in and be a bell tower orphan again, one step ahead of the law with his friends at his side.

There was more at stake here though. He owed Felissa his life, and if he didn't go back, it would cost hers. That was what the Authority had said, and his word was law.

"Got a debt," he said, knowing that Lybella at least would understand that, "Someone saved my life – got to return the favour."

Both Orso and Pellita immediately dissolved into a chorus of more demands and disapproval, but Tolimo kept his eyes on Lybella's. She stayed silent. Whatever her opinion, she was keeping it well hidden.

He didn't entirely understand what part of him was choosing to argue so hard in favour of going back, but he pressed on anyway, before his willpower could desert him.

"It's not like we can't do this again. We've just got to be careful." It hurt to say it. Tolimo didn't want to give this up, but the moment was coming soon.

Then again, maybe some traitorous part of him did. It was simple being a Plaguewalker after all. No stealing to survive, no fearing that the law was behind every corner. Was he that shallow? He couldn't be sure.

"You do what you have to do, Tol."

Lybella spoke sadly, but he thought he heard a little understanding in her voice. An attempt at understanding at least.

"Well," Tolimo said sadly, "I guess I'll have to find my way back then."

“What do you mean? We’re coming too,” Lybella replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Tolimo could feel a hint of colour coming to his face at the obvious care written all over the other orphans’ features, each nodding in agreement.

“I don’t really want to make you go all the way back to the Spire of Justice,” he said, doing his best to cover his own emotion, and failing.

“Not got anything more important to do,” Lybella replied, with a hint of a smile, “Besides, how else is the ladder going to get hidden again when you’ve used it? This is going to be a regular outing, remember?”

Her words helped more than she could have known. Just knowing that he had this escape available made things more bearable. He gulped down his emotion – wouldn’t be right to let the others see that.

Orso still looked stricken, and Pellita’s arms were folded in petulant anger, so Tolimo did his best to present a happy front, even though he was anything but happy about his decision. Perhaps that was a reason to go back on it, but he had set his mind on going back, and he wasn’t going to change it now. Maybe here was where he should say goodbye, before anyone could change it for him.

Best not to wait until it got any lighter out anyway – it was already going to be risky trying to get back without anyone realising he’d been gone. It would be alright. What was the worst the guards could do? Might be quite a funny end to the night, he thought as he prepared himself to leave.

They’d probably never caught anyone breaking back in to their imprisonment.

## **SEVEN: FIRETRAP**

Tolimo was awakened by the clanging of bells. Their clashing sounds combined to make a din that no one in the spire could possibly sleep through. His head pounded both with the sound, and his body’s protests at being suddenly awoken.

“Get up!” was the next thing he heard, yelled by a running white blur that his tired mind only just recognised as a Plagewalker. More yells followed as he sat up and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes.

A part of him debated trying to roll over and pretend to be asleep, in the hope that he might escape the consequences of that noise. Then a hand caught his collar and yanked him from the bed.

“Up!”

It was Felissa, wide eyed and looking far more ready than Tolimo. He stood, slightly dazed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and trying to understand what all the rushing people were doing, and why.

“Fire!” one called, “Fire in the undercity!”

That woke Tolimo up properly. He knew personally how dangerous such blazes could be, and with a shock it hit him that he was now a part of dealing with it. A cold shudder of fear went down his spine, and it might have grown stronger if Felissa hadn't gotten him moving.

"Work to do," she said in a firm, but light tone, as if they were just going to market to sell wares. Her calmness helped Tolimo find some of his own, though as they joined the throng of Plaguewalkers, he wasn't sure if it would last.

He'd managed to keep from losing his mind this last week, he could do this too. Maybe. The days since he became a Plaguewalker had passed in relative boredom. Everything was routine, with each minute from waking until flopping back into bed in exhaustion governed by guards, regulation and the distant whims of nobles.

Tolimo had been kept busier than he ever had been in his life. There seemed to be endless tasks for Plaguewalkers to do, and not enough white-wearing people to do them. He was in demand too, being young and healthy, and that was helping him get stronger, along with the regular meals. He had even started sleeping better, having gotten used to the dormitory beds – until now.

Maybe it had been a mistake to come back to the Spire of Justice, despite it saving Felissa's life. True, he could still see the other orphans briefly some nights, but he hadn't counted on being called on to put out undercity fires. The bustling mass of people gave him no chance to protest though, sweeping Tolimo along with it until order formed from the chaos.

Black and white guards shepherded the Plaguewalkers from the spire, whereupon regular city watch joined the group as it began to thread its way across Morbetzia upon platforms and flat roofs. Soon a preacher started up the usual dirge of prayers, and they were forced to file along listening to yet another speech about how they deserved everything that came to them – unless they all worked really, really hard, of course.

In an attempt to ignore the preacher's pointless words, Tolimo focused in on those around him. Felissa, keeping pace at his side with difficulty, was characteristically quiet. Others, however, had more to say.

"Third fire this month. People shouldn't be so sloppy with their tinder boxes," a Plaguewalker just in front suggested. Tolimo could see that they were heading towards the old city though, so that made no sense. No one lived there, not even orphans like him. The buildings were low and derelict, the Plague swallowed everything regularly, and the stench from the sewage in the canals was at its strongest there, where every other street was a waterway.

"Been more every year. City's falling apart," said another well-muscled man, who Tolimo recognised from the night at the docks. Leonato, was it? "More work in choking smoke. More nights without proper sleep. When does it end?" he added.

Apprehension settled heavier and heavier in the pit of Tolimo's stomach as he listened.

"Vindo died on the last one," the first Plaguewalker said, "And Arlita on that one a few months back. Going to be none of us left soon."

Apparently dangerous, unexplained fires were not all that rare. Tolimo bit his lip until it almost bled, balled his fists and said nothing. It was the only way he could put one foot in front of the other, heading towards terrible heat and memories.

Tolimo wouldn't have been surprised if the nobles had ordered the blazes deliberately started to clear away old buildings so they could sweep in and buy up the land for profit. They routinely neglected the poorer quarters of the city, after all – and he knew all too well that the Authority was not above burning parts of the city if it suited his ends. They had failed to purge the Plague all those years ago, the death of Tolimo's parents and so many others achieving nothing. He saw no indication that anyone had cared to learn any lessons from those times.

The line of Plaguwalkers and their escorts shuffled and hobbled their way towards the glare in the distance that Tolimo knew was the fire, but didn't want to think about. With every new rooftop and pathway the pit in his stomach grew harder and heavier. It was like a coal. One from an old fire. Soon enough that orange glow swelled – as did Tolimo's dread.

"It will be alright," Felissa said, reaching down gnarled fingers to briefly squeeze his hand. Tolimo refused to show it, but it did make him feel a little better. It didn't help for long.

Soon they had to descend to street level, though they were still a good way from the flames. This district, next to the mess that was the old city was too decayed for anyone to have bothered building walkways across the roads. Guards followed as close as they could, spreading out to surround the blaze on nearby rooftops, but far enough away that their black silhouettes barely looked human in the smoky orange night.

Then they passed a number of collapsed buildings into the district the smoke was billowing from, and it took all of Tolimo's willpower to keep going. Besides the fire, the only colour around was the sickly green around their feet. The Plague wisps were still creepy to Tolimo, but he could now manage to touch the stuff without quaking in terror. The prospect of going towards the fire was much more daunting.

By the time Tolimo and his fellows reached the building - a rickety construction that had probably once housed more families than it ought to - the blaze was happily crackling away and thinking about spreading to nearby houses. Embers flicked across the street, threatening to catch in dry, flammable wood.

Other Plaguwalkers had already arrived from other spires, throwing buckets of water into the flames and pumping the handles of hoses mounted on large carts. It seemed to Tolimo like a lot of work for very little effect.

Their own group got to work too, finding empty spaces at pumps, and rushing to the nearby canal to fill more buckets with stinking city water. Tolimo knew that he should be doing the same, but found himself rooted to the spot, as if the heat had melted him there.

"We must act. People in danger," said Felissa quietly, and began to nudge at his shoulder for him to move. She always spoke so simply. So directly.

"People..." Tolimo said, half in a stupor. His parents were people. The fire though, the fire was right there. He just couldn't

"We can help. We should help," Felissa added, bending down to look into his eyes. She had so many wrinkles, so many years. Did she have a family somewhere? She looked like somebody's Grandma, but she'd never mentioned anyone. "We are the only ones that can," she finished quietly.

Tolimo hated the very idea of getting closer to the fire, with all its fierce, living light, but Felissa's words cut through his haze of fear and let him really see what was in front of him. Rushing people. A building on fire, but not out of control. This wouldn't spread to swallow the city, not if the Plaguewalkers could fight it back. She was right. He had to beat his fear. People needed their help.

That, and those guards back at the edge of the district were not going to allow any Plaguewalker to leave while it was still burning. Either it died, or he did.

Under Felissa's urging, Tolimo grabbed a bucket and got to work tossing water at the fire. It was like spitting into hell, and the fire barely seemed more than annoyed by it. It snarled at those trying to fight it, spreading itself to more dry fuel with every hot roar and snap of wood.

There wasn't much time for thinking as he dashed back and forth, listening to the cries of the other Plaguewalkers and the terrifying crackle of the fire, but a few stray ideas pried their way in all the same.

How had this fire started? Not even the bell tower orphans would have entered these buildings, risking a rotten floorboard splitting under them - and only the maddest of the mad would have thought striking a fire in old timber was a good idea. It didn't make sense.

Tolimo saw Felissa rush past, struggling to carry a bucket. He was tempted to stop his work to confide his worries to her, but the look of intense concentration on her face made him think twice. It seemed her sense of duty had infected him a little - talk of conspiracy could wait until after the fire was out.

Then, less than a minute later, a fear-laced voice yelled out, and Tolimo almost dropped his bucket, just as he had been about to dip it into the stinking canal. Swinging round, Tolimo saw people in white pointing down a street in the direction of the old city. Green was pouring out of it in great clouds, spreading and advancing towards the blaze and those battling it.

Another Plague plume. Now? One of those phantom things had to come now?

Tolimo had learned his lesson from the last time, and immediately flicked his eyes up to the nearby buildings, searching for a quick way up and out of danger, and saw others pausing their fire-fighting efforts to do the same.

He also saw that there was nowhere safe to flee to. The city nobles had never seen fit to spend the coin on walkways and lifting pulleys - nor on shoring up the old and rotten timbers of what buildings were still standing. That was why all the escorts had stayed back, out of this dilapidated district.

The only way out was on the ground, and ahead was blocked by Plague. That left back where they had come from, and Tolimo could spot some Plaguewalkers straying toward that direction. He was

tempted to do the same, but then from a few storeys up and more than a few buildings back a voice shouted out,

“Keep working!”

It didn't strike Tolimo as being a very good idea, but the watchman, or whoever it was had a point. What choice was there? The fire wasn't going to put itself out just because the Plaguewalkers had to face two terrible things. He did as he was told, but kept swivelling his head in every direction, the healthy paranoia of a life on the streets making him search for whatever bad thing was coming next.

In the next few runs Tolimo's worry made him slosh out almost as much water as he managed to carry to the fire, but it didn't seem to make any difference. The Plaguewalkers were making little progress in fighting it, and the efforts seemed less and less worthwhile by the moment.

The fire was not the only thing growing, either. Plague now blanketed the entire area, and was growing denser still. Tolimo's hands tightened around the bucket handle until the knuckles went white.

He wasn't sure which was worse – the Plague or the fire. Both fears had filled his darkest moments, and never before had he been in as much danger from either. Except, maybe, on the night his parents died. Tolimo shuddered, the emotion rattling through him as he tossed his load of water uselessly into the heat.

No more.

It should have been his cue to run back to the canal for more, but Tolimo had had enough. The inferno had pushed him right up to the edge, and as he looked round, he was nudged over it.

The firefighting had been almost orderly until the Plague plumes arrived. Now chaos reigned. White-garbed people ran, or hobbled in seemingly random directions, wanting a way out of this nightmare. The stupidity of the mob was all that remained, and it was worsening by the minute.

Then Tolimo saw another billow of Plague whoosh out of an alley, cutting off one small group from another. The resolve he had been holding on to vanished.

He had to get out of here. They all did, if they wanted to see another day.

“Hey!” Tolimo yelled to no one in particular, and got no answer back. They weren't going to listen to a child who hadn't even been a Plaguewalker a few weeks ago. Besides, Tolimo saw, plenty were already too busy saving themselves – or trying to.

Shadowy figures were moving around in the fog, and to Tolimo's panicking eye, they looked like they were closing in. He froze in place, wanting to run, but not knowing where.

What did those creatures intend to do? The clouds of Plague wouldn't hurt the Plaguewalkers - unless their immunity deserted them. Of course, that assumed that straight murder wasn't an option to the phantoms.



Tolimo began to run himself, checking alleyways for a way out unspoiled by Plague. There were none, and on the third, he realised something even more disturbing about the clouds of sickly green creeping towards him.

The Plague was flowing uphill.

This couldn't be a coincidence. The Plague was being directed towards them somehow. Why? How? He had not satisfied his curiosity last time, but Tolimo wasn't stupid enough to try again now. So, he picked a street at random, and sprinted down it, leaving the remaining idiots to fight the fire that was never getting extinguished by human hands. It was a decision born of fear, and he felt a coward as he sprinted away. He hadn't exactly tried that hard to help anyone else – he hadn't even spared a moment to search for Felissa. But he was going to live.

If the other Plaguewalkers all ran too, they might be fine, Tolimo told himself as he propelled himself back towards the way they had come into the district, where the demolished buildings had been. He threaded through the twists of Morbetzia's streets with a speed born of terror, imagined fire and Plague tendrils licking at his heels.

There seemed to be no one on the rooftops, not a guard, not even a preacher. It didn't seem a good sign. Plaguewalkers were valuable commodities. There was no way they would be left alone like this in the bowels of the city. The only reason for the rooftops to be bare was that someone had made them so. Tolimo realised that he was getting towards the edge of the district. Maybe there he might be safe, he thought, eyes darting around, searching for potential dangers. He found some at the next turn.

The street was blocked, and the wooden barricade that had been collapsed into it to do the blocking was ablaze. A panicked suspicion shot through him that this might not be the only place the district had been sealed off. Maybe every line of escape was being cut.

As if to confirm it, a shadow appeared on top of the closest roof carrying a torch. No sooner had Tolimo spotted it, than it had touched the fiery stick to the nearest beam, and scurried away. In seconds the entire length of it was aflame. The wood must have been soaked in some kind of oil to make it burn faster.

Tolimo felt his lungs stuttering in air, the tiny quick breathes not enough to keep him going, but couldn't stop it. It was the flames, so close that he could almost taste them, on top of every other horror he had witnessed this night. It was too much to have to fight his own memories too.

The fire wasn't just upon the one building either – it was all around. Wherever Tolimo turned there were more cloaked figures scuttling and climbing, lighting flammable wood alight. These things were flesh and bone, he realised, but the knowledge did nothing to make Tolimo fear them less. Still, his fear of the fire starters, was eclipsed by his terror at the flames themselves.

Searing heat washed over him, from the barricade, from the buildings, from everywhere. Fire was leaping across timber and between rooftops, the breeze sending embers across gaps to catch and burn. Tolimo flinched as some heavy beam cracked under the burning stress, the furious sound like thunder in the darkness. Then he turned and ran, pursued by it and his own demons back in the direction he had just come from.

There had to be another way out. Had to. Had to. He found himself retracing the route back to the firefighting, unable to think. Unable to do anything but run.

Tolimo just had time to spot that the cobbled street he was pelting down held a much thicker carpet of Plague than the first time that he had travelled it before he turned a corner and was forced to screech to a halt before an awful hunched presence. A shadowed figure wearing robes.

It held a censer, like the incense burners that the preachers held, only this one was not spreading anything as harmless as incense. As it swung, Plague spewed from its grills in hissing clouds in time to the creature's strange, tapping footsteps.

A step further and Tolimo could make out more. The robes the thing wore were old, but patched and sewn up where they had frayed. They had the look of clothes that were taken care of for function, and nothing else.

He didn't understand. He couldn't even move, let alone think. Let alone live, most likely.

The thing in front of him, clearly no phantom, was looking him right in the eye, and there was nowhere to hide. Its hood was slightly pushed back, revealing much of what had been hidden beneath the patched cloth. It wasn't some kind of ghost or spirit, but its face was still plenty frightening enough.

Like a ratling, its skin was not furry, but scaled. Its features were long and pointed, with black, twitchy eyes staring out, suspicious and clever. Several burns scarred its awful face.

The horrible thing looked more surprised at his presence than angry. The censer continued to swing back and forth, back and forth hissing out more of the deadly glowing gas as it watched Tolimo, features frozen.

It seemed that neither of them had been prepared for this meeting. Any second Tolimo expected the thing to bare its rodent fangs and strike for him, but it didn't. Instead, it regarded him levelly as the Plague its censer was generating writhed up around him. The strands of green fog did nothing more though – a fact that seemed to puzzle the creature, for it cocked its head to one side in confusion.

Tolimo knew what terrible danger he was in, but didn't know what to do other than quiver in fright as the Plague coiled ever tighter around him and the beast making it halted paces away.

Should he run, and risk it chasing him down? Maybe if he'd had some kind of weapon, it might have been worth trying to fight it, but Tolimo had no skill with steel, even if he could somehow find some. Plaguewalkers were supposed to be kept safe, not fight.

He looked round, searching for a way to flee that made sense, but there were no alleyways, and a quick glance behind showed Tolimo that more Plague was coming in from that end of the street. Another of the censer-bearers had to be passing there. To his horror, he realised he had been right. This was no coincidence.

This was a trap.

These beings had brought the city's Plaguewalkers to one place with no easy retreat. The nearest spire was some minutes away at a sprint, and with no one fighting the fire every building in this district was going to end up as char. Not that Tolimo was going to last that long.

He heard the creature in front of him let out a low hiss and shift its weight of the cobbles. A moment later it swept a robed arm forward in command. A myriad chorus of squeaking answered from behind – and the noises were rapidly closing in.

The figure was not alone. Tiny shapes blurred along the street, partially obscured by the Plague mists. It was only as they closed on Tolimo that he realised that it was a horde of ratlings, their scurrying scaly shapes moving with much more intent than normal.

That was enough make him risk breaking away from the tendrils of Plague that surrounded him. Tolimo pushed through the spectral fog, intending to make a run for it, but the onrushing tide of vermin was far quicker than he was.

Squeaking scaly forms clattered along the cobbles until the ratlings were streaming past Tolimo – all but a handful that turned as if on command and went for him directly. Panicking, he tried to back away from them, but the rodent-like things were too nimble. They encircled him within seconds and closed in.

He considered kicking out at them, but hesitated and lost his chance as the ratlings reached him. Tolimo felt them begin to swarm up his legs, and wanted to scream, but was transfixed by fear. The sound simply wouldn't come.

One in particular drew Tolimo's horrified attention, as it scaled his back. Tolimo was a statue, but that didn't stop it moving. The ratling soon reached his shoulder, tiny claws poking through the white material of Tolimo's clothing to pinch and nip at his skin. The thing's tiny weight felt leaden, like it was going to tear his shoulder off in the long, long seconds it sat there.

Tolimo's head wouldn't move, so it was only his eyes that slid slowly round to see what the little creature was doing. He couldn't risk its sharp little incisors being buried into his neck. The ratling was just sitting there, blinking beady eyes and regarding him with an intensity that no animal ought to have. Suddenly, as if trying to provoke Tolimo to do something, it bared its teeth and made a little hissing noise. It did not attack though, despite the blood pounding through the all too exposed veins in his neck.

"I don't want to fight," Tolimo whispered, too addled by fear to think about the fact that he was trying to talk to vermin. All his normal bluster and disrespect for those in power had evaporated in the face of this horror. He continued on, babbling, "We just came to put the fire out. That's all, I swear. I don't know why you're so angry with us – I'm new, I don't know anything. I don't want to die."

He probably would have continued, his fear feeding his mouth a constant stream of words, except that the ratling's master called out in a language that barely sounded like words with its odd teeth obscuring them.

The ratling immediately turned its head, twitching its stubby whiskers. The cloaked figure turned both its snout and its black eyes directly on Tolimo's. There was a long silence, full of terrible potential.

"Not yet," it eventually said, in a shocking imitation of human language. Then the thing's robe swished, the censer following them, pulling around in an arc as it turned away to leave down another alleyway.

"Wait!" Tolimo said, only realising how stupid he was being after the word left him. The figure paused, and turned its cowed head back to Tolimo. Why had he done that? He racked his brains for something clever to say, but only came up with,

"Why are you doing this? Doesn't the city have enough problems? We've got no reason to hate you, so why do you hate us?"

He found that his fear was tainted with a hint of anger. The Plague had been a blight on Morbetzia for so long, and had cost so many lives. If these creatures had been behind it all along, they were the ones that had made the city starve and eat itself over the decades. The ones truly responsible for what happened to his parents.

The thing's dark beads regarded Tolimo. He felt his heart slamming blood through his veins. He had been so stupid. It had been leaving – why had he said anything?

"You do not?" it suddenly asked, in a tone that could have been anywhere between curiosity, disbelief or amusement. Its strange features left its emotions almost impossible to decipher.

Tolimo found his hand had risen without conscious thought to the old wooden prayer block at his neck, his fingers shakily running over the angular grooves of its indecipherable letters. The creature spotted him doing so, and took half a pace closer. Tolimo would have flinched, were it not for the ratling at his neck holding him in a lock of fear.

The being didn't attack though. Instead, it peered from under its hood at what Tolimo held on to so tightly.

"The old beliefs." it said after a moment's inspection, "In some old, buried places that still means something - but not here. Not anymore. The trust is broken and can never be fixed. Can it?"

The burned creature looked away at those last words, as if thinking. Tolimo didn't understand. Was it talking about the long dead language cut into the wood? Why should this creature care? It was a struggle for even that much to cut through his fear, and trying to reason further was too hard.

The ratling on his shoulder suddenly cried out a chattering series of squeaks right into Tolimo's ear. Startled, he flicked his gaze round to stare at it. It squeaked again, cleaned its whiskers with a scaly paw, and clawed its way down his arm before leaping to the street. He felt the small but terrifying weights the others leaving too, dropping away one by one.

A heartbeat after he watched the last scurry away, his eyes snapped back to where their master had been, but it too was vanishing, its tattered robe whipping around the corner of a building.

It was gone. It was gone. Gone.

His breaths were coming in rapid wheezes that Tolimo couldn't control. If he hadn't been for where he was, and how bad things still were, he would have collapsed right there in the street. Plague still flowed there though, and the crackle of fire still rent the air. If he lost his grip, he was done for.

Tolimo didn't understand what had just happened, and he didn't care. There was still plenty of danger all around. It triggered something in him, now that his mind was free once more to be filled with the sounds of burning and the smells of smoke. Before the fear could completely claim him, a terrible thought came to Tolimo.

He thought he now understood why someone would want a fire like this. There was only one reason to set them, when only certain people came in response. Why lure the Plaguelwalkers in?

Why else, but to destroy them?

#### **EIGHT: NO ESCAPE**

Tolimo made it back to the first fire in daze.

On arrival, he saw instantly that the fire was a lost cause, and the buildings it had already caught with it. Fires were leaping up in every direction. The district was being cut off, and the remaining Plaguelwalkers were being boxed in. Plague plumes clogged the open area, and as Tolimo watched, more people were drawn into them to face who knew what horrors inside.

He couldn't think anymore, couldn't run any further. His head was full of fire. It had all been too much, and now he felt trapped in half-held memories when the first of his lives had been consumed by flame.

It would have been so easy to fall into that forever, tumbling away from reality as the fire closed in, paralysed in place. It might have had him, if it were not for the spindly white shape of Felissa running in front of him, silhouetted against the flame.

She was heading for the canal, a bucket swinging at her side as she moved with an impressive pace for someone her age. Tolimo blinked at the sight, but he shouldn't have been surprised – it was just like Felissa to be still thinking of a Plaguelwalker's duty even with all the terror going on around her.

Tolimo saw her pause in her pointless work and cock her head as she spotted him. Then, as if for the first time, she seemed to realise how bad things had gotten around her. The woman's old eyes widened, the awful reality reflected in them.

Guilt grabbed at Tolimo. He had barely even thought of her when he fled – yet he could barely even hold his thoughts together now, with her right in front of him.

The creatures intended to cook every Plaguelwalker they could in this trap. Images again flashed through his head of his own home engulfed in flames, and other things he couldn't possibly have remembered.

“Tolimo?”

The loss of his family was still so fresh after all this time. How could it not be, when it had been seared there by the flames.

“Tolimo? Things seem to be out of hand.”

Felissa. It was Felissa. He hadn’t even seen her come over.

“This... we... they’re here. Everything going to burn,” he said, the words lead.

“Don’t worry. Rest of the city is safe.”

What? Tolimo thought about that for a moment, and suddenly realised what she meant – and what that meant in turn. Wasn’t it awfully convenient that this blaze had happened in a self-contained district, one bounded by canals on one side and broken wreckage on another?

Suddenly those knocked down sections on the district edge made sense. They were firebreaks – gaps too wide for the fire to cross that would keep it contained. The things didn’t want the whole city ablaze, just those that kept it alive. The pit welled up again, threatening to swallow him.

“The Plague things are here. They’re going to burn everyone!” he repeated, numbly.

Felissa’s expression changed from stoicism to alarm, but her feet remained firmly planted.

“Others in danger,” she said without budging, save for twisting her head across the scene, perhaps searching for other Plaguwalkers. Only a handful were left.

“They’re going to die too...” he mumbled, sinking deeper into his pit of despair. Too much. It was too much. Had to get out of this heat. This madness.

Suddenly, he grabbed hold of Felissa’s sleeve, and began towing her along, not knowing where he was going, or how they would get there. Somewhere. Anywhere not here.

However, but he could up to run, or even decide where to run, his attention was drawn by the shout of a large framed man in white whose face Tolimo recognised. It was followed by the clicking of claws and the clinking swing of metal chains from a nearby alley.

As the man attempted to turn and run, a new squeaking tide rolled out of the alley, ratlings streaming out in a widening cone, much as they had done to Tolimo earlier.

The Plaguwalker kicked out at the rushing vermin, catching several glancing blows, before managing to land a stamp on one that flattened so much of it that the violence seemed almost silly. There was no time to feel sorry for the squished vermin though.

Plague swirled together and gusted at the man as if it was a blow from a giant spectral fist. The substance smashed into him, but with no force, and he barely even flinched. Instead, he simply stood there unmoving as the Plague dissipated back to the floor.

Tolimo smiled grimly, thinking that whatever intelligence animated the stuff wasn't all that smart, but then the man threw his head back and gave a stifled cry of pain. Something terrible was happening to him. Something that turned his cry into an agonising scream.

The man fell to his knees as every bit of exposed skin began to sag, distending and leaving him with a horrific rubbery imitation of a face. Plague had wriggled its way inside him, his immunity gone. Tolimo knew what that meant, but that didn't prepare him for the full horror of what followed. It would have been much better to look away, but found that he couldn't.

It was like all the health had been drained from the unfortunate Plaguelwalker, but still more was leaking from him, dripping away much like his skin. He slowly oozed to the ground, his head coming to rest pointing at Tolimo. It was at that point that the doomed man saw Tolimo for the first time, and the shock of it gave him a brief moment of clarity, free from screaming.

"Help... me..." the man said, bulging eyes staring, voice reed thin and full of despair.

That was the moment that broke Tolimo, and he turned to run once more, in yet another direction. He didn't care which one, as long as it was away from the monster, its minions and the horror they had created.

Dragging Felissa along too, he let fearful instincts pull him in and rush away.

"We should..." she said, but he wasn't listening.

"Can't help him. Can't help him. Can't help him," Tolimo muttered to himself in a mantra to overcome either fear, or his conscience, or both. The dying man had a manta of his own though, and the cries of pain were a powerful one indeed.

The Plaguelwalker wasn't dead, not yet, but Tolimo found himself wishing that the man's strength would fail. Then it would be over. There was nothing anyone could do for him now, and it would be so much better if those shrieks would just stop.

Tolimo dragged Felissa with him as he fled, the man's screams following them. The air was thick with grey smoke and green Plague, and the haze lead him to almost run right off the canal bank. If it had not been for Felissa's weight as a counterbalance, Tolimo certainly would have toppled in.

Regaining his balance, he was about to pelt off in another direction, when Felissa pointed into the water and said loudly,

"That way!"

"What?" he shouted back.

There was no point getting to the other side – the waterway ran through the district from one end to the other and the opposite bank was just as much in the trap as this one. Along its length though...

The canal. It might work - it was the only place that the fire couldn't reach. Hope began to move his feet along the bank before his mind could catch up with how bad an idea it truly was.

With each step he thought up a new problem. He was at best a passable swimmer. No one went in the canals if they could avoid it, given the waste that so often got dumped in it, and the fact that the Plague tended to flow into their channels. No one really maintained them anymore, and anything could be lying beneath the waters, from obstructions to sharks for all Tolimo knew.

None of that mattered a pinch. They weren't going to make it through the inferno on foot, and at any moment another creature could come across them – and be less merciful than the last.

"Through there," Tolimo said, pointing at the place where the canal split the buildings.

"Is that..." Felissa managed to get out in reply, but then events overtook them.

First, a pair of cloaked figures swished through the Plague cloud, a horde of squeaking ratlings running at their feet. Censers held in their right claws swished in time with each other, and Tolimo's terror rose higher with every metronomic swing.

Then the building, having fought so long to stay standing while the Plaguelwalkers tackled the fire licking at its dry innards, finally gave up on standing any longer. The entire thing buckled with a deafening crack – the sound of a stick frying in a giant's campfire. More followed, until the collapse became a deafening thunder of breaking timbers, loud enough to wake the dead – or to make them.

It smashed down over the canal, cascading burning debris over stone and water both. Its structure was still that of a building, but soon the debris would break up and settle down to the bottom. Then there would be no chance of escape that way.

"We must!" said Felissa, but Tolimo couldn't do it. Too much fear. Fire and images of the past. Plague and the presently closing monsters.

"I.." he said, frozen.

"We must jump!" she said, as strong as he'd ever heard her say anything.

"Can't.." he managed, but couldn't finish the thought, because without warning Felissa had leapt from the bank, pulling Tolimo with her into cold darkness. It was an awful experience from the very first moment his feet touched the water.

Cold swallowed his body, soaking his clothes and dragging him down. He just had time to hear Felissa splash in too, and then he was submerged in it, water doing its best to fill everything. Tolimo tasted foulness in his mouth, and fought to find air for several seconds before breaking the surface long enough to grab a single gasp.

Tolimo desperately flailed his way forward to where Felissa was also catching her breath, trying to indicate that they had to head through the sinking rubble before it was too late. The chill had brought back some of his senses, and he was focused now. They had to get through this. Together.

Pushing through the fire flecked reflections in the water, Tolimo linked up with the older woman, and they pushed on together, helping one another's attempts to splash along the stinking canal towards the ever more ruined building.



Felissa did better than he had expected, and actually managed to find a swimming rhythm where he was still struggling heavily. She was weaker than him, certainly, but she had some kind of technique – she must have learned to swim before.

Together they made a passable attempt at movement, though Tolimo couldn't have explained how. Every kick and stroke he made seemed more frantic and random, but the panicked pace seemed to be enough to drive them forward.

It was almost impossible to see anything with the smoke fouling the air and terrible light everywhere, from the burning orange flames to the dense green eeriness all across the water surface.

There was a fury of sound too, particularly from the demolished building that they had almost reached. Tolimo had hoped that there might still be some kind of space on the surface that they could fit through, but there was nothing he could see in the churning mess.

They couldn't get out. Even if they could hide from the robed beings, the fire would be a relentless hunter. Nowhere would be safe – but they couldn't stay in the canal forever either, and they couldn't keep swimming forward on the surface.

There was only one way to go, one chance.

"Down!" he yelled and pulled Felissa under with him. Diving into the blackness was tantamount to suicide, but not acting was even worse – and he'd rather drown than burn. Frantically Tolimo kicked himself forward, the canal water stinging his eyes. Not that he could see much besides strange shadows of falling debris, only partially lit by the inferno on the surface.

That fire was blotted out as they passed into the collapsing wood and stone, the darkness almost a worse horror than what lay behind. Something sturdy brushed by his arm, its massive weight forcing Tolimo downward, down to be crushed at the bottom of the canal, or so he thought before being freed a moment later by a yank from Felissa.

The din of the settling rubble sounded out from all around and the air in Tolimo's lungs was fading fast. He had no idea if they were swimming into a dead end where they might be trapped and crushed, or spend their last drops of air fruitlessly scrabbling at unmoving rubble.

His breath was almost spent already. The fire above seemed to have made its way into his lungs, burning them away now that they had been emptied. They had to go up, whether they were through or not. Kick, kick, kick towards the light. Towards the fire. Tolimo's fears had been overtaken by his will to live, and he poured all of his strength into the task.

Gasping, he broke through into the night air, Felissa a fraction behind. The smoke-filled night felt like paradise after the dark water. It wasn't safety though. There were still nightmares roaming the streets, still a world on fire nearby.

Still in the clutches of fear, he whipped around in the water, so desperate to understand what was going on that he gave himself a mouthful of canal water to spit out. Coughing, he only began to calm when he saw that the barrier lay behind them, still summoning up the odd crackle and snap of cooked wood even as it fell further into the canal waters.

Felissa sounded half-drowned too, choking out liquid and sucking in air with a worrying wheeze. Tolimo would have feared for her in other circumstances, but here, next to the blaze and the wreckage it had dumped into the canal they still swam in, it felt pointless. He watched a few more bits of rubble tumble into the water in great splashes as he tiredly helped her towards the water's edge.

It was likely going to dam the canal up when it was done – another bit of damage the phantoms had done, on top of the huge heap of worse crimes. Tolimo couldn't bring himself to care much. He was too relieved to be alive.

They were free of the fire. In body at least. While they continued to slowly swim away, Tolimo's mind lingered in darker places, lit by flickers and screams. Or it did until several minutes later he heard cry of a voice he recognised from a rooftop near the canal edge, safely away from the blaze.

"Sinners, you have survived!" called the preacher, his incense censer swinging in a horrible reminder of the creatures creating the Plague, "A step on the road to forgiveness! A sign that your path is right and just!" he declared. The man wasn't alone. The tattered remains of the guards that had accompanied the Plaguelwalkers stood beside him on the rooftop, crossbows levelled. Tolimo swam to the side and climbed out of the canal, wet and stinking. He helped Felissa out too, before collapsing to his knees, hands up in surrender.

Time to go home.

## **NINE: BURNT OUT**

They needed to carry Tolimo back to the Spire of Justice.

His mind was still too busy fighting that fire. Now that he was out of immediate danger, the stress of everything that he had been through was raking claws deep into his thoughts. Carried between two grumbling guards in a state of near stupor, Tolimo clutched his prayer block tight, thanking whatever gods it was meant for praying to that he had survived – though not unscathed.

Memories flickered through him, repeating hot terrors over and over until they burned themselves into him next to old mental scars. It took several minutes for the images to burn themselves out, and much longer before Tolimo could even speak. Even then he was trembling, and not from the cold.

At least he had escaped the fire. Compared to some, he was pretty lucky. He felt nothing of the sort, but it put his own miserable appearance into perspective, from his sodden, grubby Plaguelwalker's clothes to the ash he could still feel clogging his dark hair.

That was the spire up ahead he realised, with a strange mix of comfort and dread. The place he was cursed to call home.

He could have stayed with the other orphans and been spared this. Instead he had chosen, what? Responsibility? To who? Duty? He didn't believe in that kind of madness, not like Felissa did.

“With me,” he heard Felissa say as they reached the entrance to the spire, and she helped him find his feet, shepherding him up the stairs until they were once again surrounded by metal and pipework instead of timber.

“Right to the top,” one of the black and white guards said. Tolimo no longer felt like mocking the man’s floppy hat, no matter how silly it was.

“We’re going to... the Authority?” Tolimo managed to get out. Felissa nodded.

The Authority’s office was as Tolimo remembered it, with all its expensive decoration, only now its occupant looked a lot less composed. It was hard to be sure with that split black and white mask, but he had a hand tangled in his greasy dark hair as he bent over his desk.

“You’re back. Good,” he said, leaning back, “Too many Plaguewalkers lost tonight already.”

That was true, but the way the Authority said it, he might as well have been reading from a bad month of a balance sheet. He did have a piece of paper full of numbers in front of him. Maybe he was.

“We almost got burned to death because you sent us...”

“Yes,” the Authority interrupted, “I can see that from the soot and such. Tell me everything, boy. I intend to discover how this disaster occurred.”

Tolimo didn’t have the energy to try and refuse. He did what he could to explain what had happened in broad strokes – he was not in a fit state to do much more. The Authority listened, fingers steepled, mask revealing nothing of his thoughts. When he was done, he took a deep breath, and said,

“Aunt, you let me listen to this pack of lies without saying a word. Say something now.”

Aunt? Tolimo looked around, searching for some other masked noble, perhaps one in a bejewelled dress and an exquisite swan mask. No one was there, except him – and Felissa. Who the Authority was looking right at.

“What?” Tolimo cried, “He’s... You’re his aunt?!”

“She didn’t say?” said the Authority, “No, of course she wouldn’t. Doesn’t say much, does she – but she does know her duty. Her duty now is to confirm your story. Or not, as the case will probably prove.”

Despite the man’s disbelief, Felissa just nodded. Tolimo just gaped at her. She was a noble! At least, she had been once. An important one too, if she was related to the Authority.

“Well. Isn’t that something. Assuming your mind isn’t totally addled, which I’m thinking is likely. I don’t know who it was you saw – not rat people, I’m sure – but someone set those fires. What’s left of your guard said as much. We’re going to need more guards. More weapons. Article 10 of the city charter would hold the necessary powers, yes.”

“They were rat...” Tolimo began, but the Authority’s mask snapped towards him and he held up a hand in caution.

"I didn't ask for comment. I was thinking aloud. You may go. You too Felissa – and I'm glad you're safe, and that this boy didn't run off and leave you with the consequences. Try not to believe every bit of superstitious rubbish he spouts though."

"I.." said Tolimo, ready to carry on fighting, but Felissa put an arm around his shoulders and began trying to usher him out. He gave in. There wasn't any point trying to convince the Authority of anything. He was a man with a mind of stone, the thoughts in it chiselled in with no room for more.

"Get your rest," the masked man said as they left, already moving to work on a stack of paperwork, "Those of you that are left are going to be busy every waking moment from now on."

He waved them out, and his personal guard escorted them away, back to the Plaguewalker barracks. The place was almost empty, Tolimo saw. Some that had been already injured, and a few that had also limped back to the spire were all that was left in the dozens upon dozens of beds. The door slammed shut, and they were left in the dark with all of the ghosts.

Tolimo tried to sleep. He really tried to, but there was too much in his head. Echoes of the fire, and of even worse things. He hadn't known that there were worse things before tonight.

No, he couldn't sleep, not after everything.

"Felissa," he hissed, sitting up, and saw her eyes flick open.

"I... Would you like to talk for a bit?" he said, hopefully.

She sat up too, and Tolimo chose to believe that meant yes.

"It's..." he began, and realised he had no idea what he wanted to say.

"None of this is alright," said Felissa, to his surprise, "You don't have to pretend."

Tolimo almost broke down in tears at that. Almost, but he managed to hold them back. He didn't want to break. He'd already cracked too far. He wasn't sure he could come back if he let everything out. Too much death. Too much horror.

"The Plague. Those things. They'll never be alright," he found himself saying.

"They never were. I remember before it started," Felissa replied, "Didn't need Plaguewalkers then."

That sounded nice. Tolimo would have liked to think of times like that, but the night had put too many images in his mind.

"I saw the Plague take that man, the big one with the tattoos," he said, leaving the details unspoken.

"Leonarto," Felissa said softly. Of course, she must have known the man better than Tolimo. With the name attached to the face, Leonarto's fate seemed all the more terrible. The handful of moments that had been all it took to snuff out a life replayed in Tolimo's head, from the moment the monsters and their ratlings appeared, until his last sight of the dying man, writhing in pain on the cobbles.

Leonarto couldn't have been the only Plaguewalker to fall tonight. There had been so many people there trying to save part of Morbetzia from going up in smoke. So many screams in the night. Yet even with all that, Tolimo kept coming back to what he had seen happen to that man. There was something about his death that didn't make sense.

"He just... one minute he was immune, and then he wasn't."

It was like someone else was making the deduction, a rational person separate from Tolimo that was talking in his voice.

"All those ratlings rushed him," he continued, "like they did me – like they were dancing to that thing's tune."

Tolimo traced a letter in the prayer block, and then another, the gesture calming him. He needed it to fully recall what had happened to Leonarto without retching. The image was burned into his mind of the Plaguewalker, the man, as he succumbed in awful pain to the Plague that – up until that moment - had not touched him for months. Years maybe.

It didn't make sense. If the phantoms were what took people's immunity, why did it sometimes just happen at random?

"What if it isn't random?" he found himself saying. Until the words fell out of him, the thought hadn't quite formed, but now they were there in the air, he found himself believing in them.

"It didn't take my immunity," he mused, "Or yours. Leonarto though, he didn't act like either of us. He fought."

Tolimo recalled the vivid sight of the man stamping on a scurrying rodent. Ratlings were commonplace in the city, and most adults killed them on sight, especially when they got into homes. Tolimo wouldn't be surprised if most people had murdered one or two of the vermin before they were adults.

But he hadn't.

Tolimo had lived somewhere high enough that ratlings rarely ventured there, and had never been that enthusiastic about the idea anyway – every denizen of Morbetzia had it bad enough already without someone trying to kill them, even ratlings.

Could it be that simple? Did it even make sense? He looked over at Felissa. Kind, empathetic Felissa who never sounded like she would hurt a fly, let alone a person – or a ratling. Tolimo could easily believe that she had never killed anything, despite years of opportunity.

Maybe the Plague really did only affect those that killed the little creatures.

Shouldn't someone have noticed? Why would they, Tolimo supposed, it wasn't like anyone would have thought to ask the question when everything else about the Plague seemed so random. It took who it wanted and did what it wanted with them, as far as anyone knew.

"What if the killing was what killed him?" Tolimo said aloud, setting the idea into reality. He looked into Felissa's lined eyes, watching for any wisdom they might offer.

"The ratling I mean," he added, "Right after Leonarto killed it, the Plague took him."

Silence answered him for several long seconds.

She wasn't rejecting it out of hand. Did that mean that Felissa thought the idea reasonable, or that she just thought it was so stupid that it was not even worthy of a response?

"So?" He said, growing impatient, "What do you think?"

"Maybe."

"You think maybe?"

"Yes," she said, as if that made it clear.

"Well, then we should take this to the Authority," Tolimo suggested, "If people know about this, maybe it'll keep them alive!"

"Won't believe it."

"Not even from you? His aunt?! I still can't believe that, by the way."

"He knows I want my city to be whole again, like it used to be," she said in her tempered, quiet way, "He knows me. Knows I wouldn't hurt things. Maybe thinks I'm a bit mad. It'll be no better coming from me."

If they didn't even trust someone like her, a Plaguelwalker who had served them loyally for decades without complaint, what chance was there that the Authority or any other noble would believe anything that came from Tolimo? They were blind to real devotion, never mind anything else. Even now, Felissa was polishing the golden heart on her collar with a sleeve, as if it meant something.

"Why do you care so much about that?" Tolimo said, pointing at it. Her hand went to the symbol, and a tired little smile appeared on her lips.

"Morbetzia needs Plaguelwalkers," she said, as if she were recruiting for the post.

How many Plaguelwalkers were even alive now?

Tolimo really didn't know. There had to have been a large chunk of the city's entire supply fighting that fire. Some others had slipped out, but there was no way to be sure how many. Personally, Tolimo thought the odds for most of the other Plaguelwalkers looked slim.

He looked at the empty beds again. If that many were truly gone, Morbetzia didn't have long. Starvation, ruin, or even more fires would take it before long. There wasn't time to be fighting with the nobles to make them believe the truth. The Plague people would take what they wanted, and there'd be no one to stop them. Who knew what they wanted though.

That creature hadn't made it clear with its halting speech and strange talk. Tolimo ran the conversation through his head again, seeing if it made any more sense. Not much – but something did spark in his head.

“One of those things said that there are buried places where the ancient language means something,” Tolimo said quietly. The robed rat-person had recognised the writing on the prayer book and said that. It wasn’t the dead language that Tolimo was interested in. It was the buried places. Somewhere in Morbetzia, those creatures lived and plotted. Somewhere old, and buried, it had said.

“Tolimo?” Felissa questioned.

“I want to know,” he replied, finding his resolve growing by the word, “I want to know why this happened. I want to know what they are, and why they’ve destroyed this city. So many people have suffered. It gave me a clue to finding them, and all of their reasons. I’m not staying here, waiting to be sent to die on some other job. I’m going to get answers.”

Felissa looked at him, a surprising level of evaluation in her gaze – not something Tolimo had seen her before. Eventually those old eyes found what they were looking for, as she said directly, and firmly,

“Coming with you.”

Tolimo wasn’t fond of that idea. He didn’t like the idea of getting her into more danger. Felissa was one of the few people Tolimo had met that didn’t seem to be out for herself. In this city that was something precious. Morbetzia needed people like her.

“Not going without me,” Felissa added, which reminded Tolimo that if he did, it would only leave her to whatever nasty punishment the Authority decided on. There would be no mercy from him. That black and white masked man was someone that kept his promises, good and bad. Even his own relative would not be safe.

“I guess that’d be best,” said Tolimo, not that he was exactly sure it was. Felissa nodded, and went to a desk in the corner that held paper and ink saying,

“I will write a note for Balo telling him everything, in case we do not come back.”

“Balo?”

She blinked at him.

“Do you mean the Authority?” Tolimo added.

“Yes, Balo,” she said as she began to write, “I suggested the name to his mother. I’m going to call him by it, and he can’t stop me.”

Tolimo was starting to think that most people would struggle to get Felissa to do anything she didn’t want to do. As she finished writing though, doubts began to creep into his head – not about her, but about himself.

“This... I don’t know if we can do this. I don’t know if we can find those creatures. I don’t know if we really should. It just... I think I’ve got to. No one else will. It’s my...”

Felissa stepped up to Tolimo as he tailed off, and put one wizened hand on his shoulder.

“Responsibility,” she said simply.

“Do you really want to do this?” he questioned, feeling like with a decision like this, you should be sure, “You saw what those things do to people like us. People that wear white. If we find them and they catch us... You want to risk that?”

Now Tolimo said it out loud, he wasn’t sure he did either. He was going to do it anyway though, and Felissa had made her decision too.

“My responsibility,” she said.

To help preserve Morbetzia, Tolimo wondered, or to look after him? He decided that he could accept either. That wasn’t the only issue though.

“Alright – but are you alright to climb?” Tolimo asked dubiously. She nodded, and he chose to believe her despite his misgivings. She had proved much more capable than he had thought before after all. At his acceptance Felissa nodded again and asked,

“What is your plan?”

That was something that Tolimo knew he was going to have to work on. However, he had some kindling around an idea that might be sparked to life with a little luck. Fortunately, he did know where to begin.

“First,” he said, “we’re going to need some help.”

#### **TEN: POOR COUNCIL**

The bell tower orphans arrived at the spire’s window even earlier than Tolimo could have hoped.

Their worried faces stared back at him from the rooftop across from the Spire of Justice as they sent the badly constructed ladder up for him to cross. They were all happy to see him, until they spotted Felissa beside him, causing not a little consternation.

Tolimo shushed them, until he could clamber across and say,

“It’s alright, let her come over too.”

The three children did as he asked, but pelted him with questions while the old woman painstakingly made her way over the ladder too. She didn’t make it look easy, but she never looked like falling either.

When she stepped onto the rooftop, the first words were Lybella’s, and they were uncharacteristically rude.

“Who’s this? She looks like she’s going to keel over before the night’s over.”

Guiltily, Tolimo remembered when he’d thought of Felissa in much the same way.



“Not one of us,” muttered Pellita, never one to trust when suspicion was an option. Feeling that it was better to jump in before the mood of the group soured too far, Tolimo placed himself between Felissa and the others and tried to look disarming as he said,

“This is Felissa. She’s here to help.”

“Help with what?” Lybella said warily. It was fair – Tolimo knew that he had a lot of explaining to do. Hastily, he gave a description of the night’s events, to the increasingly disbelieving faces of his friends.

“It’s all true!” he finished, after describing their escape through the canal, and realising how ridiculous he must sound.

“Well, I can believe that last bit about swimming – you still smell rank!” Pellita told him. She held her nose and wafted her hand back and forth for emphasis.

Tolimo menaced her with the sleeves of his stinky Plaguewalker whites until they were both laughing. He even mock-chased her around the roof a bit until Lybella coughed and asked,

“So... not that we’re not happy to see you, but why is she here? Are you both running away? I guess she could stay with us, if that’s what it takes to get you out.”

“No!” Tolimo said, “Well... not exactly. The Authority wouldn’t listen. He thinks its people setting the city on fire. He thinks it’s something that can be fixed with a few more crossbows. You heard what I said – this stuff’s important, and I think we might be able to do something about it.”

“I think maybe those white clothes have strangled the blood off from your brain,” Lybella replied, “Even if we can do something – and I’m not convinced that we can – you say these things use the Plague as a weapon. You and this lady are Plaguewalkers. We’re not.”

Tolimo thought he had the argument to counter that.

“I know it doesn’t seem safe – it wasn’t for Leonarto, the one we saw the Plague take – but I think I know the reason it happened. The Plague took him the moment he killed a ratling. Look, I know it’s not exactly proof, but it does make sense. I’ve never killed a ratling, nor has Felissa. Neither of us has even tried to – and we’re both immune still.”

“I haven’t either,” added Orso.

“Or me,” said Pellita.

Tolimo was glad of the brightness in their voices. The two younger orphans really did sound optimistic that they might be immune too. Lybella was the one he had to convince though. Without her approval, the others would not go along with his plan.

“So, what do you think?” he said, turning to lock eyes with the older girl. Lybella frowned, considering what he had said. He tried staying quiet, letting her come to her conclusions on her own. Eventually though, he couldn’t wait any longer, and urged,

"It makes sense right? People might not notice when everyone's poisoning and trapping ratlings every time they can."

"I don't know," Lybella began saying, but before she got any further, Tolimo felt a tugging on his sleeve and spun to find Felissa urgently gesticulating. Suddenly, he realised that the two other orphans were missing from the roof – as did Lybella.

"Where are they?" she demanded of the old woman.

Felissa pointed over the other edge of the building. Fear rising in him, Tolimo rushed over, Lybella a shade in front of him. Had they fallen? Had one of those creatures found them? He looked down into the Plague filled street below, and let out a shocked breath.

"Wha... what?!" Lybella stuttered.

Down on those streets Orso and Pellita were both dancing in the Plague. Dancing!

"We had to test it, didn't we?" Orso's voice floated up from the ground, where he and Pellita had obviously climbed down to.

Tolimo just looked on open mouthed. What else was there to do? The recklessness of it was terrifying, but the danger had already been ploughed straight through, the two younger orphans too full of confidence to have properly feared it.

"I guess," Tolimo said after the sight had properly sunk in, "I guess that's one way to get you to believe me fully."

Lybella was still watching, stunned by the scene.

"I don't understand it, but I do believe it," she said.

How could she not when the evidence was dancing a jig before her very eyes? Tolimo felt a little of the two younger children's joy infect him too, and felt compelled to climb down and join them in the wisps of greenish fog, ending their dancing by embracing them both at the same time.

Lybella did not come down, instead watching from above, smiling.

"What's wrong?" Orso called to her when he had calmed down a little.

"If you're right, I can't touch the stuff," Lybella explained, "I killed a ratling that got into the lair last year, remember?"

Tolimo did. She'd chased the thing around the bell tower with a pan after finding it gobbling up their meagre food reserves, before flattening it rather gruesomely. It had seemed almost funny at the time. Not so now.

"We're probably going to have to search the streets. I don't want to see the Plague get you, Lybella. Maybe you should stay here?" he suggested, knowing what the answer would be.

"You think I'm going to let you lot go off without proper supervision?" said Lybella with a half-smile, "You wouldn't last five minutes. Besides, I've got you this far – in life I mean. I'm not letting go now."

Too many of us ended back in that orphanage, and I won't see any of us follow them without fighting it."

Tolimo nodded. He remembered those times just as well. They were a family, bound by shared tragedy.

"You promise me though, if there's no way on but through Plague, you won't risk it?"

"I'm not stupid!" she replied, and that was the end of it. Together it was, for now. Except, together where?

"So, the old city?" said Tolimo sheepishly, "Any idea where to start?"

He wasn't really expecting any answers. They would just have to search those broken districts until they found something. It was big area. It might take days. Weeks, even.

"I know just the place! I can show you!" Orso cried excitedly, and climbed back up, before pattering off along a plank walkway in the direction of old city. Tolimo followed, Felissa and the other orphans in tow.

"You don't know anything!" teased Pellita from the back.

"Yeah I do!" He paused, as if embarrassed by his outburst, and then stopped and added, "Where do you think I keep going on my own?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lybella.

"It's... I just... I go look at the stuff in the old city that's fallen down and work out why, alright? It reminds me of father. He used to tell Pellita and me all this stuff about building. How it works, why some things are strong and some... anyway, that's where I go. That's why I get so dirty – why you... why you had to cut my hair like this," he said, indicating the barely there mess of hair on his head.

"You..." said Pellita, "You idiot. I would have come too."

"We all would, if you wanted," Lybella added.

"I know... I just... Sometimes it's easier on your own – but not now, right? I'll show you what I've seen, and we can maybe, I don't know, fix the city or something."

"Oh... Orso, I don't know if..." Lybella replied.

"You are a good family," the quiet voice of Felissa suddenly cut in, "It is good you stay together. Not enough hope in Morbetzia."

Lybella stopped whatever she had been going to say, and nodded. It was enough to put them back on track, travelling the rooftops and walkways with Orso in the lead. It took a while, but they crossed over to the section of Morbetzia known as the old city easily enough, though Felissa did slow them down a little. She couldn't help being a little sluggish compared to the orphans, what with dragging around a handful of extra decades and much less experience of wandering around on rooftops.

Smoke from the fires still settled over the city in a choking blanket. The blaze had done its work well, leaving a blackened rent where the old buildings had been. All that remained was neglect, decay and char. Tolimo expected a lot of nobles were one day going to end up bickering over who was going to get the contracts to rebuild it all – if the Plague clouds ever cleared enough for them to do it.

Until then, Morbetzia would have to live with this wound burned into it. It might be lifetimes before the charred scar could be cleaned and healed. It could be never.

A few more disasters like this and there wouldn't be anything left of the city, just broken homes and Plague-ridden rubble bounded by the city walls. Those would no longer be there to keep invaders out, but to keep the ghosts of ruined Morbetzia in.

"We're nearly there!" Orso suddenly shouted, and sped up, moving quickly over more bridges and up sloped roofs.

Several minutes later, after the group had threaded carefully along a thin piece of guttering that risked giving way if anyone looked at it wrong, Orso sat on the edge of a building, pulled out his little telescope and began scanning it across the broken cityscape.

Tolimo thought about asking Orso what he was looking for, but before he could, the younger boy wriggled out a little dance where he sat, obviously excited by something.

"I saw these a few weeks back – thought it was weird then. Look!" Orso said, offering up the telescope. Lybella took it and looked, before handing it to Tolimo in turn. Pellita bounced around waiting for her go as he put the lens to his eye and looked down at the section of city that Orso had been pointing out.

Immediately he saw that something had happened to the buildings. They didn't stand quite right anymore, sagging as if someone had taken away half their supports, leaving only the shell of a building behind. If Tolimo had only been here by chance, it might not have stood out – the whole area was known for its disrepair after all. Tolimo wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for, but felt it had to be around here somewhere. This oddity seemed too much of a coincidence.

Now that he knew the phantoms that stalked the Plague fog were real beings, and not mystical ghosts, Tolimo was certain that they had to live in Morbetzia. Where would he hide if he was the kind of creature that couldn't afford to be seen by human eyes?

"What do you think it means?" Orso asked.

"I don't know," said Tolimo slowly, though he was beginning to get an idea.

"It's all sealed up. Old boards and barricades. Looks like it's been that way a long time," Lybella commented. Tolimo could see that she was right. No one was going into those buildings through the proper entrances. If this was where the things were living, how were they getting in and out?

He searched for some clue in that rat creature's words. Buried, that had been the word it had used. Not hidden, buried. He began looking around, his inspiration half found, searching for the rest of it. His eyes settled on the wide canal that threaded past the strangely buckled buildings.

"They buried the canal long ago too," said Felissa, as if thinking on the same lines.

Tolimo turned to look at her, and then down at what she was looking at. Towards one end of the district the waters of the canal were streaming out from a tunnel almost low enough to touch the surface.

Where did no sane person ever go? Below.

He thought about the prospect, and shivered. Going underground in general brought dread to any citizen of Morbetzia, for the Plague flowed downward. Downward was death.

Maybe that was just how the creatures wanted them to think. How better to hide your home than to make everyone think that it would be deadly to even try to go near?

"So what are we doing here then?" said Pellita, growing bored.

"Going to get to the bottom of this," Tolimo said, and smiled at his little joke.

"Why's it our business?" Pellita replied, "Maybe the nobles ought to be the ones sorting all this out."

"They don't understand what they need to sort out!" said Tolimo, "And they'd just want to stab everything anyway. There's more going on that we don't know about, I'm sure. If we can find out, maybe someone can do something about it!"

"Nobles are so dumb," said Pellita, "You're right about that at least."

"Balo and the others see things in their own way," said Felissa, "It is easier for them that way, not looking deeper."

"Balo?" Lybella questioned.

"I can't just leave this alone, either," Tolimo added before Felissa explained too much, "I'm pretty sure that this isn't the first fire they've set, and given how successful their plan was, you think they'll stop now?"

If the creatures making the Plague could do this once, they could do it again – and maybe to an inhabited district next time. Tolimo gave an inward shudder at the idea of unsuspecting slum dwellers being burnt in their beds. He looked between the faces of his friends, and saw that he had their attention. They were willing to give him a chance, Tolimo thought, and Lybella confirmed it a moment later.

"Then what do you suggest we do?" she said.

"Well," said Tolimo, looking down toward the nearest canal, "The thing said buried places in the old city, and I think I might know how to get to them."

He paused, imagining what his plan would entail, and then added,

"I don't think you're going to like it though."

## ELEVEN: THE DESCENT

"It's pretty nasty down here!" Orso's voice called up. He sounded like he was holding his nose shut, and Tolimo didn't blame him.

As he followed the younger boy down the ladder from the broken grating – they had searched for about an hour to find one in a Plague free street – Tolimo was assaulted by a stench of almost blinding power. It was almost enough for him to lose his grip on the ladder rungs. He managed to make it down without falling, and luckily Pellita, who was next to descend, also avoided falling on him.

"You're not wrong," she said, getting off the ladder and obviously trying not to gag, "It's vile down here."

Under lantern light Tolimo could see that the canal was thinner under here, and bounded on either side by slimy stone banks – one of which they now stood on. Lybella and Felissa found their way down too, wincing at the nastiness they were getting themselves into. Then they were all there in the sewer, ready to press on into danger and who knew what else. Success, if getting everyone he cared about into a foul, stinking, diseased and enclosed space could be called a success.

From here, things only got more difficult. Morbetzia's sewage system had never been better than terrible, and the arrival of the Plague had put a stop to most of the improvements midway through construction. No one alive knew the layouts now, Tolimo guessed.

"Doesn't look like much," said Orso, and Tolimo could see what he meant. It was all stone and water, and no evidence whatsoever of human shaped rat creatures. One or two of their smaller brethren swam past nearby, but that was all.

Forging forward seemed like the only thing to do, so Tolimo set to it, hoping that luck would see them true, rather than lose them in what he suspected was a maze of tunnels.

"Remember any turns we make," he suggested, and the others each nodded in agreement. It turned out to be quite wise, as the tunnel branched and re-branched alarmingly often. The canal split with it, but petered into ever smaller streams as it did so. Several times they had to backtrack when they hit dead ends, but Tolimo felt that they were probably still heading in the right direction.

As they walked, doing their best not to slip and fall into the disgusting water, Lybella asked,

"What's your plan anyway? After the sewers, I mean."

"To begin with, just to find where they came from and take a look around."

Lybella wrinkled her nose and asked,

"How will that help?"

It was a fair question, but Tolimo thought he had a good answer.

“Maybe we can find real proof in there, or maybe learn what it is the creatures are doing to make the Plague. Doctors fix some stuff, when they’re not peddling leeches or whatever. Maybe they can do something with more information.”

It wasn’t the greatest plan in the world, and when Tolimo heard himself speak it aloud, it seemed all the more foolish.

“It’s magic, isn’t it? What can anyone do against that?”

Apparently Pellita agreed, and Lybella wasn’t looking any more convinced. Tolimo could understand their hesitation, but his mind was made up. It had been since surviving the fire – he refused to have gone through that for nothing. He had failed to live up to who his parents would have wanted him to be then, and he was going to do better now.

“We won’t know if we don’t go to look,” he said, setting his jaw and readying himself to argue. Lybella took in deep breath – which, due to their fragrant surroundings, she seemed to regret – and then spoke her mind.

“Look, Tolimo, you’ve been through a lot. That fire – I can only guess how bad that was. Your parents... Well, I just mean... Are you sure you’re thinking clearly?”

She had a point, he had to admit. Tolimo didn’t think that he was being reckless just because of that, but what if she was right?

“This place smells like death,” Orso interjected, breaking Tolimo’s line of thought.

“You think that’s bad, try swimming in it,” Tolimo said darkly, recalling how little he had enjoyed the experience hours before. He only hoped that it wouldn’t be necessary to do so a second time – down here the water had taken on a distinctly browner tone that Tolimo preferred not to think about over much.

“Look!” said Pellita suddenly, raising the lantern and sending the shadows dancing. Among them, Tolimo saw that the sewer tunnel ended up ahead – by his guess, not far from the buildings that Orso had picked out as strange.

They hurriedly shuffled up to the crudely knocked through hole that marked the end of the passage. The canal had fully dried up here, which was just as well, considering it would otherwise cascade right through the gap into the massive space beyond. One by one the orphans and Felissa found spots around the breach and stuck their heads through, wary of what they might find under the strange buildings.

There was nothing human about what was inside. Looking up, Tolimo saw that all of the architecture had been ripped away, along with every bit of decoration – and the floors. Only the walls remained, entrances heavily boarded up and propped by beams. Without that support, they would have collapsed into the gulf beneath.

“What happened?” said Orso, “It’s all gone, why would someone do that?”

Tolimo guessed that the external walls had just been left behind as a disguise for the changes within. It was a wonder that they had not fallen down, given that no one was maintaining them. No one human, anyway. Someone had been doing something else though, judging by the great dug out pit below.

It was wide – almost the entire width of the building above it, and about as deep too. Some fraction of the sewer system within that earth had survived, with great metal pipes larger than a person spewing out of walls. Tolimo had no idea what they were meant to do, but they weren't doing it any more. The pipes had been altered, bent and hammered to redirect the flow or shut it off entirely. They weren't the only changes, either.

It looked like the myriad bits and pieces from the hollowed-out buildings above had been brought down into the pit and stuck into its walls, or to other chunks of stuff, battened on with nails, or whatever else was handy at the time.

The creatures had been cannibalising the city, Tolimo guessed, taking from above and bringing it down below, building out their own constructions from the bones of Morbetzia's decaying body.

The whole thing was hard to take in, but when Tolimo looked closely, he thought he could make out a pattern. Every nailed in plank, every oddly mounted chair and dismantled cabinet had been placed deliberately.

"They've made a climbing frame," said Orso, who had apparently noticed it too.

It wouldn't make sense for a human to do it this way – the various jumps necessary to get from one object to the next were wide and dangerous, but Tolimo had seen the creatures move gracefully between rooftops while setting fire to them. They were obviously much more athletic than people.

"There's more at the bottom!" said Orso, having got out his tiny telescope once more to take a look. He let Tolimo see too. Through the lenses, he could see that there had been more modifications made down in the pit, with a great hole cut into one wall leading out to who knew where.

The Plague was down there too. The air at the bottom of the pit was thick with it. They had been lucky to get this far without seeing more of the stuff – though even now the green mist glowed up at them from the distant floor, and nowhere else.

"Probably flows out with the rest of the sewage," said Lybella, when Tolimo mentioned it aloud. She was probably right, as usual. Didn't help with the problem at hand though.

"The rat people can make these jumps without any problems," Tolimo said, "but I bet we can do it too if we work a bit harder."

"Bet I can get to the bottom faster!" said Pellita with more confidence than she really ought to have. This would not be easy.

It was like the kind of game people with luckier childhoods played, where they climbed their way around a room pretending that the floor was the endless, bottomless sea. Only from this height, losing the game would mean real death.



“We can get past this – so long as we’re careful. It’s no different from the rooftops.”

Tolimo did his best to speak with confidence, but a note or two of worry crept in.

“We can, can we?” said Lybella, grimly. She was looking through the telescope, and apparently not liking what she saw.

“Not safe for you,” said Felissa quietly, her sad eyes on Lybella. The woman was right – there was no way that anyone but Plaguewalkers would be able to get through that cloud at the bottom of the pit alive.

Tolimo turned his gaze on her too, as she handed back the telescope and began playing with the peace braid in her hair – an old habit that resurfaced whenever Lybella was under real stress.

“You’ve got to let us go on without you after all,” he said, “There’s no way through without touching the Plague.”

Lybella stared at the green pit as if trying to will it away. When it didn’t work, she clenched her fists, gritted her teeth and said,

“You’re right. Plague take you, Tolimo, but you’re right.”

She closed her eyes, massaged them, and then her forehead, obviously hoping for inspiration to strike, but from her frown, clearly nothing did.

“You’ll be careful getting back, won’t you?” Orso said.

“I’ll do more than that,” Lybella replied.

“What do you mean?” Tolimo asked.

“I’m going to get you help,” she said, determination written into her features, “This is too much to keep to ourselves. It was one thing when it was just that creature saying something to you, but this,” she said indicating the hollowed out building and everything below, “this is proof. I know you’re going to go on, you’ve got that look in your eye. The one you get when you’re determined to make a score that’s way too risky.”

“You’re going to get the nobles – the Authority?!” Pellita said, disbelieving, “You who curses his stupid masked face with the rest of us?”

“How are you going to convince them of this?” Tolimo asked, more practically.

“I’ll find a way. Someone has to. You two should come with me.”

That last was directed at Pellita and Orso. Tolimo saw what she was doing. Lybella, always eldest and most sensible of the bell tower orphans, was doing her best to protect those she could. Being responsible, even. It was not catching.

“He needs us to back him up!” Orso said, emphatically. Pellita crossed her arms, not about to give any ground either. Lybella looked like she wanted to argue, but perhaps realised that it wasn’t going to get her anywhere. Instead she said,

"Alright. You'd better keep them safe, Tol. You too, lady. Something happens to them, and not to you, I'll make sure you get something worse later."

Tolimo nodded. As if he would do anything less. It was because they were like family that he had needed them on board with this crazy adventure as it was. He could not have trusted anyone else.

"Tell them that there is a letter in our quarters that explains everything, if they don't believe you," said Felissa, "Say that Felissa says Balo should listen to his elders for once. I remember once when he was little, and he threw a tantrum when he wasn't allowed to cheat at counters..."

"Err..." said Lybella, "Sure..."

"I'd listen, Lybella," Tolimo said, "She knows what she's about – more than she sounds like, anyway."

"Alright then... I guess I'll get going."

Wondering guiltily if it might be for the last time, Tolimo embraced Lybella, before stepping back to let the younger orphans do the same. Good lucks were exchanged. Then it was time to part.

Orso, being the most sure-footed among them, led the way out onto the first junk-step, a heavy table impaling the wall.

"Sturdy enough," the boy said, though he sounded a bit worried.

"Best we go one at a time," Tolimo suggested.

They did. After Orso had jumped down to a half-broken wardrobe a short distance below, Pellita, Tolimo and finally Felissa followed, each only moving on when the next junk step was clear.

"Gets harder further down!" Orso reported. Not too hard, Tolimo hoped, or they would have to worry about getting stuck in the middle, unable to go up or down. He looked up, hoping that Lybella might have a last word or two of encouragement before leaving. The entrance was empty. She had gone, back up to the human world and the impossible task she had set herself. Well, if there was anyone who could do the impossible, it was Lybella.

Down and down they went, the green Plague pit's glow ever brighter, the only other light the pathetic bob of their lanterns. Tolimo soon found himself struggling more and more with each jump as they turned into long leaps.

Looking back from atop a chest of drawers, Tolimo saw Felissa landing heavily and feared that she might have twisted something. It was then that he shifted his weight, and felt the drawer give.

Rottenness splintered under pressure, and Tolimo felt himself begin to tip over, foot caught. He was going to topple into the pit, down to the rubble at the bottom. He would smash upon it, and there was nothing to grip onto to stop his fall.

Then Tolimo felt something impact heavily next to him, and a bony arm wrapped around him, holding him back. Breathing hard, he found himself being held up by Felissa. She had leapt across the instant that she saw he was in trouble, and not a moment too soon.

“Thank you,” he breathed, heart still pounding.

She had saved Tolimo’s life. Needing to be saved was starting to become a habit – one Tolimo would rather not have. He would just have to return the favour later.

“Come on! Too slow!” Orso called up from below.

They obeyed, continuing on down without incident, until they were at head height above the pit floor, on the opposite side from the hole in the wall. Greenness writhed under their feet, wanting victims. Tolimo couldn’t see any way over there without touching the dense Plague fog. What to do?

Then Orso and Pellita jumped right down to the dirt, Felissa following them, the children supporting her more frail form as she dropped.

Tolimo smacked his forehead. Of course they didn’t need to avoid the stuff. Only Lybella did – assuming they were right about how it worked. He hoped that she was safely back on the surface now, even though that would leave her on a path straight to the Spire of Justice, and who knew what difficulties.

Felissa was stretching out, the heavy exercise obviously putting her in some pain. Pellita on the other hand had ran right up to the hole in the pit wall, which Tolimo could now see was large enough for them to all walk down side by side.

“I just hope it doesn’t get any worse through there,” she said jabbing a thumb towards the path onward. Tolimo nodded. He wasn’t sure how they were going to get safely back up again, and the idea of the way ahead being blocked too was a troubling one.

Tolimo at their head, the group strode on into the tunnel. He had to see this through, and hope that they were not already fated for failure. You couldn’t defeat a problem until you saw it.

Not that Tolimo expected have only a single problem. That would be far too easy.

## **TWELVE: FACADES**

The group came out into an entirely different tunnel. Its walls were haphazardly constructed of hardened mud, with wooden beams lodged in them at crazy angles. It seemed unlikely to have been built by human hands.

“Not the sewers anymore,” Felissa whispered, and Tolimo had to agree. This tunnel, and wherever it led, must have been dug out of the earth beneath Morbetzia, and Tolimo didn’t like to think how many hands – or claws - must have been needed to do it.

It widened as they went, and wound deeper into the ground. In time, they came to an intersection filled with entrances to other tunnels, at the centre of which was a large wooden pillar covered in carvings.

“I recognise those,” Tolimo said, hastily getting out his prayer block to compare the letters. He was right – the script was the same, just as the rat being had suggested.

“Must be other ways up,” Felissa suggested. She was probably right – this looked like a signpost. Maybe the rat people could move freely under the whole of old city. Maybe even further. Not a fun thought.

What now though? It would help if he understood those mysterious markings. He didn’t, however, and was stumped what to do next. Explore onward? In which direction? Translate the writing? How?

He looked again at the prayer block for inspiration. There were a number of arrows on the post with symbols next to them, and one set of symbols looked like they matched up exactly with those on his prayer block.

“This way,” he said, pointing. It was as good a choice as any – they couldn’t go back after all. Tolimo chose to take it as a sign. Maybe somehow his parents were still watching over him.

They kept going through tunnel after tunnel, heading deeper and deeper under the city. Each split was marked with another pillar with the old language on it, and they definitely had the feel of signposts, given that there were always arrows next to the handful of words. Tolimo did his best to remember the way, though it wasn’t easy. Too many twists. Too much of the same dark earth and stone. After what must have been an hour or more, all talk suddenly ceased as they strode out from their latest tunnel into another world entirely.

“The lantern!” Pellita hissed, and Orso quickly shuttered the light away. They didn’t need it here. Here in this vast cavern it could get them killed.

Under the city was another city. This one was not the random mess of buildings that the surface held, designed in detail by people like Orso and Pellita’s parents. Instead, they were faced with a careful grid of squat wood houses – hovels really, but undeniably put together by skilled claws.

Tolimo would have expected a place built by creatures to be less ordered, less planned, but no. Each street was regimented, as if drawn with a ruler. He couldn’t be sure from here, but he thought that there were other routes out of the cavern at the end of each street. Not only that, but they seemed to all spread out from the same place. That was hard to tell though, for the cavern was only faintly lit by the flicker of oil lamps on poles. Of the Plague there was no sign.

This place must be built in clever ways, Tolimo realised, or the burning of lamps would choke the air with poison. He looked up and saw vertical tunnels gouged from the roof. They must provide the town with ventilation, though not, it seemed, any natural light.

“Wow,” Orso whispered, taking it in.

“Can’t stay here,” said Felissa. She was right. A rat thing could come along at any moment, and they were standing in the middle of an entrance passageway.

“Come on,” Tolimo said, darting forward into the shadow of the first house. The others followed.

“We’ve seen enough, right?” said Pellita, sounded more scared now, “We can go back.”

“We don’t know everything yet. we don’t know anything really, yet,” he replied.

“Tolimo,” said Felissa gently, and her calm tone made him think twice.

His curiosity was still drawing him deeper, but he wasn't stupid. They were right - this was too dangerous. It was time to get back to the surface – then maybe bring the Authority and his guard back here.

"Maybe we should try a different passage out?" Tolimo suggested, "Might get lucky and find an easier climb. That way maybe."

They headed off in the direction he had suggested, padding between buildings – though the city's straight lines made it hard to hold on to any real stealth. Suddenly, the rhythmic scratch of something on stone caused every eye to snap open wide.

"Quiet!" Tolimo hissed, and the others all immediately were, quickly moving back and flattening themselves to the nearest wall.

Someone was coming. Several someones.

Tolimo's heart thudded. Maybe they would take another street. Maybe they would just pass by. No such luck. A hooded figure shuffled into view. Its feet, though hidden under a patched robe, clacking on the ground unlike any human limbs. More followed.

A dozen robed things – maybe more, and there was no question of them having missed Tolimo and his friends. Squeaks and hisses issued from hoods. Claws scratched stone. Every face turned to spear them with dark glares.

Tolimo tensed to run. Then he realised that it would do no good. Those creatures were quick, these streets had nowhere to hide, and this was their lair. Besides, it would mean abandoning Felissa, and he wasn't willing to do that.

"We're unarmed!" he said, hoping that would mean something, and added on impulse, "and we've never killed ratlings!"

The lead creature stepped towards him, pulling back its hood. It seemed unarmed too – it held no censer, nor did its companions. It still had large front teeth jutting from its burned face though, that along with its clawed hands looked like they might make effective weapons all of their own.

Without the spooky surroundings of a Plague plume, it wasn't as frightening as that night amid the flames. It was plenty scary all on its own still, but there was something about seeing it here in this light that made the thing seem more physical, and less mystical. A real thing could be fought if necessary – maybe even talked to.

The others gathered to Tolimo – behind him, notably – and waited for whatever was coming next. He knew he should be saying something, doing something as the lead thing took another step towards them, pulling back its hood to reveal the burned, scaly rat face within. He was still too afraid.

Any second it would attack, or release Plague upon them or scream out for its horde to attack. It did none of those things. Tensely, the various beings examined one another, human coloured irises watching the rat person's totally black pools. It took a few seconds, but Tolimo realised something about its face – he had seen those burns before. That sliver of understanding cut through his fear.

“You were there, in the fires,” he blurted out, “It was you, wasn’t it – the one that spoke to me?”

It did not answer, instead just turning its beady eyes on Felissa, and then each of the bell tower orphans in turn. It was a judging stare, one that penetrated deep, but so alien that Tolimo wasn’t sure how much it was really seeing. The thing regarded them for so long that Tolimo felt compelled to speak again, just to break the quiet.

“Who are you anyway?”

“What are you?” Orso added, a question that might have been rude coming from an older, less innocent person. The other rat people shifted in their robes, but the lead creature didn’t appear to take any offence.

“Ratkin is as good a term as any,” it said, “Some of us use that name. Better ones have been forgotten. Much has been forgotten. Why are you here? Speak.”

Tolimo wondered what else might have come before. The preachers had tales of times long ago in their books, but they always sounded so twisted, so drenched in manipulation and lies layered on truth.

“What you said about this,” Tolimo said, showing the ratkin his prayer block. Muttered squeaks and hisses flowed from the robed creatures. This meant something to them. “I wanted to understand what it meant,” he added, sensing that he was onto something, “What is it really, and why does the writing match yours?”

The lead ratkin shifted its weight back and forth on its hind claws.

“It is our language, and that text used to mean something – a marker. A sign of a friend to our people. It used to be your language too, only you’ve forgotten, like everything else. Maybe everyone has.”

Seeing that Tolimo was going to follow that up with other questions, the ratkin held up one scaled palm, calling a halt before he could begin. The clink of a censer’s metal from somewhere within its robes echoed as it did. Just a coincidence, or a threat?

“You will come with me now,” the ratkin said, “There would be no point running. We can move faster than any of you.”

Tolimo believed it, and to make sure the others didn’t try it either, said,

“We won’t make trouble. Lead the way.”

What had he gotten them into? He hadn’t been banking on this ratkin turning up – and certainly not in a fashion that resembled a city watchman arresting a group of petty thieves. Follow they did though, down the strange city streets. The other ratkin surrounded the humans, ensuring that there was no escape.

Tolimo stayed at the front, where he could talk with the burned ratkin. He didn’t know where they were going, or how bad it would be when they got there. Rather than walk in silence and fear, he got out a few of the questions that burned in him.

"What is the Plague?" he began, not sure if they were going to like the answer – or even if he'd get a reply. The ratkin reached into its robes with one clawed hand, and with a metallic clink began to draw out the familiar chain of a censer.

Everyone flinched at the sight, causing the ratkin to pause slightly, the censer's little metal chain running out with an almost musical sound. Slowly gathering the whole thing, container, chain and handle into a scaled paw, it explained,

"We use these, made long ago by hands long turned to bone. We burn our nightmares, unleashing them on those that would harm us," the ratkin said, the odd voice and strange words making it necessary to concentrate to catch the whole meaning.

"And it doesn't hurt others, right?" Pellita offered levelly in reply, but with a hint of bite behind the words. Perhaps she was bitter on Lybella's behalf – the older girl had never intended to hurt these things, and had had no idea the ratlings were anything more than vermin when she killed one. The creature simply replied,

"It is the only reason that the method was agreed to. Many objected even so... but they have been silenced over the years."

Tolimo's ears pricked up at that. There was dissent among the ratkin then. Maybe they could use that. Also, though it was hard to be sure, he thought that he detected a hint of disapproval in the ratkin's voice. Could it be that this was one of those dissenters?

"Who wanted it then?" Felissa asked softly, surprising Tolimo, "Who silenced them?"

The ratkin's whiskers twitched. There was emotion in this subject, Tolimo thought. Then the ratkin whispered out a name.

"The Rat King." The ratkin said, tone partway between reverence and dread, and the other ratkin echoed it with a low hissing noise.

The words sent a shiver along Tolimo's skin. It was someone that Tolimo didn't want to meet, and had to know more about.

"And what's his problem?" said Pellita defiantly, though with a flicker of uncertainty. Suddenly the ratkin became very tense. It began to recite.

"The Rat King will end humanity's tyranny, and we are his instrument. Those that destroy our relatives will fall before his will, as they deserve."

The phrases sounded like something the thing had memorised, rather than something it believed.

"People don't even know you exist! They don't know that you care about the ratlings, let alone that they should," said Tolimo, angrily. Probably he should be more respectful to people with power over him, but apparently, he had still not learned his lesson.

The ratkin could have become enraged at being judged so, but instead it replied with an eerie calm.

"You should not have come down here. The King's law says that any humans are to be captured on sight, or killed rather than let them escape.

"It doesn't have to be like that." Tolimo said, "We can talk. Maybe sort this out."

He was reaching desperately, but Felissa nodded sagely in agreement at his side.

"We will see what he says," said the ratkin.

"What do you say?" Tolimo asked, more boldly than he felt, but he was rewarded for it when the ratkin calmly told them,

"He is my King. He was chosen by the very land itself to lead us. To save us. I have a duty to follow his laws, whether I agree or not. To their letter."

People blindly doing what they always had were what started all this in the first place, Tolimo wanted to say, but the ratkin didn't seem in the mood to hear it.

"Laws are not duty."

Felissa's words hit a chord in Tolimo. That was how the woman saw the world. Not as rules and expectations, but as a place where there was a right thing to do.

"I know duty," the ratkin hissed, "I, and my companions are doing ours, when others have abandoned it. I patrol here, guarding my people, no matter how little they think they need it."

"And you think we're going to hurt you?" Pellita cut in, "What a joke!"

The ratkin blew air through its massive front teeth. A sigh?

"The Rat King will speak to you, and we shall see where that leads," it said, with an air of finality.

That might have been it until they got where they were going. However, it turned out that Orso had not been interested in any of the previous talk. His little legs struggled to keep pace beside the odd rhythm of the ratkin's strides as he got in his own question, saying,

"You must have some kind of name – how else do you remember who's who?"

The ratkin looked down at Orso, and responded,

"You would not be able to speak it."

"Then I'll have to make something up for you. I'm not calling you it, or thing or whatever."

"You may call..." the ratkin began, but Orso cut it off.

"I'm going with Squeak... wait, are you a boy rat or a girl rat?"

The ratkin's robed shoulders seemed to sag ever so slightly, and stopped to properly stare at Orso, who failed to take the hint.

"Girl rat?" he guessed, "So Squeaka?"



The ratkin blinked twice, slowly and heavily.

“You get used to Orso,” said Tolimo. He hoped so, anyway – if they were around the ratkin long enough to become familiar, it meant that they would likely survive the experience. The ratkin made a noise that could have been a sigh and said,

“Alright. Squeaka it is.”

Felissa had already been smiling serenely, but Tolimo and Pellita both tried to suppress smiles. Orso didn’t bother, happily grinning away. The ratkin – Squeaka – let the indignity pass without further comment.

It was a good sign – when Tolimo had been captured by the city watch, he hadn’t been able to get this much out of his guards, and he’d lived through that. Through luck, perhaps, but luck could always strike twice. Or not.

Squeaka felt like a reluctant captor, and not one that had any real desire to hurt them, but Tolimo had seen those other ratkin running around on rooftops lighting Morbetzia ablaze, and the one that had watched Leonarto die without a hint of caring. Squeaka’s possible lack of hatred said nothing for the other ratkin.

Where were the other ratkin anyway? Trudging along under the low light of the oil lamps, Tolimo saw no others on the streets. Squeaka’s group seemed the only one out tonight.

“Why is it so quiet?” Tolimo asked after a time. Squeaka did not answer, leading him to look around for one instead. He spotted that there were almost no lights glowing at windows. There were plenty of homes, but no one at home it seemed.

“Where are they?” asked Felissa, noticing the same thing.

“There,” the ratkin replied, pointing its sleeve towards a larger construction at the centre of the ratkin town, one that pulsed with firelight inside. The place they were heading directly towards.

“There, with the Rat King.”

### **THIRTEEN: THE THRONE OF KNOTTED TAILS**

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Squeaka’s claw tapped on the metal of her censer as she marched them to their doom. Tolimo had to remind himself that he’d survived a similar walk before. That had been over an apple. This was much more important. He tried to remember that, but the fear kept building.

Orso and Pellita kept tight to him, but he didn’t feel any braver than them. He couldn’t, with the Rat King’s home looming close.

The construction was only a few stories high, and largely made of wood like the other ratkin buildings. It was still much larger than the homes around it though, with the gate doors tall enough

to fit one of the hovels through it. It was simple and unadorned, with no decoration to speak of on any of its surfaces, right up the beams supporting its flat roof. In stories, Kings always wielded magical armour and swords while ruling from great castles looking out over the sea. This was about as far from that as it was possible to be.

No one guarded the entrance, and Squeaka pulled it open using one of the mismatched brass handles that had clearly been stolen from several different doors on the surface.

“Enter,” she said. It wasn’t a request.

As they were lead inside, the door ominously creaking shut behind them, Tolimo glanced about in every direction, drinking in the details. Odd shaped alcoves were filled with trinkets, again stolen from above. Lanterns hung at seemingly random distances, but the misshapen walls of the hall evened out the dim light.

Squeaka and her followers took them right to the end of the hall, where another set of double doors was pushed open, leading to what had to be a throne room. It was not like any throne room that Tolimo had heard about any story though. It certainly wasn’t as extravagant as the Authority’s office. It was just as impressive though, not by the value of the objects in it, but by the number of robed ratkin that packed its floor space right out to the walls.

There were a lot of them. Hundreds, certainly. Maybe more.

With all the robed figures, the gathering resembled a religious ceremony, but not one with any peace or goodwill behind it. Tolimo’s stomach turned over, further fear rising in him as the assembled beings all swung their hooded faces toward the intruders. Tolimo would have taken the pointless, monotonous droning of a noble preacher over this assembly of, if not monsters, then things that had been practicing hard for the role.

“I don’t like this,” said Orso quietly, sounding like fear was finally starting to get to him. Too late to do anything different now. Tolimo gave the younger boy a quick hug around the shoulders in support.

He saw that the assembly had been facing a stage, on which a single ratkin lounged in a chair. Upon his head lay a crown of bone - a skull, carved into shape, Tolimo worriedly realised. In each of the eye sockets, a purple shard of crystal glinted.

This had to be him, the Rat King.

He was old, older than Tolimo had expected, with grey scales and movements that betrayed creaking joints. How long had this creature been ruling Morbetzia in secret from below? The nobles in their masks knew nothing of what was behind their city’s.

Tolimo saw too that the King had his own nobles nearby, their robes finer and less torn than their fellows. A few even wore mockeries of the masks Morbetzia’s real nobles used. Tolimo spotted one with the same split pattern as the Authority, and found himself in the odd position of wishing to be back in front of that man in the Spire of Justice, with simple demands being placed upon him.

Better that than walk down through the ranks of ratkin as Squeaka was motioning to do. Felissa and the three orphans did as they were told though. There wasn't much choice. Already murmurings were coming from the crowd at their sudden appearance. This army of ratkin knew they were there now, and that couldn't be taken back. There was no escape.

They had been insane to come down here, that was now certain. Tolimo's wild idea was going to get him, and those he cared about killed. He didn't want to think like that, but as they filed forward through the crowd, with all those strange eyes on them, Tolimo couldn't help it.

A dozen wood carved ratlings supported the Rat King, each leg of his chair standing on their front paws, their tails in the air. Those tails curled up to join in the centre, where they formed the seat of his throne. It looked old, like something with a history behind it. The image it suggested, with this Rat King sitting atop his minions, did not make Tolimo feel any better.

"King," said Squeaka as she came to a halt in front of the dais, "We have... guests."

The old ratkin turned his head slowly, looking over Tolimo and the others lining up before him as if he hadn't seen them until they were pointed out.

"Humans?" he asked in a voice that betrayed no surprise. The word was spoken clearer than Squeaka's were, as if he were more practiced in human speech, "I haven't seen a live human for... well, it must be twenty years since the last."

The Rat King slouched back on the Throne of Knotted Tails and adjusted his skull crown, his face screwed up as if trying to recall something. The Rat King did not seem to find what he was looking for, instead giving his long face a little shake as if to clear it, and saying,

"Can't be trusted. Can't be trusted, none of you. Should kill them now!"

"The Plague does not touch them!" Squeaka exclaimed, "They are not to be touched. The law..."

"The law, the law, the law. The law I made. I can make it again."

"This one holds one of the old markers," Squeaka added, indicating Tolimo, "We owe them free passage."

"Old things. Forgotten things. Worthless things. The humans do not even know the meaning. Owe them nothing. Best to kill them now."

Tink. Tink. Tink.

Squeaka tapped on the censer hidden in her robes, and what had been a building murmur of ratkin voices died. The air was suddenly filled with tension. Several of the ratkin had tensed up too, Squeaka's patrol foremost among them, but many in the crowd seemed attentive too.

"The law," said Squeaka, "The law you made in agreement with us all. We all have a pact to hold to."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, and Tolimo wondered if there was about to be a fight. Then the Rat King spoke again.

“Yes, yes. The pact must be upheld. Did I not make it? I have brought you this far, and further glory awaits – this little thing is no great burden. So, humans – you come bearing our marker. Those that held it came to talk to us long ago, to learn, to hear, to ask. What ask you?”

He addressed Tolimo directly, ignoring the others. Trying to put on a brave face, Tolimo began to speak before his courage could leak out.

“You lead all your people?” he asked. The Rat King nodded.

“There are others of course. Pretenders in Romoria and Casmaran, but I was the first and after Morbetzia falls, I will remind them of it. I was chosen, not them. I will save us. Make things right.”

They were in Lybella’s home – and other places - too? Tolimo felt sick. The Rat King paced back and forth, nodding to himself as if listening to voices that only he could hear.

“Join you in what?” Pellita asked, and Tolimo found himself dreading the answer.

The Rat King flung out a sleeve dramatically, giving them a quick flash of an old scaly claw hand adorned with battered tin rings. A copy of someone else’s idea of what richness looked like.

“The whole continent will know what they have done,” he pronounced, to a rumbling of approval from the crowd, “If anything exists beyond the sea, then they too will know.”

The Rat King paused for a moment, a shine of remembrance coming over his black eyes. He seemed for a moment to be reliving another age, one of glory and promise.

“They used to, back in the old days,” he continued, “when the land was new and we all freshly spun from it. No so now. Not for a hundred years. Longer. Much longer. Friends once. Forgot us. Broken trust. Never mended.”

He acted as though he remembered such times. Did these ratkin live that long? Tolimo had no idea what the Rat King was talking about, only that it sounded a bit mad, and that going by the nodding of most of his masked nobles, they were willing to go along with it.

Orso and Felissa remained silent, perhaps intimidated into it by the uncouneted inhuman stares at their backs. Tolimo decided to reply with what they were all thinking.

“I don’t understand.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” the Rat King said, nodding sagely, pleased with his own pronouncement, “but it is indeed good that you are here now. It would be a shame not to discuss what is to come with those it will happen to.”

“What’re you going to do?” Pellita demanded.

“Yes, my King,” said Squeaka, “What is your grand plan?”

“Haven’t you heard?” said the Rat King, “The humans are in disarray. They may never recover from the blow we have dealt. Their slaves that walk our magic can no longer help them. The plan worked better than even I had guessed. Did I not say this was the right path? But I will not allow our enemies

even the chance to recover. Tonight, we make our victory sure. We make it total. We have more of the cleansing mists to spread, and another cleansing fire to set – this one under their so-called Spire of Justice itself.”

Tolimo’s breath caught.

“No,” Felissa whispered.

“Tol...” said Pellita. Her brother just looked at him wide eyed, but Tolimo had no idea what to do about this horror. He looked to Squeaka, but her unreadable features delivered no answers. She did however say,

“This is what this meeting is? Your decree on humanity’s fate?”

She did not seem surprised by it. If anything, Tolimo thought he detected a note of disappointment. He wasn’t sure why she would feel that way, but any ideas he had on the subject were swept away when the Rat King began to speak again.

“And you will stand with us, loyal sentinel. Your watch soon will be needed no longer.”

Tolimo looked into Squeaka’s burned face, hoping. Hoping that the ratkin would have something to say that could fix all this. At last, she spoke.

“I stand with you,” she told the Rat King, “We are all bound to the pact. This is our path. Our one path.”

“Yes,” the Rat King almost shouted, a claw outstretched and clenched into a fist, “My people! Tonight the age of humans ends! We have been beneath them long enough. You, and you, and you will no longer hold our land and kill our brothers.”

The Rat King gesticulated at the row of humans before him as he said that last.

“We didn’t hurt your ratlings,” said Orso, obviously frightened.

“Your kind did,” said the Rat King, waving his claw dismissively. Then he lapsed into the ratkin tongue, strange rodent noises echoing out over the crowd to repeated cheers. It was a disturbing sound, like bones clacking together while a chill wind rustled through rags.

There was more, and more and more of it, and the noises got angrier and angrier. The masked ratkin started joining in at points, chanting squeaking phrases.

Finally, he finished his rant, and then added a few human words for Tolimo and his friends to hear.

“My people! March with me! Take what is yours! Burn everything else.”

#### **FOURTEEN: SCRATCH THE SURFACE**

The march back up to Morbetzia was far worse than the way in. They had been wandering around for hours now without rest, and Tolimo could feel fatigue setting in. It didn't matter. It couldn't matter, not if there was still any hope of putting a stop to this.

"What should we do, Tol?" Pellita muttered to him. Tolimo wished he knew. Up ahead, Squeaka was doing something – as she had already done twice before on this trek.

"There is still time to reconsider this," she said to the Rat King.

"Reconsider? Reconsider! This is our destiny!" the Rat King replied, bead eyes flashing in the lamplight.

Unfortunately, Tolimo sensed that while Squeaka's voice held some sway here, the Rat King was used to deflecting her, for he gave no ground.

"This course is full of danger and death. Our people..." said Squeaka, before Rat King cut in,

"My people. Mine. Mine. I know what's best for them. I was chosen. The voice from below chose me! It sent me the treasure keepers in their black building. Send me my choice of crowns! Not you."

Tolimo saw now that the Rat King, whatever he preached to his followers, was no less corrupted than those he was fighting. Whatever point he had once had, the Rat King had long since spoiled it on the altar of revenge. Tolimo found righteous anger rising in him, eclipsing his fear of this place, its people and even their Plague weapon. He felt his heartbeat throbbing in his chest as it began to overflow.

"You like the sound of your voice, don't you?" he found himself saying.

"What?" said the Rat King, suddenly with an edge to his voice. Tolimo knew that he should stop, knew how much danger he was in, but just couldn't. With Orso, Pellita and Felissa looking at him in horror, he pressed on.

"Whatever some humans have done to you, you've visited it on us ten times over. You could have just asked us to change! Maybe people would have listened."

His anger ebbed slightly at the end. It had sounded good, but Tolimo had met the Authority. He had seen how pitiless the other nobles had been at his so-called trial. They wouldn't have listened to the Rat King, or any of his kin. They would have called them monsters and then called for steel to stab them with.

"You are unfit to be stewards this land. In our time to come, we will clean away the stains your people have built."

It seemed that the Rat King was of a similar mind. He ranted on about the ills that had been done to his people and the ratlings they called cousins for several minutes before the procession rounded a corner, and reached the end of the tunnel.

Tolimo saw with shock that it was not earth that the slight slope led up to, but wooden planks. The ratkin had dug right under the Spire of Justice, right up to the floorboards of its lowest level. They must have been planning this for some time.

“Justice,” the Rat King muttered to himself, “This, here and now will be our justice! Build the pyre!” he ordered, and ratkin rushed to obey, carrying bundles of kindling.

“You can’t! Our friend’s up there!” Pellita said, though even her fire wasn’t much in the face of the one the creatures were building. They didn’t listen, continuing until the kindling was piled across the entire hollow, and oil had been poured across the front of it. The tunnel was filled with the scent of olives. It would soon be replaced with far worse ones. The Rat King strode to the front when they were done, fiddling with his skull crown.

“Remember what they’ve done,” he said, “and make ready. If the fire doesn’t cleanse them, our Plague shall!”

“I’m scared, Tol” said Orso quietly, but Tolimo didn’t have any comfort to give. His attention was locked on the ratkin and what they were doing.

Those not stoking the bonfire were putting things into their censers – fuel for the magic, Tolimo had to assume. Little carved figures. Freakish representations of humans, if you imagined a human as a monster. Burning nightmares, as Squeaka had said. Humans *were* the nightmare, to these creatures. Tolimo’s was coming though, he could see it – some of the ratkin were readying burning torches, and striding towards the kindling.

“No!” Tolimo cried out.

“Light it,” the Rat King ordered, and the fire burned both in his eyes, and before them. Tolimo shook at the sight, the deep fear of years ago gripping him once more.

“Stop!” he screamed out, and made to rush toward one of the ratkin holding torches. He wasn’t sure what he was going to do. Try and grab the torch from its grasp? He didn’t find out.

“Grab the human thing. Put it somewhere out of my sight where it won’t spoil things,” the Rat King ordered Squeaka. She obeyed, taking hold of Tolimo with far more strength than he could match.

“Leave Tol alone!” yelled Pellita, but another ratkin moved in to grab her too. Tolimo fought as he was manoeuvred through the ratkin crowd, right to the back. He couldn’t see Felissa or the orphans, didn’t know where they’d been taken. Perhaps the Rat King was making them watch the burning.

Squeaka released her grip when they reached the rear of the group, next to the tunnel they had arrived through.

“Why are you listening to him? He’s going to... going to kill...”

He couldn’t finish.

“Your nobles are evil. They keep you down too, like us, but less,” Squeaka declared.

“My friend’s up there! And... and... they’re bad... wrong, I don’t know... Maybe they are evil sometimes. They still don’t deserve to be burned alive though! Your King, he sits on a throne shaped like his people – he’s no better! He’s worse! He’s.. he’s...”

Tolimo ran short of words, and breath. The smoke was rising, the oil whooshing alight, timber growing hot.

"He was great once," Squeaka told him after a moment, "Or at least... he said he was. He said so many things. So many promises."

"He doesn't care about any of them. He just wants to destroy – can't you see how much he enjoys the power?" Tolimo hissed back, conscious of the heat on his face.

"You are afraid?" Squeaka asked, "The fire. It affects you."

She had seen that?

"My... my parents. They nobles used to try to burn the Plague away. Our house was in the way..."

He couldn't finish. Not here, not in front of the flames. Looking up into Squeaka's strange eyes, he saw something there that he didn't expect. Pity.

"I lost much in those fires too," she said, before tapping a claw against her censer and adding, "The one that gave me this. Gone. I got these trying to save him."

She indicated her face and the old, nasty welts that crisscrossed it.

"You... you were in the city then?"

"We were. Scouting for the Rat King's plan. It was needed for all our kin."

"He's wrong," said Tolimo, "He just cares about hurting people – and staying in charge. You deserve better. We all do."

Squeaka did not reply for a long moment, as the crackle of flame began to build behind her. Tink. Tink. She tapped her claws on hidden metal, thinking. Then, suddenly she reached out and pushed him away, out towards the empty tunnel system they had come through.

"You are not the same as those above," she explained, "You deserve a chance. If you flee now into the tunnels, you may be able to find a way out."

Tolimo looked at her, at those beady, black, but strangely remorseful eyes. He looked at the backs of the Rat King, of Orso, and Pellita. Of Felissa. He looked at the blaze, now starting to really take. Soon it would spread up through the spire, taking everything else too.

"I'm not running away any more," Tolimo said, and charged back towards the flames. It was stupid. He knew it was stupid. A reckless courage coming from his fear snapping back and pushing him in the other direction. He barrelled past the intently gazing ratkin and into the licking fire anyway.

"Tol!" Orso cried out, but that was all he heard, for the roar of the inferno was in his ears, and his other senses burned. The ratkin, Felissa and the bell tower orphans vanished into the haze of crackling orange and suffocating grey.

Burning.



Everything was burning. His hair singed, and his clothes did their best to catch. Tolimo sprinted forward, desperate to get out of the heat, the awful, deadly heat. He couldn't breathe, could barely see. This was going to kill him. He had killed himself.

Then he was through the bonfire that had already started and through to the rear of the hollow, where the flames hadn't yet devoured their fuel. It was only a matter of time though. Even if the fire was not coming for him, if Tolimo stood here long, he would cook.

At this end of the dig, the ground was closer to the wooden ceiling. Tolimo jumped, punching at the wood, but got only skinned knuckles for his trouble. He needed much more force.

Squinting, he searched for something that could help, something that could get him out of this awful mess he'd put himself into. A thick plank. Oil soaked. Already smouldering. Tolimo heaved it upright anyway, feeling the beginnings of blisters bubbling on his fingers.

He whacked it up into the floorboard above with all his might. It bounced off, and a splinter cut into Tolimo's palm. Again, he picked it up, hotter now, and screamed out as he swung it again. This time, the old timbers crunched as some rusty nail gave way. A few frantic upward pokes shifted the board aside, enough for Tolimo to leap and grab the edge. Praying that this floorboard wouldn't give way under his weight, he hauled himself up, fighting not to retch from the choking fumes and blinking away tears.

By the time he rolled out and onto his back, he could barely see, and for a moment could only cough and strain his eyes. He'd gotten several burns for his trouble, and his white clothes were almost black with soot, but he had made it out. His vision eventually stopped swimming – though the coughing didn't – and Tolimo managed to see where he had ended up. It was a cellar, full of wine and spirits – and already the flicker of fire. He had only moments before it got a lot worse.

In pain, but not caring, Tolimo got to his feet and charged up the stairs. He made it up one flight, then and another and another, before slamming into the door at the top. He expected to burst through into the main entrance hall beyond. Instead, with another jolt of pain, he bounced back off the heavy thing. The door was locked.

Panicking, he hammered on the wooden panels with both fists and screamed at the top of his lungs. He was not getting this far to burn here. Bang. Bang. Bang. Wisps of smoke were starting to issue from below. Something that sounded suspiciously flammable popped loudly. He didn't have long.

"Lybella!" he yelled, "Someone! Anyone!"

He had to stop to cough. His lungs were still half full of ash. Raising his fists again, Tolimo prepared to bash the door once more, but the strike didn't connect. Instead, he found himself tumbling through as a key clicked and the door swung open.

Tolimo found himself in the spire's main hallway, one end of it ending in giant oak double doors that led out onto the walkways above the streets. The place was nicely decorated with tapestries and the like, though that was all going to go up in smoke soon. More to the point though, it was packed with soldiers. City watch and the Authority's personal black and white guard rubbed shoulders, and clinked weapons. More were filing into the chamber too.

“What?” said the one that had released Tolimo from the cellar, but he pushed past the man and on, for he had just seen something far more important. There, on the main stairwell, a man wearing a tricorne hat and fine travelling cape strode down beside a Casmaran girl with coloured braids in her hair. A man wearing a black and white mask.

“I don’t care if you’re the blasted *Princess* of Casmaran,” said the Authority as they reached the bottom, “you will not give my people orders!”

“I will if my friends’ lives are at... Tolimo?!”

Somehow – *somehow* - Lybella had made them listen. She’d gathered these people to come save him and the other orphans. The Authority had even been willing to come personally! She was amazing. She spotted his blackened face, gawked for a moment in stunned surprise, pushed through the crowd and then almost charged Tolimo to the ground with the force of her hug.

“No...” Tolimo coughed, “No time,” though he was grinning despite the seriousness of the situation.

“What do you mean boy?” the Authority demanded, pushing through his guard, “What’s going on here – this girl has been convincing everyone up and down the tower that... What’s that smell?”

Tolimo thought for a moment that he still smelled of the sewer, but then realised that the scent of wood being scorched was drifting out of cellar door. He pulled it shut to buy more time and said,

“They’re here – beneath us. The creatures that make the Plague, they’ve dug under the spire and set fire to it. Got to get everyone out, now!”

The Authority – and just about everyone else – stared at Tolimo, possibly in disbelief. No, no, no. They had to believe him. The flames were coming.

“Lybella – please, make them listen!”

He didn’t know how she could. Some of the city watch were tightening grips on weapons, as if thinking that Tolimo was the one to start the fire.

“If you’re going to take my word for it this far, why would you stop now?” Lybella demanded, “You can smell the fire yourselves – why would Tol burn down a building he’s in?”

Whether the guards believed her or not, the Authority cut in,

“It is clear we must evacuate the Spire of Justice. City ordinance two holds all the necessary procedures. I expect this done quickly and carefully. No mistakes.”

One of the black and white clothed men nodded, and hurried to obey, shouting orders.

“And you,” the Authority continued to Tolimo, “I will have a full accounting of this when the night is done and if it proves...”

As he had been speaking, several of the city watch had been pulling at the main double doors, and at that moment they cracked open. Inside rolled a horrible coil of glowing green.

“Plague!” one screamed, and leapt back as the stuff drifted in. Everyone started back away from the doors, but there was only a thin tendril of the evil stuff. It wasn’t invading – just blocking anyone from leaving. Heart in his mouth, Tolimo realised that the people of the spire were trapped.

Unless.

“Lybella, get everyone to come up to the window – you know the one,” Tolimo said, “I’ll get to the ladder and swing it across – people can climb over and get out.”

“Tol... you can’t go out there on your own,” said Lybella.

“He can. That heart on his collar says it’s his duty,” said the Authority. Lybella turned to glare at the man’s mask, hands balled into fists – and definitely nowhere near her peace braid.

“He’s right Lybella. I have to – together we can do this. Show them the way.”

Tolimo didn’t want to leave it there, but there was no time for a proper goodbye. He darted through the crack in the double doors and out into Morbetzia’s darkness. Dark, that is, save for the terrible glow he walked through.

It was issuing from below, from the cobbles of the real town the spire had been built on top of. Tolimo ran forward along the walkways, trying for a better view. He thought he knew what he would see, but was still horrified to see it when he found a good railing to peer over.

The Rat King wasn’t leaving his plans to the whims of the fire. The tunnels were emptying, spilling tatter-robed figures out into the streets.

The ratkin were here, and from their claws swung death. Plague billowed, its fingers curling, swelling, ready.

Ready to consume them all.

#### **FOURTEEN: THE ONLY THING TO FEAR**

Tolimo charged out onto the walkways, desperate to get to the rooftop where the makeshift ladder was hidden. He was moving so fast that he almost skidded right off an edge, narrowly avoiding tumbling down to be dashed on the cobbled streets. To his horror though, he locked eyes with a swarm of ratkin, one swinging the censer that was generating the Plague – and another wearing a crown carved from a skull.

“Bring the human here,” the Rat King ordered.

The ratkin obeyed, swarming up and then forcing Tolimo to climb down to ground level, the smiling Rat King and his retinue.

“You tried to ruin everything!” the ruler declared.

“Sorry,” said Tolimo, not meaning it in the slightest.

"You... you... you will be dealt with," said Rat King said, unable to find the right punishment for the crime, "Watch him, and properly this time!"

The last he addressed to Squeaka, who took charge of Tolimo, moving him near his group of scared friends.

"That was dangerous," said Felissa.

"You'd have done it in my shoes," Tolimo shot back.

"You had your chance to run," said Squeaka, "You should have taken it. Now you are back in his power – and he is angry."

The creature's mood didn't really matter. There was no reasoning with the Rat King, that much had already been proven. He was mad, or as close to it as made no odds. Instead, Tolimo protested to Squeaka, the only one that had showed a hint of sympathy.

"My friends. You could let them go," he reasoned with her, "They aren't going to hurt you. We couldn't hurt you. You've won!"

"Yes," said Squeaka, "I suppose we have."

She looked toward the spire, to the deadly smoke that would soon envelop the whole structure.

"Is this what you want?" Tolimo demanded, "Do you want to burn them, like they burned you?"

"I..." said Squeaka, obviously unsure.

"This doesn't fix it! It can't make it better. Trust me, I know! I hated the nobles. I still do a bit – but they aren't all the same. Felissa showed me. They're just people, like you and me."

"Ratkin and humans..." she began, but Tolimo wasn't having it.

"We just look different," he said, "Doesn't mean we can't live with each other. He keeps telling you we can't, because it suits him that way!"

"He is our King."

"That... that doesn't mean anything. Not really. It only means anything because you let it."

"Enough," the Rat King ordered, "I tire of its prattling."

"He is right in one thing," said Squeaka, and indicated Tolimo's friends, "These are no threat. The magic may take them another day, but not now. They should be released."

"That is not..." said the Rat King, but Squeaka interrupted.

"I have supported you these many years. My followers have listened to me and done the same. I have asked for little in reward. I ask only this small thing now."

She fixed him with a deep stare, and Tolimo held his breath. The Rat King adjusted his crown, half snarling with anger, but holding it in. Eventually he said,

“They may flee, and tell others of this night. Go, and tell your diseased city who it is that now rules!”

He waved a claw, and Felissa, Orso and Pellita were freed. Pellita rubbed her arms and glared at the ratkin that had held her. Her brother looked close to tears. They began to move away, and Tolimo stepped forward to join them, but the Rat King held up a claw.

“Not you,” he said.

“He...” said Squeaka.

“He helped the enemy. He is ours too. No death for him, if that is your request, but no freedom either.”

Squeaka opened her mouth, looking like she wanted to object, but did not. Orso ran over to Tolimo, saying,

“Tol, we can’t leave you...”

“Yes, you can – you have to.” said Tolimo, and then whispered, “Get the ladder. Lybella and the others need you to save them.”

“I...”

“Orso! Go! I’ll be alright.”

Tolimo thought he might be lying, but tried to smile at the younger boy anyway. They all went, looking scared. He thought he saw Orso starting to tell them Tolimo’s message as they passed around a corner. Felissa looked back at the last moment, and nodded toward him. They understood.

“Now watch quietly. I want to enjoy this,” said the Rat King, shifting from foot to foot and brushing dust from his patchwork noble’s robes.

The spire was properly alight now. The entire base was lit up orange, and if anyone was fighting the fire inside, it wasn’t working. In hours, the whole thing would be a mess of charcoal and roasted metal.

Tolimo watched, heart in his mouth once more. Now his fear was not for the fire itself, but for the people in its path. He looked over the walls, searching for the window that he himself had used to escape before. Nothing. Minutes passed, and still he saw nothing but the flames flitting higher.

Then, just a smudge against the dark sky and smoke, he saw something. A prong being pushed toward the spire from a nearby roof. The ladder, it had to be. He knew it would be better not to watch, better not to draw any attention, but he couldn’t look away as it quietly touched down onto a window ledge, and a figure began sliding their way out of the death-trap that was the Spire of Justice.

Lybella. It was Lybella, he realised, seeing braids lifting with the fire’s hot winds. She was escaping, and the others would follow. They were getting out - but it was a long, painstaking process. Only one could get across the ladder at a time. It took a minute before even Lybella could make it, never mind anyone else.

When she had, she looked down at Tolimo from the roof edge, and gave him a little wave to say she was safe. Except, in that moment it became clear that she wasn't - Tolimo wasn't the only one to have noticed what was going on.

"Release the Plague!" the Rat King commanded, gesticulating wildly upward with one claw, and holding his skull crown on with the other.

The shiver of metal and chain as the ratkin crowd responded sent chills of fear into Tolimo. Only a little of it was for himself though. He, Felissa and most of the others should be safe from this attempted execution, unless the Rat King had something worse up the sleeve of his robe.

"Squeaka!" he yelled, desperate for someone to do something as sparks flared to life in one censer, and then another, until they were all lit, glowing sickly green, the little human effigies inside catching fire. Burning nightmares.

Plague spilled out from each with the first swing, and the living cords of evil smoke coiled and merged together, expanding at the feet of the ratkin until they were a vast carpet of sickly green. It pushed on, surging up the side of the building Tolimo's friends stood on.

Ratlings followed.

Hordes of them, squeaking and chittering, scattering out of every hole and hiding place. They took to the climb, wreathed in the magic, looking like miniature monsters as they dug claws deep into wood. Still, Squeaka did not respond, and Tolimo tried one last time to get through to her. There was no time for any more attempts.

"Squeaka, you have to get off the fence and make a decision! You know what's right! You know! They're going to die!"

She stood there, censer not ignited, but doing nothing besides. There was nothing she would do, and nothing Tolimo could do. The Plague continued wriggling slowly up the walls as he watched. Lybella however stood there, unable to leave her friend in danger.

"Tol!" he heard her cry out, but she was too far away to do much else. Then he realised that it wasn't support she was offering – it was a cry of alarm. The ratlings had reached the top ahead of the Plague, and swarmed around her on all sides, rounding up the humans, trapping them in place.

"She's never wanted to hurt any of you!" Tolimo protested, swinging back to the ratkin crowd. Some were looking at each other, unsure of themselves, but the Rat King stepped in before it could become more, saying,

"The magic will judge her. The guilty die by its hand – as these vile humans shall all see. My people, this is our last barrier, break through and we shall take our rightful place and... ah!" he cried out, as something small and hard hit him right on the snout. Pellita, a look of grim determination on her face, had launched the largest pebble she could find from her catapult at the Rat King.

His teeth bared into a snarl of rage, as he swung to glare at his attacker. He lifted a claw to point accusingly at Pellita, and then sweep it over the others.

“Kill them too,” he commanded, his voice chilling. Tolimo realised that the Rat King was using their language to make sure that they knew what was coming, and if anything felt his fear rise a notch. He hadn’t thought that was possible.

“No!” said Squeaka, striding over to the Rat King. “The magic does not touch them,” she added loudly, “They are innocents.”

She added more in the ratkin tongue – repeating her words to the crowd, Tolimo guessed. The Rat King, scowling at Squeaka, rattled off a reply, ending with human words.

“None of them are innocent. They all deserve judgement.”

“Yours?” Tolimo shot at the ratkin leader, who ignored it.

“You have always claimed we were better than them,” said Squeaka, “That we would rule better than them.”

The other ratkin were listening attentively to the exchange, even Tolimo’s part in it, and he was surprised to find that the expressions on many had changed.

“You are right. He has been lying to us,” one said directly towards Squeaka, and more made noises in their own language, hopefully in agreement.

“He has,” she replied, and Tolimo would not have been surprised to hear an ‘I told you so’ at the end of the sentence. Squeaka rose above that though, instead continuing, “I think... I think you, my so-called King, have already ruled for too long.”

Then she too lapsed into the speech of ratkin, moving to where she could be seen by all, and squeaking out what seemed to be some kind of rousing speech. It was punctuated by sweeping gestures and small cheers from many of the ratkin – and Tolimo had no idea what any of it meant.

“No!” The Rat King snarled, “This is the moment! It is in our grasp! Kill them and the world is ours, do you not see? Have I not ruled you well these long years of exile? Kill them and be free!”

“Oh, shut up,” said Squeaka, stepping up to the ancient ratkin. In one fluid motion, she deftly picked the skull crown off his head, drew back her arm and belted him with it with such strength that the bone cracked and broke apart at the force of impact.

Hisses that could have been gasps went up from the ratkin as the Rat King slumped to the floor unconscious amid the ruins of his own crown. Its pair of purple crystals bounced away, still in the metal that had pinned them to the bone. Shouts from the humans above drifted down seconds later. The ratkin were in no mood to care.

Squeaka spoke a word, and a good number of ratkin dropped their censers and tackled others, their targets seemingly all wearing the imitation noble masks of the Rat King’s court. It was a full on rebellion – but a short one. Quickly, Squeaka’s followers were winning their little fights. They were fitter, more coordinated and cared more.

Tolimo looked back and forth wide eyed between the fallen Rat King, and Squeaka, the one who had deposed him. The one who, he realised, had been half way to deciding to depose him before Tolimo even met her.

Tolimo wondered how long she had been planning, agonising over what to do. Whatever the answer, now she had showed the crowd the Rat King's true colours, and destroyed his power in his brief moment of weakness.

As the crowd lost focus and confusion spread, more than a few ratkin stopped swinging their censers and let them go out. Either they were Squeaka's supporters already, or she had convinced them now. Whichever it was, it was enough. The cloud slowly stopped, the life leaving it. It was still dangerous, but no longer actively seeking victims.

They had done it – the Rat King no longer commanded the army, and without his instruction, it seemed like cooler heads might prevail. Censers stopped swinging, or were quickly confiscated from those continuing to try. A swift swipe or bite was enough in most cases, but Tolimo saw a few ratkin wrestled to the ground by Squeaka's rebels. Just as long as it was over, he thought.

Then Tolimo heard Pellita scream up above.

"Lybella!"

The name cut him deeply. He looked up, and saw the rest of his friends cradling one that had fallen. The Plague had touched Lybella after all. Just one tendril's touch, but that was enough to kill.

She had a hand tangled in her hair. Holding her peace cord.

Peace was coming now. Too late.

## **FIFTEEN: THE WORTH OF THINGS**

"Lybella!"

The name ripped itself from Tolimo's throat unbidden, full of horror and grief. He knew what that one touch would do. She couldn't die like this. Not now, he thought as he climbed up and rushed to her side. She had crumpled to the ground, Felissa managing to move in and catch her.

This was his fault. He'd urged them all to come with him on his fools' quest. Now Lybella was paying for it, a deep flush already spread across her face and heavy sweat pouring from her.

"Lybella!" he said again, but she didn't respond. She was mumbling nonsense and twitching in the grip of some internal torment.

She had a little time left – the Plague had put one of the slow killers into her. Tolimo knew that it was only going to give her pain though. If it was going to happen, better something quick.

"You have to fix this! Cure her!" he desperately shouted at Squeaka, who was climbing up onto the roof too, to the deep discomfort of the spire dwellers on it – and not a few half-pointed crossbows.



"The Plague has no cure," she replied, "It is our nightmare, and now yours. Easy answers to it would have ruined the Rat King's grand old plan."

There was compassion there but that didn't matter. Pity would not save Lybella. Nor, apparently, would anything else.

No. There was something. Maybe. What Squeaka had just said had sparked something – a memory of something she had said before.

Suddenly, the fact that the disease was a slow killer was no longer horrifying but an answer to prayers. Maybe there was still a way, if only he had enough time. Tolimo knew what he needed first though and cried out,

"Squeaka, give me your censer!"

The ratkin cocked her head in some unknowable expression, but Tolimo was having none of it.

"Give it to me, now! You owe us this!"

Hesitantly, Squeaka unsheathed the metal device from her robes, and handed it over. Tolimo took it with shaking hands. Close up he could see that the metal had a greenish sheen, and was covered in tiny engravings, even the links of the chain. The symbols looked similar to the ones on his prayer block, though he still had no idea of their meaning. It didn't matter – he hoped.

Tolimo scrabbled at the device, fingers seeking some kind of catch. He fumbled it over searching, squinting through the half-light at any detail that stood out.

"What are you doing?" Orso asked, just as Tolimo's questing hands found a little green crystal mounted on a nub at the top of the device. He twisted, and the lid of the censer popped open.

"Nightmares, Squeaka said," Tolimo replied, tipping out the charred mass inside, "They burn nightmares."

"What?" said Pellita, sounding as frantic as he felt. There was no time for much explanation though.

"That wasn't just poetic, right? You meant it for real?" he asked Squeaka. The ratkin gave a single, long nod. That was enough for Tolimo.

Even so, he couldn't prove he was right. What had been within the censer was no more than ash. Whatever it had been before, there was no knowing now. It was a desperate idea, but what choice did he have? He had seen a glimpse of those little wooden effigies, and that would have to be explanation enough.

"I'm going to burn dreams. Yours too, if you'll let me," he announced to the other bell tower orphans.

"What're you talking about?" Pellita angrily demanded. They didn't have time for anger.

"Maybe it can save her. Maybe it can save us all," Tolimo told her, tried to make the urgency in his voice substitute for actual answers – ones he was none too sure of himself.

“Just help her, Tol!” Orso said, eyes full of tears, voice only just short of a wail. He was watching Lybella, and she was rapidly getting worse. Her flush had turned into more of an all over rash, and her sweat had become a full-on fever.

As Lybella convulsed in place, Tolimo held out a hand and demanded,

“Your treasures, give them to me.”

He knew that they would know what he meant. Not gold, or coins or precious gems, but memories and ideas in the form of simple objects.

“This?” asked Pellita, her catapult in hand. He nodded, and took it from her before she could question any further. Lybella might have only seconds. Orso didn’t need any words – he just tearfully did as he was asked, trusting that Tolimo had some way of fixing this. Tolimo hoped the younger boy was right.

He fitted each of the precious things into the censer with the reverence that it deserved.

The catapult.

Orso’s tiny telescope.

After swiftly cutting it out of her hair, Lybella’s own braided peace cord.

His own little wooden prayer block.

That last one went in with a pang deep in his chest. Tolimo didn’t want to say goodbye to that last piece of his lost parents. It was a high price indeed, and he expected the others thought the same of their own treasures – but it was no price at all for Lybella’s life. It was no price at all even for a chance at it.

Now, how to light the thing? None of the ratkin had seemed to use any kind of torch or taper. Maybe it had some mechanism inside. Tolimo spent a frantic moment looking for one, before deciding that it didn’t exist.

Instead, he simply began swaying the censer back and forth, as he had seen the ratkin do. Nothing happened. He did it harder, but still nothing. It felt stupid, and Lybella was running out of time, but Tolimo didn’t know what else to do.

“Will,” suggested Squeaka, “It needs your will.”

It wasn’t hard to do as she said. This was all Tolimo wanted in the world. He watched for a couple more swings, and felt heat coming from the censer – as did a few brief sparks. Something was happening in there, but it wasn’t enough. The objects weren’t catching light, weren’t making magic like the ratkin had summoned. Only a sputtering few wisps of smoke spewed from the metal of the censer and then faded away.

They were so close! Tolimo could feel the magic straining to break free, like softly smouldering tinder, but apparently the censer demanded more than the sentimental possessions of a few children.

He shot a glance over at Squeaka, hoping for her to provide the last piece of inspiration they needed. It had to exist. However, the ratkin slowly shook her head, whiskers drooping as she said,

“Those things do not have enough years in them. A nightmare can be made in a minute, but dreams sometimes take a lifetime to fully form.”

Tolimo got a momentary flash of the fire that had made him an orphan. The ratkin had a point. He still had those nightmares, but a pure dream eluded him. There were flashes of it, ideas of what he might do with his life, but nothing yet set in stone.

A nightmare could poison you, paralyse you, make you frozen with fear – but a dream was more than just its opposite. A dream could propel you forward. It could lead you to build and create and live a fuller life. Both held power, but Tolimo was convinced that though gaining it was harder, the strength of a dream would always win over fear in the end.

He didn't know why he found himself believing it so strongly. It wasn't like his life had shown him much to prove it, especially now, with Lybella's breathing growing ever shallower. People were watching, both ratkin and human silently adding to the tension that needed no further tending. It wasn't fair. Lybella shouldn't have to pay for their mistakes, but he was out of ideas.

“I can help.”

It was Felissa, striding over and looking almost as worried as Tolimo felt.

“How?” he asked, stopping the censer's useless swinging.

In reply, Felissa just reached for her badge, the symbol of a Plaguewalker, and slowly unpinned it from her tunic. She held it out to Tolimo in one gnarled hand. There was only reason for her to do so. With only a quick word of thanks, he caught the censer and popped it open, heedless of how hot it had become. Felissa dropped her golden heart in with the other treasures, a smile lining her old features.

Tolimo could guess how much this meant to her. She had lived her life according to that symbol. If anything could count as a dream, this would. He snapped it shut again, and once more tried to make a miracle happen.

The censer swayed from side to side, producing a little smoke, but nothing more. Useless.

“Come on,” Tolimo muttered, swinging it harder, as that would make a difference, “Work!”

Suddenly, light flashed within the censer, and with it hope ignited in Tolimo's heart too. Then bright smoke danced and spiralled out, its light seeming joyous to Tolimo's eyes, though he didn't truly understand what he was doing.

It flowed out much like the Plague had before, but where once the greenness had a sickly bent to it, now the swirling substance had a different kind of glow about them, like sunlight through vibrant tree leaves. Spring after a hard winter, with the swelled sun of summer on the way.

There was more of the vapour than could possibly have come from the scraps that he had burned, but the impossibility didn't bother Tolimo. He focused only on making more of it, willing the hopes

and dreams that had been given to spread and heal. They flowed out in all directions, right off the roof edge, and began touching the wispy remnants of the Plague the ratkin had generated before.

The new tendrils fought back the old, rolling over them and into them, slowly destroying what Plague it touched. It wasn't going to clear the whole city of Plague. Not even close, but that didn't matter. Only one thing did.

The thick cloud surged towards where Lybella lay motionless, breaths coming in horrible wheezes, and swallowed her up into its embrace. She disappeared utterly into the magic, like Tolimo had seen happen with Plague plumes, but he could feel that this was different. Something better. Something right.

Then the burning inside the censer spluttered and died.

Tolimo gave the thing a few more swings, but the artefact's fuel was spent. The magic it had made faded away, leaving a wide area around the building free of Plague and with Lybella's prone form near its centre. Almost not wanting to know whether his efforts had been enough, Tolimo stepped closer. The others did too, no one daring to say anything, fearing to curse Lybella by breaking the silence.

She was so very still, and for two awful heartbeats, Tolimo thought the worst.

Then Lybella coughed once, and then again. Wheezing breaths followed, and she even began to move. Her skin was restored to a natural olive, and all trace of fever was gone. Then, in another small miracle, she actually sat up under her own strength.

She was alive. She was safe. She was cured.

## **SIXTEEN: IMMUNITY**

The bell tower orphans went to Lybella, Tolimo dropping the spent censer in his hurry to hug her with the rest.

"Stop... squeezing..." Lybella said after a minute inside the mass of hugging arms, and everyone broke away, smiling. Orso was still crying, but they were now happy sobs. Pellita just gave Lybella a light punch on the arm and said,

"Don't you dare do that again."

"Won't. Brought you help though, see," she said twitching a tired finger up at the nearby city watchmen with a self-satisfied smile.

Tolimo felt so drained by the spectrum of emotions that had passed through him that he had to flop down next to the older girl. He didn't say anything, but just grinned. They had really done it. They'd cured the Plague.

It was something that might change the world, Tolimo knew, but in that moment such momentous things didn't matter in the slightest. All he cared about was that Lybella was alright, looking plenty the worse for wear, but better with each passing breath.

None of that would matter though, if the city's people carried on as they had. There were other Rat Kings out there, if what they had heard was to be believed. Romoria. Casmara – Lybella's old home. There would have to be diplomacy. Compromise. Tolimo didn't know if the ratkin would be capable of it. He didn't know if people would be.

Time to be bold, and see.

He looked round at the gathered crowd of humans, growing greater by the moment as more and more of them fled the Spire of Justice. The ladder the bell tower orphans had constructed was holding up surprisingly well. That was desperately important, for the full spire was now ablaze. The fire hadn't gotten this high yet though, and hopefully there would be time for everyone to make it out. The roof had filled up enough that people were starting to spread to other rooftops too, and Tolimo couldn't help but be wary at the sight.

Pikes and spears broke up the human outlines. The city watch were still armed for war. Tolimo spotted the floppy hats of the Authority's guard too. They didn't seem silly now, with starlight gleaming off their weapons. This wasn't all done yet. There was still plenty of chance for bloodshed.

Though Tolimo was very tired, he forced himself to find his feet. There was a lot of mumbling all around, whispers of anger, fear and mistrust. The ratkin were still milling about below, confusion everywhere. There was still some organisation to be found though – the black and white masked Authority, flanked by his personal guard, pushed through the crowd to Tolimo and his friends.

"Felissa," said the Authority from behind his mask, "It seems you helped him find his way after all. Not quite what I intended, I have to say."

"Did my duty, Balo," said Felissa.

"I suppose you would see it that way. That girl has some spirit," he said, nodding at Lybella, who smiled weakly.

"None of us would be where we are without her," said Tolimo.

"So I can see," the Authority retorted. Was that disapproval in his voice? Perhaps he wasn't pleased about his property doing things without his permission. Tolimo felt anger rising again, but fought it down – this was not the time to let it out.

"You believe me now, then?"

Well, he mostly fought it down.

"I see a danger to Morbetzia," said the Authority, looking at the ratkin below, who were almost done reassembling, "The danger, the one hiding behind the mask of the Plague all along."

Like he should be talking about masks, speaking from behind that black and white one. Tolimo got a sudden urge to rip the thing from the man's face, but forced himself to stay in control. He didn't

want this all ending in fire and steel, not after everything they'd been through, and that meant getting this right. He spoke with care.

"Look, you haven't ordered your people to attack. You obviously think that there might be another answer than fighting. I think you're just thinking through the best way to do it."

It was the only thing that made sense to Tolimo. The Authority gave the slightest of nods, and then replied,

"I'm also wondering if it would be better to have this all done right here and now."

Now that did set Tolimo off.

"Don't you get it? It's that kind of thing that started this all off!" he shouted, "The Rat King could never have convinced his people to do this if we weren't already hurting them. Maybe we didn't know any better then, but we do now. If you fight them, it'll make everything ten times worse. He said that there were other Rat Kings in Casmaran and Romoria already. There must be ratkin living below us everywhere - give them a reason to fight us openly, and there'll be a Rat King in every city soon enough."

"Easy for a child to say – a street urchin and a thief. You know nothing of power, of decisions, of responsibility."

"Maybe I know a little more of it than I did before I wore this," said Tolimo, tugging on the filthy white of his Plaguewalkers' clothing. He found that he actually believed it. He'd never have expected that.

Felissa came and put a hand on Tolimo's shoulder, and the other orphans pushed in closer to back him up too. Ridiculous really. What were four children and an old woman going to do against the Authority's personal guard?

"You should listen to Tol," said Orso, more defiantly than he had any right to be.

"Or you'll have to deal with us," added Pellita, recklessly.

"It's what's right," said Felissa, "nephew."

"What they said," Lybella managed to groan out, then "Wait... Nephew?"

Tolimo didn't stop to explain – Lybella had just given him another idea for trying to get through to the Authority.

"You saw us cure Lybella," he said, "If all of you can negotiate something, maybe we can clear the streets of Plague together, and get back to being people again, not animals caught in a cage, eating each other to survive!"

"They're the ones that built this cage," said the Authority, "and when cages are broken, sometimes animals bite."

His attitude got to Tolimo, and once more he found himself snapping out angry words to power.

"You don't want progress? You don't want peace? I can't stop you fighting if you want to, but can you at least leave the rest of us regular people out of it?"

The floppy hatted guards clutched their weapons more tightly, which was faintly ridiculous. What was Tolimo going to do, try and strangle the man with his bare hands? He only had words as weapons, but as it happened, he was willing to use them.

"Just talk to Squeaka. She's the one that stopped them from attacking you. You would all be dead if it wasn't for her and her people. They may look funny, but I don't think the ratkin think much different to us. Why not try and talk? What does it hurt?"

The Authority was silent for a moment, as if in deep thought. Then, slowly he said,

"Ah... Squeaka?"

"The name was my idea," Orso chipped in, "Good, isn't it?"

Tolimo looked round to see that Squeaka herself nodding at her fellows down below. The situation there seemed to be coming under control, blessedly.

"Could be worse," she told Orso, who grinned. The Authority's guard clanked slightly as they collectively tensed up, as did the Authority himself.

"You, ratkin, is it?" he said, with only a hint of rudeness, "Well, I'm not going to say I trust you. You've killed and killed without punishment over the years. That I won't ever truly forgive."

"I could say the same, human," Squeaka almost growled.

"And that is why I say: guards, put up your weapons. This giant rodent and I need to talk."

## **SEVENTEEN: THE ASHES**

The Spire of Justice was gone.

In its place lay a smoking pile of debris, metal piping and grills sticking out of the mess, glinting in the dim morning sun. Tolimo even thought he could see the now somewhat twisted carcass of the Plague chamber that had set all this in motion. A piece of fruit had put him in there. Now he bit into another, the fresh, crunchy apple having been brought to him at the Authority's own order.

How times changed.

"These are really good!" said Orso, around another apple. Tolimo had to agree. Everything tasted better today. He was almost exhausted from the night's events, but it was a good kind of tired. He finished his snack, and tossed the core out to land on the pyre, smouldering away.

"Wake your sister, and let's go see how they're doing," he said, and Orso went to nudge Pellita awake. She swatted at him grumpily, but got up from where she had been curled up on the roof. None of them had gotten more than a few hours sleep, but how could they, when the world was changing by the minute.

"I'm awake, I'm awake," said Pellita, and leapt up to lead the way across a series of platforms, threading her way through the crowd of people that were coming and going from a flat roof some distance back from the wreckage of the Spire of Justice.

"Got the food you sent," said Tolimo, when they had arrived at its centre.

"I had to remind Balo that we all need to eat. He always did get absorbed in his work," said a smiling Felissa, standing by her nephew.

"Thank you, Felissa," said the voice behind the black and white mask.

The ratkin had found a table and chairs in some old house, and brought them up to one of the platforms. Now the Authority sat, furiously scribbling notes onto paper at breaks in his conversation.

"So, that will form the core of city ordinance seven thousand and twelve. Now, you! Have more writing materials brought from the Spire of Commerce – and food," he said to an aide as Tolimo approached, "I think this will be a very long day."

Tolimo thought that he was probably right. Squeaka sat opposite upon another rickety chair and rested scaled arms on the table.

"And you, bring the uncrowned one," she told a nearby ratkin, "He has things to answer for – much as do you, human."

The Authority gave a curt laugh and said, "We all do, I think."

Tolimo saw it all, and smiled. Those two probably couldn't ever be friends, but that didn't matter, just as long as they weren't enemies. This was a good start.

He turned away from the table – that wasn't what he had come for.

"Pleased with yourself?"

Lybella, now almost managing to stand unsupported. A gaggle of clucking doctors still surrounded her though, their bird masks making them look like giant chickens jabbering for feed. She tried to wave away their examinations, looking pretty pleased herself, judging by her deep smile.

"No more than you," said Tolimo, smiling back. Then a voice broke in, sudden and strange.

"I was foretold!"

It was the Rat King, crownless and looking rather pathetic in the light, being dragged along by a pair of ratkin loyal to Squeaka, all of them blinking night eyes against the daylight.

"By no one but yourself," said Squeaka, all her previous, cagey respect gone.

"It is I who brought us together, fought for us, made us ready to rule. It was I that... Arrgh!"

Pellita had kicked the fallen Rat King in the shins.



“That’s for being so mean,” she said, matter-of-fact. It seemed to stun the Rat King into silence, for he allowed himself to be quietly led to the discussion table, where the Authority began questioning him.

“They’ll be talking a while,” said Felissa, coming over, “Perhaps we should find something else to do.”

The group began to wander away, taking turns to support Lybella.

“Got any idea what to do next, Tol?” she asked.

“Not really,” he admitted.

“We saved the city!” said Orso, “There’d better be a reward for this – muffins maybe. Baskets of them.”

Pellita punched her brother lightly on the arm, and the two began to squabble good-naturedly.

“We did, didn’t we?” said Tolimo, looking between their faces until he reached Felissa’s lined features. Her beaming smile was the largest, and perhaps the most genuine. He had put her through a lot, Tolimo realised, and she had never complained.

“Sorry for being so difficult,” he told her, “I wasn’t really the best Plaguewalker.”

“Did our duty,” she said, and to his surprise, Tolimo found himself agreeing.

Not only that, but he saw that the other bell tower orphans had more than done the same. They had even managed to find their way to immunity on their adventure. Others would soon find that path too, when the censers were used to fully cleanse the city.

Maybe none of them would be wearing white, or pinning golden heart badges on, but that didn’t mean that the spirit of the idea couldn’t live on.

Tolimo looked between the faces of his friends, both young and old, and smiled back at them. Whatever happened to Morbetzia next, they would all play their part. Maybe they would even make a difference. That was what he, once a poor orphaned thief, intended to try and do. He knew the others would help him, if they could. It felt like it was their responsibility, along with everyone else.

After all, they were all Plaguewalkers now.