

THE ROCK AND ROLL ADVENTURING BUREAU

'Do pay attention,' the strig said, peering at Tychus down his hooked beak. 'He was the owner of the Rock and Roll Adventuring Bureau, as I have already explained.'

'And now it is mine?' Tychus picked up a candle, holding it closer to the parchments spread out across the table. The Salon Lumiere did not live up to its name.

'And now it is yours. If you will just sign here, and here,' the strig said, drawing forth a quill and offering it to Tychus. He pointed a sharp, finger-like talon at blank spaces on one particularly cramped page covered in tiny characters.

Screwing up his eyes, Tychus studied the writing. His pupils strained at each tiny letter. Try as he might, he could only make out one sentence in three. The minuscule, looping characters led his gaze astray so that he came back to the beginning of the few sentences deciphered.

'What does this bit mean about no indemnity for mortuary costs?'

'It is all correct and legal. I drafted it myself,' the strig said, smoothing the greying feathers that bristled beside his short, sharp beak.

'Yes, but I don't understand it.' Tychus said, studying the strig's owl-like face. Despite living in Civitate Bestiæ for six years, Tychus still found the anthropomorphic forms of the bestia fascinating.

'What is there to understand? You are your second cousin's closest living relative. As such, ownership of the bureau passes to you. I have investigated the matter thoroughly these past

few weeks.' Leaning back against the green leather of his padded chair, the strig stared at Tychus.

'Was there no one else he wanted to leave it to?' Tychus asked, shifting awkwardly in his seat.

He wasn't used to the comfort. At work, he sat upon a hard, wooden clerk's bench and, by night, lay on a straw-stuffed mattress. The Salon Lumiere was a world apart with its polished mahogany tables, cushioned seats, liveried staff, and wealthy patrons.

'It doesn't matter if there was. He neglected to complete a will, despite my advice to do just that. Indeed, young man, I have taken the liberty of drawing a will up for you in advance, so you can spare me future pains. All you need do is name your beneficiary.'

Tychus frowned. 'Why do I need a will?'

'Does not the demise of your second cousin demonstrate the fragility of life, boy?' the strig said. 'We none of us know when might come that day and hour.'

Tychus shivered, despite the heat radiating from the Salon's glowing fireplace. In his mind's eye, he was seven years old once more, back by the watermill, watching his father pulled from the river.

'How long did my second cousin own this Adventuring Burea?' Tychus asked.

The strig looked at him.

Tychus looked at the strig.

'Three days.'

'Three days?' Tychus said, putting down the quill. 'He owned it for three days and was then speared by a falling portcullis?'

'Quite.'

'Quite?' Tychus said. 'Well, are the two things connected?'

'How do you mean?' the strig asked, pouring wine from a silver carafe into their cups.

'I mean, did his inheritance of the bureau lead to his death?'

'I am not a philosopher. Who can say which of our choices or circumstances brings us closer to the grave?' the strig replied.

'Choices and circumstances that lead us to stand beneath falling portcullises,' said Tychus.

There was silence between them. Tychus looked across the Salon Lumiere's tables, crowded with patrons dressed in velvet and silk, towards the dining room. He wondered if the strig intended them to eat together. It was a little past noon when Tychus ate lunch, and he guessed the hour now approached eight. What delights, he wondered, might the Salon serve in its exclusive restaurant? Whatever they might be, they'd beat the eel pie he was about to buy from Rodderick's stall when the strig first accosted him.

Draining his cup and finding the carafe empty, the strig looked towards the bar at the far end of the Salon and hooted.

A vulpine waitress sashayed towards their table, deftly flicking her white-tipped tail aside as a portly diner sat nearby tried to grab it. The man laughed, the waitress did not.

'You hooted, Monsieur Chouette?' the waitress asked, looking at the strig along her narrow, red-furred snout.

'We shall have wine.'

'Very good,' the waitress replied. Tychus watched her walk back towards the bar, giving the overweight man's table a wide berth, tail swaying in harmony with her hips.

Wine in the Salon Lumiere, Tychus thought to himself. He imagined the faces of the other apprentices when he told them. They already called him *Scholar Tychus* in jest, a nickname he'd won simply by being better spoken. What might they call him now he'd visited the city's finest inn?

Holding a silver tray that reflected the Salon Lumiere's soft lamplight, the waitress returned and set down a fresh carafe of red wine at Monsieur Chouette's elbow.

'Will there be anything else, Monsieur Chouette?' she asked.

Chouette waved his hand back towards the bar. The waitress's pointed face remained impassive, but her peaked, velvety ears twitched. Tychus gave her an apologetic smile. For a moment, she studied him with narrowed eyes. In the Salon's lamplight, their colour seemed to shift from gold to green and back.

As he watched her walk away, Tychus noted that the would-be tail-grabber at the adjacent table was staring at him.

'Can I help you?' Tychus asked.

'You're an apprentice over at Weights and Measures, aren't you?' the fat man said. He was balding, his forehead, shiny in the lamplight, beaded with perspiration.

Tychus adjusted the grey clerk's robe he wore, a dowdy contrast to the fat man's burgundy doublet, and nodded. But before he could turn his attention back to Monsieur Chouette, the man clapped his hands.

'Told you,' the fat man said to his two drinking companions – a yellow-haired mus in a purple frock coat and a brown-feathered gallus with a sagging red comb.

Despite being but a few feet away, the mus took a pair of spectacles from his breast pocket. 'What are you doing here?' he squeaked, scrutinising Tychus.

Monsieur Chouette rotated his head towards the mus, 'Do you mind? We have business to discuss.'

The fat man clapped again. 'What manner of business brings an apprentice clerk to the Salon Lumiere?'

'Private business,' Monsieur Chouette replied curtly.

'You'll forgive us, I'm sure,' the fat man said with a wink to the gallus. 'But we have come to expect loftier company than apprentices in this establishment.'

'What you expect or do not expect is no concern of mine,' Monsieur Chouette said. 'Now, you will leave us in peace.'

'Will we?' said the fat man as he refilled his cup from a near-empty bottle of brandy. 'That is not very friendly, and we demand good cheer from our fellow drinkers.'

Ignoring this, Monsieur Chouette turned back to Tychus, saying, 'If you do not wish to accept ownership of the bureau, you must sign a waiver to that effect. I hope you do not make such a foolish choice, both for your sake and mine.'

'Your sake?' Tychus said, conscious that the fat man and his companions were still watching.

'Yes. It would force me to begin my quest anew. According to the Bureau's founding charter, I would need to look for a new beneficiary in such a case, beginning with the kin of former owners.'

'An inheritance is it?' said the fat man.

Monsieur Chouette ignored him.

'Oi!' the fat man said. 'I'm talking to you.'

Slowly, Monsieur Chouette rotated his beaked head towards the bar and gave a loud hoot.

Wiping a hand across his sweaty forehead and slicking back what little hair remained on his head, the fat man leant towards Chouette and poked his arm.

Tychus gulped as Monsieur Chouette reached down to his knee-high top boots and drew forth a long-bladed dagger with bejewelled quillons. The pommel was a hefty yellow-green gemstone, and the grip was bound with red leather.

Tychus stared at the weapon. Its blade caught and magnified the Salon's subdued light, but from the corner of his eye, he saw the fat man shrink back as the gallus grasped for the sword he wore at his plumed waist.

'I forgot to mention this,' Monsieur Chouette said, laying the dagger before Tychus. 'It is called Starfallen and is, amongst many other valuable things, the property of the bureau's rightful owner.'

Tychus didn't reach for the dagger until he saw the gallus relax, hand no longer at hilt. Then, hesitantly, he lifted it in both hands, laying the blade flat across his palms. The red leather grip felt warm against his hand. In the polished steel of the dagger's long blade, still ablaze with captured lamplight, he saw his reflection. But by some trick of the light, it was as though he looked upon a different face. Rather than the boyish bookworm he usually saw, the dagger reflected a man's hardened, confident eyes.

'How may I be of service, Monsieur Chouette?' the waitress asked as she returned to the table.

'Do you have a private room, one where we may dine undisturbed?'

Looking at the fat man and his companions, the waitress nodded, saying, 'Come this way.'

Still holding the dagger, Tychus followed. Passing the fat man's table, he locked eyes with the bespectacled mus.

'That's quite the prize you have there, boy,' the mus squeaked, the whiskers on either side of his triangular snout twitching.

'They say bad company is its own punishment,' said the fat man with a glare. 'But I say, what goes around comes around.'

The gallus, beady eyes rolling, clucked in agreement, and snapped his beak.

Lost in contemplation of the bejewelled dagger, Tychus did not reply. But glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that all three watched him as he followed Chouette and the waitress towards the private room.

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Lamplight, reflected from the private room's polished, ivory-inlaid tabletop, sparkled on the dagger's ornate blade, but Monsieur Chouette's large, round eyes were impenetrably dark. Now that he and Chouette sat alone in this oak-panelled, velvet-curtained chamber, Tychus was painfully aware of the silence. The strig sat watching him, as if he expected Tychus to make some remark.

'How did it happen?' Tychus asked as he gingerly took a pastry from the silver platter.

'What?' Chouette said, already holding one of the Salon's dainty macaróns under his beak.

'The portcullis falling upon this second cousin of mine.' Tychus said, his eyes still on the trays of delicacies the waitress had heaped upon the round, ivory-inlaid table in the private dining suite.

'That's irrelevant,' said Monsieur Chouette. Tutting, he pivoted his plummy head all the way around and hooted towards the door.

It is?' Tychus asked.

'Yes,' Monsieur Chouette replied as he turned back to Tychus, pastry still in hand.

'Well, I'd like to know, all the same, thank you,' Tychus set his own pastry down beside the bejewelled dagger and sheaves of documents, sitting back in his chair.

'I am paid by the hour,' he said.

'Not by me.'

'Yes, by you. The bureau pays my fees and will receive my bill for legal costs in due order.' Choutte looked towards the door and hooted with even greater volume.

'All the more reason why you should answer me then,' Tychus said with a smile.

Monsieur Chouette coughed, adjusted his monocle, and twitched his filoplumes.

'It was an unfortunate incident. The accidental triggering of a warding mechanism, I believe.'

'That sounds odd,' Tychus said, sitting up a little straighter in his high-backed chair.

'Does it sound odd?' Choutte replied, smoothing down his blue-black feathers. They were starting to look a little ruffled. 'Believe me, young man, as a professional in the matter of heirs and bequests, I have encountered things far odder.'

'I'm sure,' said Tychus, in a deliberately formal tone. 'But perhaps you can explain how exactly the portcullis caused his death?'

'Why, by falling on him, of course!' Chouette looked at the door leading back into the Salon's main chamber.

'Well, I guessed that,' Tychus said.

'So, now we have some privacy, if you will just sign here, and here...!' Monsieur Chouette pointed to the documents once more.

'No. Wait. I mean, I want to know. How did it come about that my second cousin died beneath a falling portcullis? Which city or castle was careless enough to allow their gate defences to drop down on him, and why?'

'Oh, for goodness sake,' Monsieur Chouette said, waiving the pastry. 'All these questions. I'd have thought one of your station would be overjoyed to learn that they had inherited their own adventuring bureau.'

'Well, that's another question,' Tychus said. 'What exactly *is* an adventuring bureau?'

'I hope you aren't simple,' Monsieur Chouette said.

'Hey now!' Tychus replied. 'You really are quite rude.'

'I have worked long hours and travelled a great distance to bring you news of financial gain. And yet, all you do is quibble and question. Which of us is the ruder?' Monsieur Chouette crossed his arms over his brass-buttoned jacket. Tychus had to grant it was indeed a touch travel-stained.

The door opened, bringing sounds of laughter from the Salon. As the vulpine waitress entered, her eyes rested a moment upon the dagger at Tychus' elbow.

'This is not good enough,' Chouette's beak snapped as he spoke. 'When I requested a private room, I meant private from the hoi polloi, not to be sequestered away from the serving staff. Where have you been?'

'We have other guests,' the waitress said, shrugging her slender, red-furred shoulders.

'Insolence is not an admirable trait in serving girls. Have a care that I do not take this matter to your employer.' Chouette's beak plumes vibrated.

Tychus, often berated by vexed merchants caught up in the bureaucracy of Weights and Measures, tried to catch the waitress's eye, wanting to offer another apologetic smile, but she looked at the floor, hands folded across her white apron.

'How may I be of service, Monsiuer Chouette?'

'I specifically requested madeleines, and yet we only have macaróns and mille-feuille,' Chouette said, with the air of a diner who has discovered maggots on his plate.

Tychus looked down at the pastries. The mille-feuille, small three-tiered sandwiches of puff pastry with cream between each coco-and-sugar dusted layer, were the sweetest, most delicate things he had tasted. Looking at them now, he saw how each sugar-glazed top had its own geometric design etched in chocolate sauce. And for reasons he couldn't fathom, Tychus felt sad.

'I shall bring the matter to the attention of the pastry chef at once,' the waitress said, head bowed, and stepped towards the door. But as Chouette turned back to Tychus, oblivious, she silently pirouetted, gave a mock curtsy, and poked out her tongue. Tychus laughed and she, eyes sparkling, returned him a white-fanged grin.

'It is no laughing matter,' Chouette said to Tychus. 'One must be firm in small things if one is to have surety in big things. Besides, I enjoy madeleines, even though they remind me of my annoying aunt.'

Tychus took a breath, looked at Monsieur Chouette, and said, 'Let us start over. I do not think the evening has progressed as you imagined it might. Nor so has it for me. But an hour or two ago, I envisaged an eel pie and an early night. So perhaps you will understand that this whole matter is a big surprise.'

Monsieur Chouette nodded slowly, and then sighed.

'I must leave the nest,' he said. 'Nature calls. While I am gone, take a moment to glance once more at the contract. Look too at the dagger and consider the other treasures that await you in your new life. You will sign the documents when I return.'

Left alone, Tychus took the opportunity to hide a half-dozen pastries away in his robe. Gifts for his fellow apprentices. He took up the dagger again and looked at the letters on its red leather grip. R&RAB.

He was interrupted by the vulpine waitress, carrying in a tray of madeleines. Seeing Chouette's chair empty, she turned her gold-green eyes on Tychus.

'You should have a care,' she said softly, setting the tray down and rearranging the silverware.

'I should?' Tychus asked, still holding the blade.

'The patrons of the Salon Lumiere have one thing in common – money.' The waitress wiped her hands upon her apron. 'But how they get their money, well, that depends...'

'On what..?'

Tychus began, but she raised a finger to her muzzle.

Stealing a quick glance over her shoulder at the closed door, she said, 'That dagger would buy years of revelry. Envy is a poison. Watch yourself.'

Chouette, bustling back in, hooted softly at the sight of the madeleines, and before Tychus could finish his question, the waitress had gone.

'So then. You are satisfied?' Chouette asked. 'Upon the morrow, we board the Bonne Vitesse for passage along the river to Tenebris, where your new life begins.'

'To Tenebris? Tomorrow? But...but I can't,' Tychus said. 'I have to work.'

'No,' Monsieur Chouette replied. 'You did have to work, but no more. Now, my dear boy, you are a man of substance. A man of means. From this day forth, all your labours will be for your own fortune.'

'But Monsieur Chouette, I have commitments, responsibilities.' Tychus spread his arms. 'I can't just pack up and go.'

Seating himself and taking a madeleine, Chouette said, 'Can't is just a word. The time is now. Good fortune has called, and you must seize it. The Bonne Vitesse departs when the estuary reaches mid-tide, and all must be aboard by eight. Either you shall be with me, signed contract in hand, or I shall return to Tenebris alone and seek a more grateful heir.

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Tychus, drawing his hood over his head, tucked the contract under his arm to keep it dry as he made his way up Ladder Street. The rain made the streetlamps gutter, spilling shadows over the irregular steps winding up between the high-peaked, lopsided old houses overlooking the harbour.

Chouette had not been pleased when Tychus asked to take the contract home. He had hooted and blustered but at last, relented. Not the dagger, though; the strig had replaced it in his boot top, saying, 'The blade belongs to the Bureau's owner and that you will not be until the contract is signed.'

As water soaked into his robe, trickled coldly down his neck, and dripped from his nose, Tychus fretted that the contract would be a sodden and even more unreadable mess before he reached home. He pushed the sheaves of paper inside his robe. Already the garment emitted the barnyard-reek of wet wool.

Ladder Street might better be called a hill, a precipitous one at that. And given that it was all steps rather than pave, perhaps it had the wrong name altogether. Precariously steep and

narrow enough that Tychus could touch the walls of the houses to either hand, on rainy nights like this, it became a waterfall.

Tychus looked down at his green leather boots. The cascading rainwater swirled about them, but his feet were dry. Two years he had saved for the boots, the only quality piece of clothing he owned. Tychus side-stepped a dead rat caught in the surge of water gurgling down the steps. Looking behind him, he saw it bounce down, swirling towards the gutters of Barrow Way far below. But as he watched, he saw movement on the steps not a hundred paces behind.

An odd kind of movement too. As he'd turned, someone on the steps below, a man possibly, had darted beneath an overhanging window thick with lamp-shadow. Thinking of the vulpine waitress's warning, Tychus increased his pace, taking the steps two at a time where their uneven height allowed.

But after a minute of this, with breath coming in little gasps, Tychus slowed. Wasn't it more probable that whoever jumped into the shadows did so to get out of the rain? To reassure himself, he looked back again. The steps of Ladder Street appeared empty. No skulking pursuer. Just gushes of rainwater splashing and frothing between the buildings.

From this vantage, Tychus could look out over the southern districts of Civitate Bestiæ. To his left, The Quays, where dozens of ship lamps glowed amidst the rainfall. To his right, the Inner Bastion – a high wall that separated the dockside districts from the more affluent Merchant's Quarter, and directly ahead, The Wrinkles, a vast tangle of rickety dwellings and weaving lanes.

Tychus' lived at the very crest of the hill in an attic room in Madame Grenouille's boarding house. As he wound his way from the top of Ladder Street towards her manse, his pace slowed, despite the rain.

Madame Grenouille might be awake. Indeed, she might be sat behind the front door waiting for him. Waiting to scold him for returning late and waking the other guest. To scold him in a grating croak much louder than any disturbance Tychus might cause as he picked his way up the winding stairs to the attic.

But, of course, Made Grenouille didn't really care if he awoke anyone or not, she only cared about taking any and every opportunity to be vindictive.

Hunched against the rain, Tychus turned onto Spawning Street with its once elegant, now crumbling, houses. The boarding house was at the top of Spawning Street, and Tychus's room was at the top of the house, but it was very far from top of the world. A century ago, the hilltop had been a desirable location for the well to do. But the rich had long since moved into the Parterre Quarter with its ornamental gardens atop tree-lined hills. There, in new mansions, they were far from the harbourside stench and hoi polloi.

Madame Grenouille was an elderly, web-footed ranae with a passion for tobacco. By day, with a black shawl drawn up over her broad head, she sat in her front window, clay pipe clamped in wide mouth, awaiting opportunities to berate her neighbours. Her bulbous round eyes missed no grievance, however slight. But if the neighbours failed to cause offence, she would vent her ire on Tychus for some imagined breach of her byzantine house rules.

Tychus reflected on this as he approached her narrow, green front door. The boarding house had a high-peaked roof – a roof missing slates so that his attic chamber often leaked. With a shiver, Tychus imagined just how sodden his straw mattress might be.

Few boarders stayed long in Madame Grenouille's damp house, but Tychus, with only an apprentice's wage, could find no better lodging. Safe in the knowledge that her home was at least preferable to the street, Madame Grenouille would take Tychus to task over every triviality.

Doubtless, his return at this late hour would be noted and, if she were not even now awaiting him, come sunup, he could expect her croaking voice to summon him down the creaky stairs.

But would that be the last time she scolded him?

Tychus paused at the front door, his hand upon the tarnished brass doorknob. Was he going to leave? Really?

Quick footsteps behind him broke his reverie. Turning back to the street, he saw a figure of middling height in a hooded raincoat. It was dark, and he couldn't be sure, but did the face beneath the hood have a mus-like snout?

The figure, looking about quickly, caught sight of Tychus, and then, with elaborate nonchalance, turned about and strolled back along Spawning Street without a look behind.

Tychus, with a crawling sensation at the nape of his neck, wondered if the hooded figure might be the same person who had leapt into the shadows on Ladder Street. And once again, the vulpine waitress's warning came into Tychus's mind. What was it that she had said exactly? That

the patrons of the Salon Lumiere shared only one thing in common: money – but how they got that money depended upon something the waitress did not have a chance to say.

The hooded mus-like figure disappeared into the street's rainy gloom, and Tychus was pulled from his fretful reverie by the opening of the boarding house door.

‘What mean you by this,’ croaked Madame Grenouille’s booming, raspy voice.

As he turned to face her, Tychus found himself eye to boggly eye with his cantankerous landlady. When angry, which she usually was, Madame Grenouille’s green, warty skin took on a reddish sheen, and the already bulbous eyes would protrude from her wide, squat face like overfilled balloons.

Drenched, cold and discomfited by thoughts of shadowy followers, Tychus opened his mouth to speak a retort, to tell Madame Grenouille to mind her business. He paid his rent on time, and that was all that counted. But, although his mouth opened, no words came.

‘What, boy? Are you trying to catch flies?’ Madame Grenouille pulled her black shawl higher over her shoulders but did not step aside.

‘I’m wet and cold, Madame Grenouille. Tired too. Let me pass.’ Tychus said wearily.

‘And this gives you the right to make the whole household sleepless too? Galivanting about town and returning at this late hour to wake my treasured guests!’

The top of Madame Grenouille’s amphibian head came no higher than Tychus’s shoulders, and yet he always felt small when she scolded him.

Tychus shook his head, looked down at his feet – the only dry part of him thanks to his boots – and mumbled, ‘You are right, of course. It will not happen again.’

Stepping aside so Tychus could at last step in out of the rain, Madame Grenouille looked him up and down.

‘See now how you scatter muddy water all over my floor! You think I have nothing better to do than clean up after you?’ Madame Grenouille’s skin became even redder.

Tychus had taken a step towards the decrepit manse’s grand staircase but stopped and turned, looking at the water pooled on the dirty white tiles behind him. It wasn’t muddy.

‘Madame Grenouille, it seems to me you do indeed have nothing better to do,’ he said.

‘What? Madame Grenouille’s croak seemed to shake the walls.

With a sensation akin to falling and tumbling down a hill, Tychus began to speak. Words coming so quickly that in a corner of his mind, he felt as if he were watching another speak.

‘Given that you sit all day waiting to gripe and cuss at anyone who crosses your path and that I have never seen you lift a single webbed finger to clean up this mouldy relic of a house, then yes, you have the time. And as I give you the better part of my wages just to sleep in your wet, drafty attic, I think too that it will not break your back to clean up the water I have trailed,’ he said, and stomped, with a deliberate shake of his rain-soaked cloak, up the staircase.

Behind him, it was Madame Grenouille’s turn to be speechless, her slit-like mouth opened and closed. But by the time he’d reached the first landing, she’d found her voice.

‘You will pack your trunk. Pack your trunk and be gone. Insolence! Rudeness! Never have I known such ingratitude,’ she called up after him.

Tychus’s anger lasted until the second landing, and then, like a candle blown out by a sudden breeze, it had gone. A sick feeling crept into his stomach. What had he done? He was far

from resolved to accept Monsieur Chouette's offer. Was he really going to leave his job, his friends, his whole life and take a riverboat into the wild and run, of all things, an adventuring bueara, whatever that actually was?

If he wasn't, then should he not rush back down the stairs and crave Madame Grenouille's pardon?

For four years he had endured her harsh words without a peep, but now, in a moment, and without thought, he had thrown his lodgings away. And where else might he stay? There were few enough places affordable on an apprentice clerk's wage.

These anxieties lasted until the third landing, with its ominous portrait of one of Madame Grenouille's ancestors sporting a powdered wig atop his toadish face.

'Don't you judge me,' Tychus said to the picture. 'Were you as mean in life as she?'

The bewigged ancient Grenouille said nothing, of course, but his protruding eyes held the same gloating malice as those of his descendent.

Tychus continued up the grand stair towards the fourth landing, pondering now rather than worrying. He would read the contract. Read the contract and decide. If, as he felt was most likely, he chose to tell Monsieur Chouette he could not abandon his whole life upon such short notice, then he would apologise to Madame Grenouille come sunup.

The grand stairway stopped at the fourth landing, but Tychus's ascent did not. From here, he took the narrow, shaky, servants stair – as it was called in the days when the house had servants – up towards the attic rooms.

With head bowed to avoid the rafters and shoulders drawn in to avoid the cobwebs on the walls, Tychus climbed up towards the top of the house. And now, a new feeling came. Why shouldn't he go? Riches, that's what Monsieur Chouette said, riches awaited him. Had he chosen the life of a clerk? No, he had not, it was a role selected for him. In fact, had he chosen a single thing, other than the boots he wore, since his father's death?

Tychus, you will go to the monastery. Tychus, you will study calligraphy. Tychus, you do not have the makings of a monk. Tychus, we have found you an apprenticeship in Civitate Bestiæ. Tychus, you will work eleven hours a day at Weights and Measures.

Now he was on what was still called the servants landing. Small brown doors gave off to tiny, cramped rooms here beneath the manse's slanting roof. But still, Tychus had to go higher. The final ascent, up the rungs of a ladder held together by rotting string, through the hatch and into the loft. The attic above the attic.

Tychus had been fourteen when he was first apprenticed. For two years, he lived in the Apprentice Hall on Longdeck Street, just over the road from the labyrinthine Chamber of Weights and Measures. At sixteen, apprentices were placed in their own accommodation. Albertus, the cheery, red-cheeked Second Clerk of the Second Chamber, had walked him up Ladder Street and to this boarding house.

Once again, he was given no choice. Just brought here. Madame Grenoille had received them in her parlour, with its china figurines and doily-covered table. She gave Tychus sweet tea and patted his head while the red-faced Albertus discussed rent. And that had been that. When Albertus left, his new landlady, now thin-lipped and brusque, showed him to the foot of the ladder and shooed him up to his chamber.

It was not much different now from how it had been then. True, he had moved aside the boxes, broken furniture and moth-eaten carpet rolls and made space for his wooden pallet bed, straw-stuffed mattress and the trunk that held his possessions. And, over the years, had cleared out the bird and spider nests and blocked mouse holes, but nothing else had changed. Dark and damp, the room held but a single window built into its steep sloping ceiling. Grimy and small, the pane gave Tychus a view down towards the river. He could even see the peaked grey roof and baroque, twisted chimneys of the Office of Weights and Measures.

He slumped down onto his mattress in his damp clothes. As rainwater leaking through the gappy tiles above had already made it soggy, giving the room a stale, wet smell, he didn't concern himself about making it damper still.

A weariness came over him, and he began to lie back but then thought of the contract. Sitting up, he reached within his sodden cloak and brought it out. Too gloomy in the attic to read, he lit a candle on his lopsided nightstand, spread the documents upon the floor and crouched over them.

Good, they weren't wet. Not at all wet, in fact. Tychus held the candle closer, studying the cramped script. The handwriting, spidery and with multiple loops, seemed to shift upon the page. For all the world, as if the letters sprouted actual spider legs and scuttled this way and that. Tychus blinked his eyes. Still the letters seemed to scuttle and crawl. He closed his eyelids altogether for a few moments, then, opening them, saw the letters were still.

Good. Just tiredness, then. But as Tychus began to read, he found the letters once more seemed to have a mind of their own. The letter O would hop across to the next word, swapping

with a B, or the entire script would reverse itself or turn upside down, so that he found himself twisting and turning each page, trying to chase the letters and make them readable.

At length, Tychus set the documents back upon the floor and scowled at them.

‘You,’ he said, ‘are no ordinary manuscript.’

Was it a trick of his mind or did the one particularly cheeky O actually poke out an inky tongue?

Tychus walked over to the window and looked down at the lamps glowing aboard the ships moored on the river. Somewhere down there was the Bonne Vitesse. Was he going to walk to the riverbank tomorrow, board ship with Monsieur Chouette and sail off upriver into the wilderlands?

It was well known that the lands east of Civitate Bestiæ were inhabited by monstra. As a child, Tychus would look at a mosaic map laid out on the floor of the monastery. The hills and rivers picked out in tiles of green or blue. Cities and towns shown with castles, walls and tiny houses.

East of Civitate Bestiæ lay Tenbris, a city of dark repute, and here, so Monsieur Choutte claimed, the Rock and Roll Adventuring Buraea awaited him. But thinking of the monastery map, Tychus recalled the words emblazoned across the lands of the east: Diaboli Terra.

And if that was not enough to dissuade him, was he really going to sign this ensorceled contract? A document that defied his every attempt to read it?

True, there was a promise of wealth, but all he had seen of that wealth was the dagger, and Monsieur Chouette had kept it. How could he be sure there was any wealth at all? And the whole story of his unknown relative's demise sounded, well, fishy.

Very fishy.

At least here in Civitate Bestiæ he had a secure job. Admittedly, that job largely consisted of furling and unfurling lengthy scrolls detailing the manifests of ships, scrutinising the contents, and, abacus in hand, calculating revenues based upon the vessels' laden cargo weight. Then recording, in triplicate, all taxes, duties, assessment fees, and fees for assessment. The latter two were different, although many an enraged ship captain had expressed bewilderment about how they differed. Tychus had perfected a sympathetic shrug.

Tychus, lying back upon his soggy mattress, imagined how the senior clerks and the other apprentices might react if he did not arrive for work. Aged Trefullus, the Deputy to the Second Senior Sub-Clerk, looking down the rows of lecterns and seeing one, Tychus's one, unmanned. Sharply, Trefullus would tap his cane three times upon the floor to summon Morganfrew, Second Deputy to the Second Senior Sub-Clerk, and he, in turn, tapping his cane to call up Albertus.

As the Second Clerk of the Second Chamber, Albertus was Tychus's overseer. And a pleasant one at that. Ever since his arrival in the city, scared and unsure, Albertus had looked out for him. Whereas men like Trefullus and Morganfrew regarded the apprentices in much the same way they regarded quills, Albertus was kind and looked towards his charges' welfare as well as their work.

As Tychus had no family to return to on holy days, Albertus would invite him into his home. Many of Tychus' happiest moments had happened beside his hearth. Albertus, his already

red face made redder still by wine and fire glow, would tell far fetched stories of an imagined seafaring career he claimed to have followed in his youth. And Mirribor, his indulgent wife, and Mirriamne, their daughter, would laugh at his tales of mermaids and pirates.

Mirriamne. This was something to consider too. Tychus could not say how or when the understanding arose, but nevertheless, there was an understanding. An understanding of the matrimonial sort.

Lying back and shivering on his cot, Tychus wondered if anyone had ever asked Mariamne if she wanted to marry him. Certainly, neither Albertus nor Mirribor had asked for *his* thoughts on the matter. Nonetheless, it had been decided that when his apprenticeship was complete, Mariamne and he would wed.

In the cold darkness of his attic room, with a smudge of starlight visible through the dirty window, Tychus reflected that until this moment, he had never wondered if he wanted to marry her. It was just what was going to happen. He was going to become a clerk, he was going to marry Mariamne, someday they would have children, and, if he kept busy at his abacus, in time he would become a senior clerk. And until now, he'd never wondered if he wanted any of it.

And did he want it? Mariamne was sweet. A child still, really. Although she would be of a marriageable age once his apprenticeship was done. And she liked his company, not that she ever said much. Shy, Tychus supposed.

It would, he thought, not be a bad life. A clerk earned enough for a decent home, he liked Mariamne's family, and he supposed he liked her too. Well, at least he didn't dislike her. Yes, there were far worse ways of life than that. But could there be better ones?

And as he thought these things, lying atop his mattress, still fully clothed, and the perplexing contact temporarily forgotten, Tychus's mind drifted off slantways into the realms of sleep.

It was a sense of stillness that woke him. The candle had guttered out, and only the faint starshine lent any light to the room. A room that now seemed curiously still, as if the cobwebbed roof timbers and spider-haunted boxes were awaiting something.

And Tychus, who had come wide awake, knew he was not alone.

Someone, or something, was in his attic room. He was not sure how he knew, but know he did, and so lay motionless, scanning the shadows for signs of the intruder. From the gloom near the hatch, a shadowy figure moved, creeping forward, stooped, and starlight glittered ominously on a blade they held half raised.

Tychus twice had fistfights with other apprentices, and both times he lost. But he was rolling from his bed and grabbing up his nightstand in an instant, the movement coming as a surprise to him, as if his body, rather than his mind, had decided upon it.

The dark figure was upon him then. Up came the knife, and Tychus, swinging the nightstand wildly, felt the blade strike its wooden top. By luck, the weapon bedded itself deeply in the wood. As Tychus swung the nightstand again, in a wild and inaccurate attempt to hit his half-seen foe, the blade was torn free of his assailant's hand.

The figure hissed, and Tychus saw a snake-like tongue flickering from its mouth. The fight had carried them both beneath the window, and Tychus realised that his attacker was a woman with the scaled skin of a serpent.

She smiled at him, showing slender fangs.

‘I need no dagger,’ she said, springing forward, mouth agape.

Tychus hit her then, the corner of the nightstand striking her temple, and she fell back, one hand clutched to her head, green-hued blood dribbling down her scaly cheek.

And again without thought, Tychus ran towards the loft hatch, intending to leap down the ladder rather than climb, but tried to stop as a brutish figure hefted itself up through the opening ahead of him.

As Tychus sought to check his headlong rush, large yellow eyes widened in the intruder’s hairy, simian face. Unable to check himself, Tychus collided with the hominoid, and in a tangle of limbs, both plummeted down the hatch.

The hominoid caught hold of a rung in one hairy fist, and Tychus, in turn, caught ahold of the hominoid’s furry tail. For a moment, both hung suspended, but the rickety rung gave way, and in a tangle of limbs, they plummeted to the floor below.

Breath knocked from his body, Tychus lay unmoving as with a groan the hominoid sat up and glared at him. In the hatchway above, the serpent’s face appeared.

‘Kill him then, before he wakes the house,’ she hissed.

Breathless or not, Tychus knew he must run. The hominoid was burly with long, powerful arms, and at his waist hung a cudgel with an iron crown.

Gasping, Tychus clawed at the wall to pull himself upright, and at as fast a pace he could manage, hobbled towards the top of the servant’s stairway. Behind him, the hominoid let out a rumbling cry and looking back, Tychus saw that the thug was on one knee, clutching at an

injured ankle. But the serpent was sliding down the ladder, and Tychus wasted no more time. Breath returning, he rushed down the narrow stairs.

On the next landing, at the top of the grand staircase, he leapt upon the bannister, straddling it facing upwards, and let himself slide down. A practice that earned him repeated scoldings from Madame Grenoille, Tychus hadn't ridden the bannister in years but was glad now that in his early months at the manse, it had been one of his few joys.

Down he sped, and at the next landing, without a glance at the disapproving painting, did the same, speeding down each stairway until he came all the way to the entry hall. Without a pause, he rushed for the door.

Behind him, he could hear the serpent running down the steps and hoped Madame Grenoille did not awaken. Dislike her though he did, Tychus didn't wish her any harm and feared his attackers might act to silence any witnesses.

Fumbling at the lock with shaking fingers and glancing fretfully at the stairs, Tychus, at last, swung the door open. Outside, the rain had stopped. The grey half-light of pre-dawn was in the sky, as was a low moon.

The houses of Spawning Street stood unlit as Tychus ran a short distance before veering off into an alleyway that ran alongside, and then behind, Madame Grenoille's house. At the rear was an overgrown patch of garden where a thicket of birch trees stood, and Tychus hurried to hide amongst them.

As he did so, he came up short. There, beneath the trees, lying amidst fallen leaves was the contract.

He had left it upon the floor in his attic room. But here it lay. As if waiting for him. Could his attackers have thrown it out of the window? No, why would they? And besides, if they had, it would have fallen into the alleyway, not the garden.

Tychus swallowed, the skin on his neck crawling once more as he bent and picked the contract up. Its pages were crisp, and the ink seemed to shine with a silvery luminosity.

‘Right,’ Tychus said. ‘That’s it. You’re going back to Monsiuer Chouette. Let him find someone else to sign you. I want none of this.’

*

The Bonne Vitesse, its hull painted in alternating ribbons of yellow and red, bobbed at the quayside as Tychus, with many a wary look over his shoulder, hurried along the waterfront. The rising sun shone upon the ship’s fore and aft castles, situated at either end of its twin masted deck.

Stevedores, including a trio of orange-furred pongos whose ape-like faces reminded Tychus uncomfortably of the hominoid back at the manse, carried barrels up the gangplank and into the hold. The pongos could bear a cask under each long arm.

Tychus had hidden in the thicket hoping his assailants would think he had fled into the city, then crept via back alleys to the top of Ladder Street. Fearing the scaled serpentes might be lying in wait for him somewhere below, he’d tarried there until the city began to awake and the steps became busy with people heading to their workplaces. Slipping himself into the increasing throng, Tychus then picked his way through the streets, starting every time he was jostled.

Now he was on the final approach, with no sign of his attackers. Feeling sure they had sought the dagger Monsieur Chouette had shown him, Tychus thought that if he returned the contract and beseeched Monsiuer Chouette to make it plain that the dagger remained upon his person, he might be safe.

With no wish to endanger his friends or colleagues, Tychus had opted not to ask for help. And while visiting the City Watch had crossed his mind, the watchmen were known to have friends amongst Civitate Bestiæ's thieves and robber gangs. No, his best option was to make it plain to all that he was nothing but a poor apprentice, and then he would be left alone.

Coming to the foot of the gangplank and dodging aside as a pongo sprang down to fetch another wine cask, Tychus looked back once more. With a flinch, he saw amidst the quayside bustle of sailors and dockmen a slender, dark-clothed figure slipping behind a cart, not a stone's throw behind him. The serpentēs? Tychus could not be sure but did not wait to find out and scurried up to the deck.

‘Hoy there, you! What are you about?’ quacked a white feathered anatidae in a tricorne hat as Tychus came on deck. Yellow-billed and with feathers of blue and black, he stood atop the aft castle and glared down at Tychus.

‘Begging your leave, Sir,’ Tychus said. ‘I am seeking Monsieur Choutte, one of your passengers.’

‘Ah, you are the boy,’ the Anatidae said brightly. ‘Welcome aboard. You will find him in the starboard cabin ‘neath the forecastle.’

Tychus, whose checking of ships manifests was more a matter of calculation than verification, had rarely actually stepped aboard a vessel. He was uncertain which side of a ship

starboard might be, but fretful lest the serpentes suddenly leap up the gangplank, he chose to knock upon the rightmost door.

He was relieved to hear Monsieur Chouettes answering hoot and fairly stumbled into the cabin as the strig opened its door.

‘Have a care!’ Chouette said, stepping quickly aside on his spindly, taloned legs. ‘Your hurrying is most unseemly.’

‘Unseemly?’ Tychus said, falling back into a winged chair set at a small table beside bunk beds attached to the bulkhead. The cabin was small, with polished decking and a brass-rimmed porthole.

Monsieur Choetter regarded him for a moment, beaked head tipped to the side and one large eye half-closed.

‘You are distressed?’ he said.

‘Indeed I am!’ and in a rushed jumble, Tychus babbled out the night’s events.

Monsieur Choutte listened calmly, without interruption, but poured a measure of brandy from a flask and, seating himself on another chair, pushed it across the table to Tychus.

With his tale told, Tychus felt suddenly weary and noticed his hand tremble as he brought the glass to his lips.

‘Ah, the perfidy of men,’ Monsieur Choutte said. ‘Ever are there those that see in another’s good fortune nought but an opportunity for self-gain. But fear not. You are here. Safe. And I shall have Captain Canard set a watch upon the cabin. Soon, we shall take to the river and leave your assailants far behind.’

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