



SMALL-TOWN CRAFTER 4

THE ADEPT ARTIFICER

(A LOW-STAKES COZY LTRPG)

TOM WATTS

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Chapter 1

There was no cozier place than Coiner's Way, a winding street of cobblestone pavements and brick stores that ran through the heart of Sunhampton. An avenue crammed end to end with local shops and set snug in the middle of our little town, where the air always smelled of cinnamon and pastries, and it was impossible to walk more than a few paces without a friendly smile or a call of 'Good morning!'

Spring always seemed slow to come to us here in Sunhampton, almost as though the residents had all come together and decided, 'It took us so long to get used to the cold of winter, we might as well enjoy it a while longer.' Winter was the season of hot water bottles. Two-for-one pumpkin coffees at the Sunny Café. Boots crunching on soft snow, later to be shaken off so that cold feet could be warmed by the fire. Folks in other parts of Easterly might have wished winter away, but the residents of Sunhampton were born in the cold and savored every chilly second of it.

The holiday season of Yulthor was way gone now. Tourists who'd spent it in Sunhampton had packed their things into their rucksacks and suitcases in their bed-and-breakfast rooms, written their thanks to the owners in the guest books, and then taken wagons back home, wherever that was. All across Easterly, Yulthor trees were taken down, and decorations were stored in cardboard boxes in the dark corners of attics. Already, children began the countdown to the next Yulthor, while adults began saving their coins once again.

People went back to work and back to their routines, soon finding themselves floating in the familiar ebb and flow of daily life. Douggie Fernglass gritted the cobble streets every morning and lit the lamps at night. Spruce Wilkinson checked the artificed ordering system in his café not long after opening up. If old Mrs. Tyler wanted ham and eggs for breakfast, he cooked up a generous batch and sent his delivery boy, Billy Nelson, out on his bicycle to deliver it. Across from the cafe, Alec Argyle knelt down and, armed with a bucket of soapy

water, washed the stone steps of the King's Head tavern, relishing every rough back and forth with the sponge for the reminder that it was. For the token of wisdom that although he might own the tavern now, he started out as a pot washer and general errand boy thirty years ago, whose duties included washing those very steps.

I couldn't have asked for a better place to have my own store than right there, on that enchanted street. The fact I even had a store of my own was incredible. Me, a store owner, and not even twenty years old yet. I was an adept-ranked artificer, sure, but it still felt like a dream that I was in charge of a place on Coiner's Way. Especially one that was right next door to my best friend's store, and which would soon bear the proud name of 'Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown.'

Dreams are defined by reality in the same way that getting wet gives meaning to the state of being dry. The reality was that the store belonged to Master Artificer Jack Cooper, and I was merely running it for him. I was an adept-ranked artificer, and folks didn't strike out on their own until they reached the next level – journeyman.

But there was also a different kind of reality that intruded on my daydreams that day. I was standing in my workshop when I heard it. This was a very real intrusion of reality, one that took the form of a series of knocks on the locked store door.

Thump, thump, thump.

Leaning out of my workshop, I glanced toward the door at the other end of the shop. *That's the fifth time someone's knocked on the door today, I thought to myself. People are really impatient for me to open the store.*

Folks in Sunhampton were lovely and kind, but they were also legendarily stubborn. They wanted to have things their own way - that was the short of it. This meant that ever since Master Cooper and I had told folks that we'd be opening an artificery shop in town, people had been knocking on the door every single day trying to get inside. It had gotten to the

point where their interruptions were actually putting me behind schedule.

The only way to deal with this was with a strict regime of not giving in to them, and so that was what I did. Even as the knocking sounded through my store, I ignored it and concentrated instead on the paint I was mixing in a tin on my workbench, using alchemical dye to get the exact right shade.

Thump, thump, thump.

The knocking was insistent, the thuds threading through the store past the empty front, along the narrow hallway with the squeaky floorboards, before reaching me in the back workshop. The annoying part was that I knew the recipe for something called a Muting Salve, which would have drowned the sound right out. Unfortunately, I didn't have any salve with me nor any ingredients to make one with.

I tried to put the knocking out of my mind, but it seemed to speed up the more I ignored it. Almost as if the person read my thoughts and adjusted their knocking pace according to how much I wanted them to go away.

This person just isn't giving up.

It was inevitable that one of us would win. This person wanted to enter the store, while I wanted some peace and quiet in which to work. Stubbornness had met stubbornness. Since I had never been good at being rude – one skill Master Cooper had failed to impart on me – I decided it would probably be me who gave in first. The same thing always happened with me and my friend Paisley about whose turn it was to buy coffee and sweet rolls. In a battle of wills, she won every time. I guessed I just didn't have enough of a willful streak in me.

I'll just get it over with, I thought.

Leaving the workshop and crossing through the store, I hopped to the left and then to the right to avoid the opened tins of paint I had left on the floor. Reaching the front door, I twisted the key in the lock and opened it. The door hinges groaned, and I mentally added the sound to my list of things I needed to fix.

Standing on my step was a grass stalk of a man. He was so slight that if you left him in an overgrown field, you would lose him in seconds. His thin frame was only made starker by the fact he was wearing clothes completely unsuited for the weather. Though the season was edging ever closer to spring, there was still more than a hint of ice in the air. Yet, this man wasn't wearing a coat. He wasn't even wearing trousers. He stood there, six feet and four or five inches tall and with ganglier limbs than a grasshopper, wearing nothing but a t-shirt and grass-green shorts. His knobby knees looked blue from the cold, yet when a gust of wind hit him as though as a test, he didn't betray a single shiver. It was almost impressive.

Even stranger than his attire were his hands. Specifically, his fingers. He had deep brown and red stains on his skin, especially under his fingernails where a powder of some sort had bedded in. It made me wonder if he was an alchemist, since working with powders and tonics all day had a habit of staining your hands. I always used an alchemical wash after making a potion or a salve, but not all alchemists bothered to do that, and after decades of working with potions their hands began to resemble old, spotted tree bark.

"Is this the artificery shop?" he asked. His accent wasn't local. I'd traveled through many parts of Easterly with an acting troupe called Lisabeth's Five Fiends – named just the Five Fiends back then - and I guessed he was from somewhere far north of Sunhampton.

"It is," I said. "But-"

"Oh, lovely," he said as he went to move past me.

I stood firm. "I'm afraid we're not open yet."

The man looked behind him. It was a quick glance, conspiratorial. Almost as if he expected someone to be watching from across the street. "I really need your help," he whispered.

He wouldn't be the first person I'd turned away recently. Although this would soon be an artificer's store and workshop, I hadn't finished preparing it yet. I needed to redecorate, build the shelves, and then craft a whole bunch of

things to actually sell. Not to mention I'd need a safe to store gold in, as well as a filing system for orders and invoices. There was too much to do to declare my store open yet. I didn't even have a sign for the front.

But this man wasn't like the other people I'd already had to politely ask to vacate my doorstep. He wasn't Spruce Wilkson looking for an artificed egg timer for his kitchen. He wasn't Kelly Shrew looking for a self-calculating maths book so she could cheat on her homework. This man had the air of alarm about him, the aura of someone with a slightly deeper artificeric need than usual.

Realizing this, my kinder and more curious side won out and I stepped aside, freeing space at the door. "You better come in."

"Thank you."

I shut the door behind us. "Get you a brew?" I asked.

"That'd be a charm. Do you have any coffee?"

"We do. Bought from Paisley Porter – Merchant of Fine Goods," I said, remembering that Paisley had asked me to mention the name of her store to as many people as possible.

"Oh, right. That'd be t'rrific."

"Take a seat on the..." I began looking around at my store, empty of furniture save for a stepladder. "Actually, better to just stand for the moment, I'm afraid."

"Having a refurbishment?" he asked.

"We haven't even opened yet. There's a lot more involved in opening a store than I realized."

"I'm in the spice game," he said. This instantly made me think he was a merchant; folks in that line of work often talked of 'games'. Jace Porter, Paisley's uncle, always asked me, *'How's the artificery game, Lewis?'*

"The spice game?" I said.

He nodded, clearly eager to talk about his trade, as most merchants were. "Importing spices and the like. Sell 'em to

taverns and restaurants all over Easterly. If you need saffron, black mustard seeds, or anchur powder, I'm your person."

Ah, so that explains the stains on his fingers.

"Sounds interesting," I replied.

"I'm Reuben, by the way," he said, offering his hand. "Of Reuben Bates and Sammy Sandcaster Fine Spice Imports."

"Good to meet you, Reuben. I'm Lewis Cooper, of 'Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown'. Do you take sugar with your coffee?"

"Nine spoonfuls, please."

"Nine?" I said, incredulous.

"If you please."

"Biscuit?"

"What do you have?"

"Let me see."

I left the storefront, walked down a narrow hallway, and crossed into my little workshop in the back, where I kept the glow stone, kettle, and biscuits. From there, I could still see Reuben through the open doorway.

I quickly scanned the lonely shelf just above the kettle and glow stone, resting on which was a potted geranium that Chris had given me as a store-opening present for a store I still wasn't close to opening yet, and a glass jar filled with assorted sugary biscuits. I picked up the jar and shook it.

"We have ginger nuts, a few chocolate biscuits, and some custard creams," I said.

Reuben's answer traveled from the storefront, down the hall, and met me in the workshop. "I'll have three of each, please."

Of course you will, I thought to myself, grinning at his sugary appetite despite the fact that he was depleting my snack supplies.

“Are you sure you don’t want twelve sugars and five of each biscuit?” I said.

“No, no. Nine sugars will be quite enough.”

Two pours of hot water, two splashes of milk, nine deft tips of the sugar spoon, and some vigorous stirring later, my alchemy was complete. I carried two cups of hot coffee from the workshop and into the store, where I left them on the base of the stepladder that Reuben was sitting on.

“Careful, it’s hot,” I said.

“Thank you very much.”

With the brews delivered, I once again left the storefront. I dragged my chair out of the workshop, down the hallway, and offered it to Reuben. He sat down in it, while I perched on the middle step of the ladders.

“Thank you kindly,” he said, holding the mug with both hands.

“Nine sugars?” I said.

Reuben blew on his coffee. “I’ve always had a sweet tooth.”

“You’ll have no teeth left at all before long. But I’m assuming you didn’t come here just for a cup of coffee?”

“I need some...” began Reuben, then leaned forward and added in a reverential hush, “...artificery.”

The way he then shifted his gaze side to side, you’d think he’d just confessed to a plot of treason. I was used to it, though. Artificery was a part of everyday life. More common than people thought, actually. Even so, some folks still treated it like this mystical thing whose name you couldn’t even say at any volume louder than a whisper. If only they knew what an honest, practical craft it really was. Nobody ever spoke about replacing toilet pipes while speaking in an awed whisper, and artificery was just as much a practical vocation as plumbing.

I decided to just get to the point of the matter in straightforward terms. “What is it you need?”

“Let me ask you something,” said Reuben, holding a chocolate biscuit between his index finger and his thumb, poised to dip it into his coffee. “What is your crafting rank? I hope that’s not too rude a question.”

“Not at all. I’m an adept-ranked artificer, but I work closely with Jack Cooper who’s ranked as a master. We also have a master alchemist named Janey Morgan who works with us when necessary.”

“Adept. Hmm.”

“Why don’t we discuss what you need before we worry too much about ranks?” I said.

“This Jack Cooper fellow...I believe he’s the one I came here to see. Only, I asked a gentleman at the café across the street where Artificer Cooper was, and he pointed here.”

“That’d be Spruce Wilkinson, and he wasn’t wrong. My name is Cooper, and I’m an artificer. This is our new store,” I said. “Jack Cooper has a workshop, also in Sunhampton, but I’m going to deal with most of the town’s artificery needs right here. So, what is it you wanted?”

“What I want is to not be rude, so I very much hope it doesn’t come across that way. But the matter in hand might be a little too complicated for an adept-ranked craftsman.”

“Mr. Bates,” I said, feeling a flicker of irritation now that he was poking pinholes in my artificeric ego, “I’ve artificed all kinds of things long before you walked into my store. Doorways that cross geography, mirrors that show things yet to exist. You’d be surprised at what an adept-ranked artificer can do.”

Reuben looked thoughtful, his fingers idly tapping the rim of his coffee cup as he took in my little speech.

How did things switch around? I asked myself. How did I become the one auditioning for work?

I guessed it was because I had a feeling that Reuben Bates’s artificeric needs were for something beyond the usual. He definitely hadn’t come here looking for something as ordinary as a self-cleaning cooking pot. Just like beer lovers

always seek out new and interesting brews, and how food lovers always want to try new cuisine, so do artificers seek out new, strange, interesting, and even dangerous jobs.

“What does artificery mean to you, Lewis?”

The question didn't just throw me for one loop, but several. Even a cursory attempt at an answer revealed it to be a question I hadn't asked myself in a while, if ever. It seemed personal. Too intimate for a topic between strangers, even ones who were sharing a brew and some biscuits.

“Is it special to you?” continued Reuben. “Or just a craft? A means to earn gold?”

I got the sense of this being a test, but one which I'd never enrolled in. All the same, it seemed an important question, and one that needed answering if not now, then at some point. So it may as well be now.

“I found artificery when I had nothing.”

“No preoccupation?”

“No, I mean nothing. Barely any gold. No home, no family. I was a barndoor away from freezing in the night,” I said, remembering all the shivering hours I spent in unlocked barns.

“A means to an end, then.”

“Artificery gave me a home, but then I suppose it became more than that. It feels like...” I paused, already feeling silly for talking so earnestly.

Reuben waited, hands cupped around his coffee, his face revealing nothing.

“Artificery just feels like what I should be doing. I know we don't need to do anything for our time to have meaning, but artificery just kinda...gives weight to mine. It feels right. I've never regretted a single second I spent learning it or doing it, and it never gets old or boring.”

Reuben raised his cup to his lips but didn't drink, he was so deep in thought. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision.

“Have you heard the news that they found a sealed Agclopian tomb near the cliffs of Port Estereld?” he asked.

I recalled Chris mentioning this to me at breakfast a few days ago. He’d told me while dipping his toast into his egg yolk, and my main takeaway from the conversation wasn’t about the tomb but about how brilliantly he’d boiled his eggs. They were just right – not undercooked but with the yolk still runny. That was a skill that even a master alchemist like Janey Morgan couldn’t perfect.

As a town crier, Chris’s usual realm was local news, but he still took an interest in wider matters. As did Paisley’s uncle, Jace Porter. His mercantile interests ranged far and wide, and not a single rumor was whispered in any part of our land without him hearing of it. Chris and Jace were always talking about wider events that went over my head. I was a crafter, and my thoughts were always with the practical. I would never be an academic person. I knew my faults well enough to realize that. I would never be able or interested in carrying on a conversation about politics or history. But if you had a crafting problem you couldn’t figure out? Grab your coat and join me at the tavern, and we’ll talk it through over a beer or two.

Nevertheless, I recalled now what I could of mine and Chris’s conversation, mixed as it was with my jealous thoughts of how my boiled eggs were overcooked and his were perfect.

“Oh! Some people were studying cliff erosion or something, weren’t they, and they dug into the tomb by accident?” I said.

Reuben nodded. “Into its atrium, in fact. One moment it was a routine excavation into the cliffs to gauge levels of erosion, and a shovel of soil later it became a matter of historical importance. The tomb of Port Estereld is one of the few Agclopian relics that we haven’t yet searched, excavated, or in some cases, robbed. But that’s another matter. This one was the resting place of an Agclopian high priestess, the archaeologists think. The Agclopians put her inside the cliffs of Port Estereld so she’d always be looking east. Do you know why?”

I shifted uncomfortably on the stepladder at yet another question not just beyond my areas of expertise, but a thousand miles south of them. If it wasn't enough that I practiced a very hands-on craft, traveling around Easterly with a theatre troupe in my youth hadn't given me much in the way of a formal education. I always found my knowledge lacking when people talked about things like this. It always felt as if everyone else had a head start thanks to their schooling. That if conversations were a race then I started each one five minutes behind.

Reuben seemed to sense my discomfort, and he continued on to save me from having to offer an answer. "It was so she'd always be looking toward the Land of Promise, as they called it. Anyway, as fascinating as it is, it isn't the old bag of bones in the crypt and rooms full of gold that interest me."

Reducing the relic of an ancient high priestess of the Agclopian race to a 'bag of bones' was so ridiculous I couldn't help but grin, despite my discomfort in the subject. "Then what's your interest in this?"

"They found an herb store inside the tomb," said Reuben. "A few rooms away from the lady's resting place, That'll give you some idea of its importance."

"An herb store buried under the cliffs?"

He nodded quickly. "Right there in the tomb system."

"Surely they were ruined," I said. "Herbs couldn't survive so long."

Reuben nodded. "Yes and no. There were no live herbs there, obviously. Yet, herbs were tremendously important to the Agclopian people. We already know this from texts that we've found. They used them to make spices for flavor, mood remedies, and most importantly, medicines.

"Now, we know that they had a special kind of herb that they used as a very effective cure-all for many maladies. It's mentioned in all of their texts and carved into many of their tablets. Their adorations for it borders on worship, to be

honest. Their name for it spans half a page, it was so revered. Every time they used the herbs to cure someone's illness, they added the name of the healer and the patient to the herb's label. Our name for it is somewhat simpler: vitae-panacea."

Reuben said those last two words in the kind of whisper you'd use to utter the name of a god. The air in the store seemed to quieten even further, like in a church when the parishioners were asked to close their eyes and pray.

"Never heard of it," I said, breaking the spell. "But what has it to do with me?"

Reuben dunked his last gingernut biscuit into his coffee and then ate the soggy half in one bite. "Most of the herb stores were long decayed. Except for one thing – a little pot of seeds that we believe come from the vitae-panacea."

"They survived that long?"

"It's not unknown to discover seeds that still germinate even after two thousand years, Lewis. Not so impossible a thing, no. Especially not when you consider that the Agcloprians almost certainly used some kind of magic in the tomb."

"Wow, that's really something. But like I said, where do I come into this?"

"The cliffs of Port Estereld are eroding at a worryingly fast rate," said Reuben. "We need to excavate everything from the cliffs or we'll lose them to the sea. All the treasures, the priestess's bones, the tablets, the relics. And, of course, the vitae-panacea seeds."

"You're not really just in the spice-importing business, are you?" I said.

A flicker of a smile crossed Reuben's lips. "The Agcloprians left behind tablets pertaining to the care of the seeds. The seeds were imbued with their own version of artificery, which was supposed to keep them safe from the clutches of time. But I suppose time is the ultimate enemy, is it not? Very little can beat it. Even those grand cliffs of Estereld are losing their battle."

“The more complex the artificery, the more often the miodes need maintaining. It’s best to replace them completely every so often. And that’s with modern methods,” I said. “I’d assume that whatever magic they used to preserve the inner tombs hasn’t been maintained in centuries.”

“I won’t pretend to follow everything you just said,” replied Reuben.

This gave me a small shot of crafter’s pride, the idea that as much as I struggled to follow politics and history, someone like Reuben could get equally confused in the world of artificery.

Reuben continued, “It’s for the best because I came here looking for an artificer’s help. See, we of the Historical Seed Society have split up to travel Easterly and recruit as many artificers as we can. We’re asking each of them to work with what scant instructions we can decipher from the Agclopian texts, and devise an artificed system to transport the seeds out from the caves. We thought about asking mages for their assistance, but decided against it.”

“Mage spells are way more powerful than artificery, but they’re like a firework to our candle,” I said.

“Exactly so. We need effects that are stable and longer lasting.”

“Are you worried the seeds will just...crumble or something when they leave the tomb?”

“The truth is, we don’t know what might happen when the seeds leave the safety of the tomb’s magic, and we simply can’t take any risks with the only vitae-panacea seeds in known existence. We need a foolproof storage system that guards against any possible hazards. Once we get the seeds to the Easterly Herbatorium south of The Cove, we can germinate them.”

“Just put them in a sealed vial. It’s not hard.”

Reuben shook his head. “I’ll give you diagrams of the tombs, Lewis, and then you’ll understand. The seeds have very particular air, moisture, and temperature needs. These

amounts, however, seem to change. The Agclopians had arranged their storage vault to provide them, and the transport container will also need to do so.”

“And you’re asking a bunch of artificers to do this?” I said.

Reuben nodded. “We will pay for your time and materials whether your system is chosen among the ones we use to transport the seeds inside or not. You will do very well out of this.”

“You said you come from the Historical Seed Society. So what was all the ‘Reuben and whatever spice imports’ all about?”

“Sorry. I just wanted to get a feel for you as a person before I told the truth.”

“And you got that from...what? We hardly spoke about anything.”

“From the nine sugars and nine biscuits,” said Reuben, smiling, “Such generosity speaks to a well-intentioned spirit. Of course, that’s a small matter. What really struck me was your obvious love for your craft. If you and Jack Cooper are happy to work on this project, we’d love to have you. What do you think, Lewis? Would you like to try devising a system for the seeds? As I said, I can’t guarantee yours will be used. But we will pay you well for it either way. Whatever time you spend, whatever materials you use.”

“A blank invoice, then? That’s a risk on your part.”

“The society can afford it. I’d need to see actual invoices, of course. To prove you aren’t-”

“I wouldn’t bill you for things I didn’t use, or time I didn’t spend.”

“No. Of course not. I didn’t mean to cause offense.”

“Don’t worry. You didn’t.”

The fact was, I didn’t care very much for the history of the tomb or the seeds. That might have been an uncultured view, but it was the truth. Artificery was my love, and I’d have

been as happy artificing a waterproof hat as a complicated seed storage chamber. The problem Reuben had presented, and the various ways artificery might solve it: that was my version of the tomb under the Port Estereld cliffs. Every artificery project was a new dig, a new place to uncover some fresh lessons about my craft.

“I have a lot going on at the moment,” I said. “My store isn’t even open yet. I don’t have time to travel across Easterly.”

“You won’t need to. Any information you need to make the container system, you can just send a letter to the society. When you’re finished, we’ll come and get it from you.”

“What’s your deadline?”

“Six months would be comfortable,” said Reuben.

Master Cooper had always preached to me, ‘under promise, over deliver’. One of the most important parts of a crafter’s life was managing their customers’ expectations, and project completion times were key. I always gave deadlines that allowed me plenty of slack, because I was often guilty of having several projects on the go at once and chipping away at them here and there, rather than working through them one by one. It wasn’t the best system, but it was how I worked. Six months ought to be plenty of time.

“I’ll need to speak to Master Cooper about this,” I said, “but in principle, I think we’d like to try helping you. How long are you in town for?”

“A day or two,” said Reuben. “I’m afraid I took the name of this place a little too literally, however. Who’d have thought Sunhampton would be so chilly? I think I need to visit a tailor and buy some trousers.”

“I have some bad news for you, my friend. The town’s tailor shop? Well, you’re in it. This used to belong to Mr. Flueitt, but he’s retired now. You might try the general store, though.”

“Thank you, Lewis. I will. Can I trust you not to speak about this with too many people? The seeds are valuable, and

they will be most vulnerable to theft during transport, even if your system protects them from everything else.”

I made a mental note that theft was just another thing my system would protect against. No risk or hazard would escape my attention. But I didn't say this aloud, not wanting to get Reuben's hopes up yet.

“Leave it with me,” I said.

Chapter 2

When Reuben left the store, I watched him walk down the street while gathering strange looks from the Sunhampton residents who noticed his attire - or lack of it. *What a strange guy*, I thought to myself, deciding that I liked him even if he had no idea how to dress for Sunhampton weather.

Soon he was gone from view, but remnants of his visit clung stubbornly to my mind. My instinct was to go outside and lock the door, leave Coiner's Way, head straight to the craftstead, and talk to Master Cooper about it. But that would have meant completely abandoning my plans for the day, and it would have been a useless errand in any case. Cooper and Janey were out of town for the next couple of days, visiting her younger sister, Kinny, in Llwyn.

That reminds me. I really need to tidy up the house before they get back.

But as much as I had other things to do, my head was bursting with excitement at the artificeric puzzle Reuben had laid out for me. I found my thoughts getting carried away by it already. What dangers did the outside world pose for the vitae-panacea seeds? How much air should their storage container let in? Would germs be a problem? Moisture, wind, heat? There were herbs that withered if they merely knew that you were looking at them. Janey had shown me them a few weeks earlier. The dangers to the vitae-panacea seeds could be absolutely anything.

Reuben had left me a small pamphlet containing what scant information they had on the seeds. I guessed I'd have to read that later. I wondered if maybe I ought to go to Sunhampton Library right now and start some preliminary research on other kinds of seeds and their care and storage. Jot a few ideas down, maybe design a first draft of the storage system.

No, I told myself, I planned to paint the store today, and that's what I'm going to do. Otherwise, this place is never

going to open.

I reached into my pocket and took out my crafter's notepad. This was my second one, having filled the first with various project briefs, materials lists, sketches, ideas. Having covered every page in the first, I had stored it in the drawer of my desk in my bedroom and immediately bought another blank pad from Joe Phillips's general store.

I hadn't stopped there, though. Now that I was an adept artificer, I could competently handle using three miode types on things. For my second crafting pad, I had used miodes that helped me when planning jobs.

The first was evaluation miodes that I had disenchanting from a spell scroll that mages often created for merchants, which allowed a simple spell to calculate the value and components of something. Only, I had employed them for a slightly different task.

I put the crafter's pad on the top step of the stepladder and took my never-deplete pencil from my pocket. Licking my finger and turning the crafting pad to the first blank page, I quickly scribbled a rough brief for Reuben's project.

Project: Seed Transportation Device

Reuben Bates from the Historical Seed Society needs a weather, tamper, and damage-proof container to transport rare seeds in.

I paused for five seconds, allowing the miodes in my crafting pad time to work. Sure enough, the sound of an imaginary pen moving over paper filled the store, and words soon began to write themselves onto the bottom half of the page.

Suggested materials needed:

Unknown - more information required.

Skills that will be involved:

Intermediate Enchantment [High likelihood]

Intermediate Alchemy [Moderate likelihood]

Intermediate Tinkering [Moderate likelihood]

Suggested job charge:

Unknown – more information required.

Expected experience yield:

Unknown – more information required.

This was artificery; it wasn't magic. My miodes could only do so much, and I needed to feed them a little more if I wanted my pad to provide better information about the job. Pen poised, I composed my thoughts and then wrote some more.

Project: Seed Transportation Device

Reuben Bates from the Historical Seed Society needs a weather, tamper, and damage-proof container to transport old, rare seeds in.

The device will potentially need to protect seeds from excessive heat, cold, rain, and any other elements common in Easterly. It will also need the ability to control temperature and air levels from outside when required.

Additionally, the device will need a system of security that prevents theft or violence upon it.

With that done, I paused and waited for the miodes to work once again.

Suggested materials needed:

Artificed or alchemical lock set

Skills that will be involved:

Intermediate Artificery (Certainty)

Intermediate Alchemy (High likelihood)

Intermediate Tinkering (Moderate likelihood)

Suggested job charge:

4500 gold

Expected experience yield:

This job will require creative thought and well-developed skills. The expected experience from completing it is high.

Was it just me, or was the winter sun shining just that little bit brighter through the dusty windows of my storefront now? Was I imagining that I felt lighter in step, in my thoughts? Or was it just the rush that I always got from receiving an interesting yet challenging project to work on?

Feeling excited, I quickly added one last line to the project information sheet, under the title of ‘deadline’. Reuben had given a deadline of six months, which should be plenty of time, but I decided I would like to complete it in four. Then, I could either submit the seed transportation system to Reuben and surprise him with my promptness, or I could finish it and have two months of leeway in which to make changes.

With that done, I finalized the project in my crafter's notepad, and then closed it. Holding it in my left hand, I tapped the front cover of the pad three times with my index finger, allowing text to unfurl in the air in front of me. It looked a lot like the token text that often accompanied skill increases and level-ups.

Current projects and deadlines:

1) Get store ready for opening- Deadline: 1 month

2) Tidy Craftstead before Cooper and Janey return from their trip – Deadline: 12 hours

3) Seed Transportation system – Deadline: 4 months

Putting thoughts about deadlines, seeds, and tombs aside for now, I focused instead on the bare insides of my store, and on the walls which bore a dozen little screw holes from where Mr. Flueitt's shelves had once been fixed. Seeing the scale of the job before me, I let out a sigh.

It was incredible, really. I was an adept-ranked artificer with five intermediate skill trees. If you added up all the time I had spent learning and honing my abilities and put it all together without breaks or sleep, it probably totaled months of straight work. With a single command, I could create an oak wardrobe in minutes, then use my artificery so that it organized your clothes by size or cleaned them for you. Hells, I could probably make it talk if you wanted to chat with your furniture while you dressed.

Through the wonder of artificery, tinkering, and alchemy I could make a pot that spiced your stews, carts that rolled by themselves, and lights that adjusted their glow according to your need. The realms of the ordinary weren't a cage for me. The valley of the possible was just a scenic stop along the way to the wondrous.

Yet here I was, having to paint my store by hand. For all the separate abilities my five skill trees contained, not a single one of them would let me change a wall's color without having to do the work manually.

Suppose I ought to get to it.

I spread three old bedsheets over the floor to protect the timber boards, which I planned on restoring. I assembled my tins of paint and my brushes. I had dressed that morning in my scruffiest shirt and trousers, so there was no danger of me getting paint on a nice shirt and depleting my already pathetic wardrobe. Then, with everything ready, I began to paint the north wall of my store's customer-facing room a deep, ocean blue.

Soon, I had covered a quarter of one of the walls in its new color. Then, a feeling of doubt settled upon me, and I looked at the new color next to the old one – a dull gray like an elephant's rump – and wondered if I had chosen correctly. It was just so hard to decide. I had never been good at aesthetics. I was always more crafting-minded, focused on the technicalities and the tiny details. Whether one color matched or contrasted with another was about as easy for me to decipher as a five-thousand-page book written in ancient runes.

I wiped the brush on the side of the tin to remove any excess paint, then set it down on the bedsheet. Standing up to full height and stretching my back muscles, I stared out of my storefront window, trying to get a little perspective before I decided whether to carry on with the blue color or not.

Outside my store was Coiner's Way, the main thoroughfare in Sunhampton. It was quiet today, with the pre-Yulthor rush long behind us. Also gone was the post-Yulthor busy period, where people spent the money they'd been gifted during the holidays. Now it was the end of winter lull, where folks were easing up on shopping to let their gold pouches recover. Most stores made enough sales during Yulthor to survive this lean period. My friend Paisley, whose store was right next door to mine, had done very well.

But what about my store, Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown? Well, two months of rent had already been paid and not a single customer had crossed its threshold. Except for Reuben, I supposed. Oh, and a man who was bursting for the loo. I had been about to shoo him away after he knocked on the door, but the poor guy’s expression was so agonized that I had to take pity on him.

“You need a sign,” Paisley had told me. “One that says ‘toilets are for customers only.’ That way, they’ve got to relieve themselves of their gold before they relieve their bladder.”

“I need things to sell to them first,” I said.

Turning away from the window, I headed through my store to the workshop at the back, where I had a little glow stone, a copper kettle, a mug, a teaspoon, and two jars filled with tea leaves and coffee grounds. Sadly, my biscuit supplies were now empty, and I half-wondered if I ought to add that to Reuben’s bill. As well as my tea and coffee jars I also had a little cool box that I’d made by taking the miodes from a glow stone, adding them to the box, then enchanting a second miode type that reversed the effects of any miodes they were artificerically linked to, which transformed the glow miodes to cool miodes. Inside the cool box was one sweet roll – unless I ate that already, I couldn’t remember – and a metal saucer three-quarters full of milk.

My stomach rumbled at the thought of a sweet roll. I opened the cool box and felt a chilly hit of disappointment. Yep, the sweet roll was gone. Damn my poor sense of self-control.

I made a cup of coffee, took it back into my storefront, then sat on the top step of my stepladder and looked at my partially-painted wall with fresh eyes. Outside the store, the odd shopper here and there filed through Coiner’s Way, visible to me only as shapes in my peripheral vision.

I stared at the walls, wondering when I would ever be happy with the color. Master Cooper had been unusually patient with me about getting the place ready. In fact, taking

his personality into account, he'd been ridiculously patient. Even the strongest dam bursts eventually, though. And when it came to tolerance, Cooper's dam was made from tissue paper and bamboo. I needed to make progress.

Why was I struggling with this so much? Why couldn't I just settle on a paint color, paint the damned walls, and then open the store to the public? What was lurking in my own head that was holding me back?

I know what I need, I thought, with a sudden flash of inspiration.

Flush with motivation, I went into my workshop at the back of the store. It wasn't much of a workshop, really. It certainly didn't compare to the workshop back at the craftstead. Nevertheless, Mr Flueitt, the tailor who last rented this building, had cleared away all of his things, leaving me, for the first time in my life, with an empty workshop that I could make my own.

I already knew that I loved that little space. There was a window that looked out onto the yard out back, beyond which was a narrow alley with vine-covered brick walls and a bed of grass planted as a natural walkway, instead of the usual cobbles or stone paving that covered much of Sunhampton. Mrs. Silvers, who owned the florist shop three doors down, had strung a webbing of yellow fairy lights here and there all the way from one end to the other, giving an otherwise dull alley a magical feel.

Sometimes, when I was in the workshop, I'd see Paisley going into the yard of her store with a bag of trash, dragging the bag along, and then heaving it away with anger as though it was filled with poisonous spiders that had invaded her shop. Sometimes she'd see me through my window and wave, other times I'd tap on the glass to get her attention.

Inside, the workshop ceiling was much lower than the one at the craftstead. At just a few feet taller than my head, it gave the room the feeling of a grotto, of a cozy little nook. I had hammered hooks into the beam that ran across the middle, and from these I hung three lamps, adjusting their oil level

until the light they gave off was just perfect, the ambiance alchemically and artificerically at my precise level of comfort.

I had two workbenches to work on, each with various drawers and vices all along them. These were good, sturdy benches, though they were a little too perfect for me. Too unmarked. I liked a workbench that had the scars of crafting; the little nicks here and there, the gouge marks where a chisel had slipped, stains that spoke of alchemical mishaps. Those would come with time, I was sure. To their right was a small refreshment counter, and finally, on the furthest wall away from the doorway, I had fitted some artificed storage shelves using miodes that allowed them to store more things. They did this by artificially changing the physical size of whatever I placed on them until said item was retrieved. This meant the modest shelves could hold way more items than you'd expect.

Spending time in my new workshop never failed to put me in a good mood, and so it proved today as I began a little spur-of-the-moment artificery that I was sure would help me in my painting efforts.

The way I saw it, painting was boring. My friend, Jester, loved to paint. He was always changing the color of his cottage walls. He said that the act of sweeping a brush up and down was meditative as well as practical, and an activity that accomplished both those things wasn't one to be ignored.

As for me, well, sometimes I liked the mindfulness aspect of painting. Other times, I found it boring. Today was one of those times, and I needed something to distract me while I worked. And there, in my artificer mind, I was sure I knew what that was.

In the backroom workshop, I took my crafter's notebook out of my pocket and put it on the workbench. This new book was artificed in another way, so it shrank when I put it in my pocket. It was also rainproof, smudge-proof, and tamper proof.

Pen in hand, I quickly scribbled a few ideas for my artificer idea, then used this to list what I'd need to complete the project. One draft led to another, then a third, and after a

few additions, scribbles, and crossings out, I was happy. Now, I needed to get some miodes.

Chapter 3

The craftstead where I lived was at the western edge of Sunhampton, sitting proudly on the summit of a very steep hill. Customers and visitors used to have to walk all the way up the muscle-punishing slope just to get to our workshop, but not anymore. As a wedding gift, I had created an artificed cart that moved up and down the hill on its own, and Cooper graciously allowed customers to use it during the day. I rarely used it, though. Walking up the hill was a great way to work my legs a little, to test my thigh and calf muscles that otherwise didn't see much use in my crafting life.

By the time I reached the summit, my forehead was covered in sweat, despite the end-of-winter chill. I unbuttoned my coat, loosened the top button on my shirt, and stood for a moment and let the freezing air cool me down. The sight of my home filled me with a sense of gratitude, just as it did every single day. Just as I hoped it always would. That old house with its wonky chimney, its windows whose glass and frames needed replacing, and its brickwork that was long overdue a good alchemical scrubbing. It was the first real brick-and-mortar home I'd ever had. Sure, I'd live in a huge manor once, but my stepfather and his children had begrudged my presence, and to me, a home wasn't just the building, but the people inside it. The brickwork on the craftstead was decades overdue repointing, certainly, but it beat the manor for everything else.

Though the craftstead had stood there for generations, it wasn't immune to the winds of change. Nowadays, as well as boasting a main house and artificery workshop, it also had an alchemy workshop with an adjoining storefront, which Master Cooper and Mistress Janey shared. They'd even hired a clerk to run it – a fifty-six-year-old lady named Florence Anderson, who insisted that everyone call her Flo.

Flo was an intimidating lady. We all agreed on that, especially Chris. Well, almost everyone – Paisley could stare an enraged silverback gorilla in the face until it blinked,

apologized, and slunk away in defeat. Flo smoked vanilla-scented tobacco in a tobacco pipe on her breaks, she drank exactly four cups of coffee every day without exception, and the way she spoke never left you wondering if you were in her good books or her bad books. Two minutes in her company was enough to set you straight on that account.

On Friday nights she would go to the King's Head - where she was well known as the tavern's best arm wrestler - and drank four fingers of whiskey with her oldest friend, Mebbie Blathwick. On Sundays, she volunteered for the new Grub-and-Gab initiative, which she and Spruce Wilkinson, the owner of the Sunny Café, had created. This was where Spruce cooked food in his café and then delivered it to some of Sunhampton's lonelier residents. Whoever delivered the meals would stay for a while and just enjoy a brew and a gab.

"Gab?" Jester had said after hearing about the initiative when he was having dinner with us at the craftstead. "Is that another of your Sunhampton words?"

Ever since moving here, Jester had been obsessed with learning about our town and our dialect, collecting local slang and mannerisms like they were shells on a beach. He still couldn't say them like a natural Sunhamptoner - nor could I, for that matter - but the locals loved him for how hard he tried to fit in. In fact, Jester probably adored our town more than some folks who'd lived here all their lives.

"Gab means to talk, Jester lad," replied Cooper. "Also known as nattering, prattling, or having a good old lip-flapper."

"Ah. In Hattersdale we just said 'chat'."

"Well, the Grub-and-Chat initiative doesn't quite have the same alliteration," Janey had said.

That afternoon, Flo came out to greet me as I entered the craftstead yard. Her cheeks were a pale red either from the cold or enjoying too much time at the King's Head the night before, and her right hand was smudged with ink.

"Oh, it's you, Lewis. Thought you were a customer."

“Hey, Flo. Just need to grab a few miodes from the storage shed,” I said, crossing the yard. I took one pace, then two, and started to imagine I had made it through the gauntlet.

“Now hold on just a second,” said Flo.

I stopped like I’d been zapped by a minor lightning spell. Feeling a sense of dread sneaking up on me, I slowly turned around.

“This way, please,” she said, beckoning me with her finger.

I didn’t have time for this but nor could I just walk away. Cooper and Janey absolutely loved Flo. She handled all their customer queries so that they could focus solely on alchemy and artificery, and she had completely reorganized their material inventories so that everything was accounted for. Not only that, but she had insisted that Cooper artifice a shared calendar on a huge slate, which Flo could update so that they’d know which jobs were due for completion, when materials shipments were going to be delivered, as well as any other dates worth remembering. In short, employing Flo completely removed all the things they found boring or tiresome from their lives while making sure they were more organized.

What this also meant was that whatever Flo said was the law. She had quickly become the queen of the craftstead yard, and her authority even extended to Cooper listening when she told him he shouldn’t drink so much, and that the tonics Healer Brown prescribed for him were for his own good. It was remarkable, really, the extent to which Cooper and Janey relied on Flo, even a month into her employment.

It also meant that I had to listen to her. She was already a key part in the Cooper and Cooper machine, and though I would be spending much of my working time in the store in town now, I had to listen to Flo when I was at the craftstead. Cooper had told me so, and as an adept-ranked artificer working under a master, I had to respect his rules. Besides, Flo was good at her job, and I couldn’t have brought myself not to listen to her if I tried. I had just never been that kind of person.

I followed her into the craftstead storefront, which was attached to the alchemy building but served both Cooper and Janey's customers at the same time. Inside, it was a cozy little room with Flo's desk taking up almost half the space, two antique, felt-backed chairs for customers to sit on, a refreshment counter with a glow stone, mug tree, and jars for tea and coffee, and lots and lots of plants placed here and there. A jungle of them, in fact. Hanging plants fixed to the wall, huge potted plants by the walls that looked like they might outgrow their pots at any moment. Mrs. Greaves, a lady who had an exotic garden at the edge of town, was always sending us new ones. Cooper complained that each plant was 'another bloody mouth to feed,' but Flo seemed to love having so much greenery in her environment and she followed the care instructions Mrs. Greaves sent with each plant to the letter.

"I've just brewed up if you want a cup of coffee," Flo said.

"No thanks," I said.

"Well, come on, come on, sit your bum down before it falls off. You must be exhausted from walking up that hill."

"Will this take long at all, Flo?"

"It will take as long as it takes, my chick," she said. "Coffee? Did I already ask you that?"

"No, really. I don't want anything."

"Tea?"

"Seriously, I'm fine," I said.

"Jam Surprise?"

"Okay, I'll have a Jam Surprise."

Flo smiled at her victory, leading me to curse my lack of self-discipline. She always won our little games, and she relished it. This was why she kept a healthy supply of sweet treats handy, stockpiling them like an arsenal of kindness. If Mrs. Grant down at Rolls and Dough ever commissioned a plaque in honor of her most loyal customers, Flo's name

would be near the top. She didn't just have a sweet tooth, but a whole set of sweet dentures, and I would have bet my last copper that she and Reuben Bates would have been good friends if they met.

Flo took two Jam Surprises out from a cardboard box on the refreshment counter, put them on a plate, and then brought them over to the desk. She settled into her seat while making a 'hoo' sighing sound, which was also something Cooper also did. Actually, Percy Tattersall did that, too, come to think of it. I didn't know why, but I wondered if it was just something that grew on you as you got older, that involuntary need to sigh when you sat down.

"Now," said Flo, "I won't keep you long. I just want to know which miodes you're taking out from the storage shed, how many of each, and which customer they're for. I'll put them in my little book, and then off you go, my chick."

Four weeks earlier, Flo didn't even know what a miode was. Her vocational experience came from receptionist and admin roles at an impressive list of businesses in northwest Easterly, which made her more than qualified for the job. But she'd never even spoken to an artificer before, much less worked for one.

On getting the job, she'd gone to Percy Tattersall's bookshop and bought 'Artificery for Idiots,' and spent her free time reading up on the craft. Over the course of a single weekend she learned a lot about our terminology, even if she didn't know a great deal about the craft itself. Then, she insisted on watching Master Cooper working for a while just to get a feel for artificery. He'd grumbled at first, then grumbled some more, but finally relented when he realized Flo was not only more stubborn than he was but was a consummate professional and wouldn't accept refusal of what she felt was vital training.

She opened a huge ledger, flicked through the pages, and then looked at me, pen poised in her right hand. "So, my chick, if you'd just like to tell me which miodes you need?"

I took out a ledger of my own – my crafter’s notebook. In terms of size, it paled against Flo’s tome. It was, however, waterproof, so I supposed I won in a strange sort of way. Not that Flo had any idea we were competing in the Notebook and Ledger Game, as I quickly named it in my head.

“Let’s see,” I said, scanning my rough scribble of ideas, “I’ll need some vocalization miodes, some mimicry ones, and some comprehension.”

Flo scribbled in her ledger. “I think we have a few of those somewhere. How many will you need, my swan?”

“Not a lot. Half a miode pool’s worth of each.”

“Lovely. And which customer is this project for?”

“Well,” I began, “you see, this is a different kind of project. It’s not for a customer.”

Flo raised her eyebrow. “What are you making, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I want to artificed a device that will read my books out loud while I paint.”

“Oh, how will that work? Do tell.”

I smiled. No crafter in the whole of Easterly can resist when someone shows genuine interest in one of their projects. “It’ll be an artificed device of some kind,” I said. “The vocalization miodes will let it make sounds. The comprehension ones will let it read books. Finally, the mimicry miodes should let it mimic the words in the book. At least, I hope. It might not turn out that way; you know, there’s always Artificery’s Law of Probability to account for.”

“I must say, it never ceases to amaze me what you and Jack get up to. The things you concoct. Certainly beats inventorying raincoats, galoshes, and umbrellas at the Port Amick docks.”

“I’ll just be getting the miodes, then, and I’ll leave you to it.”

Flo shook her head. “Sorry, duck,” she said.

In the space of fifteen minutes, I had been chick, swan, and duck. Chris said Flo had once called him ‘sparrow’, while Paisley was sure she’d heard Flo call Cooper ‘my goose.’ Why Flo should use endearments like that I had no idea. Right now, it wasn’t what concerned me.

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Young Jester was here again on Thursday morning, working through Master Cooper’s books for last quarter. What with building a new alchemy workshop and this storefront, as well as renting out the store in town, gold isn’t as fluid as Master Cooper would like. He said that I’m to monitor and restrict miode and material usage for a while.”

“That doesn’t sound like Master Cooper.”

“No,” said Flo, “I was being nice. He said ‘Make sure that lad doesn’t waste all my miodes on some hare-brained project. He’s got a mind like a moth bouncing from one project to another.’”

“Oh.”

“Sorry, duck. I told him off when he said that, I hope you know. I said, ‘Jack, that’s no way to speak about Lewis.’”

“Thanks, Flo. But restricting miode and materials still doesn’t sound like Master Cooper, no matter how he phrased it.”

“Young Paisley was here when Jester was telling Mr. Cooper about his accounts,” said Flo, “She also had a few choice words to say when she overheard how stretched things had gotten.”

“That makes more sense. Jester did the maths, Paisley told Master Cooper what to do about it. So Cooper won’t let me use any miodes and other stuff?”

“Only for customer projects,” Flo replied.

I slapped my forehead. “Oh! I forgot to mention. This is actually for a customer. Didn’t I tell you that already?”

“What’s his name?”

I thought quickly. “John.”

John wasn’t exactly an original name. It was probably the most common one in Easterly. I wondered if my lack of originality would make my hypothetical customer more believable, or if my lack of ingenuity would expose me.

“John who?” said Flo, leaning forward on her elbows and staring at me with a gaze that could have belonged to a judge ready to deliver a sentence. “I’ve lived in ‘hampton for twenty-six years, remember.”

“John Reeplothorpe,” I replied in a tone so cool it could have chilled a glass of beer. “He just moved here. He lives with his three cats and elderly mother. He wants the book-reading device for her, you see. To read to her while he’s at work.”

“What’s his job?” asked Flo.

Without even half a second’s pause, I replied, “Chimney sweep.”

The clock on Flo’s desk ticked and then tocked as she held my gaze, weighing the truth of my words against her clear disbelief.

“You’re a good liar, Lewis Cooper, but not good enough.”

“Fine. The project is for me. I just want to make something that entertains me while I paint, so that I can work better. I used to be able to use whatever miodes I wanted, you know. After I earned the Enchantment skill tree, that was. This isn’t purely selfish, though. When I have the first device made, I can easily produce more of them. I plan on selling them in the store.”

“Sorry,” said Flo. “Master Cooper gave me a directive, and I must follow it. No miodes are to be released unless they are going to be directly used on a customer project. Unless...”

I leaned forward. Nothing bad had ever come from the word *unless*, and it was always my policy to listen carefully whenever someone said it. “Unless?”

“Well, this talking-book-thing of yours. Why do you need it?”

“Like I said, it’s to keep my mind occupied while I paint. And if it’s something that I need, then other people will need it, too. That’s one of the ways artificers decide what to make. If there’s a need for something that can’t be solved with more normal crafts, then we fulfill it.”

“Oh,” said Flo, “So you could argue it will help you get the town store ready for business quicker, and thus help with Mr. Cooper’s gold flow problem?”

I nodded. “Yes, that was exactly my thinking.”

“Then maybe I can release the miodes, but I’ll have to explain this to Mr. Cooper, and you know how he gets sometimes. I’m taking a big spoonful of sour medicine here, Lewis, and I’ll need some sugar to help it go down.”

“Uh...what?”

“I want you to do me a favor,” said Flo. “The Grub-and-Gab scheme is struggling to get going. We have a few volunteers, bless ‘em, but not enough.”

So Flo would release the miodes to me, but with a catch. How did my working life become so complicated? Not so long ago, I used to be able to go to the miode storage shed and take whatever I wanted. Ah, those were the days.

I supposed it was wise that Master Cooper was being more careful with gold, though. Business had been good lately, but building a whole new alchemy workshop hadn’t been cheap, not even with Janey’s contribution to the funds. As well as that, Master Cooper had had to beat competition from two other people to secure our new store premises in town, and that couldn’t have been cheap.

All things aside, this wasn’t so bad. I had been thinking of signing up for the initiative anyway since I really liked the idea of it. I just hadn’t put a concrete plan in motion yet. It had resided in the ‘maybe I’ll do that someday’ part of my brain, where my desire to learn how to play the lute also dwelled.

Maybe taking Flo's deal was the push I needed, while getting me the miodes at the same time.

"Sure, I can do that," I said.

Flo's smile banished the shadows of the whiskey from the night before from her face. Her eyes lit up, and warmth seemed to glow from her. "Splendid, my little pigeon! I'd need you to get a few others involved, too."

"Others?" I said.

"Let's say five people, including you. If you do that, I can be creative in releasing the miodes to you."

"You know, I could just go to Steve's Spell Scroll shop, buy a few scrolls, and get my own miodes. I am an artificer, after all," I said.

"I also know you're a good lad with a kind heart, Lewis. If you can get your miodes while helping folks out, that's what you'd prefer to do. Plus, you don't like spending your own gold, do you? Am I wrong?"

"You couldn't be more wrong if you were wearing a sign showing how wrong you are," I said. "I'm selfish, and lazy, and I hate helping people. I hate it so much I look for ways to hinder them."

"Is that true?" said Flo, eyebrow arched.

I sighed. "Fine. I'll help you out.

"Wonderful, my duck! Perhaps there's something in it for you, too. A little reward for helping out."

"A reward?"

"Talk to your friends, get them to join Grub-and-Gab, and then you'll see. You'll really like it, chick. I promise you that. See your way to helping my little initiative get off the ground and you'll be glad you did."

Chapter 4

Soon after leaving the craftstead storefront, I made a hasty entry in my crafter's pad project list.

Current projects and deadlines:

- 1) Get store ready for opening- Deadline: 1 month**

- 2) Tidy Craftstead before Cooper and Janey return from their trip – Deadline: 12 hours**

- 3) Seed Transportation system – Deadline: 4 months**

- 4) Create a book-reading device for personal use and as a future artificed store item – Deadline: 3 days**

- 5) Get four people to sign up for Grub-and-Gab – Deadline: 2 days**

It was easy to get Chris to sign up for Flo and Spruce's Grub-and-Gab scheme. My town crier friend paired a gentle heart with a complete inability to say no, which would have been a worrying combination if he ever fell afoul of a trickster. Luckily, spending all his time with Paisley negated that particular danger. She could sniff out a scam from miles away, which meant we rarely took her to the funfair, since her cynical instincts took the fun away from the rigged fairground games.

I explained Flo's initiative to Chris over a beer in the King's Head. We usually sat at a table by the hearth, but Alec, the owner, was having the tavern walls replastered, and that section was off-limits for tonight. Thus we found ourselves

sitting in the darts and billiards room. It was a little distracting, seeing darts whizz by in my peripheral vision, and I had to resist the urge to duck.

“So I just deliver meals to people’s houses, talk with them for a bit, then leave?” said Chris when I was finished explaining.

“That’s the bones of it. Take some food to someone’s house, chat with them, and then your job’s done.”

“But why do these people want a stranger in their house talking to them while they eat?”

“They’re just lonely, I suppose,” I said. “It’s nice to have a chat every so often, even if it’s with someone you don’t know. Conversation is good for your brain and your mood. They can’t travel into town themselves to do that, so the town has to go to them.”

“Do you think Spruce will throw in a meal or two for the volunteers?” asked Chris.

“I’d guess he might be generous with a bacon sandwich from time to time.”

“Then sign me up. It can be my good deed for the month.”

Chris tried to do a good deed each month. Just last month he had completely unclogged Mrs. Downham’s gutters, which had become blocked by a mulchy mess of mud and wet leaves. It took him all of the morning and most of the afternoon. He’d returned to the craftstead cold, wet, and thoroughly miserable, so I’d brewed him some tea, built up the fire in the living room, and told him to sit himself down. I remember looking at him and thinking, *‘Doing good deeds is a really, really bad idea.’* But despite his shivery state, Chris had worn a contented smile while he sat by the hearth and drank his brew.

Signing Chris up for Grub-and-Gab meant I had two people enrolled in the scheme, including myself. It was a decent start, but I didn’t want to get too hasty with my optimism. I had chosen the easiest person first, after all. Chris

had a heart as big as his appetite – which was huge, despite his recent dietary success. My other friends, though still kind-hearted, weren't as generous with their time as Chris was, and I predicted tough times ahead.

As it turned out, I was right. Phil Brownhill was the hardest to persuade since he was away on a trip. Phil used to work as the head of house in the Porter manor but had recently opened a business making model ships. He rented space in the craftstead workshop.

For his birthday, his former employer, Jace Porter, had bought Phil a week's stay on a merchant galleon that was traveling from Easterly to the faraway Port Enerelsa and back, going out there with molasses, brown sugar, and other sweet goods, and returning across the waves laden with bay leaves, saffron, and various spices that were hard to get in this part of Easterly.

It wasn't exactly a pleasure cruise. He would be sleeping in the communal berthing space with the rest of the sailors, no doubt hunched up on a roughly made hammock. Phil, however, was probably the most excited I'd seen a person about anything, ever. Sailing on a real boat would take his model ship-making to the next level, he'd excitedly told me, and he was sure to absorb sailing parlance that would mean he could carry a conversation with the old sailors at the Salted Cod, a tavern in Hattersdale where he was hoping to become a regular patron. He had only visited once so far and had hurriedly left after feeling like the veterans in there could tell he had never stepped onto a deck in his life.

"I'm a little nervous, though," he had said to me two mornings before his trip when I had visited him at Cooper's workshop. "What if I don't fit in with the others?"

"The others on the ship?"

Phil had nodded. "The sailors. They'll know that I'm paying to be there. That I'm not one of them. They might even resent me for it."

“Just offer to pitch in. Sweep the decks, polish the stern, or whatever it is people do on boats.”

“Work for free?”

I shrugged. “You want to fit in, don’t you? Offer to help. Even if you don’t know what to do, they’ll appreciate your willingness.”

“Perhaps you’re right. Maybe I can do other things to fit in, too. I ought to grow my beard out in preparation. I was going to visit Solomon Wallace to get it trimmed this afternoon, but maybe not.”

Phil’s beard was impressive enough already if you asked me. The once-clean-shaven man who used to answer the front doors at Jace Porter’s manor with such an impeccable sense of grooming and tailoring was well and truly gone, replaced by this person with hair that reached his shoulders - graying in spots at the root - a beard grown well beyond needing a simple shave, and clothes that often sported all kinds of glue and grease stains. If an artist had created portraits of Phil Brownhill now and Phil from even a year ago, nobody in Easterly would say they were the same person.

It was a good change, though. Not only was he much happier these days, but in my opinion, Phil’s beard softened his appearance a little. It took the weight off his angular features that used to be so prominent when he was smooth-faced. His thick, bushy hair added a gentleness to his expression that had always seemed so stern to me, back when I used to visit the manor to call on Paisley, and he would answer the door.

“Keep the beard,” I agreed.

Phil had gone on his trip a few days later. Not before buying a pipe that he didn’t intend to actually smoke but carry around the ship as a prop, as well as a box of boiled sweets to share with the other sailors. I didn’t know whether sailors liked boiled sweets or not, but Phil was keen to ingratiate himself. He was due back in three days, but he would likely be exhausted from his time on the sea. Especially if he took my advice and helped with their duties. This meant that he’d be

very unlikely to want to do even more unpaid work when he returned. He would be the toughest person to convince.

For now, this left Paisley and Jester as my remaining targets. When I went to see Paisley in her store, she was decorating it for Scamp's Eve, the night when all the otherwise hidden creatures like imps and fairies left their domains and crossed into ours for the purpose of causing chaos. If you believed in that kind of thing, that was. I didn't. I was an artificer, and I believed in the things I could trust and see. Miodes, metals, tinkerer gears. You could work with them, use them, manipulate them. But pixies that used their one night each year to fly around Easterly pouring flour on people's doorsteps, pulling on dog's tails, and throwing eggs everywhere? Nope.

Still, this was the soonest holiday after Yulthor, and definitely my favorite. It was also Master Cooper's. Janey and Paisley preferred Yulthor, while Jester and Phil were partial to Spring's Rise. Jester, in fact, hated Scamp's Eve with a passion, and had already told us he wouldn't be taking part in it. Chris, meanwhile, loved every holiday equally and always made sure to book at least a couple of days of vacation from his job for each one. This gave him time to shop for presents at Yulthor, pick a bouquet of wildflowers for Paisley on Spring's Rise, and go to his favorite restaurant in Stow in the run-up to Scamp's Eve, where he'd visit the Flying Pig and treat himself – and whoever he dragged along – to a pumpkin stew.

“Well, if it isn't the guy who owns the store next door,” said Paisley as I walked into her shop. She set down the wreath she was making out of oxyltrail and bowm leaves, taken from the traditional Scamp's Eve trees. Scattered over her sales counter beside her ledger, a pile of brown paper bags, and reams of ribbon, were a hammer and a couple of dozen nails. The wreath was just the tip of her Scamp's Eve iceberg though, judging from the rest of her store.

“Did you become a Scamp's Eve store all of a sudden?” I said, looking around.

“I went too far?”

I looked around at the black and yellow streamers, the jars here and there filled with things labeled ‘bats wings’ and ‘troll guts,’ and the huge skull set in the corner next to a shelf of endless water canteens. The skull’s eyes glowed red and fog seeped out from its half-open mouth. That had the hallmarks of Janey, I decided. It was exactly the kind of effect she loved to use her alchemy skills to create.

“You didn’t go too far...you’re just enthusiastic. Those aren’t real troll’s guts, are they?”

“No, but maybe I’ve gone just a tiny bit overboard. I just want my store to get a name,” said Paisley.

“It has a name – Paisley Porter, Merchant of Fine Goods.”

“No. I want my store to become well known. You know, have a unique thing that makes people think of it. I came up with a whole bunch of ideas and settled on this: Scamp’s Eve. When people think of Scamp’s Eve, I want them to think of my store. I’m hoping it’ll become a tradition. You know, when Scamp’s Eve comes around folks will say ‘Why don’t we go visit Sunhampton and take a look around Paisley Porter’s store?’”

“There’s definitely no doubt about what holiday you’re celebrating,” I said with a smile.

“Anyway, at least my store is open, Mr. Cooper. Are you ever planning on letting a customer inside yours? One that doesn’t want to use the toilet?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I just have a few things to take care of first. Don’t look at me like that - I want everything to be perfect, that’s all.”

“I can offer you support or honesty,” said Paisley. “Which would you like right now?”

I weighed up both things. “Honesty, please.”

“You’re procrastinating opening your store because you’re worried it won’t do well, and you’ll let Master Cooper

down. So, you keep inventing all these ways to delay it. After all, if you don't open the store, it can't fail."

"Get out of my head, you evil mage," I said.

Paisley laughed. "Well, you chose honesty. I was happy to lie."

I leaned against the sales counter, idly twirling a bowd vine around my finger until Paisley gently slapped my hand away. "Sorry. You're right in one way, but I'm not dragging things out. I just want to make sure everything is as good as it can possibly be."

"That's a different way of phrasing exactly what you said earlier."

"I actually came here to ask you something," I said, hoping Paisley would allow my obvious change of subject pass without comment. When she didn't interject, I carried on. "Flo is looking for people to help out with the Grub-and-Gab scheme that she and Spruce Wilkinson are starting."

"Oh...no, I can't. Sorry. Scamp's Eve is around the corner. I barely have time to breathe."

This was the answer I'd expected from Paisley. Not only did she own a store, but she had other business interests that she worked on with her uncle Jace, and she spent what remained of her time with Chris. Luckily, I had spoken to Spruce Wilkinson, and I had come prepared.

"Spruce says that he'll make sure anyone who helps with the scheme gets their name mentioned in the Sunhampton Times. He spoke with Pillary Oats who says she'll have her scribes write a few articles about it, and that people's businesses will be mentioned."

"Free publicity?" said Paisley.

"At a cost of your time. An hour or two per week, at the most. Chris has already agreed."

Paisley's forehead scrunched up, a sure sign of her mind delving into difficult thoughts, no doubt weighing up the cost

of her time versus the promise of her shop being mentioned in the local newspaper.

“I’ll do it on one condition,” she said.

“Flo says they can’t pay us for our time, Paisley. I already tried asking that.”

“I don’t want gold. I want you to promise that you’ll open your damned store within one month. Promise that, and I’ll sign up for Grub-and-Gab.”

My next visit was to a cottage on the outskirts of town. Well, almost my next visit. If I were recounting my day under oath, I would have to admit that I visited the Sunny Café first, under the guise of keeping Spruce Wilkinson up to date on how many people I’d signed up for the initiative. Really, though, I was angling for a free bacon sandwich.

After seeing me hanging around for a while, Spruce finally said, “I suppose you’re wanting some grub?”

“Only if you’re offering,” I said. “I won’t turn down a free volunteer bacon sandwich with fried mushrooms.”

I ate my sandwich and drank a pot of coffee in the café while sharing a table with Percy Tattersall, who’d closed his store for a self-care afternoon. The bookseller, who’d crossed the boundaries of middle age and was venturing into what some might class as ‘old’ but I preferred to call ‘well-weathered,’ often swung the sign on his door from ‘open’ to ‘closed.’ Then he’d take himself to the King’s Head or the Sunny Café for a leisurely bite to eat, or maybe he’d get a seat on a commuter cart to Hattersdale or Full Striding and spend the afternoon walking around a museum or gallery.

Later, I headed over to Jester’s cottage, not far past Yellow Leaf Avenue on the east side of town. Jester had inherited the cottage from his aunt, Sheila. She had been an avid gardener who coupled floral know-how with a love for all things green, and hers had been a garden filled end to end with plants of both the local and the exotic kind. Then Jester had come to live here. His knowledge of plant care stretched to the

potted Flowering Toral he kept on his old desk at Jenkins and Clyde Accountancy, and he'd only barely kept that alive. Aunt Sheila's garden had unfortunately suffered a little under his stewardship.

Lately, though, Hattie Greaves had been visiting the cottage to teach Jester the art of plant care. She had a garden of exotic – and sometimes dangerous – plants in the woods outside town, and she had barely ever set foot in Sunhampton until recently. Master Cooper and I had built a tinkered watering and feeding system for her garden, and spending time with us had eased her social fears a little. Nowadays, Hattie even ventured into Coiner's Way to peruse the shops or have dinner at the King's Head.

Mainly, though, when she left her cottage it was to visit Jester. I think his quiet, almost shy nature appealed to her. She'd often described her and Jester as 'Two peas in a pod.' Under her tutelage, Jester had improved both his plant care skills and his motivations to actually use them, and old Aunt Sheila's garden was slowly beginning to return to its former glory.

I stood there for a moment at the new gate at the end of the garden and breathed in the smells. The tang of musselwhite leaves, the sweet smell of honeyed lotus. This was a garden fit for a summer's day, perfect for sitting in with a lemonade and a book. Pity we were still some ways away from sunny times.

Before I could even approach the front door it opened and Jester emerged dressed in a fancy grey suit and with a folder tucked under his arms. It was bound by string and must have been thicker than the Collected Encyclopedias of Easterly.

"Lewis," said Jester, closing the cottage door behind him. While keeping his folder secure under his arm he took a key out of his pocket with his free hand. As he went to lock the door, the folder almost came loose from his armpit.

"Let me get that," I said, taking the key and locking the cottage door.

“Walk with me,” said Jester, heading down the pathway. ‘Walk with me’ was something he’d started saying recently, after spending too much time with Jace Porter as he worked on his accounts.

“I was hoping for at least a cup of tea and a sit-down,” I said.

“Sorry,” said Jester, opening the garden gate using his foot. “I’d love to, but Mr. Porter sent word that he needs me.”

“Doesn’t it bother you, being summoned like that?”

“He has three dozen business interests, Lewis. You won’t believe how many emergencies come up. Last week, he sent for me at one o’clock in the morning.”

“Really?”

“He’d gotten word that a textile mill in Stow was about to declare insolvency, and he wanted me to go through their books and see if there was a business worth snapping up and working into shape.”

“And it couldn’t have waited?” I said.

“I knew what I was getting into, taking on a client like him. Two months ago I was struggling. Now, I have more work than I could do even if you artficed a working copy of me. Say, is that something you could do?”

“I’m afraid not,” I said. “So you don’t have much free time these days, then?”

“Time is never free, Mr. Porter says. Unfortunately, I’m beginning to think he means that literally.”

“I suppose that means you wouldn’t have any time to give to anything else, say Spruce Wilkinson’s and Flo’s Grub-and-Gab initiative?”

“Afraid not, Lewis.”

“Not even if it got your business mentioned in the paper?”

“Heavens, no. The last thing I need right now is more clients.”

I walked with Jester as far as Coiner's Way, then said goodnight as he headed west toward the sloping hill and Jace Porter's manor. We promised we'd find time to have lunch soon, but neither of us suggested an actual date. Alone, I walked the darkened streets of the Way, finding myself drawn, as I often was, to the King's Head.

Inside the tavern, two wolfhounds were relaxing by the fire, lying tail to tail and enjoying the soft warmth of the flames. The presence of Rudy and Paul, who were the gentlest of Cooper's wolfhounds, must have meant that Master Cooper was in the tavern. This was surprising since he and Janey weren't supposed to be back from Llwyn yet.

Even more surprising than his early return was the realization that it wasn't Master Cooper at all. Instead, it was Flo who must have brought the hounds here. Turning away from the bar, she headed over to the table near the hearth, next to the hounds.

"Hey, Flo," I said.

"Lewis! I hope you don't mind me bringing these two with me. Master Cooper said the other hounds don't like to get out of the craftstead much, but Rudy and Paul enjoy it."

"I don't mind at all, but I thought Alec told Cooper we couldn't bring them here anymore. Not after Rudy stole the steak off Duggie Fernglass's plate."

"Oh, that? I straightened that out. I straightened Rudy out, too. Didn't I, Rudy? He won't be stealing any more food."

"Do you need some company?" I asked.

"Oh, that's alright, duck. You don't want to spend your evening with me. Besides, I think someone's trying to get your attention."

I turned around toward the bar, and instantly my chest seized up, my breath caught, and any semblance of sensible thoughts left my head like smoke from a bakery chimney. Sitting at the bar was Ophelia, the leading lady of the Fiends.

Toby, leader of the acting troupe known throughout Easterly as Lisabeth's Fiends, always said that when it came to acting, looks were a distant second to stage presence. He'd never selected members of his troupe based on their appearance. What he wanted was someone who didn't just draw your gaze but held it tight like a pearl inside a shell.

"I want them to take the audience's attention like a thief in the night, and then refuse to give it back until the curtain falls," he'd say.

Ophelia was only a couple of years older than me and had barely acted before joining the Fiends, but she had stage presence that would have made the stars in the sky change position to get a better look at her. Even now, sitting in the King's Head tavern and wearing an old, checkered shirt and tattered trousers, she was a sunflower in a field of weeds. I included myself in the weeds.

I headed over, feeling that despite moving further away from the hearth I was actually getting warmer the closer I got to Ophelia and her smile. All kinds of greetings came to me in that short walk. Nice ones, funny ones. Wry observations, witty compliments.

What came out of my mouth was, "What are you doing here?"

Ophelia was drinking a glass of pale ale, and her last sip had left a white strip of foam on her top lip. She wiped it away with her sleeve. "That's quite a greeting. Am I not allowed to go to the tavern?"

"Sorry. I meant what are you doing here in Sunhampton? After Yulthor, I thought you guys were heading south."

"Our main booking was in Honeyset Valley," said Ophelia. "But the dam north of the city burst, and there's all kinds of trouble down there. We offered to help, but they sent word that we're not to go there. Our other bookings down south were so small that it isn't worth traveling all that way for them. So we're performing at a manor in Stow – a private rug

trader's daughter's birthday – and Toby's trying to line a few things up after that.”

“Did he trash his own wagon? He used to do that when bookings got canceled. He'd always say-”

“The cheek of it, the cheek of it,” said Ophelia.

I laughed. “Exactly.”

“Well, he did say that. But he didn't trash anything. Maybe he's calmer now than when you were with the troupe.”

“Good. I wouldn't wish the old Toby on anyone. But I don't get why you're here. What I mean is, there are loads of taverns in Stow.”

Ophelia took a sip of her ale. “So first I get, *why are you here?* And now you're saying I should have stayed in Stow.”

“No, not that. It's just a long way to travel for a beer.”

“The play's in a week, and I know the lines top to bottom. I just needed some space away from the others in the meantime. You know, in my own room where I don't have to wake up to the sound of Big Henry doing squats and sprints around the camp, or Toby grumbling because he drank too much the night before.”

“Very wise. You're staying here, then?”

She nodded. “I took a room for a few nights. Only, there's a problem, Lewis.”

“A problem?”

“You see, I don't really know many people here, and I don't know much about Sunhampton. I might need someone to help me occupy my time here.”

“Ah, you'll be fine. You were the star of the Yulthor play,” I said. “Folks will fall over themselves to help you.”

“I was talking about you, Lewis.”

“I know you were,” I said. “You're really that stuck for things to do that you want to hang around with an artificer?”

“I’m awful with having free time. I’ve never done well with it.”

“Me too. I always end up working.”

“Why don’t we make a pact?” she said. “We’ll commit to spending some time together, and we won’t let work get in the way.”

“You’ve got a deal,” I said.

“Of course, some of our time is already spoken for, isn’t it?”

“It is?”

She nodded. “Sure. We’re to help out with the Grub-and-Jab scheme or something, aren’t we?”

“Gab,” I said. “It means-”

“To talk. I know. I was only joking. Paisley told me about it, and I’d quite like to help out while I’m here. I’ll be popping over to Sunhampton quite a lot while the troupe’s in this part of Easterly.”

Recruiting Ophelia into the scheme – though I could hardly claim the credit for that, really – meant that I needed to find one more person. Over the next few days, I tried again to get Jester to take part. The hardest thing about this was actually finding him; he was like a ghost. Only, a ghost who had lots of accounting to do.

Failing to get my friend to agree to help, I tried Master Cooper – *sorry, lad, but I’ve got too much work to do at the minute* – and then Janey, who was polite yet firm in her refusal. Her alchemy store and workshop hadn’t been open long, and unlike her last few attempts at creating a sustainable business, she was determined to make this one work.

This really limited my options, and I didn’t know where in the whole of Easterly I was going to find a fifth person to get involved in the scheme. I became so desperate that I even started wondering if I could convince Flo and Spruce that a wolfhound could technically be classed as person, and that lots

of people loved dogs and would welcome a visit from one. Somehow, though, I doubted that would work.

One morning, I was just leaving the craftstead ready to head down to Coiner's Way, when I heard someone singing. The words were faint at first, and I couldn't see who it was over the brow of the hill. Soon, though, the lyrics became clearer as whoever it was got closer.

"Oh we sail the sea, the mighty sea, we sail it well, my ship and me."

Then, a stranger reached the top of the hill and stood at the end of the craftstead yard. Tall, bearded, wearing a tattered shirt with the top four buttons unfastened, a necklace threaded with shells around their neck, and with a tattoo of some kind on their chest. Accompanying them, strong even from across the yard, was the smell of seaweed and salty water. But although this might have been a stranger in many ways, it was, in fact, someone I knew well.

"Phil?" I said.

"Ahoy, Lewis! How's the day treating yer?"

This wasn't the man I knew as Phil Brownhill. It couldn't possibly be. But when one blink and then another refused to alter my perception of reality, I was forced to admit that it was really him.

"Phil...you're very tanned."

"Aye, Lewis," he said, his voice very different and much deeper than I knew it. "The sun, she be shining down without mercy in Port Enerelsa, so she does."

"She? Did you get a tattoo?" I said, staring at his chest.

Phil unbuttoned his shirt fully, revealing a huge, black inked tattoo of a ship's anchor. It went from his collarbone all the way to his stomach.

"We had a couple of nights in Port Enerelsa before we came back, and the crew convinced me to get it. What do you think?"

"I actually like it. Did it hurt?"

“Hurt? A fella like me, who’s sailed seas rougher than the roughest storm? Yes, actually. It did hurt. Quite a lot,” he said, his voice beginning to sound normal again.

“Well, I admire you. I don’t think I could have sat through it.”

“Spend as long as I have on the seas, Lewis, and you learn to weather anything this world can throw at you. Now, is old Cooper around? I want to tell him all about my voyage.”

“He’s pretty busy at the moment, Phil.”

“Then you’ll do. Pour us a rum, and I’ll tell you the whole yarn.”

“It’s very early for rum,” I said.

“Okay, then a sailor’s coffee. That’s coffee with a splash of rum. Let’s go, Lewis. All hands on deck.”

Phil spent two hours telling me all about his trip, and though I had lots of things to be doing, I couldn’t bring myself to cut his tale short. He was just so enthusiastic about it, so happy in the telling, that it seemed a shame not to listen. When he was done telling me he went to see Janey, and then Paisley.

Much later, when Chris got home from work, he told him all about it, and he finally cornered Master Cooper over dinner and spun his story once again.

Even after telling it half a dozen times, he wasn’t bored. His story, too, grew in the telling, and in its final form, the captain of the Golden Bow had to ask Phil to take the helm during a thunderstorm, during which Phil steered the vessel to safety.

When the tale – and dinner – was over, Phil once again insisted on us all having some rum. This time he found a willing co-conspirator, and Master Cooper gladly retrieved a bottle of Sailor’s Sun from the liquor pantry. He poured big measures for Phil and himself, and a smaller one for me, since I didn’t much like rum but also didn’t like to be left out. Janey, meanwhile, stuck to a glass of lemonade because she wanted to wake up hangover-free the next morning.

Cooper and Phil compared sailing stories, though Phil's limited experience of the sea meant he was forced to take more of a listening role than he would have liked. He interjected here and there, correcting some of Cooper's language with the correct boating parlance. Cooper grumbled at this, but in fairness to Phil, he seemed to have picked up sailing lingo very quickly.

As the night wore on and the nocturnal insects came out and chirped from the craftstead yard, Phil stood up and announced that it was time for him to retreat back to his hammock. His hammock in Sunhampton, of course, was actually a king-size bed in his personal apartment in Jace Porter's manor.

Everyone said their goodnights. Cooper yawned, and he and Janey left the kitchen and went upstairs after Chris and I told them we'd clear up and make sure everything was locked. We worked at this with a speed-over-quality approach, neither of us enjoying the task of clearing and tidying all that much.

Not long after, as I watched Phil walk across the craftstead yard and toward the hill summit, I had an idea. I stepped out into the night, feeling the post-Yulthor chill on my neck and enjoying it in the knowledge that my warm bed and thick duvet were waiting for me upstairs.

"Phil," I said.

He turned around. "Yes, Lewis?"

"What if I said I know a few folks who would be delighted to listen to your story?"

"If I can educate but one person about the beauty of our seas, Lewis, I will be happy. If I can explain its splendor to others, share its cocktail of majesty and danger, then I would consider it time well spent."

"Right. Well, Spruce Wilkson and Flo have started this scheme, you see, and..."

It wasn't long before I finished explaining about Grub-and-Gab to Phil, and quickly earned his agreement. His only request was that he be allowed to offer some of the flyers he'd

printed about his model ship-making business to the people he delivered food to. I couldn't see any harm in it, so I told him yes, as long as Flo and Spruce agreed.

No sooner had I recruited my friend, than the left side of my chest began to vibrate. I unbuttoned my coat and reached into my inner pocket, taking out my crafter's pad. Text spun out from it like sunshine through a dusty window.

Project complete - Get four people to sign up for Grub-and-Gab

The next morning, I had a breakfast of boiled eggs with runny yolks and buttered toast, then waited around the craftstead until nine o'clock, when Flo usually arrived for work. Sure enough, I soon heard the click-clack of our artificed cart rolling down the hill and then, shortly afterwards, heading back up again.

Leaving the craftstead, crossing the yard – while fending off the wolfhounds who demanded that I play with them – and going into the storefront, I found Flo already brewing up a pot of coffee on the glow stone.

“Morning, Flo,” I said.

“Hello, duck. Cup of the good stuff?”

“Thanks, but I'm not staying. I just wanted to say that I've found five people to help out with Grub-and-Gab. There's me, Paisley, Chris, Ophelia, and Phil.”

“Ophelia?”

“She was the leading lady in the Yulthor play.”

“Oh. I didn't see it. I was tucked up in bed feeling sorry for myself. I got the most awful bug. It happens to me every Yulthor without fail, chick. I always come down with something.”

“Well, she's going to help out, and that makes five of us. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to requisition some miodes.”

Flo settled into her chair behind her desk with her customary hoo sound. She placed her coffee cup on a coaster and then turned it slightly so the handle was positioned exactly as she wanted it. I watched, noting how funny it was that people developed little habits like that. I had ones of my own; for instance, I always tended to start work, or to do something, when the clock showed a specific time. I would begin something at nine o'clock, but not two minutes past nine. If it was two minutes past nine, then I'd wait until five minutes past. There was no particular reason for it.

Flo scribbled something down on a sheet of paper, tore it off, and handed it to me. "There you go."

"What's this?"

"Your miode requisition slip."

"What do I do with it?"

"Just keep it, goose, and show it to Mr. Cooper if he ever asks."

"Right, thanks. I better go now, Flo. I've got plenty of work to do."

I stood up and headed toward the door, only to hear her call out.

"Now hang on just a second."

I turned around. "Is something wrong?"

"I promised you a little something extra if you recall. I'm not one to renege on my vows, duckie. Just wait a second."

She scooted her chair back a little and then opened her front desk drawer. Taking out an object wrapped in brown parcel paper, she handed it to me. I took it, surprised at how heavy it was.

Flo explained, "Those were my father's. He was a tinkerer, don't you know. I might not have known much about artificery before working here, but I knew a tiny bit about tinkering. I think you'll get use out of these."

I unwound the string tying the parcel together, to reveal not one item inside but several. It was, in fact, a set of chisels. When I touched their wooden handles, I felt a glow coming from the token bracelet on my wrist. Token text unfurled into the air in front of me like a yellow ribbon caught in the wind.

Tinkerer's Precision Chisels

Crafting rank needed: Adept

Useful on projects where accuracy is essential, the Tinkerer's Precision Chisels will grant an immediate boost to craftsmanship quality. The strength of the boost increases the slower you work.

“These are great! Thanks, Flo,” I said.

“No, duckie, thank you. It's hard to get any sort of scheme off the ground, much less one that takes folks' time without paying them. There are people out there who will really appreciate it.”

Chapter 5

I spent the rest of the morning and a good part of the afternoon in the workshop at the back of my store in town, doing what I loved most: artificery. There was much less room to work in my store's workshop than the huge one at the craftstead, but I liked it. The way I always saw it, the smaller a place, the cozier it was. It was a theory as scientific as 'two compatible miodes placed in close proximity will always try to anchor to one another.' With my glow stone sending out a gentle warmth and the hanging lamps set at just the right brightness, it gave the place a comforting feel. If a room could embrace you, then my little workshop was most definitely a hugger.

What was strange, though, was that I began to feel that something was missing. Or not something, but someone; the truth of it was that I missed sharing a workshop with Phil. Back when he'd first started renting space from Master Cooper, he'd annoyed me so much that I would have taken a sea voyage of my own just to get away from him. Eventually, though, things had thawed between us, and we'd learned not just to tolerate each other's presence in the workshop, but to become friends. Now here I was, in a workshop of my own, half wishing I could glance up and see him working on a bench ahead of me, gluing some rigging or adding a mast to one of his model ships.

That feeling soon lessened as I allowed myself to get drawn deeply into my artificery. As a crafter, I sometimes measured time by the clock and other times by cups of coffee. That day, it took me four cups of coffee to finish my project, the one which I had needed miodes for.

To create a device that would read my books aloud to me, I started with a simple piece of red walnut timber. This kind of timber responded best out of all the woods to the presence of miodes, accepting them much easier and providing a space for their effects to work best. I didn't know exactly, because I had never made an instrument, but I suspected it was

much the same as how certain types of wood might provide better acoustics for a guitar.

Using the chisels that Flo had gifted me, I manually carved the timber so that the top part of it had a gentle nook where I could place a book. I spent time chiseling it inch by inch, getting the shape exactly as I wanted it so that the book sat just right.

Then, on its base, I used my Enchantment ability to place three miode types inside it: mimicry, comprehension, and vocalization. Again, I completed this work manually. My Enchantment skill tree allowed me to use my ability to instantly accomplish this, but this was a project that warranted me doing it slowly, carefully, by hand.

When I was finally done, token text informed me that I had earned experience on my Intermediate Craft and Forge and Intermediate Enchantment skill trees, without actually leveling any of the abilities within them. A final piece of token text informed me that my efforts hadn't been a waste of time.

Artificery Complete: Book Vocalization Device

When a book is placed on the shelf and opened up, the device will read aloud from it.

No sooner had my token bracelet finished delivering its information, than my crafter's pad had an announcement of its own to me. Resting on the bench close at hand, it sent out a short stream of words.

Project complete: Create a book-reading device for personal use and as a future artificed store item

I didn't know what felt better: finishing the artificery, or the little spark of joy I got in my brain when I successfully crossed a project off my list.

Eager to try the device out, I retrieved my copy of ‘Tales of the Necromancer’s Butler’ that I was reading and set it on top of the device. Opening it to page two hundred and six, where I had folded it to mark my progress, I felt a brief pang of nerves when nothing happened. Then, however, a voice spoke.

‘The necromancer rang his bell, summoning his butler for the third time that morning. The butler grumbled his way up the stairs of the tower, bemoaning the fact that he had signed a contract to work here for a year, and wondering why his employer couldn’t simply resurrect a corpse to cater to his whims.’

“Not bad,” I said aloud. It wasn’t perfect, of course; the device would always read from the top of the page it was opened to, rather than allowing a person to pick up where they had left off. The voice it used was also lacking; it was rather wooden, and not because of the kind of material I had used to make the device. The truth was, I didn’t know how the voice was chosen or what shaped its timbre. I knew that it came from the vocalization miodes, but was there a way of altering it? A way of manipulating the miodes before enchanting them, perhaps?

I knew I ought to just accept that the device was finished, and then get back to my whole reason for creating it: as something to listen to in the background while I painted my store. But then, it wasn’t perfect. Knowledge of that imperfection would just play on my mind, distracting me, until...

A series of rapid knocks came from outside the workshop and across the small hallway, originating at the locked door of my store. I took my artificer’s goggles off my head, smoothed back my hair, and crossed the hallway until I reached the storefront.

Standing outside in the darkness, which indicated that much more time had passed than I had realized, was Ophelia. She must not have seen me, because she knocked on the door again, louder this time.

Suddenly aware that I smelled strongly of miodes, oil, and varnish, I wished that I had brought the bottle of cologne that Chris had got me for my last birthday. Then again, was ‘cedar smoke and sandalwood’ cologne much better? I also wished I had more of an interest in fashion, and didn’t just spend most of my days wearing my stained crafter’s shirts and trousers.

I turned the key in the lock and opened the door. Ophelia headed straight past me and into the store, and then stood there shivering on the spot.

“Bloody hells, it’s colder in here than it is outside!” she said, clutching herself in a tight embrace.

I grabbed my coat from the hook on the back of the door and handed it to her. She draped it over her shoulders.

“Sorry,” I said. “The stove isn’t working and the window frames need resealing. Or fully replacing, to be honest.”

“Don’t you freeze in here?”

“I guess I don’t notice it. Come into the workshop and I’ll make you a brew.”

I felt a little ashamed then that I hadn’t done something as simple as fixing the stove that Mr Flueitt used to heat the store on cold days. I guess I had just never been all that affected by things like that; when I was working, I could easily ignore the heat, cold, hunger, and random pains from standing in one spot too long.

I led Ophelia into the workshop and pulled out the lone stool and offered it to her. Before I could even ask if she wanted a brew, she walked past the stool and to the small refreshment counter, where she took my two mugs down from the shelf.

“Tea or coffee?” she said.

“Coffee, please.”

Any crafter will tell you that their workshop is more precious to them than their home. Walking into a crafter’s

workshop and touching things – even coffee cups – is worse than opening their underwear drawer and rummaging through it. For some reason, though, I didn't mind when Ophelia rummaged. In my workshop, that was – let the gods help anyone who risked searching through my underwear drawer. But I really didn't mind her using the place as though it was her own. In fact, standing there in the doorway, there was something nice about watching her making a cup of tea for herself and a coffee for me. Almost like she fit.

“So are you going to fix the stove, or what?” she said. “My uncle's a blacksmith, and I know you crafter types can fix things in seconds when you bother to use your abilities.”

“Right.”

I headed into the storefront. The stove was made from iron which had been oxidized to give it a black finish. It had a little grill hatch that could be opened, allowing for wood to be placed inside. Smoke was vented through a flue, which ran up the chimney and took fumes outside.

I knelt in front of the stove. I knew that a piece of metal must have corroded somewhere because my last attempt to use it had resulted in the store quickly filling up with smoke. Using the Repair ability on my Intermediate Craft and Forge skill tree, I quickly fixed it. This was a simple job, and my skill tree was way beyond such basic things. No sooner had I commanded the ability to begin, than I got some token text.

Repair Complete: Stove

I got some wood and kindling from the store cupboard and soon built a fire in the stove. Small at first, but it wasn't long before it was big enough for me to open the hatch and place two big logs on top. I fully closed one of the vents on the grill and half closed another, then fiddled with the vents so that they directed warm air into the center of the room.

When I headed back into the workshop, Ophelia had taken off her coat and mine and hung both of them over the

stool. I was surprised to see that she was wearing a set of white overalls underneath.

“Are you auditioning for a new part, or something?”

She handed me a cup. “Here. I didn’t know if you took sugar.”

“Nine.”

“Nine?” she said.

“That’s a lot of sugar, right? I don’t take any sugar at all, actually, but I had a guy in here last week and he took nine sugars in his coffee. He acted like it wasn’t strange.”

“To each his own, I suppose. Someone has to keep dentists in business.”

I leaned against the counter, holding the cup of coffee in my hand and appreciating the warmth against my palm.

“Do you want to sit down? I’ve taken your only stool,” said Ophelia.

“No, you’re okay. But what’s with the overalls?”

“I don’t want to get paint on my clothes. I hardly have anything nice enough to wear in public, so I have to be really careful.”

“You’ve been painting?”

“I’m going to paint. Why do you think I’m here? Paisley told me that you’re messing around opening this place. Making excuses. I’m here to help you get rid of them. First, we’re going to finish painting. Then we’ll see what other excuses you come up with to avoid actually opening your store.”

“Avoiding opening the store? Me?”

Ophelia gave me what I recognized as the patient smile of someone who liked a person, knew their flaws, and who wanted to help them but didn’t want to make a big thing of it. At least, that was what I took from the smile. I could have been wrong; many famous artists have made a life’s work from creating hundreds of different meanings from such a

simple gesture, and there's always this barrier between people. The person who gives the smile, and the person who takes meaning from it. The person who says something, and the one who listens and interprets, filtering everything through their own consciousness, through a lifetime of ups, downs, friendships, grudges. A well-meant *'hello'* from one person can quite easily become a *'oh, it's you again'* to the person who hears it, if maybe they're in a low spot or have trouble making friends, for instance.

Reaching down to her coat slung over the stool, she took a box out from her inner pocket. It was black and soft like the boxes that jewelers sold their necklaces and bracelets in. From it, Ophelia brought out a folded slip of paper. She carefully unfurled it, then handed it to me.

“What's this?”

“It's a letter to me from my grandmother, when I was ten years old. Read it.”

“Ophelia...I don't think...”

“It's okay. Honestly.”

Just by looking at the handwriting, I could have guessed it was from a grandmother. There was just something unmistakably 'grandma-ish' about it. From the first few paragraphs I developed a picture of the context; the letter was seemingly sent to Ophelia in response to a letter that she in turn had sent to her grandmother.

“So you were cast in a play, and you were going to quit?”

“Our school's version of *The Tiger and the Two Full Moons*,” said Ophelia. “I got the role of Melanie Hugget. Not the lead, but an important part. But I was so scared I could have vomited every hour of the day. I came up with all kinds of reasons to get out of it. I even drew pox spots on my face and neck, and when that didn't work I told my teacher that a witch had warned me not to act in the play. My parents sent a letter to my grandmother explaining everything, and she sent this in reply.”

“She sounds like a lovely lady.”

“I take the letter everywhere,” said Ophelia. “It’s a talisman for me. The bit where she says that the part of me that has doubts, that finds excuses, isn’t really me? That when I hear its voice trying to get me to quit acting, I need to recognize that it’s just a voice and not really me, in the same way that when I hear your voice, I know it’s your voice speaking and not mine? That’s got me through a lot of doubt. I re-read the letter over and over, and it never loses meaning. I look at it before every rehearsal, and especially before every performance. It just gives me that extra confidence that I can go out there and act.”

“Something as precious as this should be artificed. Especially if you’re taking it everywhere and always unfolding it.”

“I could do that?”

“Well, an artificer could. Weatherproofing it would be easy enough. I could make it tear proof, probably. It’d be intricate work, since paper is very thin and that makes it trickier to insert miodes in.”

“Would you do it?”

My gut told me, *no, Lewis. Don’t agree to this*. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to help Ophelia; of course I did. I was just worried about handling something so precious to her. And the silly thing was that I knew my worries were unfounded. Just because this one slip of paper had more value than other slips of paper, didn’t mean my hands would suddenly turn into scissors and start tearing it apart the minute I worked on it.

“Of course I’ll do it,” I said. “Leave it with me.”

“Thanks! One good turn deserves another. Let’s get to work on this place.”

Holding her tea, she stood up from the stool and went past me, heading into the storefront. I grabbed my book reading device and then followed, fully aware that I was smiling and not doing my usual trick of thinking I was too sophisticated to have a big grin on my face, and thus hiding it.

In the storefront, I found that Ophelia had already opened up the tin of paint I had been using days ago, and she was holding a brush in her hand.

“Ocean blue?”

“It’s my favorite color,” I said. “But now I’m thinking I should change it. If Phil hears the word ocean or sees anything remotely blue, I’ll never get rid of him.”

“I like it, too. But I think one of your walls should be a feature wall.”

I said nothing.

“You don’t know what a feature wall is, do you?” asked Ophelia.

“Somewhere I put my best items for sale?”

“Lords below, you really expected to decorate this place without knowing what a feature wall is? We just need to make one wall a different color. Or a different shade. Maybe put up some patterned wallpaper if you’re feeling adventurous.”

“I think I have a tin of ice cube blue somewhere,” I said. “I know ice cubes aren’t blue, but I didn’t invent the color. It’s a lighter shade, anyway.”

“That might work.”

“Just one thing,” I said. “Do you mind if I use this?”

“What is it?”

“It reads books out loud. I made it to keep me occupied while I’m painting. I don’t need that with you here, of course, but I’m thinking that maybe this kind of thing could be useful to someone, and I should sell them in my store. I need to test it out a little more.”

It struck me right then that ever since Cooper had handed me the keys to this place, I hadn’t spent even a second thinking about what I would sell. It might have seemed stupid, opening a store without knowing what you would sell, but I was an artificer. I was used to crafting things in the moment, going where my inspiration took me. At times when

inspiration left port without me, I could always wait for a customer to actually request something specific. But the fact remained I hadn't allowed myself a concrete thought about what I'd put on my shelves. Now, though, maybe I was starting to, and perhaps that was a step in the right direction.

"Be my guest, if my wit and personality aren't enough to keep you occupied. That thing really reads books out loud?" said Ophelia.

"Sure."

"So what are you reading?"

"Tales of the Necromancer's Butler."

"You're joking," she said, with widened eyes and the tone of voice people use only when they unexpectedly learn that someone else shares their obscure passion. "Have you got to the part where the necromancer brings a zombie dog into the house, and it's the butler's job to look after it?"

"They get a dog?"

She clamped her hand over her mouth. "Sorry. No, there's no dog. None at all."

The store wasn't very big and it didn't take the two of us long to finish painting it. The truth was that I could have done it all on my own in a day, but my main problem had been a mental one, rather than physical. With Ophelia there, though, there was no room to back out. No excuse good enough to just stop painting. Before I knew it we were done, feature wall and all, and the store looked transformed already.

"I guess that's us for today," she said. "I'm exhausted. I think I might head to my room at the tavern. But I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Did we make plans?"

"You're going to make some shelves and decide what to sell on them, and I'll arrange it. I won't do as good a job as your friend Paisley, but I'd like to try. I used to work in my aunt's embroidery store, and I miss it sometimes."

“You really want to spend your free time helping me get this place ready?” I said.

“No, in a perfect world, I’d want to spend it on a sunny beach drinking rum, but we haven’t even had Spring Rise yet. So this place will have to do.”

That evening, I got back to the craftstead to find my bedroom door ajar. I wasn’t suspicious when I saw that; Cooper, Chris, Janey, and I never went prying into each other’s spaces, and though we shared a cleaning schedule, it didn’t extend to bedrooms. There was no question any of them would go into my room, except if Chris wanted to borrow one of my books or something. What I suspected was that something on four legs had gone into my room. A wolfhound, to be exact, and I was pretty sure I knew which one.

Sure enough, I walked into the room to find Bones lying on my bed, almost taking up the whole thing. Bones was Master Cooper’s oldest wolfhound, and he was famously reclusive. He didn’t much like people, though he was never vicious or anything, and quickly grew tired of the antics of the younger wolfhounds. Thus, on nights like this, he would leave the kennel, scratch at the door to be let into the main house, and then find his way into my room. For some reason nobody could figure out, I had somehow become top of the list of ‘humans that old Bones likes.’

“Hey, Bones.”

The gentlest of tail swishes told me that Bones had heard me, acknowledged me, and now considered the matter settled. I stood for a moment, breathing in the warm air that came complete with the unmistakable scent of a dog. Cooper must have had the house fire on all night because the house was stuffy, and my room was actually too warm. Given that heat rises, and since my room was approximately over where the fireplace was, my bedroom often got hot.

Taking off my jumper, I slumped down onto the bed next to Bones. I had the strangest feeling, then. That of something...not being wrong. But missing. Something, or

maybe someone. I couldn't figure it out. Perhaps I was just hungry. Whenever I became suddenly introspective, the answer usually lay in a cheese sandwich or a chicken and mushroom pie.

There are few times better in life than when you decide that you want an impromptu snack, and then you find exactly the right snacking items in your larder or pantry. It's as though the stars have aligned themselves just to carry out your personal destiny, and for that brief moment, everything is right in the world. Tonight was one of those times; a quick trip downstairs and to the kitchen saw me returning to my room with a bowl of potato and leek soup that Cooper had made, and four chunks of garlic bread. Feeling generous, I'd even brought Bones a few doggie biscuits to munch on.

"So are you sleeping in here all night," I asked Bones as we ate, "Or just getting some peace and quiet? Because I bought something for you."

After finishing my snack I knelt by the side of the bed, then pulled out a huge dog bed that I had bought for my pal. Last Sunday there had been a pet supply vendor at Sunhampton's market, and he boasted that his dog beds were the comfiest in Easterly. I was inclined to believe him. This thing was so big and comfy that I could have slept in it.

The second I dragged it into view, Bones carefully clambered down from my bed and crawled into his new one. Quickly seizing the newly unoccupied territory, I jumped into my own bed and spread out on it, enjoying the feeling of my muscles almost sinking into the mattress.

Feeling something digging into the side of my head, I reached under my pillow and adjusted it. Then, something brushed against my fingertips. Sitting up, I lifted my pillow and pulled out a folded note.

Lewis,

Any chance you can meet me at the Fox and Hound in Perentee, buddy? Gonna be working a really late shift tonight, so I'll be at work until nine thirty and then I'll head to the tavern for a while. No problem if you can't come. If I don't see you by eleven, I'll assume you couldn't make it.

Chris

P.S. Could you not mention this to anyone else?

The clock on my wall was artficed so that it didn't just tell the time, but the weather. Right now, both things showed bad news; it was only eight o'clock, so I had plenty of time to get to Perentee and couldn't reasonably say it was too late. Not only that, but it was raining.

A part of me wondered if I should ignore the letter and pretend I hadn't read it until it was too late to go to Perentee, but I knew that I was only kidding myself if I thought I could do that. Chris wouldn't have left me a note unless he really needed to speak to me about something, and there was a reason he had asked me not to mention it to anyone else.

No, there was nothing else for it. I was going to have to go to Perentee.

"What do you think, Bones?" I said. "Fancy a trip to Perentee tonight? No? Fair enough. I don't blame you, my friend. Stay here and enjoy your bed."

Chapter 6

The road from Sunhampton to Perentee was well-traveled and rarely empty, and most carts that rolled up and down it at all times of night had a space or two for paying customers. Even on a dark, rainy post-Yulthor evening like tonight, I didn't have to walk for long before a wagon came up beside me.

It slowed to a stop, its wheels gently sloshing through the puddles until they stilled. The horses pulling it neighed, and steam left their nostrils and escaped into the starless night. The smells of hay, or maybe even manure, rose up around me.

“Your gold or your life,” said one of the drivers.

I gave a start of fear, before getting control of myself and wondering if my best course of action was to run for it or use my Dismantle ability to instantly dislodge the wheels from the wagon.

Then, I heard one of the drivers laugh. They held up a lantern so I could see them properly. The light shone on familiar faces.

“Jane? Samantha?”

“You are getting on, Lewis, or what?” said Jane. “We don't have all night. Sit up and the front with us. Trust me, you don't want to sit in the back. We're taking Jimmy to the veterinarian.”

“Jimmy?”

“One of Jonathan's goats. Nothing serious, don't worry, but there's also a nice tavern in Perentee so Sam and I volunteered.”

Jane and Samantha Tillwright ran a farm just outside of Sunhampton, along with their brothers, Jonathan and Alister. I had done quite a lot of work for the family over the last couple of years, including making new farm tools and equipment for

them, as well as repairing their old ones, and even tinkering some of their plows so that they worked by themselves.

Getting three of us on a two-space driving seat was a tight squeeze, but we managed to make it fit for the ride to Perentee. The women told me all about happenings at their farm, and how Alister, who used to work at a bank in the city, was getting more farmified by the day and had even helped deliver a calf two weeks ago. Their acres were producing well, their animals were mostly happy and healthy, and things seemed to be going well.

“Except for one thing,” said Samantha. “Foxes. They keep getting to the chickens.”

“I think it’s wolves,” said Jane.

“There’s no wolves around here, Jane. Lee Hunter takes care of that. Foxes are doing it, on my honor. At any rate, we’re stumped. We tried trapping them, tried protecting the coop. Nothing. It’s no good. Every other night is a chicken buffet, poor things. I told Alister, one more night of it, and I’m bringing them inside the farmhouse. No excuses.”

“Did you ask Lee Hunter if he can do anything?” I said.

“He was out two weeks ago. Slept on our farm for three nights running. He did his best, but if it really is a fox, then it’s a clever one.”

“Maybe I could take a look,” I said. “I’m no hunter, but I might be able to find a way to protect the chickens.”

“Something artificery-related?”

“Maybe. Some kind of artificed coop, perhaps. Who knows? Worth a try. But I can’t do it straight away. I’d suggest maybe bringing the chickens inside for a while in the meantime.”

“Tell you what; do that for us, and we’ll make sure you get fed nicely.”

“No offense, but I’d prefer gold rather than food,” I said.

“Are you really Lewis Cooper, or is this some kind of trick?”

“Master Cooper won’t like it if I’m doing jobs for free now that I have my own store.”

“Not for free. For food.”

“Still. The store needs to turn a profit. Well, first, it needs to open. Then it needs to turn a profit.”

“You’ve got a store?” said Jane.

“Sure, on Coiner’s Way where Mr Flueitt’s tailor shop used to be.”

Samantha gave a gentle tug on the reins to correct one of the horses, then said, “Oh, so that’s going to be your store, is it? It’s been empty for so long that I thought there was a problem stopping someone from opening it. You know, something structural. Jonathan says we’ve got dry rot at the farmhouse.”

“There’s no problem other than me. I don’t know. I just keep...delaying stuff. You know, inventing jobs to do to stop me from opening it.”

“Do you think you could take a look at the coop tomorrow?” asked Samantha.

“Sorry. I really need to get the store open, or Master Cooper’s going to be disappointed in me. And I have another project that I haven’t had a chance to work on yet.”

“The day after, then?”

“I think it’ll take me a month to get around to designing something for you,” I said.

“Two weeks.”

“Three,” I countered, adding, “With a slice of your famous leek and mushroom pie thrown in.”

“Done,” said Samantha.

We were silent for a while, the only sound that of the horses’ hooves as they trampled over the stone road and

splashed through puddles. Some nights in this part of Easterly, it was easy to imagine there was nobody else in the world and that the roads and hills belonged just to you. The wind wheezed through the gaps in the stone walls on either side of the road, whispering the secrets of the night. Above us, the half-moon gave half a smile, its color that of a pearl lit by lamplight.

“You know how long it took me to get the nerve to give up working at the healer’s in Weller’s Hope?” said Samantha. “Jane was ready to leave the minute she heard how Alister and Jonathan were doing at old Pop’s farm. But me? I wanted to go, but I kept finding things to do first.”

“You were a healer?”

“A healer’s assistant. I picked up a couple of simple skill trees, but not the class. It wasn’t for me at any rate.”

“I imagine it takes a certain type of person,” I said. “You know, dealing with blood, rashes, all kinds of stuff like that. Plus if Master Cooper is anything to go by, some patients can be hard work.”

“I always loved the healing side of things. The detective work. Working with Healer Groome to figure out what was wrong with someone. But the whole human interaction aspect? No, thank you. If only there was a way to have one part, but not the other.”

“There’s always veterinary work,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You know. The whole reason you’re on the road tonight. You could become a vet. You could figure out maladies and cure illnesses but not have to deal with people. And you could have looked at Jimmy yourself and saved a trip to Perentee.”

Samantha and Jane shared a look. Within it was something left unspoken because it didn’t need to be said, in the way that only close siblings can manage.

“He’s right,” Jane told her sister. “I could see you doing it.”

Samantha shook her head in a way that seemed aimed at herself. “Why the bloody hell didn’t I think of that? It never occurred to me, Lewis, but it’s so obvious now. I sort of feel like I’ve run into a brick wall that I should have seen from a mile away.”

“It just takes a different perspective sometimes. I’ve been stumped on artificery projects that my friend, Paisley, gave me the answer to, even though she knows nothing about artificery.”

“Ah, but she’s a wily one, that girl,” said Jane. “I half think she could outwit our fox.”

“In any case,” said Samantha, “Going back, my point was that I delayed and delayed and delayed coming out here. I knew it was the right thing to do, but change is hard, and our brains will come up with all kinds of excuses, bargains, and tricks to stop us from doing what’s good for ourselves. Our minds like things to stay as they are, because change can mean danger. But it also means opportunity. A chance of something better.”

“I’ve been told something similar a couple of times,” I said. “It’s getting hard to argue against it.”

Chris was late when I got to the Fox and Hound tavern. At first, I’d had trouble finding it; Perentee was a bigger place than Sunhampton, and it had half a dozen or more taverns. Not only that, but each one of them had ‘fox’ in their name. There was the Fox and Apple, the Crafty Fox, the Fox’s Den, and so on. Chris had told me a while ago that it was because the town’s founder, Perry Perentee, had a special love for the nocturnal animals. As such, many of the streets also had foxes in their name, such as Foxhill Drive and Foxfield Row.

Tonight, the Fox and Hound tavern was host to an apprentice bard who was there, under the watch of his master, to complete his class-earning project. For me, my class earning project meant completing a project of sufficient difficulty for a paying customer. For a bard, it meant performing a show

comprised of their own songs to a crowd of strangers, at a venue that had paid them money to do so.

Such conditions were factored into most classes for their class-earning projects. For mine, it was important to have to make something for a paying customer because otherwise, I could have written myself a crafting request, fulfilled it, and completed my class-earning project easily that way. For the bard, they could just as easily have booked a room in a tavern and played to their friends, but that would have been too simple and would be completely unworthy of marking that transition from apprentice to novice. Thus, they needed to convince a venue to pay them for their services, and then have the guts to play their own material to a bunch of strangers.

While I was waiting for Chris, I took out my crafter's pad and opened it up to a blank page, where I quickly scribbled out the details of the job the Tillwright sisters had given me. When I was done, the notepad weighed up the job and evaluated it as a low pay, low experience task. Its main benefits were in the small reputational boost Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown would get for pleasing another customer, as well as my personal satisfaction for helping out a couple of friends. Not to mention that the Tillwrights always insisted I stay for dinner whenever I visited, and Samanatha made the best pies I'd ever tasted. Or if not the best, then certainly in my top five.

The tavern door opened, and in walked a tall, thickset guy my age, though not as thickset as when I'd first met him in Sunhampton, back in what seemed like a decade ago. Seeing Chris, my heart got a quick burst of warmth that we all are gifted when we see a good friend.

“Lewis!” said Chris, giving me a cheery wave.

He hung his slightly-rain wet coat on the coat stand near the tavern hearth, then threaded his way through the tables – giving a few hellos and nods to people he knew – before joining me at the table.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “I really appreciate it. How about I get us both a beer?”

As we waited for our drinks to arrive, I watched the bard tuning his lute while performing vocal exercises to warm up his throat. I couldn't help but feel sympathetic; I'd have rather worked in an underground coal mine in the heart of winter than perform songs in front of strangers. Chris, on the other hand, only needed an ale or two at the King's Head karaoke nights before he was ready to climb on stage and entertain the regulars with his – admittedly tuneful- singing voice.

Joining Chris at the table, I placed his drink – Foxglove Pale Ale – in front of him, and set my own – Perentee Special – on a coaster on my side of the table. In the middle, equidistant between us, I put down the bowl of salted, lemon and basil marinated olives.

I expected Chris to set upon the olives immediately, but to my surprise, he didn't touch either them or his drink. In fact, the longer I watched my friend, the more it looked like he was just as nervous as the bard. I wondered if some kind of residual anxiety had traveled across the tavern from the would-be performer to my friend.

“What's wrong? Are you in trouble at work or something?” I said.

“No, it's not that. It's...you know what? I'm getting a whiskey. Want one? I'll get you one. In fact, I'll get us two each. Three whiskeys all round!”

Before I could even say I didn't want any whiskey, Chris got to his feet. He returned soon after with two measures of Firebrand for each of us. He quickly drained one of his. I took a sip of mine, winced at the feeling of fire in my throat, and then pushed the glass away.

“Are you going to tell me what's wrong?” I said.

Chris eyed me, then the whiskey. Then me again. “This stays between us?”

“Of course. What is it?”

“It's Paisley. Well, not her exactly. It's me. Alright, it's this. I want to ask her to move in with me.”

That had been maybe the last thing I expected, and my brain seemed to turn off the road of logic and start rolling along the bumpier road of ‘stupid’.

“Into the craftstead?”

“No, course not into the craftstead. Think I’d inflict Coops on her?”

“Or her on Master Cooper,” I said.

“That too. I meant me and her could get a place in town. We’re both a little more established in our careers now. And my folks were married by our age.”

“Is that why you’re doing it?” I asked. “Because your parents were settled down by now? That’s just about the last reason to give up the glorious freedom of bachelorhood.”

“No, no way. I just want to spend all my free time with her. I don’t want to have to walk her down the hill to Mr. Porter’s manor every night, and then walk home again on my own, already missing her.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that’s a better reason.”

“I just...” he began, then took a gulp of whiskey.

“What?”

“I don’t want to put it out there, only to have her say no.”

Chris looked up at me now, and I didn’t like that look. We weren’t brothers but we were good friends. Though we hadn’t developed the kind of telepathy Jane and Samantha seemed to share, there were certain times I reckoned I could read my friend’s mind. This was one of them.

“No way,” I said.

“C’mon, Lew. Just have a word with her. Sound her out a little. I just don’t want to scare her off by asking something as big as this, that’s all. I mean, if she doesn’t want to move in with me yet, that’s fine. Things are great as they are. But if I actually ask and she says no, it’s like that saying about

opening a box full of scorpions, right? You can't put them back in."

I couldn't think of any situation that would warrant someone opening a box of scorpions, and so couldn't imagine how such a saying had come about. At the same time, in a strange way, it made sense.

I shook my head, feeling bad for how agitated my friend was but determined to stick to my gut feeling. "There's no way in the world I'm getting involved in this. I'll happily talk to you about it. Maybe even help you figure out what to say, to a point, even though I'm bad at anything like this. But as for actually talking to Paisley? Nope. Sorry, my friend."

"Ah, I thought you might say that. What if I threaten to pull out of the Grub-and-Gab scheme?"

"C'mon, Chris. We both know you won't do that."

Accepting that I'd successfully called his bluff, Chris sighed. "Alright, well, you can at least listen to how I plan on bringing it up, and tell me what you think."

One beer became two, then three. After the third, my tolerance to the burning sensation of Firebrand whiskey increased, and I had a couple of measures. By the time Chris and I set off back to Sunhampton, we were both in a fine singing mood. Later, back at the craftstead, we cooked a midnight feast while talking in whispers and being very, very quiet. I swear, the pair of us could have made a living as burglars, we were so good at stealth. How many other people in Easterly could make supper while half-drunk, and be almost completely silent in the process?

The next morning, I was up before Chris. When I put on my dressing gown and went downstairs, I found Janey sitting at the table. The smile on her face seemed to promise some kind of hidden knowledge.

"Enjoy yourself last night?" she asked.

"Just met Chris at the Fox and Hill," I said. "Or was it the Wily Fox?"

Janey stood up and went over to the counter, turning her back on me. I heard the tinkling sound of a spoon against metal. When she turned back around, she held out a metal tankard.

“Here. Janey Morgan’s hangover cure.”

“Thanks,” I said, sniffing the concoction. The smell of honey and anchovies didn’t promise my taste buds a good time, but I had work to do and a moment of unpleasantness was probably worth it if it meant I didn’t have a headache all morning.

I drank the liquid in three gulps, burped, then sat down. “Sorry,” I said.

“I live with Jack, and he lives with me. We’ve all heard worse.”

“So I’m guessing we made a little more noise than we thought last night?”

Janey nodded.

“Sorry again,” I said.

She smiled. “You’re only young once, unless your name is Steve and you run a spell scroll shop in Larking. It’s not like you to overindulge on a work night, though. What was the occasion?”

“Uh...nothing. Just me being a young guy. You know. That’s what we do.”

“It’s what many people your age do, Lewis, but not you. I won’t pry. Anyway, I think Jack wanted a word with you before you leave. He’s in his workshop.”

After washing, dressing, and thanking the lords and ladies above and below that I lived with an alchemist who knew how to banish hangovers, I headed out of the house and into the yard. The breeze that greeted me felt like a slap in the face. If I hadn’t already had one of Janey’s concoctions, this sudden, refreshing chill would have been enough to sweep any trace of hangover or lethargy from me.

I found Master Cooper in his workshop, as Janey had promised. Phil was also there, standing a few benches down from Master Cooper and working on a model boat with 'Lady Diathorpe' painted on the side. Neither of them heard me enter; Phil was humming a sea shanty, while Cooper had artificer's goggles strapped to his head and was deeply entrenched in his work.

Standing there for a moment, I tried to make sense of the scene. It looked like Cooper was working on a giant goat's head with three horns and glowing red eyes. There was no goat body in sight. Blinking, I wondered if I was still asleep or if Janey's brew had hallucinogenic properties.

"You wanted to see me, Master Cooper?"

My voice broke both men from their concentration.

"Ahoy, Lewis!"

"Hey, Phil."

Master Cooper took his goggles off his eyes and pushed them over his head, the tightness of them seeming to smooth out his forehead wrinkles. Resting his right arm on the workbench, he grinned. "So the midnight feaster finally emerges from his lair."

"Sorry," I said. "Chris and I honestly thought we were being quiet."

"The noise doesn't bother me one bit. I was reading anyway, lad. I'm on book three of Tales of the Necromancer's Butler. He's just learned that-

"Stop right there," I said, "I'm still on book one."

"Oh. Right you are. What was last night in aid of?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Right."

"What's the grin about?" I said.

"You can't see what's happening, can you, lad? It's not like you to go overboard in your enjoyment on a work night. Sometimes I wish it was. You put me to shame with your

dedication. If you ask me, there's a reason you overindulged a little and made yourself get up late."

"Because of the store," I said.

Cooper nodded.

"That's maybe the fifth time I've heard that," I said.

"Then perhaps you ought to start believing folks who know you well, especially the one who's paying the rent. But since you're here, I need your help with something. See this goat?"

"I had noticed it, yes."

"Well, this is my idea, lad..."

Master Cooper explained that Sunhampton was having a Scamp's Eve parade this year. It only happened every five years, which was why I'd never heard of it. Master Cooper had entered each one over the years, hoping to win first prize for best parade monster, but had never come better than third.

"The problem is out-of-towners," said Cooper. "The parade brings a lot of tourists to this neck of the woods, and that's good for folks on Coiner's Way, don't get me wrong. Good for Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown, too, if you ever get that damned store of ours open. But it's bad for me. Ever since they started letting out-of-towners enter monsters in the parade twenty years ago, I haven't had a sniff of winning."

"So you...what? Make a monster of some kind and then walk through the streets with it?"

"That's what a parade is, yes, lad."

"Well, if you're going to be like that..."

Cooper caught my sleeve. "No, no. Sorry. I'm just tense, is all. I just want to win the parade this year, and then I can go to my grave feeling content."

"What?" I said, alarmed at his somber talk.

"It's just an expression," said Cooper. "I want an actual Sunhamptoner to win this year, and ideally I want that

Sunhamptoner to be me. But I'll need your help."

"I wasn't born in Sunhampton," I said.

"Aye, but you're one of us. You're stubborn, you like ale, and you moan about winter when it's cold, then summer when it's hot. You're a Sunhamptoner, like it or not."

"If your artificery has never won the parade before, Master Cooper, then what help could I be?"

"Ideas. A different perspective. Two heads are better than one, Lewis. Though, not as parade monsters. The year I made a two-headed, flying lion, I barely scraped fourth place. All I'm saying is, if you can find the time to help me come up with ideas and work on the monster a little, then I'd appreciate it. Who knows? It might be that if you help me out with this, I can give you a little something as a reward."

"Talking about joint projects," I said. "There was something I needed to speak with you about."

"Oh?"

"The other day, this guy came to see me at the store. Well, to see us. Or see *you*, if I'm being completely truthful. His name was Reuben Bates, and he asked for nine sugars in his tea. Nine! Can you believe it? But that's not the point. You see..."

Soon, I finished explaining to Master Cooper the reason for Reuben's visit, the historic tomb they'd found in Port Estereld, and how the Seed Society was paying for lots of artificers to design a system for transporting the extremely rare and probably very fragile seeds.

After I finished speaking, Cooper looked thoughtful, staring into the air as he stroked the hair on his chin. Then, his gaze focused and he fixed it on me. "So it's a competition?"

"Not exactly. They just want to get lots of designs from lots of perspectives so they can choose the safest."

"But they're going to evaluate them all, and then choose a winner, no?"

"I suppose," I said.

“Then we’ll have to get our thinking caps on, lad. We need a monster and we need a seed transportation system. I’m sure we can think of something.”

I spent my walk into town trying to think of ideas for Master Cooper’s parade monster. I had plenty of them, but a crafter always knows the difference between a good idea and the right idea. It’s a feeling they get, a sudden sense of *yes, that’ll work*. None of my current ideas felt like that.

In my store, I built a fire on the stove, stoked it, and then carefully fed it kindling and logs until it was sending out wafts of warm air. After brewing a pot of coffee on the glow stone in my workshop, I got to work on making some shelves for the storefront.

This was a simple task; someone with the Simple Craft and Forge skill tree could quite easily make some shelves, and my skill tree was ranked Intermediate. All I needed was some timber, a dollop of crafting stamina, and to have my Craft and Forge skill token set in my token bracelet.

I was just about to command the ‘Craft’ ability to work, when my gaze settled on the set of Tinkerer’s Precision Chisels lying on the far-right edge of my workbench. This made me pause.

Should I make all the shelves by hand? I asked myself. Go slowly, make them as good as they could possibly be? Surely the better things look in the store, the more likely people are to buy things or place an artificery order.

I was about to go grab my tools when I stopped myself. I was caught in the trap again, only this time, I had realized it in time. When, in all my life, had the appearance and quality of a shelf ever factored into my decision to buy something? Never was the answer.

I supposed if I was actually buying a shelf that might be a different matter, but the people who entered my store would only be interested in either buying an artificed product or placing a custom order. The workmanship of my shelves had

nothing to do with whether they spent gold here or not. I was procrastinating. That was the truth of it. Yet again, my brain was finding a way to stop me from forging ahead, only this time it was being very devious about it. It was cloaking the excuse in practical clothing.

Armed with this knowledge, it took me just thirty minutes to make all the shelves I needed. They were ready and fixed in place inside my store well before lunchtime. Now, with painted walls, a working stove, and shelves ready to display my wares, I was more than halfway there. I even found myself glancing at the open/closed sign on the door, and relishing the moment when I would flip it around.

A clicking sound brought my attention to the store door, where I was surprised to see the lock turning by itself. The door opened, and in walked Paisley.

“Hey, Lewis!” she said. She held up a white paper bag that had a few dark sugar stains at the bottom. “Brought you some sweet rolls.”

I took the proffered sweet roll from her, and then waited for an explanation. When none was forthcoming, I asked, “So you have a key to my store?”

“Sure. I got one cut when you lent me the key to borrow some wood for my stove.”

“Right. Is that normal practice, to get a copy of a person’s store key cut when they graciously lend it to you?”

“Oh, Lewis. Come on, now. I’ll get you a copy of my store key, too. It’s only practical. What if there’s an emergency or something?”

“I suppose that makes sense,” I said.

“The things I say often do. Want another sweet roll?”

Though my suspicions about the key were allayed, new ones began to make their presence felt in my gut.

“What’s going on?”

Paisley, caught mid-chew and with a sweet roll bulging in her cheeks, managed to say, “Huh?”

“You brought me two sweet rolls? What’s going on, Paisley? What are you up to?”

She glanced at the store door, as if to check nobody was there. Seeing an empty stoop, she focused her attention on me. “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?”

Paisley leaned a little closer to me and spoke in a whisper. “You promise you won’t say anything?”

“Depends what it is. If you’re planning on releasing real-life demons during the Scamp’s Eve parade, I’d have to say something. If you’re planning on stealing the diamond from the Full Striding bank vault, I’d probably have to mention it to your Uncle Jace. If only for your sake.”

“Oh, come off it. You’d help me rob a bank.”

“Maybe.”

“Look, you’re my best friend,” said Paisley. “And I don’t know who else to speak to.”

Now, I felt peculiar. Not quite worried, but certainly approaching that territory. This wasn’t like Paisley. “What is it?”

“Well...uhm...it’s Chris.”

“What did he say?”

“Say? Nothing,” said Paisley.

“Okay...go on.”

“It’s me. I’ve sort of been thinking. Things are going well, with my store and all. And he’s doing okay in Perentee. I’ve been wondering... maybe it’s time we looked at getting a place.”

“You and Chris?”

“Who else?”

“No, sure. I know that. I’m just surprised, is all.”

“Do you think he’d be interested?” Paisley said.

I felt now that I was on a tightrope of trust with Chris at one side, Paisley at another, both of them holding scissors and ready to snip the ends. I'd promised both of them that they could talk to me in confidence and I couldn't break that, not even when they both wanted – and were worried by – the same thing.

It was obvious they each needed a gentle push, a dollop of reassurance that the thing they were anxious about was actually going to be perfectly okay. But how could I do that without outright breaching their confidences?

I decided to just be straightforward. “Just talk to him.”

“But what if he isn't interested in doing that yet? I don't want him to think I'm being pushy. Once you say something like that, it's like opening a box of scorpions.”

I grinned. “You two are very much alike.”

“Huh?”

“Just talk to him, Paisley. That's my advice. Okay?”

She regarded me with a stern, deep stare now, as if trying to read into my mind. “What do you know?”

“I know nothing. And I want you to remember very clearly this moment, right now, where I'm categorically telling you that I know nothing. Okay? I don't know a thing, haven't said a word, and won't be talking anymore about this. Good day, madam.”

““Good day, madam?” I'm not going anywhere.”

“Oh. Well, if you're staying, you can help me with the shelves. It's time I started putting things on them.”

Chapter 7

Some folks say that time is a constant, and that all well-made and precisely-wound clocks set at the same time should behave the same way. I disagreed. In my opinion, time acts however it feels like acting, and it laughs in the face of any rules you try thrusting upon it. For me, the more things I had to do, the less time I seemed to squeeze from a minute. Clocks just seemed to tick faster the more I had to do. It wasn't only clocks that behaved this way, though. Calendars were the same. A day for me at busy periods seemed to hold half the hours it promised for other people. It was the darndest thing. Days, weeks, and months could pass me by quite easily.

This was the case with the following week, which I filled with all the obligations I had somehow managed to acquire, chipping away at each one. I had the seed transportation system to make, a Scamp's Eve parade monster to construct. I also needed to stock my store, figure out a way to protect the Tillwrights' chicken coop, and...and what else? I was sure there were other projects that I was missing. What I really needed was a clerk of my own. I needed a version of Flo. Not in my store, because as much as I liked her, that wouldn't work. But at least helping me out from time to time.

Work was only one part of my life, though. I also had to make sure I spent time with Ophelia while she was visiting, and I could always be sure of an invite from Phil, Jester, Chris, or Paisley to go to the tavern or have dinner at their homes. Cooper and Janey liked to eat with me, too, and I also enjoyed visiting Hattie Greaves in her woodland abode, since I knew that although she disliked traveling into town to seek out human company, she had a soft spot for people visiting her cottage.

Then there was the Grub-and-Gab initiative. It wasn't enough to just write down all our names on a piece of paper; we actually had to take part in the scheme, to go and visit people. I hadn't dedicated even a second to that yet. Ophelia, despite only being a visitor to Sunhampton, was way ahead of

me; the day before, she had taken a chicken and mushroom pie to Bert Reeve's house on Huskill Avenue, and she'd spent a few hours hearing about his life spent traveling Easterly.

"He was in a theatre troupe, would you believe it?" she told me in such an excited way that it was hard not to enjoy sharing her mood. "The Dog and Bone Theater Group. They got pretty big back in their day. Bert says he leveled his Emotional Range ability really high. I'm hoping he'll give me some tips."

If all of that wasn't enough, I had my own skills to think about. I was now an adept-ranked artificer, and the next step on my road to mastery was journeyman status. This was an important ranking in every crafter's life; it was a ranking that brought respect, it was a mark of ability and experience. It even opened doorways to new jobs and to new guilds. Many crafters saw attaining the journeyman ranking as their end goal, working hard to get there and then settling down, feeling content that such a status was good enough for most prospective customers.

I got to wondering how I could do all of this without somehow finding a way to manipulate Easterly Standard Time and bend it to my will. Was such a thing even possible? Even artificers had their limitations.

I asked Cooper that question one evening as the eight of us – me, Ophelia, Cooper, Janey, Paisley, Jester, Phil, and Chris – ate beef and red wine stew in the craftstead kitchen. It was a merry night and all of us were in great form, which is rare for a large group. There are usually at least one or two people who are tired, have had a bad day, or are otherwise stressed or down in the dumps. Tonight, though, it seemed like the stars were aligning and all of our moods were good.

I ate my stew while deep in thought, dipping my white bread into it to soak the juices even as I dipped my questions and my ideas into the stew that was bubbling inside my mind. I waited for Phil to finish telling us a tale from his time on the merchant ship again. This time it was for Jester's benefit. Jester never, ever bored of listening to people talking, and this made him the perfect audience for Phil. Ophelia, too, liked to

soak up as many stories as possible, certain that everything she heard would one day prove useful on the stage. With two such captivated audience members, Phil really gave this telling of the tale his all.

When he was finished with his story, I asked Master Cooper, “Some mages can use spells that slow down time, can’t they?”

“They can.”

“Might there be a way to work with miodes that manipulate time?”

Cooper set his spoon down in the cast iron stew pan. There weren’t enough bowls in the craftstead to serve stew to eight people, so on nights when everyone was here, one of us would have to eat from the stew pan itself, while another would have their stew served in a huge, old tin that used to have chopped tomatoes in it. Tonight, Cooper had the pan, Chris had the tin. Ophelia had volunteered to take either of them, but even Cooper’s low standard of hospitality forbade that.

“Disenchanting a time spell scroll and working with the miodes is grandmaster-level stuff, Lewis. Not even I can attempt it. Why?” he asked me.

“Oh, just trying to figure out a way to get everything done.”

“Make a list,” said Paisley, “Then cross it off one by one. I know that sounds too simple to be worth saying, but it works.”

Janey said, “I’ve always found having several plates spinning at once is the way to go. When you get bored with one plate, you can spin the others.”

“No, no, no, Ms. Morgan,” said Phil. “That’s how you smash a load of plates. Deep work - that’s the answer. When I’m working on a model, I focus on it intensely until it’s done. No distractions, no side errands into other things. Just that project, and nothing else.”

Cooper took a swig of his ale and then burped. “If you ask me, the answer is to toss a project or two aside until your workload is manageable. As long as they aren’t for a customer. Either do that or don’t take on so many bloody jobs in the first place.”

I dunked another piece of bread into my stew bowl, but found it disappointingly empty. There wasn’t an opportunity for seconds, either. That was the issue with everyone coming to dinner; these nights were joyous, but more people eating meant fewer leftovers at the end. I supposed that put under pressure to make a choice, I would choose to have everyone there. But I really did love the knowledge that leftovers of a lovely cottage pie or beef stew were waiting for me to enjoy at lunchtime the next day.

I chewed my stew-less bread and then swallowed. “The problem is some of my jobs are time-sensitive, so I need to work on several of them at once.”

“You’ve overcommitted, lad. What do I keep telling you? Under promise, overdeliver.”

“I know, I know. Just, when a project catches my eye, I can’t say no.”

“When someone tugs on your crafter’s ego, more like it.”

Master Cooper was right. There was no point denying it. If someone stopped me in the street and asked for my artificer help, I would always give them some of my time. There was just something nice about having expertise and being asked to use it. I didn’t know, it was almost like having artificery skills made me useful to the town that had welcomed me from the moment I came to live here. It was a way of proving my worth, my right to live here. I supposed that wasn’t the best way to look at things. I should craft things for my own satisfaction, not anyone else’s. But I was only human, and I had an ego. Egos weren’t inherently bad if you asked me; there was nothing wrong with pride or self-congratulations from time to time. In fact, people ought to be nicer to themselves.

That evening ended with me clear on only one thing; asking the group about anything was likely to give a range of different answers and leave me less clear than before the conversation began. I decided that tomorrow I would go and talk to someone who I knew was a master at multi-tasking.

Hattie Greaves was a legend around Sunhampton. Her home was in the woods on the outskirts of town, and deeper into the woodland was her exotic garden where she kept alive – and let flourish – many species of plants that otherwise wouldn't have grown in this part of Easterly.

Some folks wouldn't have dared approach her home alone. It was said that Hattie talked with bears who prowled deep in the woods – despite Lee Hunter's assurances that there were no bears here – and others said that every third Sunday, Hattie Greaves walked into the empty trunk of a particular tree, where she'd enter the sugar imps' realm and spend twenty years there. When she emerged back into Easterly, however, only two minutes would have passed.

It was all nonsense, of course. If the sugar imps' realm existed I would have made use of it. How handy would it have been to go to their realm, complete my projects, and then stroll back home while missing barely two minutes in our world?

As I approached Hattie's cottage, I was struck by how much it seemed like it was a part of the forest. Thick sheets of green ivy clung to the walls as if the forest had woven them especially for the job. All over the roof was a spread of moss that Hattie had grown to adapt to the seasons. In the heart of winter, the moss clung to the heat, refusing to let even a little bit of it escape. In summer, the moss turned a slightly blue color and had the effect of drawing warmth out of the cottage and releasing it into the air.

After knocking on her front door and waiting, it was clear Hattie wasn't home. This meant me taking a five minutes' walk along a haphazardly placed woodland path, which I made a game of by imagining the forest floor had turned into a gurgling hell of burning lava, and the paving

slabs placed here and there offered my only way out. I survived with my life – though it took all my agility and if I was honest, I lost my right foot to the burning red sea - and eventually came to a set of huge iron gates. They whined as I pushed them open.

The moment I set foot in Hattie's grounds, it was as though I'd entered another world where humans had been made extinct and plant life had grown unchecked, establishing its own territories, customs, and culture. This was no mere garden; from across the way came the snap of huge green flaps big enough to swallow a person's head. A patch of tubular roses played sounds whenever the slightest breeze touched them, harmonizing so they sounded like an orchestra. Mushroom patches gave a hum that changed in pitch and length as if they were talking to each other, and I fancied that a particularly dangerous-looking thorn bush not far from the gates actually growled when I started strolling through garden and looking for Hattie.

Threaded within this horticulture kingdom was the intrusion of people. Of society. Not through any of Hattie's work, since her way of taking care of the plants was as least intrusive as possible. More in the tinkered system that Master Cooper and I had installed here, at Hattie's request. Because she was renewing her relationship with her distant sister and wanted to visit her more often, Hattie Greaves had asked us to install a system of automated plant feeders and waterers that would deliver whatever nutrients and care her plants needed when she was gone. We'd tried to blend the gears, pulleys, and cranks in as well as possible, but a trained eye could still pick out a device fixed next to a tree here, a set of levers hidden inside a bush there.

Hattie's garden had become one of my favorite places in the whole of Sunhampton. Not only had she given me leave to come here and relax whenever I wanted, but she also allowed me to collect leaves, herbs, fruits, and petals for use in my alchemy. I often came here to eat my lunch on one of the many benches installed here and there, sandwiched between bushes that smelled like Yulthor trees and gave off a gentle heat from their leaves. It was so relaxing to sit and close my eyes,

breathing in the plethora of floral scents, listening to the creaks of the old trees in the wind, the wordless humming of the mushrooms that sometimes sounded like songs and other times like the fungi might even be arguing each other in a way that never failed to be amusing.

This wasn't just an exotic garden, though. Hattie also cultivated regular herbs, and these grew in plentiful bounties in their little section of the grounds. Here, she was a victim of her own horticulture skill, because the herbs were outgrowing the boundaries she had set for them. She practically begged me to clip some of them whenever I was here, so I always went home with my alchemy pouch full of basil, bay leaves, rosemary, and parsley.

Today, I found Hattie by her storage shed, fiddling with one of her many huge, green water butts that collected rainwater. This particular butt, however, seemed to be releasing water whenever she moved her finger from near the spout.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Lewis!” she practically yelled at me. “Of all the people! Thank the soil and the leaves that it's you. There's a month of rainwater in this bloody thing, but it's spilling out like gossip from Flo Anderson when she's had a few sherries.”

“Let me take a look.”

Something like a leaking water butt was about as challenging to my Intermediate Craft and Forge ability tree as tightening the bolt around a pipe would be to a plumber. A quick use of my Repair skill and the leak was fixed, the butt made secure again.

“That should do it,” I said.

Hattie tentatively stood up, revealing to me the front of her rain-soaked overalls. Her kind face was lined with wrinkles, and within those wrinkles were smears of dirt that she wore like gardener's warpaint. She stood tall and strong, not like some people her age who walked with a stoop as though time was physically pressing down on their backs.

“Thanks, Lewis. You’re a good ‘un.”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

“Come on. I’ll make you a cuppa.”

We headed into her storage shed, another of my favorite places. After Cooper and I had installed a tinkered care system for Hattie’s garden, she’d been so impressed with the results that she’d hired us for a whole bunch of other jobs. As a loner who’d spent most of her life being self-sufficient, having us help with the tinkered system was like opening a floodgate, and out of it poured all the jobs she couldn’t do herself but had been too proud to ask for help with. A person can’t learn everything, after all, and no determination for self-reliance can give you a magic hold over time and let you gain expertise in every single craft. Hattie had learned to rely on others just a little, and I fancied that she enjoyed it.

All her jobs, however, were too boring for Cooper. He was a master artificer, and though the tinkered garden system had been enough to intrigue him, completing a ream of odd repair tasks hadn’t. So, he’d invoked the master’s rule and assigned all the work to me.

Following that, I had spent most of a fortnight there in the garden and at Hattie Greaves’s cottage. I fixed gutters, replaced broken roof slates, and re-pointed her brickwork. I dug trenches, moved giant bushes from one side of the garden to the other, and heaved cuttings and soil from here to there.

My favorite task of all of them was renovating Hattie’s storage shed. She wanted it to be not only a place for her to store all her tools, plant feeds, and other horticulture equipment, but to double as a space in which to relax when the weather forbade being outside.

This involved a pleasing mix of my skills. First, I had artificed the inside of the shed to make it much bigger than it appeared outside. This was hard work, but it was also simple. Simple, in that I had produced such an effect a few times now, most recently on a travel wagon for Toby, leader of Lisabeth’s Fiends. But it was still hard work, because it meant the placing of many, many miodes, and was too large a job to let my

Enchant ability do it automatically. This meant manual work – and a lot of it.

The great thing about placing miodes, though, was that it was the kind of task where I always felt my brain settle onto a raft floating atop the crafter's river. Everything in my life - all my thoughts, all my imagined disputes - just went away, and I could place miode after miode, my mind focused on that and nothing else. There was just peace. Master Cooper called this state of being 'crafter's flow', and he said it was one of the most important things a person's brain could experience.

"So many people live in their own minds, Lewis," he'd told me in one of his rare, speech-giving, instructional moods. He was also unusually ponderous that day, having spent the morning watching a new flock of ducks who'd stopped by the craftstead pond. "They're stuck in their heads as sure as the fellas locked up in Kepswick Tower. Only, their bars are made from worry, doubt, resentment. They spend their time stewing over arguments that happened a week ago, or arguments that haven't even bloody taken place yet. They let their minds tell them they did something wrong or said something they shouldn't. They agonize over things that happened half a bloody decade ago, but they feel it as fresh as if it was the day before."

I remembered thinking to myself about all the times Cooper and I had had a choice word or two, and how I had prolonged such disputes in my mind even after they had actually finished. "Isn't it normal for people to think like that, Master Cooper?"

"Normal? I dare say. That doesn't mean it's pleasant, or that it's the only choice."

"We all have down days. We can't just say to ourselves, 'stop feeling down.'"

"Nor should you," Cooper had said. "If your brain is giving you a feeling, you should listen to it and thank it for its information. It's almost always trying to tell you something. Something instinctual, something you know in your gut. A choice to make or unmake. Something you know you should

be doing, or something to avoid. But other times, laddie, our minds don't shut up even when we acknowledge what they're saying. When that happens to me, I know I need a bit of crafter's flow."

"I think maybe I've read about that," I said. "It was mentioned in that book you've got. *Living the Artificeric Way*?"

Cooper had nodded. "Crafter's flow is the feeling you get when you're doing something that's just hard enough to demand your attention but it's also within your skill range. You start a task, get sucked into it, and before you're even aware of it, everything else in life melts away."

"Like placing miodes," I said.

"That's a good activity for crafter's flow. But so's casting a line into water, painting a wall a different color, cooking a new dish. It doesn't have to be your profession, and you don't have to be an expert in it. Anyone can have crafter's flow. Hells, it doesn't have to be a craft. I was ironing my clothes last week, and an hour went by and I realized I hadn't thought about anything except smoothing out the creases. I felt better after, and I had wrinkle-free shirts, as well."

"I thought you were looking a bit smarter today," I said.

Crafter's flow put a name to something I'd always known about and had often experienced, but had never really thought all too much about. But it was true. Doing something that put me in crafter's flow was a sure way for me to forget or feel better about any problem. It was part of the reason artificery meant so much for me; it was a place for my mind to go and relax, yet also have deep purpose.

As well artificing the interior of Hattie's storage shed to be much larger, I had also used my Intermediate Craft and Forge skill tree to create some furniture for her. Hattie wanted a set of comfortable chairs for her and her guests to relax in, as well as a refreshment counter that included a single hob stove on which she often made root vegetable soups, hot chocolate, and mulled wine.

When I had finished the job, Hattie had paid me generously, which had pleased Master Cooper. I had gotten to use my crafting muscles in a way that made them feel warmed up and nicely stretched out, even if it hadn't been a difficult project. Better still, the contented look on Hattie's face as she sank into an armchair next to her wood stove told me that she was happy with what I'd done. There was no feeling better than that for a crafter – aside from being immersed in crafting itself.

“Hot choc?” asked Hattie, wandering over to her stove.

“Please.”

“Marshmallows?”

“Well, since you're offering...”

“Chocolate sprinkles? Cinnamon stick?”

“Sure!” I said.

“I've been thinking of giving my recipe to Spruce Wilkinson for his café on the condition that he calls them ‘Hattie's Hot Chocs’, though I'm not sure I'd like the attention that would bring.”

I settled into one of the armchairs that I had made for her, which was now covered in a furry throw that Hattie had bought from Paisley's store a few days ago. The cushioned wood supported my back and legs so perfectly that I immediately felt relaxed. Soon, I had a cup of hot chocolate glowing against my palm, and I found myself looking out of the partially frost-covered pane of glass to my right, through which I was treated to the view of a well-cared-for garden.

“Ooh,” sighed Hattie, sinking in her seat. Like Master Cooper and Flo Anderson, she had reached that age in life where she couldn't sit down without making that involuntary noise.

I took a sip of chocolate and burned my tongue.

“Wait for it to cool,” chided Hattie.

I set the cup down for a minute. “Everything okay around here?”

“Oh, you know. I’m happiest when I’m in the garden and the garden’s happiest with me in it. I’m waiting for a wahacksamoat bush to be delivered. Connor Perry said it might come today with the mail wagon.”

“A wahacksa-what?”

“It’s a bush that grows in East Felliwettle. It doesn’t produce any fruit of its own, but it is supposed to help everything around it flourish. It boosts the morale of the other plants, as it were.”

“Sort of like when I have one of the wolfhounds lying in a bed while I craft,” I said. “It’s nicer working with them there.”

“Yes, I suppose. Though I can’t imagine relaxing around those beasts. It’ll be hard to get the bush to settle in; they need everything just perfect. It’ll be a lot of work while I adjust things for it. Place a wahacksamoat on its own and it droops. But plant it too near to everything else, and it feels crowded. When I manage to get everything just right, the wahacksamoat should boost the resilience of everything in my little garden.”

I smiled at the idea that anybody could describe Hattie’s garden as little.

“That’s sort of why I wanted to visit,” I said.

“Not for the pleasure of my company?”

“Well, that too. And the hot chocolate. I wanted to ask you something, Hattie. You have so much stuff going on here at once, all the time. Every plant has different needs. You must have fifty things to do every day, some of them at the same time. How do you keep it all straight in your head?”

“Oh, well, I just do.”

That wasn’t quite the piece of wisdom about multitasking that I had hoped for. It reminded me of the times when I’d ask Master Cooper an artifice question when he was busy, and he’d respond with something like “I just know,” or “I just learned it.”

I blew on my hot chocolate and took a sip, savoring the sugary hit on my tongue and enjoying the feeling of warmth as it hit my belly.

“I suppose you work on instinct now,” I said, “But there must have been a point in your life when you didn’t have so much experience, and it seemed like you had a million things to do at once. How’d you cope with it all back then?”

“Well,” she said, leaning forward in a sure sign that my question had intrigued her, “Back when I was a lass – which wasn’t centuries ago, before you say anything, you cheeky lad - I used to rely on lists. I had a hundred of ‘em. Which plants needed watering, when, and how much. Which bushes could be planted close to others, which needed space. Different soil types, plant feeds, sunlight levels, temperatures. Holes that needed digging here, fences that needed mending there. I just did it all, day after day. After a while, it all began to fit into place in my head and I didn’t need to keep checking my lists.”

“I guess what I most want to know is what you do when you’ve got a hundred things to do all at once. How do you stop yourself from being overwhelmed?”

“Well, Lewis, how does an artist finish a painting? Stroke by stroke. A musician crafts a tune note by note. A builder doesn’t try to lay fifteen bricks at once – it’s one after another. Focus on one thing, finish it, and only then move on. Go and watch Douggie Fernglass lighting the town lamps at night, and you’ll see a person who knows what I’m saying. He does it at his own pace, lamp by lamp, and he always gets it done. You never see Douggie Fernglass running around stressed and worrying about getting it all done, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“There you go, then. Do things lamp by lamp, Lewis. Soon, though, you begin to get into a rhythm of your own, and you don’t need to think so plainly. It will just be your way of working, a method that feels right like a nice cardigan.”

I supposed it was something I already knew – work on one thing at a time, do my best on it, and only then move on to something else. It was the kind of advice that everyone knows

and seems obvious. Sometimes, though, you just need to hear it from somebody else.

“There was another thing I wanted to ask,” I said, taking out my crafter’s notepad and opening it to the pages I’d allocated to my seed transportation system project. “Have you ever heard of vitae-panacea?”

She smiled. “Have you ever heard of miodes?”

“Sorry. You’re a gardener. Of course you’ve heard of them.”

“I enjoy a good fable as much as the next lass,” said Hattie.

“Fable? No, I don’t mean a fable. Vitae-panacea. They’re an herb.”

I proceeded to tell Hattie about my visit with Reuben, and how I had accepted a commission to create a system that would allow him to transport the vitae-panacea herbs safely from the tomb to the headquarters of the Historical Seed Society.

The effect was the same as if I engaged Phil in a conversation about boats, or asked for Jester’s opinion on a certain school of accountancy. Hattie didn’t just hang on to my every word but seemed to cling tightly to them, to grab them out of the air and devour them as soon as they left my bemused lips.

“Lewis...are you telling me that Reuben Bates was in your store?”

“Err, yes.”

“*The* Reuben Bates?”

“I’m sure he’s not the only person in Easterly with that name...”

She reached forward and grabbed my hand in a show of enthusiasm that I had never seen from her. “You have to introduce me. By the soil and leaves, if I’d only known he was in town!”

“He’s gone now.”

“But you’ll see him again, no?”

“When I finish the transportation system. But here’s the thing: I really need your help. He gave me a list of instructions. Things the herbs will need, lots of them. But some of them seem to directly contradict the others, and some of them I plain just don’t understand. Take a look at this. What does ‘harmonic resonance’ mean?”

“It means the herbs must be paired with herbs or plants of a different species, but ones that give off a harmonic resonance.”

“I’m still not following.”

“Take my humming shrooms,” said Hattie. “They give off harmonic resonance. They make music, such as it is, and the illikuss petals I planted next to them thrive off it. No, they *depend* on it. It seems the vitae-panacea need something that gives off harmonic resonance.”

“But there can’t be anything like that in the tomb right now, can there? It’s ancient. There’s nothing growing in there. So how have the seeds survived?”

“Perhaps the tomb itself gives off the correct harmonic resonance,” suggested Hattie. “Although, ungerminated seeds can last a long time without needing anything.”

“Ah. I understand now. Reuben’s instructions say that he believes the seeds might possibly begin to germinate the second they leave the tomb. It’s happened before when they’ve found intact seeds and tried to move them, apparently. Maybe you’re onto something with the tomb thing, though. The harmonic resonance doesn’t need to come from plants, surely? It could be a device of some kind.”

“Yes, there’s no reason why not,” she said. Then, she snatched my hand again. “Introduce me to Reuben Bates, Lewis. I’ll make sure you never go without a Hattie’s Hot Choc for a whole year if you do.”

I laughed. “What’s so special about this guy?”

“This is Reuben Bates. *The* Reuben Bates of the Historical Seed Society. Lords and ladies above, Lewis, don’t you know anything about horticulture?”

“I’ve kept the spider plant in my room alive for almost a year now.”

“You are a true gardening master, dearie. But if you’re willing to listen to an old lady who knows a thing or two, then consider me your consultant of all things floral. Anything you need to know in my little area of expertise, I’ll tell you. Call on me morning, noon, and night...well, not night...and I’ll answer. On the condition that when you next meet Reuben Bates, you take me along with you.”

“Deal,” I said.

For the next three hours and eighteen minutes, Hattie was more than happy to answer any questions I had about the project. Soon, I made so many notes that if my crafter’s pad been of the normal variety and not artificed, I would have worried about it filling up. I left her garden with three hot chocolates in my belly – which was too many, to be honest – a vow that I would get more exercise, and most importantly, a clearer idea of where to start with the seed transportation system.

When I reached the bottom of the paved slab pathway that led away from the garden and toward her cottage, I heard Hattie call out behind me.

I turned around to find her standing at the garden gates.

“One more thing,” she said, her voice carrying easily over the distance between us. I reckoned that if it ever came to it, Hattie Greaves could shout even louder than Master Cooper.

“What is it?”

“About your projects, Lewis,” she said. “I forgot to say; Always have one that is just for you. A task that you can pick up or set aside whenever you want. Something that you enjoy. That helps you relax. In other words...get yourself a hobby that isn’t artificery!”

That evening, Master Cooper and I had dinner at the craftstead. Janey was still working in her alchemy lab even after darkness had settled over the yard and the wolfhounds had been fed, and after all the way down the sloping hill Duggie Fernglass had set the town streetlights glowing, lamp by lamp. No offer of hot food or fruity wine could coax her out of her workshop. Having just secured an order from Sara-Rose, who was the new head of Jace Porter's manor, Janey was entranced in her work and wouldn't stop until it was complete.

Sara-Rose was restoring a neglected wing of the Porter manor and needed some kind of special varnish for the old timber steps, beams, and floorboards. Janey, who was determined that her store at the craftstead would become successful where all her other alchemical business ventures hadn't, had told Cooper and me that she wasn't leaving the lab until her varnish was done. Besides the need to make her store profitable, she also shared something that Cooper, Chris, Paisley, Phil, Ophelia, and all my other friends and I understood all too well; time spent working in her craft was a time full of satisfaction and free from regret of any kind. A person who loved what they did and did what they loved didn't spend a second of that time yearning for something else.

Cooper and I had vegetable chili for dinner, accompanied by a fresh loaf of spiced bread that Cooper had bought from Rolls and Dough, and a bottle of alcohol-free mulled wine gifted to us from Paisley, whose brewery venture with her uncle Jace was doing very well indeed. The chili was extra spicy since I was the one who had made it. One of many hard-fought-over rules in our home was that the chef always decided on the heat.

That night, Cooper was much less cantankerous than usual, and in fact seemed especially tired, like the bags under his eyes had bags of their own. I knew that he had been working all day on a full set of insulated, self-opening and closing windows for Lester and Bill Green, the newly retired couple who owned a house on Walker's Street. This wasn't a project that would tax a master artificer like Cooper, yet he seemed worn out by it.

“Have you visited Healer Brown lately?” I said.

Cooper pointed his fork at me. “I know what you’re getting at, laddie.”

“Concern about your health?”

“I’m as healthy as the day I was born. Well, no. Healthier. I was born three months premature, and I was a sickly lad when I was younger. Nothing like the strapping piece of human engineering that you see now.”

“I just thought you were going to ease off a little.”

Cooper gave a sigh and looked at me thoughtfully. “I suppose I just got wrapped up in finishing those damned windows. There was a time when I could work eight hours straight and still have enough in me to run to the top of Brewer’s Pike and back. Time is a crafty one, Lewis. It takes its toll on your body, but then tries to goad your mind. It tells you that you can still do it, that you should test yourself. Then it laughs when you can’t.”

“There’s nothing wrong with taking a break, Master Cooper.”

“That’s right,” said Janey. I didn’t know how long she had been standing in the kitchen doorway but there she was, a loving smile on her face as she gazed at Cooper.

“Hypocrites!” roared Master Cooper. “I’m surrounded by them! Tell me with straight faces that either of you takes enough breaks and I’ll make you put ten coins in the lie jar.”

There was no lie jar in the craftstead. That was a relic from Cooper’s youth. His mother, he had told me, had hated lies even of the innocent kind children told, and if he was ever caught in one, he’d had to put coins in the house lie jar depending on the severity of his tall tales. He used to make a game out of seeing what outlandish lies he could get away with, while coughing up the coins when his mother caught him. He quickly learned a respect for the truth while fostering a secret love for fiction. I wondered if that was why he chose artificery as a profession since it combined honest, straight-edged craftsmanship with a creative mind.

I supposed that I had to face a truth of my own right then. Cooper was right. Who was I to lecture him on taking a break, when I always had half a dozen projects on the go, and I could quite easily get up before it was light and work all the way through until the stars were out again?

“I think we need hobbies, Master Cooper,” I said. “Things to do to relax.”

“I have plenty of hobbies.”

“Like what, Jack?” asked Janey, taking her place at the table and ladling chili from the still-warm pot into a bowl.

“Sitting.”

“Sitting isn’t a hobby.”

“A hobby’s whatever a person decides, is it not? Who are you, my love, the town hobby official? Do I need to apply to you for a hobby license? I love all kinds of relaxing things. Reading – there’s one.”

“I don’t doubt that reading is a hobby, but when was the last time you read that necromancer’s assistant book of yours?”

“Butler. There’s just so much to do. I haven’t earned time to read it yet.”

“You don’t earn free time, Jack. You enjoy free time. Free time isn’t bought by hard work - it’s the fuel for it. You need to unwind, to let your body do nothing and recuperate, if you’re going to do any successful work at all.”

“I just can’t bloody concentrate on things that aren’t artificery. That’s the trouble. I open a book, and I find myself reading the same line a hundred times. Usually, it’s because Lewis is breathing too loudly or humming under his breath.”

“Jack...”

“It’s okay,” I said. “He’s just in one of his cranky moods. Why don’t you borrow my book-reading device? You might just not be a book reader, that’s all.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Dinner left me feeling in that perfect state of fullness that I liked to think of as ‘smoothing the cracks’. Most of the plaster had been spread on the wall of my appetite, and now I just had to use a trowel to cover the smaller patches I had missed. In real terms, this meant that I sat in the living room by the fire, in my favorite chair. On one arm of the chair was a bowl filled with chocolate raisins and on the other arm was a mug of sweet tea. Resting on my lap was a wooden tray, on which was a small, unassembled ship model that Phil had gifted me for my recent birthday. Though he mostly sold finished models, he’d told me that he was thinking of making and selling kits that people could finish by themselves.

“Don’t use your Craft ability to finish it instantly,” he warned me. “That would completely go against the whole point. It’d be like paying someone ten gold to run a mile for you, then telling everyone that you’ve exercised.”

“What is the point then, Phil?” Paisley asked him. “It’s a present, isn’t it? I didn’t know presents came with a point.”

“The point is to just make the model.”

“And then what?”

“Then nothing. You have a finished model. The model isn’t the gift. The gift is in the making itself. There’s nothing better than sitting down and assembling a model or finishing a puzzle. A cup of coffee on one side, some baked figs on the other, and nothing to do for the next few hours but put a ship together. That’s heaven. Trust me.”

Although grateful for the gift, I had been skeptical back then because I had never really had much interest in ships, and model-making had seemed like a frivolous use of my free time. Now, though, I thought that maybe I understood Phil’s point. Sitting there in the craftstead living room, with Chris – now returned from work – in the armchair across from me, and Janey and Cooper sharing the couch, I felt myself relax amidst the easy companionship. The fire warmed my cheeks and cast a perfectly dim light all around the room, especially on the tray on my lap. Two wolfhounds snored from on the rug by my

feet. Outside, darkness pressed against the window panes, but not as a threat. More as though it was just looking in for a moment to check on us, as though it was happy to find us sitting in a state of cozy comfort.

In such a mood of normal evening bliss, it was easy for my mind to settle down upon the ship model like a wolfhound on a rug. I started by following the instructions that Phil had written down, but soon, piece by piece, felt my mind melt away from needing instructions and float gently on calm waters like the very ship I was putting together.

Chapter 8

The following day, I woke up early, washed and dressed, and then headed into Sunhampton and onto Coiner's Way, where the merchants were getting ready for the day ahead. I watched them for a while sweeping their stoops with brooms that scratched back and forth. Breathing out plumes of steam into the chilly air as they carried stock through the back entrances of their stores. Carefully arranging displays in their windows so that they would attract the eyes of passersby. A 'Morning!' here, an 'Ain't it bloody cold today?' there.

I'm one of them now, I suddenly realized. I ought to have had this insight before now, given how long we had already rented the store. But something about that moment, something about that frosty morning when the sky was white as snow and frost lined the cobbles of the Way, made it not just a truth glowing dimly like a lamp at the end of a foggy street but a bright light, big and brilliant and shining straight on my face.

I'm one of them, I'm a merchant, and I need to act like it. Look at Mr. Jules; he doesn't need his window display to look completely perfect before he'll open his candle shop. Joe Phillips doesn't procrastinate by scrubbing his stoop to perfection rather than actually letting people inside the general store.

"Morning, Lewis!" said a voice.

Lee Hunter was approaching from across Coiner's Way. He was wearing a fur coat that looked like it didn't just ward away the cold but actively challenged it to battle, promising the icy face of winter that it would come out looking worse if it tried anything. Lee pushed his hood back, releasing his locks of thick, wavy hair that were starting to show gray here and there, despite him only being five or so years older than me. Right now, Lee Hunter's hair reached his jawline and it might even reach his shoulders before summer, when he usually cut it short again.

“Hey, Lee,” I said, smiling at the guy who’d once slugged me in the face for stopping him trapping a wolf, and thus cost him hundreds of gold.

There was a time when I couldn’t have imagined giving Lee even a half-civil ‘hello’, let alone actually finding myself pleased to see him. Lee had apologized four dozen times over for that incident, and had spent a lot of time working on his temper. Besides, I wasn’t blameless. Lee was a hunter, and that was how he made his living just as his mother had, and her mother before her, and then Lee’s great-grandfather before them. I had blundered along and interfered with him making his living, and I had done so to test my own artificery skills rather than through compassion for the wolf caught in one of Lee’s traps. My mother had always told me, ‘Don’t look into the mirror at night if you’re scared of seeing shadows’, and I believed it was important to face this part of myself. Not everything I ever did was for altruistic reasons. I could be just as selfish as anyone, even if I mostly tried to do the right thing.

These days, Lee was maybe the cheeriest, most patient, most helpful merchant on Coiner’s Way. He had signed up for Flo and Spruce’s Grub-and-Gab initiative the day they’d announced it, for instance. And last Yulthor, Lee had spent a great deal of his time traveling back and forth between Coiner’s Way and the homes of some of Sunhampton’s more elderly or infirm residents who couldn’t do their Yulthor shopping by themselves. He attached his six husky dogs to a sled and spent a whole week having them pull him through the snow, his sled laden with boxes of groceries and big bags filled with presents.

One thing I had always wondered was how well Lee’s hunting supply shop was actually doing. He kept his financial cards not close to his chest but locked in a safe behind an uncrackable combination, and whether he struggled for gold or was making a great profit, I had no idea. The fact that his demeanor didn’t change whether he was doing well or not said a lot about his newfound control over his emotions.

“Fancy getting a coffee?” I said.

“Sorry, pal. I need to open up. I’m busier than a blue-arsed fly.”

“Getting lots of sales?”

“Eh, you know. So-so. Winter’s not the best for game in general, though it isn’t a waste of time. Deer are easier to spot. They tend to gather in bigger groups, take more chances out in the open. And it’s easier to find tracks in the snow, even for a lay hunter. I get a decent trade from dedicated hunters in winter, but hobbyists tend to stay away until it’s warmer, unless they’ve got hunting in their blood. So I do alright, but not enough to buy a mansion just yet.”

“Well, we can always dream. Maybe one day I’ll come visit Hunter Manor.”

“That’d be grand. Maybe one day you’ll open your store, as well. Although, I think I’ll have my manor before you do that.”

I gave a quick glance toward my store, where the windows were dark, and the door locked shut. Was there a more pathetic sight on Coiner’s Way right now? Someone would have been forgiven for thinking that Mr Flueitt the tailor had only just left and that nobody had taken it over yet.

“I’ve really been putting things off, huh,” I said.

“You reckon? Well, that’s big news to me, Lewis. Me and Paisley have never had a conversation about that already. Not at all. No way.”

“Is everyone on Coiner’s Way talking about it?”

Lee narrowed his eyes and looked around. “Well, let’s just say that Joe Phillips started a pool. If you don’t open your store for another two weeks, then I stand to make a decent pot of money. I’ll even buy you a beer if I do.”

That did it. I chatted with Lee for as long as was polite but then headed over to my store with a fire beginning to crackle inside me. It wasn’t long before I had a fire crackling in my store, too, with my little wood stove merrily chomping its fiery teeth on some wood and quickly warming up the storefront, hallway, and my little workshop at the back.

Currents of hot air wafted through, meeting with the light from my many lamps to create a perfect storm of coziness.

In my workshop, I set a pot of coffee to warm up on the glow stone, and I cursed myself for not remembering to replace my sweet roll supply or re-fill my biscuit jar. I knelt beside my cool box and opened it, not really expecting anything. To my surprise, though, there was a box of apple-cinnamon twists in there, glistening with frosting and daring me to eat not just one, but two of them.

There could be only one culprit for this. Paisley and I had given each other keys to our stores ‘just in case.’ Well, she had technically stolen a key from me, but that wasn’t the point. I had thought that the ‘just in case’ meant some kind of emergency like smoke drifting from places it shouldn’t or burst pipes that needed fixing, but apparently Paisley had meant restocking my cool box with baked treats. She really was devious.

I’ll get her for this, I thought to myself. I’ll do something nice when she least expects it.

With a coffee and an apple-cinnamon twist to hand, I got to work on my project for the day. Everything else could wait, I decided. I would get to things one by one, and this was the first thing: my damned store needed to open.

Before I knew it, I found myself locked in crafter’s flow as I made a large wooden sign to hang above the store front, displaying our business name for everyone to see, as well as a smaller sign with a re-paintable surface, which I could use to advertise discounts, new products, and that kind of thing.

I also used my Craft ability on my Intermediate Craft and Forge skill tree to make an iron safe in which to keep anything valuable when I locked the store up at night. Since I was in my little workshop and didn’t have access to a forge, I had to use my ability to make the safe the easy way, rather than doing things manually. This meant that making the safe was a much quicker process, but it robbed me of another chance to get into crafter’s flow. That was okay, though. What

was the point of having such crafting abilities if I didn't employ them when I needed to?

After making the sign, I headed outside onto a chilly Coiner's Way, brought out my stepladder, climbed it, and then hammered the sign into place above the shop window. I enjoyed this even despite the chill, savoring the satisfying sound as the masonry screws drove into place. Soon, my store had a proper sign above it and no longer looked like it had been abandoned.

I stood there, arms folded, and allowed myself to appreciate my work. Typography wasn't one of my strongest talents, but I thought I had done a good job.

"That's a bit wonky, Lewis," said Douggie Fernglass, who was pushing a wheelbarrow filled with logs over the cobbled street. He wore a fur cap with huge, brown flaps covering his ears.

"Is it?" I said. "I think I've gone sign-blind, then. It seems straight to me."

"Definitely wonky. And trust me, I know about these things. You should see my living room. Not a single picture frame out of alignment. Need some logs for your stove?"

"I'll take a couple of bags, please, Douggie."

"Hold on there a second, my friend, and I'll get them bagged up for you."

While Douggie filled up two net bags with logs, I climbed onto my stepladder, unscrewed the screws holding my shop sign in place, and then repositioned it. When I was done, I climbed back down the ladder.

Dougie had two net bags filled with logs ready for me. "That'll be five of the king's finest," he said, using a very old Sunhampton word for gold.

"Here you go. Thanks, Douggie. Say, are sure the sign doesn't look wonky now? I swear it didn't before, and now that I've moved it, it really is a little out of place."

"Looks fine to me, Lewis."

“Definitely out of whack,” said a voice.

We had been joined by Lee Hunter, who liked to break up his mornings by getting a to-go coffee with milk and two sugars from the Sunny Café, and then taking a walk around the Way, chatting to whichever traders were around. When he did this, his little cousin, Bethany, looked after the store. She was fourteen years old and had recently started learning hunting under Lee’s tutelage.

“See?” I said. “Lee agrees with me.”

Dougie shrugged his shoulders. “Only sayin’ what my eyes are tellin’.”

I stared at the store sign, willing myself to believe that it was straight. But I just couldn’t. My mind had come up with doubts, and Lee Hunter had bolstered them.

“Tell you what,” said Dougie. “Stay right there, and I’ll go fetch Ms. Porter.”

Paisley, despite being one of the youngest merchants on Coiner’s Way, had become well-respected by the other traders over the last year, and her advice was often sought after to resolve disputes, disagreements, and differences in opinion.

Just the other day, Alec Argyle, who owned the King’s Head, and Percy Tattersall of Tattersall’s Books, had been bickering over whether soup was classed as a food or a drink. Alec, who claimed to be the authority over anything drinks-related since he owned a tavern, was adamant that soup was food. Mr Tattersall, on the other hand, said that since you could enjoy soup in a cup, it was a drink. The discussion turned into a disagreement, then a row, then became an outright feud.

Soon, Alec had changed the chalkboard sign outside the tavern to read ‘Today’s FOOD of the day: Oxtail soup.’ In response, Percy Tattersall had rearranged the books in his store window, giving prominence to a tome titled ‘Soup, gravy, and other savory drinks.’

Eventually, Lee Hunter and Mrs. Kettle, owner of Brews & Butties, intervened. “You two are friends,” Mrs.

Kettle had said. "Let's not destroy a friendship over soup."

As a last resort, Paisley had been sent for. She heard both gentlemen out, finally delivering a verdict that ended the saga.

"Soup is a beverage when it's mostly liquid without many solid ingredients," she said. "But a thick soup crammed with chunky vegetables is clearly not a drink, since you need to chew some of it or you might choke."

And so the debate ended, friendships were renewed, and Paisley's reputation as the judge of Coner's Way was bolstered.

This meant that it was only natural that we sought her out to decide whether my shop sign was straight or not. Soon, my friend had joined the crowd outside my store. She paced around. She looked at the sign from one angle, then another. We studied her, our breaths catching in our chests, our nerves dancing as we awaited her decision. It made me think about how some of the traders around here really had little else to do on a quiet day like this.

Paisley stood with her arms folded, eyes squinting in concentration. Finally, she said, "Lewis, couldn't you have used a ruler or a set square or whatever to decide this? You are a craftsman, after all. Do you really need to bother me with this kind of thing?"

With that, she headed back into her store, where she evidently had better things to do today than judge whether store signs were straight or not. Feeling freshly rebuked, I used my tools to check the sign was straight, adjusted it back to its original position, and then sarcastically thanked Douggie Fernglass for his help.

"Any time, Lewis," he replied. "Always happy to help a trader."

With the sign hung, I got to work finishing the inside of the store. Ophelia and I had painted the walls and I had already made some shelves, on which were a few artificer odds and ends that I was going to sell. It wasn't the best artificery store

inventory; things such as notepads that contained more pages than they appeared, coloring pencils, and pots of paint that lasted longer than they should. I would need to craft better stock, but not right this minute. Besides, Cooper and I had suspected that the bulk of our orders would come from custom projects, from people turning up at the store with no warning yet with a specific artificer's need.

Next, I got to work restoring the timber floorboards that Mr Flueitt had neglected for so long. It was a shame, really. The floorboards had the potential to look fantastic, but the old tailor had preferred to simply cover them with rugs. It was fair enough if that was his preference, of course, but I thought they could look pretty special if they were given some attention.

My first job was to sand them. Initially, I regretted having loaned my book-reading device to Master Cooper. It would have been nice to listen to the adventures of the necromancer's butler as I scrubbed away. Soon, though, I realized I didn't need it. The back and forth of the sand paper lulled me into the familiar territory of crafter's flow, and before long, my thoughts were lost within it.

The whole 'I must make a book reading device' thing was just procrastination, I realized. Yes, that was it. Procrastination, pure and simple. So much of my life very recently had been avoidance of the very thing I was working towards now: opening the store. Everyone else had been able to see it but me. I supposed that sometimes these things were like walking around with the back of your shirt untucked. You needed someone else to point it out so you could tuck it back in. Even Cooper recognized it, and that was why he'd never pushed me on hurrying up. He had sensed some kind of lesson for me to learn here, apparently.

After sanding the floorboards, I had to perform some alchemy. In my workshop, I used my Intermediate Alchemy skill tree to make some wood filler, wood stainer, and some sealer. With these three pots of material to hand, I got to work. First by filling in all the little holes and cracks that time – and Mr. Flueitt's customers – had worn on the boards. Next, I stained them a pleasant acorn brown, not allowing myself to

doubt the color or ponder even for a second the idea of trying a different hue. Finally, I used the sealer to protect the wood, applying the first coat, letting it dry, and then completing it with a second coat.

Not long after I finished, two knocks sounded on my store door. The handle rattled. Thinking it was another customer, I headed over to it, preparing to tell them that we still weren't open, but would be very soon.

Then, however, the lock clicked, and the door opened. Standing on the threshold, bundled up in a winter coat that Chris had bought her for their anniversary, was Paisley. Behind her were Phil, Jester, and Sara-Rose. Sara-Rose gave me a nervous wave.

"We're going to the King's Head," said Paisley. "It's board game night. You coming?"

I glanced behind me at the store with its shelves, sales counter, and newly-restored floorboards. It was so close to looking like an actual place of business.

"I don't know. I still need to..."

Paisley marched over to me, hooked her arm through mine, and then through sheer force of will compelled me toward the door. My fate, it seemed, had been made long before they knocked. The result? I'd have to tolerate an evening in a warm tavern with my friends, drinking beer and playing board games. Damn my life.

I spent the next two days crafting improved inventory for my store. At first, I hadn't known what to make, since as an adept artificer my range of craftable items was almost as endless as my imagination, as long as I could procure the right miodes and source the materials. I sought out Paisley's advice in this since she was always changing her store inventory and never seemed to struggle to make a sale.

"There are a few ways you could go about it," she told me. "Perhaps you could canvas people's opinions. Create a little survey about what kinds of artificery products folks want,

then walk around Coiner's Way for a while and try to get people to answer it."

"I never answer surveys. I can never be bothered. Now I feel bad; I never stopped to think about the person asking for the survey," I said.

"Don't twist yourself into a knot over it. A merchant's job is to take people's gold – we're not raising money for orphanages here. Unless the survey was created by someone raising money for an orphanage. Was it?"

"I don't think so..."

"Anyhow, the second way of stocking a shop is to imagine what kind of products you personally would want or need, and sell those. It's not as scientific as actually canvassing people, but it's the way I do it. It means that everything in my store is something I would want to buy, and that means I really believe in them. I don't sell random tat just to take people's gold."

At first, I found it difficult to imagine what kind of artificed products I needed, much less ones that I wanted. Truth be told, I didn't actually *want* many of the things I made. My joy came from the act of making them, not the end result. Most of the things I crafted were for other people, anyway.

I decided to imagine a day in my life. Just an ordinary day, from start to finish. What kinds of artificed products would make my day better or easier? With my crafter's notepad to hand, I soon had a list of things.

Armed with that, I spent a few hours that day and all of the next artificing things, again using my ability to quickly make them rather than doing things manually. I would have loved to get into crafter's flow by making them manually, but enough was enough. Time was ticking, the days were tocking by. The store really needed to open.

Morning became afternoon, then evening, and soon the evening threatened to disappear on me entirely and become night. Outside my store, Dougie Fernglass had already completed his own work for the evening, lamp by lamp.

Three knocks sounded on my store door. Then three more, quicker this time. I took off my artificer's goggles and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the light of the workshop. Crossing the hallway and heading into the store front, I allowed myself a moment to appreciate how great the floorboards looked. Since I had fixed the loose ones, they didn't even squeal or whine as I crossed over them anymore.

When I reached the store door and opened it, I felt a smile spread across my face.

"Ophelia, hey," I said, not bothering to act cool or reserved in how pleased I was to see her. "I didn't expect to see you for another few weeks!"

"That's the thing. Toby lined up a big play for us. We're to perform *The Knight and the Raven* at the Palladium Theatre in Full Striding. I won't be able to visit at the weekends because he wants us to rehearse like crazy and maybe tour a few villages and get a few smaller performances under our belt, so I thought I'd come now."

"I want a ticket," I quickly said.

She laughed. Reaching into her coat pocket, she pulled out eight slips of paper. "I brought a whole bunch. The venue gave us some complementary ones. You know, for friends and family. Most of the other Fiends didn't have anyone to give them to."

I had traveled with the Fiends for a long time, so I knew all their family histories. The troupe had family scattered all over Easterly. Cobby's cousins here, Big Henry's three older sisters there. Whenever a show took them to the area where their family lived, they visited them. Each member of the Fiends' real family, however, was the troupe. It was inevitable, really. Folks who spent so long together, who traveled Easterly together, who earned their livelihoods and practiced their craft together. There was no rule, as far as I knew, that blood or legalities defined a person's familial ties. Look at me; my stepfather and his children were technically my closest living relatives, yet I felt more kinship with Master Cooper's wolfhounds than I did with them.

“I’ll talk to the gang,” I told Ophelia. “I don’t know what everyone is doing, so I can’t vouch for them. I think Phil might be going to see some famous boat that’s moored up at The Cove in a few weeks’ time.”

“It’s alright. Whoever comes, comes. As long as *someone*’s there on the opening night, that’s all that matters,” she said, while holding my eyes with a stare deeper than I had expected, telling me – I hoped – exactly who that someone was.

“C’mon in, it’s freezing,” I said. “Do you want something to drink? Mulled wine? Tea?”

“Mulled wine sounds great.”

“Let me ask you something,” I said as we walked toward my workshop. “Do you think soup is a drink?”

“Err...I’m not sure I want some soup right now.”

“No, but is it a food or a drink?”

“Definitely food. I’ve never thought, I’m thirsty. I could really use a nice glass of soup.”

“Interesting,” I said.

When we reached my workshop, Ophelia pulled out a stool – I had finally crafted a second one for when people visited – and sat down on it, looking perfectly at ease. It was as though she wasn’t a visitor but that she belonged here, that it was right for her to be here. There weren’t many people I could say that about. Not in my workshop, anyway. Most craftspeople are the same. In their workshops, at their workbenches, and anywhere they practiced their trade, the intrusion of other people wasn’t usually a thing to welcome. Not so with Ophelia. She lit the little room surer than a dozen lamps.

“You’ve made a lot of stuff,” she said, eyeing the odds and ends I’d crafted and piled up at the end of my workbench.

“Oh, these? Just some things I whipped up. Nothing special. This here is a set of ever-sharp kitchen knives.

Nothing worse than trying to chop onions with blunt knives.
And this-”

“It’s a broom.”

“A self-sweeping broom. The miodes work for an hour, and then you need to let them rest. But that ought to be enough to clean most places. And these here, well, they’re sleep-inducing bed sheets, for nights when you’re really struggling to nod off and you don’t want to take an alchemic brew or anything like that. I used essence of snooze-poppy from Hattie’s garden. That’s not the official name of the plant, or anything, but that’s what Hattie calls it.”

On and on I went, pointing out everything I had made and explaining exactly what they did, and how I had crafted them. Before I knew it we had drunk two mugs of mulled wine each, and Ophelia hadn’t betrayed even the slightest hint of getting bored. I really appreciated that. The ability to listen to the ins and outs of a craft that wasn’t your own was a real talent. One to add to the many that she possessed.

“What’re you smiling like that for?” I asked her.

“It’s just nice, seeing you like this.”

A rush of warmth hit my belly right then, and not just because of the wine mulling inside it.

“I suppose only one thing’s left – I need to flip the sign from closed to open. Not tonight, though. I’m beat.”

“I was hoping you might also be hungry,” said Ophelia. “How about we go to the King’s Head? My treat.”

“That sounds gr...actually, do you think we could go to the Sunny Café? Spruce keeps it open late.”

“No of course not. Are you bored of the tavern?”

“Not exactly. It’s just that Master Cooper will be there. Maybe Chris, Paisley, some of the others. It might be nice if you and I have a meal together. You know, just us.”

“That sounds great.”

Everyone knows that the plans made last thing at night always sound good. *I'll go for a run in the morning. I'll reorganize my wardrobe tomorrow. I'll start that new diet and eat better at the crack of dawn, I promise.* But then when the day breaks and the reality of your promise to yourself hits, everything in your head seems to have changed. It's like someone removed your brain during the night and replaced it with an imposter, one who doesn't have any intention of following through on the promise you made to yourself.

So it was with me that morning, when I found myself back on Coiner's way, standing on the step of my painted, decorated, fully-stocked store. I paused, holding the open/close sign in my hand. I wanted to turn it to read open, but I found that I couldn't. My fingers refused to work, my brain tried all kinds of tricks to stop me from doing so. It was devious. Really devious. *Just spend one more day getting everything perfect,* it said.

I almost listened to it.

"Oh, for the gods' sakes," said a voice. "Just get it over with already."

It was Paisley, ready to do battle with the day armed with a box of sweet rolls and two cups of coffee from the Rolls and Dough bakery.

Indecision gripped me just that little bit tighter, as though making one last effort to erode my will. But then, with a simple act of defiance, I flipped the sign and then released my grasp.

"There. I guess Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown is open for business," I said.

Paisley hooked her arm in mine and said, "I'm proud of you, Lewis. You did it. Slowly, yes, but you did it. Oh, I forgot! Do you mind taking a look at the window in my store room? The shop's getting awfully chilly. I think the glass might be loose. Is that a thing?"

"You want me to take a look right now?"

“Please... you know you’ll give in, Lewis. Might as well save time by just agreeing right now.”

I quickly headed into Paisley’s store, where I was greeted by a scent that Janey Morgan had brewed for her. It was, in all its essence, the smell of winter. Of pinecones on a forest floor, the gentle puff of woodsmoke, a pinch of cinnamon mixed with rich coffee. The aroma came in the form of a tincture that Paisley had to spread on a special hollow stick and then leave near – but not directly on – a burning wood stove.

“The tincture should last you a whole year,” Janey had told Paisley.

“Thanks, Mrs. Morgan. But a little tip, from one merchant to another; you should make your products wear out a little sooner so that people have to buy more of them. Not so soon that they feel conned, but enough that they spend gold more than once a year.”

Janey, who always took Paisley’s advice very seriously, had scribbled this down in the alchemist’s notepad I’d made for her, and then thanked Paisley for the tip.

Most of the stores on Coiner’s Way were laid out the same, and Paisley’s back room was accessed via a long hallway, just as it was in my store. But while mine was a workshop, hers was just a place where she kept her unsold stock. There were boxes and boxes of it, all of it locally made goods. I had to walk carefully to avoid tripping, there was so much stuff. Her practice was to rotate what she kept on her shelves so that folks never knew what to expect from her store.

“Something about unpredictability really speaks to us,” she’d told me. “We crave it. Folks never know what’s going to be on my shelves, so they come in every week. Every few days, in some cases. Whereas if I always sold the exact same things, they’d have no reason to visit unless they knew that they needed something in particular.”

The window pane in the back room looked out onto the alleyway behind Coiner’s Way, just as my workshop window did. There didn’t appear to be a draft coming from it, however.

Wondering if perhaps Paisley meant a different window, I checked all of the ones in her store. There wasn't a problem with any. In fact, there was no chill at all.

When I left her store, stepped onto Coiner's Way, and turned to face my own shop, I found myself stopping midstep. Hanging on my store front, draped across the top of the display window, was a white banner with red writing, which read 'Grand Opening – Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown.' Tied to any possible fixings on the window and door were multicolored balloons that gently twisted this way and that in the breeze.

Standing next to the door was Chris. I hadn't even known that he had a day of leave from work today, so that was surprising enough. Even more surprising was when he opened his mouth and – in his loudest town crier voice – declared to the whole of Sunhampton, "Hear ye! Hear ye! Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown is now open to the public! Step inside today to sample the wondrous wares, fantastical things, inspired items!"

To the side of Chris was Phil Brownhill. He had an accordion slung around his neck, which he promptly began playing. The instrument was a new addition to his life, having picked up a desire to learn it after his week on the merchant ship. The song he played was an upbeat one, if not slightly out of tune in places. Even without any words to accompany it, the accordion seemed to sing about rum and cards, the sun beating down on the deck of a ship, of sailors conquering the seas.

"Come on, Jester," said Paisley. "Dance! You're supposed to dance when someone plays an accordion, everyone knows that."

My friend Jester was dressed for work in smartly pressed trousers, a shirt, a tie, and a dashing black coat. In his left hand was the briefcase in which he kept his ledgers, and in his right hand he had a bunch of balloons on string, holding them gingerly like they were rats he'd been asked to grab by their tails.

"You don't have to dance," I told him.

He sighed in relief. “Thank you. I haven’t danced in years, and I don’t intend to start now.”

For a moment, I just stood there and took in the scene of the banner, the balloons, of Phil playing the accordion and Paisley dancing to it. Of Chris, dressed in his town crier uniform. There are times in life that you just know straight off are going to be memories that you savor for decades, that you recall repeatedly over the years and enjoy just as strongly each time.

“You didn’t have to do all of this,” I said, approaching Chris but intending my thanks to extend to everyone.

“I used my actual town crier abilities just now,” he told me. “I wasn’t just saying words. The effect should hover in the air for a few hours or so. Anyone who steps onto Coiner’s Way will be drawn towards your store.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“No problem. Oh - I think you have your first customer.”

An hour later, I had just sold my fifth item – a bundle of sleep-inducing bed sheets to Mary Chester. She had just taken a new job working nights at Rolls and Dough, where her task was to prepare all kinds of doughs and sweet jams and sauces for Mrs. Grant to bake first thing in the morning. Her body – or maybe her mind – was struggling to adjust to having to sleep during the day, so the bedsheets were just what she needed.

“Come back in a few days,” I told her, “And I’ll have a special set of artificed ever-night curtains. That ought to help.”

“Will do, luvvie. Cheerio!”

After making my fifth sale, I took a moment to just enjoy it, to feel gratitude that someone had visited my store and spent their hard-earned gold on something I had made.

Paisley was right about deciding what to sell, I told myself. She’s always right, damn it.

It was then, standing behind my sales counter in my now-open shop, that I realized something: I hadn't checked my token bracelet in a while. I had, after all, spent a few days using my skills, and I must have earned some experience.

I didn't expect much since none of the things I had done had been particularly taxing. The amount of experience you earned on your skill trees depended on a few things; your current skill level, the difficulty of the project, and the need for the project itself. Most of the things I had made for the shop were quite easy, relative to my skill level. I mean, I couldn't have made some of them a year ago, true. But now? My artificery had grown a little beyond store inventories.

Still, I supposed I should check all the same. When I did, I got a shock.

Craft ability leveled from 15 to 17

[Intermediate Craft and Forge skill tree]

Repair ability leveled from 3 to 6

[Intermediate Craft and Forge skill tree]

Upgrade ability leveled from 13 to 16

[Intermediate Craft and Forge skill tree]

Enchant ability leveled from 14 to 18

[Intermediate Enchantment skill tree]

Upgrade Enchantment leveled from 7 to 10

[Intermediate Enchantment skill tree]

Tinker ability leveled from 20 to 22

[Intermediate Tinkering skill tree]

Create Tincture ability leveled from 14 to 15

[Intermediate Alchemy skill tree]

Chapter 9

It was a couple of days before I could find time alone with Master Cooper to ask him about my recent level ups. What with me working at the store during the day, Master Cooper toiling away in his workshop, and the pair of us having different plans in the evening, it seemed that all we saw of each other were almost ghostly reminders of our presence. The toast crumbs that Master Cooper left on the block of butter, since he always refused to wipe down his knife. The books I left scattered around here and there around the house, which always set him off grumbling about clutter. Despite the fact that, until quite recently, three of his upstairs rooms had been filled floor to ceiling with junk, old projects, and things that he had never intended to use ever again.

One lunchtime, I regretfully declined Paisley's offer to get us sandwiches from the Sunny Café and instead headed to the craftstead, where I caught Cooper in his workshop just as he was about to have something to eat. He'd made himself an Artificer's Special, a sandwich which he held as the peak of snacking yet I didn't find to be all that special at all.

"Here he is!" beamed Master Cooper. "How are you doing, lad? Not often I see you here, these days."

I got a brief moment of nostalgia standing there in the workshop with Master Cooper. It reminded me of my apprenticeship, of pleasant days spent here amidst the tools, the oil, the miodes. The early days when everything about artificery was a mystery, every afternoon a journey into something new. Then the middling times, when I felt myself start to actually understand my craft. Standing there and breathing in that familiar smell of oil, timber, and miodes, I remembered days of instruction, of lectures, of failed crafts, and hard-earned successes. Those were happy times.

"I wanted to ask you something," I said.

"So the adept artificer still needs his master's wisdom from time to time, does he?"

“I do,” I said.

“Well sit your bum down. Actually, make yourself a coffee first – you look like you could do with warming up. You may as well make me one while you’re there.”

When we each had a mug of warm coffee set before us, I asked Cooper about what had been on my mind for the last couple of days.

“I worked hard over the last week or so, but nothing I’ve done has been particularly taxing. The artificery was definitely nothing special. I don’t understand how I leveled up so much.”

“Nothing special? Need I remind you that you’re representing Cooper and Cooper while you’re down on Coiner’s Way?”

“You know what I mean, Master Cooper. They aren’t difficult projects. The level ups I got from them are completely out of line with what I actually did.”

“Did you level up any of your skill trees?”

I shook my head. “Not even close. It’s going to take a long, long time to level any of them from Intermediate. Still, I made more progress than I should have when you consider the actual work.”

“When you find a gold ring on the ground, it’s best to put it straight into your pocket rather than looking around and asking where it came from.”

“Shouldn’t we take things like that to Connor Perry at the post office so he can put it in the lost and found box?”

“Fine, a gold coin then. Or a silver, if you’re such a saint that you’d even hand in a gold coin to Connor.”

I took a sip of coffee. The taste of Cooper’s coffee, once so familiar to me, now seemed strange. I supposed I had just gotten used to the kind I drank in my store, which Paisley had sold me. Cooper’s preferred brand was now a little too bitter for my liking, though not unpleasant.

“It’s not that I’m not grateful. But if I can level up so much just from creating standard items, then I’d like to know why. I tried replicating it. I made a bunch of telescopes that collapse small enough to fit in a knapsack, and book covers that glow at nighttime and light the page. But they barely moved my experience levels at all.”

“Let me see your bracelet,” said Cooper.

I lifted up my left arm, unbuttoned the cuff of my shirt, and pushed it up my forearm, revealing my token bracelet with the tokens set inside it.

“May I?” said Cooper.

Such manners were rare for Master Cooper, but even he was wary of the ‘token taboo’. This was the feeling, idea, whatever you wanted to call it, that it was a gross breach of etiquette for one crafter to mess around with another’s token bracelet without asking. It might have been silly to someone who didn’t practice a craft or profession that required wearing such a bracelet, but these things were more than just jewelry to us. They were physical symbols of our passion, of years or decades of hard work, of all our successes and our failures. These bracelets were, in some ways, our very inner selves forged into metal.

Cooper inspected my bracelet, gently turning my arm this way and that to get a good look, tapping it in places, then leaning close and peering at the tokens set inside.

“Doesn’t seem any different than it should,” he said.

“You think a fault in the bracelet might have given me more experience than I should have gotten?”

“Token bracelets don’t give you experience, Lewis. Using your craft does. The bracelets just represent it via token text. I was wondering if the bracelet might have a problem that caused it to tell you the wrong thing.”

“But it seems okay?” I asked.

“As far as I can see, though I’m not a token maker. I’d suggest consulting an expert, but I think that might be a waste of time. Sorry, Lewis. I don’t know what’s happened there.”

It was strange to hear Master Cooper admit he didn't know something. It felt like the first time I had heard someone call my mother by her first name and discovered that not everyone in the world knew her as 'mum'. The very act of Cooper declaring a lack of knowledge about something was wrong, it was like waking up and seeing two suns in the sky.

I didn't have time to visit the Sunhampton library and research the problem – though 'problem' was perhaps the wrong way to think of it, since more experience was a good thing. Instead, I wrote a letter to someone who I was sure would have an answer.

Dear James,

Hope everything is going well at the guild and you're not spending too much time in the Port Vesta taverns. The reason I'm writing is that something weird happened recently, and I was hoping you might be able to explain it...

After finishing the letter, I put it in an envelope and then sealed it using a special wax seal that Jace Porter had given me for my birthday. Most people used envelopes that they sealed with saliva these days, but Jace believed strongly that anyone who took themselves seriously at all ought to have a personalized wax seal. It was a bit fancy for me, but since it was a gift, I decided I would use it. Besides, I imagined that my friend James Trafford might laugh when he saw such an important-looking letter only to discover that it came from me.

After dropping the letter off with Connor Perry at the post office, I paused at the doorway just before leaving.

"Connor," I said, "If I was to find a gold coin on the floor, should I hand it in to you?"

"Well, yes. Technically."

"A silver coin?"

"Again, I suppose technically you should."

“What about a copper coin? Or a button?”

“Can I ask what you’re getting at, Lewis?” said Connor.

“Oh, nothing. Just wondering about something.”

“Rules are rules, but rules also only get stronger if you test them. The way I look at it is this; if you find something on the ground that you think someone might miss, then bring it here. Anything else, I would suggest that you do whatever you like with it.”

With the letter sent, I put the whole experience question to the back of my mind and got on with my work. I had fitted a bell at the store door to alert me when any customers entered, and this meant that I could spend my time in the workshop at the back, safe in the knowledge I wouldn’t miss any potential sales.

The rest of the week rushed by like a bolt from a dueling mage’s wand. I just had so much to do, and I still had no way of slowing down time in order to do it all. Being a mere mortal, I used my time as best as I could, utilizing my new strategy of working on projects one by one, rather than spreading myself thinner than the measly dollop of honey that Phil Brownhill always smeared on his sandwiches.

For the next two days, I worked on an artificed solution to stop the Tillwrights’ chickens from being eaten by foxes. I thought of a few ways that ought to do it, ranging from tinkering solutions to artificeric ones. From the simple to the extravagant. Finally, I settled on employing alchemy.

“Making the henhouse stronger was the simplest way of doing it,” I told Samantha Tillwright when I visited their farmhouse. “But it wouldn’t keep the foxes away. All it’d do is encourage them to keep trying to find a way in. And you know what they say about foxes. So, then I looked at making an artificed alarm system that goes off when a fox gets near, but that wasn’t a great solution. It’d just keep you guys all awake at night. And I know how hard you work. You need your sleep.”

“Here you go,” said Samantha, handing me a small plate with a bacon sandwich on it. The bacon was cooked to utter perfection, crispy on the outer edges but without becoming too brittle. Butter from the bread melted on it.

“Thanks,” I said, and immediately took a huge bite.

“So what did you decide?”

“This,” I said, handing her a small tincture tin. Samantha unscrewed the lid carefully, as though there might be an explosive tinkered bomb inside. Removing the lid revealed a brown, unappealing paste which immediately let out a stench that threatened to fill the kitchen.

“Oh my lords!” she yelled, screwing the lid back on.

I laughed. “It’s a scent-based deterrent. No fox in their right mind will come near the hen house if you spread a little bit of this on the outer walls at night.”

“Lords, Lewis. This stuff is toxic. I’m having enough trouble making friends in town as it is. If I get some of this on me, people will be walking miles just to avoid me.”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t cling to skin, clothing, or anything else. I designed it that way. You could spill it on yourself, and it’ll clean right up with no trace.”

“You could have just told me how bad it smelled, rather than treating me to a practical demonstration.”

“Sometimes smelling is believing.”

“And this will really work?” she said.

“It ought to. Any problems, come back to me. Our town store is open now, so you don’t have to walk all the way up to the craftstead.”

“Thanks, Lewis. It’s a weight off my mind. Off Alister’s, too. He’s really been fretting about the chickens.”

“Your finances are still precarious?” I said, thinking of Alister Tillwright and his banking past, and how the realities of running a farm that broke even, let alone made a profit, had

really stressed him out. A few stolen chickens might not seem like much but it would really make a dent in their finances.

“It’s not that. Alister’s really worried about the chicks. He’s named them all, you know.”

“Won’t that make it harder when...you know...”

“It’s a lesson in farming life that he needs to learn, I think. Wait there a minute, and I’ll go fetch your money.”

I left the Tillwright’s farm with a belly warmed by not just one but two bacon sandwiches – the second one coming with fried mushrooms – payment for the fox deterrent scent, and the happy feeling that came from a satisfied customer and a job well done.

I arrived back on Coiner’s Way at lunchtime. Though I wasn’t hungry, I headed to the Sunny Café and bought a cup of coffee. Rather than take it to my store like I usually did, I instead sat at a table near the window, where I had a full view of the street outside.

Opening my crafter’s notepad, I took great satisfaction in flicking to my project list and crossing off the Tillwright’s chicken job. This only meant drawing a line through its place on the list, but there was just something so gratifying about that line. If I was to ever write a list of everyday things to savor, crossing an item off a to-do list would be near the top.

Sipping my coffee and looking through the window, I focused my attention on one part of Coiner’s Way. Specifically, one store. But watch as I might, nothing happened.

What’s she doing? I thought to myself. *She always goes out at lunchtime.*

I began to think that maybe I had chosen the one lunchtime of the year when my friend would vary her routine. But then, without warning, it happened. Across Coiner’s Way, the door of Paisley’s store opened, and my friend stepped out. Bundled up in her coat, she locked the door behind her and then headed north, which meant she was either going to the

Brews and Butties café or maybe even visiting Jester at his cottage. He was working there temporarily since the stove in his Coiner's Way office had broken, and it was simply too cold to work in there.

"I'll come and fix it for you," I'd told him.

"No, no, no," Jester answered, much sterner than I expected.

"Oh. Alright."

"No, I don't mean that rudely, Lewis. But I pay rent – a hefty amount of it – and fixing things like this is the landlord's responsibility."

"So you're going to work from your cottage out of spite?"

"Out of principle," answered Jester.

Wherever Paisley was going, all that mattered was that she had left her store. I finished my cup of coffee, gave a hurried thanks to Spruce Wilkinson – who was too wrapped up in cooking to hear me – and left the café. One stop at the Rolls and Dough bakery later, and I was hurrying across Coiner's Way.

I unlocked the door of Paisley's store and stepped inside, once again enjoying the winter smell pervading the air. Tiptoeing like a burglar, I headed to the backroom of the store where, amongst all the boxes of stock, Paisley also kept a small refreshment area. There, I located the cool box I had gifted her and put a smaller box inside it. Contained in the box were half a dozen glazed doughnuts with jam inside.

That'll show her for sneaking apple-cinnamon twists into my workshop, I thought to myself, holding in the desire to cackle at my own deviousness. If she thinks she can be kind to me and get away with it, she's got another thing coming.

I spent the rest of the afternoon working on my next project – the seed transportation system. That would be my focus now, and I would work on it until it was done. That was

my new way of working, and it was working well. My mind felt a little sharper, a little tighter, moving like freshly-greased tinkerer cogs. Sure, I was bound to have customers enter my shop and ask for some custom artificery projects from time to time, but as long as I under-promised, over-delivered, and stuck to one project at a time, I wouldn't feel overwhelmed.

Scribbling in my crafter's notepad, I came up with one design after another, always working with Reuben Bates's requirements and Hattie Greave's advice in mind. Then, after reviewing my designs, I would marry one or two of them together. Take ideas from one and add them to another.

Soon, I had, on paper, what I hoped would be an almost foolproof way of transporting the vitae-panacea seeds from the tomb in the Port Estereld cliffs and across Easterly.

My store bell rang. A little bubble of excitement rose in my stomach. I still hadn't gotten used to the idea of actual customers entering my store yet. I was beginning to see now what Paisley loved about being a merchant so much, even if my similarity with her – in regard to the mercantile craft – ended there. She would always be better at selling things than I was.

It was a coincidence that I was thinking about Paisley as I left my workshop, because there she was, standing in my store. She held a box in her hand.

“What do you call this, Lewis? Doughnuts? You sneaked into my store and left me some doughnuts? We're going to have words, you and I.”

Chapter 10

That Saturday, I allowed myself to sleep in a little later in the morning. This was supposed to be a treat to myself, but it didn't really work out that way. My brain woke me up at the usual time, and even though I told it that I didn't need to open the store today, it refused to let me get back to sleep. Instead, I headed downstairs and into the kitchen, made myself a coffee, and took it back to my room. Bundled under my covers with coffee on my bedside table and the Necromancer's Butler book open on my lap, I spent the next hour of the morning in comfort.

When I finally got up, washed and dressed in my lazy weekend clothes, and went downstairs, I found the craftstead empty. Chris and Paisley had gone to Stow for a day of shopping, while Cooper and Janey had gone for a walk.

Waiting on the kitchen table was a letter addressed to me. The wax seal on it was overly extravagant, and it looked like it could only have come from the study of some grand duke or duchess.

Opening it, I let out a laugh as I read the letter inside.

Dearest Lewis,

You're not the only one with a personal seal, you know. It doesn't make you important or anything. But I digress. Your little leveling-up query was very intriguing, I have to admit. On the face of it, it really does seem like you earned more experience for your work than you should have.

I would ask you to think about the events that led up to it, before you even started working on your artificed odds and ends. Was anything different? Perhaps in the way you worked, or even in your own mind. Sometimes, we crafters can learn vital insights about ourselves and the way we work, and these

little nuggets can give a temporary experience boost to our efforts.

Look inward, my young artificer friend. That's my advice to you. There must have been something different about how you approached your craft.

On another note, you should come to Port Vesta soon. We haven't caught up since Yulthor, have we, and my work means I can't really take a trip to Sunhampton any time soon.

With the warmest regards,

Your friend,

James Trafford (official guild instructor, don't you know?)

This was yet another of those everyday things to treasure. A letter from a friend. Something so simple that must have taken at most an hour to write, and maybe a few gold coins to post. Yet it was worth much more than that to me. I resolved that I would start writing to people more often.

Folding the letter and putting it back inside the envelope, I thought about what James had told me. It was quite easy to realize what he meant. I had had an insight lately, after all. An important one about the way I worked. That must have been why I had earned more experience than I expected. What other insights were out there, I wondered? How much of my craft and my progress in it lay not in the actual making of things, but in considering how I made them, and how I thought about the very act?

On Sunday, Phil Brownhill arrived at the craftstead while Cooper, Janey, Chris, and I were eating breakfast. We each took it in turns to cook an extravagant breakfast on Sundays. It was a little treat that we all looked forward to, where we'd spend a lazy hour or two sitting around the kitchen

table, eating delicious food and talking about something and nothings. Today it was Chris's turn, and he'd made a cooked breakfast of bacon, sausages, fried eggs, mushrooms, and a generous tower of buttered toast.

A knock on the craftstead door heralded the appearance of Phil, who burst into the kitchen like a big bundle of pure energy.

"Get dressed and get ready to go!" he commanded us all.

"We are dressed, Phil," I said. "But I definitely hadn't planned on leaving the house today. What's up?"

"Up? Nothing. Except that I've booked us all a treat. I'm going to fetch Paisley and Jester. Maybe Sara-Rose, too. Meet me by the King's Head in an hour. Don't be late, or I'll sail without you!"

And just like that, he was gone. Master Cooper and I looked at each other, confused.

"Did he say 'sail without us' or am I going deaf in my old age?" asked Cooper.

Phil wasn't just using the sailing parlance that had recently become part of his everyday language. He had, in fact, hired a sailing barge for the day. Moored at a small dock on the Rumber River ten miles northeast of Sunhampton, the long, narrow vessel had an engine on the back that was fueled by some kind of alchemical powder – which fascinated Janey more than the boat itself – and a huge wooden wheel on the front. Inside, it came replete with a kitchen area, two long, comfortable couches, and lots of little oval windows that allowed a view of the landscape on either side of the river.

The group of us spent a calming afternoon sailing the river. Though we spent plenty of time in the open air on the front of the barge, we also enjoyed the warm comforts of its interior, each of us content to just sit back and enjoy the voyage. Phil, however, refused to come inside for even a moment, enjoying his time at the wheel, wearing a look of

delight on his face that rivaled that of a child gifted a new sled to use in winter.

“Nothing like the sea,” he told me when I took a coffee that Paisley what brewed out to him.

“Isn’t this a river?”

“Sea, river, it’s all water. Nothing between us and the waves but this fine vessel, and nothing but my steering skills to keep us true. Don’t you feel it, Lewis?”

“Feel what?”

“The chill in the air that wakes up the mind like birdsong. The parting of the water as we sail along. There’s nothing like it. I might get a boat of my own, someday. Hey! Perhaps you could even build it for me, me matey. Do you think you could do that? Could you build a boat?”

“Almost certainly not.”

“Come on, now. That’s not the attitude of a crafter, is it?”

“It’s the attitude of one who knows his limitations,” I said. “I made a cart for Cooper and Janey. I think that’s the limit of my abilities right now.”

Besides which, agreeing to build an entire boat would almost certainly have gone against my new way of working. I had projects to complete and commitments to fulfill. As such, I spent the rest of the next week working on the seed transportation system for Reuben Bates.

Armed with the designs I’d scribbled in my notepad, a bunch of materials and miodes I’d taken from the stores at the craftstead, and a copious supply of coffee and sweet rolls, I got to work. Hammering, crafting, planing, tinkering, my tools providing the notes to my workshop song. I soon got lost in the flow of it. Conscious thoughts ebbed away, time lost its grip on me as I enjoyed the crafter’s dance. I might not have been much of a dancer in the usual way, but this was one waltz that I was adept at.

Soon, I had completed my first prototype of the system. When I was done, I removed my artificer's goggles from my head, wiped the sweat from my brow, and regarded my creation.

It was about the size of one of James Trafford's luggage boxes in which he stored his ridiculously large collection of fashionable clothes, or perhaps one of the chests that no doubt resided in Phil Brownhill's dreams of sailing the seas and finding treasure. Both the outside and inside gleamed from the miodes I had enchanted into it, giving off the unmistakable aura of artificery.

"I suppose it's time to test it," I said, noting the trace of uncertainty in my own voice.

Chapter 11

There were several conditions that the seed transportation device had to meet, and this meant a little ingenuity was needed in how I tested my design. Leaving the store with the device tucked under my arm, I set it down by my feet for a moment. After locking the store door, I stuck a little note to the door. *Gone for an hour or two*, it read. Thinking this seemed frivolous, I hastily added, *Out on official artificer business*.

I didn't like closing the store during business hours, but Cooper and I had agreed that my work would sometimes make that unavoidable. The nature of artificery meant that I might have to visit houses, businesses, or go on errands to find materials and the like.

Discussing the possibility that I would have to do so from time to time, we'd decided – with her enthusiastic agreement – that Flo would look after the store on such occasions. Today, however, Flo had booked leave for a self-care day where she planned to have a leisurely breakfast, take a long bath, and then spend an afternoon throwing hand axes at targets at the old fort-turned-recreational-centre near Stow. That meant she couldn't take over shop duties today.

Can't be helped, I told myself. *This is an important project and it'll earn us a hefty commission. Besides, I'm a working artificer. I can't stay in the store all the time. It's not like we ever get emergencies of the artificeric kind. People can wait an hour or two for their self-sweeping brooms.*

Whenever I was arguing with myself in my head and trying to rationalize something, it was almost always because I was feeling conflicted. I guessed I just felt bad closing the store, even for an hour or two, after delaying for so long in getting it open.

“Morning, Lewis.”

I turned away from the door to see Jester standing there. He was wearing a thick winter coat that was a size or two too

big for him. He'd found it a few months ago amongst the last of his uncle's old things in the cottage, and the realities of Sunhampton's winter meant it was one of the things he refused to sell or give away, despite his recent love of minimalism and his desire to 'remove anything that I don't actively need or want' from his home.

"Hey, Jester. How's the accountancy game?"

"I'm at a loose end, actually," he said. "Mr Bullbrooke's finally got someone in to fix the stove, and I'm up to date on all my work. I actually find myself with a free day. I don't quite know what to do with it."

"Really? That's...interesting."

"You said that in a very suspicious way."

"It's just, here you are with free time that you don't know how to spend. And I was feeling guilty about having to shut the store..."

"Oh."

"I mean, you don't *have* to watch the store. But I'd pay you fair and square," I said.

"I couldn't take gold from a friend," replied Jester.

"Then I'll buy you dinner at the King's Head."

"Hmm."

"You don't have to," I said. "No pressure."

"It's just...I'm not a people-person, Lewis. I'm no good at standing behind a counter and making small talk with customers. You know, smiling and asking about their day and making observations about the weather. They can see the weather for themselves – they don't need me to tell them about it. I just get self-conscious when I try. It even feels like I smile wrong."

"That you smile wrong?"

"You know. Like my face looks strange."

“Jester, you’re about as friendly as a person can be. Look how you’ve settled into the town! Everyone likes you.”

“Not Mr. Bullbrooke,” he said.

“Well, he’s your landlord. I thought it’s sort of in the contract that landlords don’t like their tenants. Anyhow, it’s okay, honestly. I just thought it might solve your loose-end dilemma.”

Jester nodded at the seed transportation device on the ground, next to my feet. “What’s that?”

“It’s an alchemical engine,” I said. “Very dangerous when it isn’t installed in a barge. Very precarious. I shouldn’t really leave it lying around, not with all the dangerous alchemical liquids inside, but hey-ho. I can’t be careful all the time.”

“What?” he said, alarmed, and took a step back.

“Sorry! That was a joke. A bad joke.”

“Ah. A Lewis special.” Seeing my confused look, he added, “That’s what we call bad jokes. You know, the gang. When someone makes a joke that falls flat, we call it a Lewis Special.”

“Well, that ruins my dreams of becoming a comedian. This is a seed transportation system, Jester. I mentioned the vitae-panacea stuff to you, didn’t I?”

“Ah. Yes. So it’s ready?”

“Almost. Now comes the fun part; I need to test it. Since you’re at a loose end, why don’t you join me?”

Testing a finished artificer product mostly depends on what the item is supposed to do. If it’s a self-sweeping broom, I would set it to sweep for an hour. A window of changing landscape? Just command it to show me several different views from beyond its panes and then sit back with a cup of tea and a sweet roll.

Reuben Bates's system had various requirements, which meant various means of testing it. The first of these needs took us out of Coiner's Way and all the way up to the top of the craftstead, where Jester and I stood at the summit and looked down the steep, sloping hill.

"Is this definitely the way to do it?" asked Jester.

"The system needs to be completely damage-proof. The last thing we want is it falling off a cart or something, breaking, and the seeds being exposed to the outside air."

"And this is the way to test it?"

"The damage I'm about to inflict on this thing is a hundred times harsher than anything likely to happen while it's on the road. If it survives this, it'll survive anything else. Would you like to do the honors?"

"Me?" said Jester. "No, I couldn't possibly."

"I suppose the fun's all mine, then."

I picked up the seed box, lifted it over my head, said a prayer to the gods of artificery, and then threw it as hard as I could. The box sailed out of my hands and then down the hill, finally losing flight and hitting the ground about halfway down, just after the turn-off that led toward the Porter manor. It bounced its way down the slope, hitting the ground at this angle and then that, sometimes smashing straight into one of the many rocks that were entrenched in the soil and then spinning higher into the air, before crashing to the ground again.

Jester winced and made 'ooh' and 'ah' sounds like he was watching someone get unhorsed at a jousting tournament. I watched the box's journey impassively, arms folded and trying my best to wear my 'serious artificer' face until it came to rest at the bottom of the hill.

My nerves were a jungle in my stomach, but I wasn't going to show it.

"Interesting," I said. "Stay right there and I'll see how it fared."

A growl came from behind us. Turning round toward the craftstead workshop behind us, I saw half a dozen huge beasts walking across the yard, heads slunk low, tails taut with tension. Sharp teeth protruded from saliva-covered lips. Jester backed towards me a little.

I laughed. "How many times have you been here? You know they're only playing."

Jester eyed the wolfhounds, who had now abandoned their fake-aggressive stances and were walking lazily towards us, eyes bright with friendliness, tails swishing side to side.

"I really wish they wouldn't do that," he said.

"They like pretending because they know you'll always react. They don't do it to Paisley, do they? It's like when a kid goads you. You need to ignore them. Don't show weakness."

"Ah. So that's what I should do when the children all line up on Coiner's Way and pull faces at me outside my office window."

"Sure. Just ignore them. What were you doing instead?"

"I complained to Mr. Leabrook. He's in charge of Coiner's Way and Sunhampton Market, and the transgressions happened on his grounds. People have to be reminded to do their jobs, Lewis."

"You haven't been meditating lately, have you?" I said. "You seem all tense again. You're letting stuff get to you."

"I suppose I have let the habit slip a little."

The wolfhounds lined up in front of Jester, behaving politely now that they'd had their fun. Jester tentatively stepped toward them and stroked the first wolfhound in the line-up, before moving on to the next.

"Won't be long," I said.

Walking down the hill, I found myself turning a jumble of thoughts over in my head. Hopes, worries, anxieties. The problem was that the seed transportation device had many requirements, yet as an adept artificer, I could only work with

three mode types on any one item. This meant that I couldn't use artificery to satisfy all the device's requirements.

After pondering my many ideas and designs, I had decided that the damage proof requirement was easier to solve by non-artificeric means than some of the other ones. So, I had used a special, flexible resin casing to form the actual device, and then employed my Intermediate Alchemy abilities to make a paste that added a toughening layer. Over this layer I had spread yet another paste which would add insulation and waterproofing.

Reaching the device at the base of the hill, I kneeled down and nervously picked it up. Relief swept through me when I saw no cracks, no breaks. Not even a scuff or a scratch.

Then I turned it over, and my breath caught cold in my chest. There, staring back at me, was a crack. A crack that ran through the underside of the device like a sinister leer, mocking my efforts and advising me not to try again.

The problem, I had decided, was that I had made the resin badly. This was just a result of my alchemy skill tree only being intermediate; the laws of crafting success meant that no crafter could make something perfectly every time, and your odds of a perfect result went down when lower-end skills came up against higher-end challenges.

My solution to this was to do things the slower, manual way, which often increased the chances of success in a project. To make the resin itself and then form it into the device shape by hand, rather than just commanding my alchemy and craft abilities to do everything. I stripped my methods way back to their essentials, even to the point where I went to Hattie Greave's garden and spent three hours very carefully foraging for the plants that I would make the second resin out of, ignoring any leaves that betrayed even the slightest imperfection.

Back in my workshop I labored slowly, entrenched deep in crafter's flow as I made the resin and then the casing, then used Alchemy to form the various pastes that would bolster its

defenses. This time, when I had finished the box itself, I didn't add any miodes. Until I knew that it was damage-proof, it was simply a waste of time enchanting it.

It was a strangely calm yet deathly chilly afternoon when I assessed my second device. The hill that led to the craftstead was so frozen that it was treacherous to climb, and this meant the only safe way of going up or down was the artificed cart I had made last year. Given this limitation, I had to wait in a queue to use the cart since Callum Reid, a glass supplier who lived in Tarrin, had traveled to Sunhampton to visit Master Cooper. He had a box filled with glass samples with him, so we couldn't share the cart.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "What is your box made out of? What stops the glass from smashing?"

Callum shrugged. "I just line it with blankets on the inside, and do the same for every individual sheet of glass."

If only it was so simple for me, I thought.

Finally, my turn to use the cart came. By that time Connor Perry had arrived at the base of the hill, and he asked me if I'd mind taking Cooper's and Janey's mail up with me on the cart. I said it wasn't a problem.

Up on the summit of the hill, after saying a quick hello to Master Cooper in the workshop, I once again raised the seed transportation device above my head, tensed my muscles, and then threw it. I stood there watching it with twin feelings of hope and regret as it sailed away from me and through the air, potentially to its doom.

The second device withstood two throws down the hill without a single scratch, which was enough for me to trust that it could easily take the kind of mishaps that might happen on a cart ride from Port Eserald to Reuben's herbatorium. Besides, there was no question that the herb enthusiast would guard the box like Toby guarding the secret bottle of sherry he always kept in his traveling wagon. An accident was very, very unlikely in the first place.

Next, however, I had to enchant miodes into the box to meet the other requirements, and then test them. The placing of the miodes was intricate work, in part because I was feeling strangely anxious to do a good job. This anxiety, in turn, meant that I couldn't work as effectively as I would have liked. I lacked precision, I toiled with a little less confidence. It was stupid, really. My brain was making me anxious because it wanted to do a good job enchanting the miodes, yet the very anxiety it had created about it was hampering my performance.

Not wanting to close the store, I spent the rest of the afternoon behind the sales counter, doing my best to think about anything except the seed transportation device. I needed to clear my head, I decided. To give it a rest.

So, while I stood there and waited for customers, I took out the completed model ship kit that Phil had gifted me, and I disassembled it. After scattering the pieces on the counter and then purposefully moving them around to mix them up, I rebuilt the model from scratch. It was a little easier the second time around, yet the challenge was just enough for my brain to focus on it. Just the ship, and nothing else.

Then, when closing time arrived, I made sure the stove was cool, turned off all the lamps, and locked the store. Paisley and I chatted on my store doorstep for a while and then said goodbye. I headed across Coiner's Way and then Yellow Leaf Avenue, where I soon arrived at Jester's cottage.

What in the world?

For a second, I wondered if I had the wrong place. Where once a homely, traditional cottage had stood, there was now some kind of haunted house. Skeletons littered the garden, cobwebs covered most of the cottage's brickwork. Lamps hung from the doorway and flickered, and pale faces stared out from the window of the upstairs bedroom.

When Jester answered the door and invited me inside, I found his living room covered in bedsheets painted to look like ghosts and fake skeletons yet to be placed outside.

"I thought you hated Scamp's Eve?" I said.

Jester settled into the armchair across from me and crossed one leg over the other. “I was thinking about what you said about the wolfhounds, and about the children who keep pulling faces at me. I’ve been so worried about Scamp’s Eve, you know.”

“What about it?”

“The whole prankster part. I was worried about what kind of tricks the children might play on me.”

“That’s why you hate it?”

Jester nodded. “But after our talk, I was working in the office. The stove is functional again, by the way, but I’ll be deducting a portion from my rent, I assure you. Anyway, I was working on some ledgers for Mr. Porter, when the children lined up on the street outside and started making faces at me again.”

I had to fight the urge to laugh. The image of a bunch of kids standing in line outside Jester’s window just to make faces at him was too amusing to me, but I knew that Jester didn’t find it so.

“Did you ignore them?” I said.

“Well, first I almost reached for my blinds to shut them out, but I didn’t. I knew I’d still be aware that they were outside, even if I couldn’t see them. I ignored them for a while, but they just kept doing it, Lewis. Standing there like little gargoyles and making the most hideous expressions. Normally at this point, I would have gone outside and told them off, but I didn’t.”

“What did you do?”

“I started making faces back at them. The worst ones I could imagine. I even started to enjoy it. The children started looking at each other like they didn’t understand, and then they just ran off. I haven’t had a problem since.”

“I’m pleased for you, but how does this tie into your cottage looking like a haunted crypt?”

“I used to love Scamp’s Eve when I was a child, Lewis. And then adulthood came and I became serious, and I told myself I didn’t like frivolous things like that anymore. Well, I’m sick of being an adult, and I’m going to enjoy Scamp’s Eve. Only, now I own a cottage, and I can decorate it however I like. I never got to do that when I was younger. What brings you here, anyway?”

I explained to Jester that I needed a little help in getting outside of my own head, in banishing the thoughts that disturbed my work. In grounding myself, in other words. I had hoped that Jester would lead a meditation. I always enjoyed those. But he had different ideas.

“Wait there,” he told me, leaving the living room.

He returned soon after with two pencils and several sheets of blank paper, handing them to me before settling back down in his chair.

“I want you to draw what it looks like,” he said.

“What?”

“The thing that stops you from working as well as you should. Give it a physical form. It can be whatever you want, whatever you picture it as.”

“I was hoping to meditate for a while.”

“Trust me, Lewis. I read about this in one of Uncle Stan’s books. It’s a very interesting technique.”

Feeling unsure, I nevertheless picked up the pencil and began a rough sketch of something that, deep down in my mind, represented all the myriad of problems I experienced on occasions when I was trying to do my best work. To my surprise, it took the form of a monster, one that I pictured joining me in my workshop, a multi-headed beast that seemed to have nothing better to do than frustrate my work efforts.

When I was done, I put the pencil down and frowned at my result. I was no artist, that was for sure. Though I actually did a lot of drawing when I was scribbling down my ideas for artficed products, my diagrams were always very straightforward, lacking flourish.

Jester leaned forward, examining the creature I had put to paper. “It doesn’t look so fearsome. Make it look like it does when you really feel it breathing down your neck.”

Following his instruction, I added teeth and claws to the monster. I refined the expressions in the eyes on its many heads. I drew its hideous skin, its great jaws lined with teeth.

“Much better!” said Jester. “This is the thing that you imagine when you’re struggling with your work?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“Very interesting. For me, it’s always a stern, older man. A sort of amalgamation of a few of my teachers who weren’t particularly nice to me.”

“Yeah, I don’t know why it’s a monster. It just is.”

“Not for much longer,” said Jester. “Next, I would like you to draw a silly hat on each of the monster’s heads. I want you to change its expression. Cover its scales with a bright shirt or something. Whatever you want, add it. Just make sure to make it as silly as possible. So stupid that there’s no way you could ever take it seriously.”

The next morning, I opened my store as usual. I couldn’t work on enchanting the seed transportation system straight away, because Mrs. Downer visited the shop and asked if I could take a look at her all-spice stewing pot, which was adding different spices than the ones she requested. This wasn’t such a tough job, so I made her a cup of tea and fixed it while she waited.

“Thanks, Lewis. I have my son and daughter-in-law coming round for a roast dinner on Sunday, and I was worried I wouldn’t be able to make my famous casserole.”

“Not a problem, don’t mention it! That’ll be four gold and fifty silvers, please, Mrs. Downer.”

When she was gone, I could finally get to work on enchanting the miodes into the transportation system. This took me all of the morning and a few hours into the afternoon,

accounting for a couple of customers who visited the store, but finally, it was done.

I tested it using a plant that I had taken from Mrs. Greaves's garden. It was a tullywhistle plant, renowned for its extreme sensitivity to temperatures and its varying needs for heat. I placed it inside the transportation system, and then used the levers I had fitted to the outside to adjust the heat and cold levels, as well as the airflow amounts. The device responded as it should, allowing me to tweak the inner conditions as I needed.

As a final flourish, I added an alchemical lock to the device, so that it would only open when touched by a fingertip stained with a unique alchemical solution. This meant that it couldn't be pried open by anyone who didn't have a pot of the formula to hand.

And then, at last, I could do nothing else but admit to myself that it was done. That every requirement had been met, and that the device worked as Reuben wanted.

Checking my token bracelet, I was soon rewarded with token text that told me something very pleasing indeed. The whole challenge of the transportation system had been more than enough to test my abilities and eke out vast quantities of experience. Both my Alchemy and Enchantment skill trees had leveled up to Intermediate level two, putting me just that little bit closer to my coveted journeyman rank.

Chapter 12

The next week went by in perfect ordinariness. I worked in the store by day, and I relaxed at the craftstead or at the King's Head by night. When the weekend rolled around, I spent Saturday visiting Mr. Berry as part of the Grub-and-Gab scheme. He'd ordered a mushroom and leek pot pie from the Sunny Café, so I grabbed the dish from Spruce Wilkinson and then walked out of Coiner's Way and up Turnshot Row, to a middle terrace house that Mr. Berry shared with his three cats, Milly, Sykes, and Bosworth.

We spent a pleasant couple of hours together eating pie and gabbing about this and that. Mr. Berry told me about his working life – now just a memory – spent as a dockworker in Port Vesta, where though the work was hard and sometimes monotonous, he gained great satisfaction from it nonetheless. While I experienced crafter's flow when I worked on my projects, Mr Berry had lived a life of flow of his own, finding an inner peace in the moving of crates from ships to the docks, and then back again. Day after day, box after box. It was work that might have seemed boring to some people, but he'd found it relaxing, he told me.

“What do you do to relax now that you're retired?” I asked him.

“I used to read, lad.”

“Used to?”

“Well, my eyesight isn't what it used to be, more's the pity. I have spectacles, but it still strains my eyes to concentrate for too long.”

“I might have just the thing for you,” I told him. “Give me a couple of days, and I'll bring you something that'll help.”

“I already visited the opticians just last week, lad. My lenses are thicker than jam jars.”

“No, not spectacles, Mr. Berry. I created a device that reads books to you. Don't look so doubtful; give me a day or

so, and I'll be back."

On Sunday, Paisley and Jester joined Cooper, Janey, Chris, and me for one of our famous breakfasts. That morning we had pancakes with a huge variety of jams that Paisley had brought, as well as a few pots of coffee to wash them down with.

After, I headed to the craftstead workshop, where Master Cooper was standing over a workbench with his own crafter's notepad opened before him.

"I think I have an idea for our Scamp's Eve parade monster," I told him. "Let me show you."

It was nice working with Master Cooper again. The last time we had spent so much time artificing things together was when we'd worked on Mrs. Greaves's tinkered gardening system. Before that, Master Cooper and I had often spent many pleasant hours in the workshop together, even if the pleasantness was sometimes marred by Cooper's cantankerous moods. I had missed it, I realized, and a part of me regretted the fact that my advancement in the craft and my running of our store meant that we were slowly moving in different directions.

"We ought to do more projects together," I told him, as we worked on the monster for the parade. "Not ones for customers. Projects for just you and me."

Hours flew by almost too fast for us to even notice them. We shaped metal, tinkered gears, applied alchemical dyes. We worked like a well-greased tinkered machine, my master and I, each of us instinctively knowing our parts in the artificer's dance.

It felt like mere minutes had passed by the time Janey announced that dinner was ready, but finally, Master Cooper and I were done. We had assembled the finished parade monster outside the workshop since it was too big to be built inside. There, standing in the yard, was a monster with five heads, each of them unique in their monstrosity. It could have been a creature of pure evil, had we designed it that way. Instead, we had married its hideousness with levity, with the

silly hats and ridiculous expressions that Jester had asked me to draw on the monster that once stalked my work efforts.

I found myself watching Master Cooper's expression rather than looking at the monster, and I took satisfaction in the grin on his face. Nearby, the wolfhounds had all gathered in a pack at their kennel door, where they regarded our creation with suspicion.

"I haven't enjoyed myself this much in a long time," said Master Cooper. "Reckon you're right, my boy. We ought to do more projects together. That'll be our hobby. I know Janey says we should have interests that don't involve artificery, but it's what I love. And it's different, working on a project for us, rather than a customer."

"I enjoyed it too, Master Cooper. Let's have a think about what we could do next. I know that Phil wants us to build a boat for him. Do you think we could do that? I mean, it seems like it'd be really difficult."

"Anything's possible for an artificer, Lewis. We can't build a merchant ship, no. But I reckon we could have a crack at a little sailing boat, perhaps. We'd have to see my friend in Port Vesta, though. Jenson Kilworth. He's a shipbuilder. But anyway, that's a job for another day. We still need to take our little creature to the parade, don't we?"

Scamp's Eve was soon upon us, and it arrived at a Sunhampton that had been transformed. Coiner's Way was less a place of business and more like the site of an invasion of the demonic kind. Duggie Fernglass had changed all the street lamps so that they glowed blood red, and he'd strewn huge cobwebs and banners from one lamppost to another. Merchants had set out stalls on the street, where they sold warm brews with names like Warlock's Blood and Spider Juice to the gathering parade-goers.

On one end of the street, a bard had set up a temporary stage. As I watched him sing songs about dragons and demons, I got a strange feeling of familiarity. I knew him from somewhere, but couldn't quite place him. That was when it hit

me; he was the bard who I'd seen in the tavern in Perentee, where he'd been preparing to complete his class-earning project.

Soon, the street was crammed end to end not just with Sunhamptoners but with visitors from different parts of Easterly, a good two-thirds of them dressed in Scamp's Eve costumes. Looking around, I was greeted by the sight of men dressed as trolls, children dressed up in ghoulish costumes.

My friends and I gathered in a group. Chris and Paisley went to Spruce Wilkinson's hot brew stall, where they bought a round of warm pumpkin coffees for us all. Drinking our drinks, we complimented each other on our Scamp's Eve costumes. Paisley was dressed as the Reaper of Souls, that mythical creature said to be responsible for taking souls from the living and escorting them to the worlds below. Chris was... well, I couldn't quite figure out what he was dressed as. Some kind of woodland creature, I supposed, though whether he was a huge rabbit or some kind of deer, I honestly didn't know. That was how strange his costume was. As for me, a few weeks ago Ophelia had sent me one of the costumes from an old production of Lisabeth's Fiends, which meant that tonight, and for this night only, I inhabited the guise of a butler. Not just any butler, however; as best as I could, I had dressed myself like the butler from my book. I was just glad that there were no necromancers around that I would be forced to serve.

We stood for a while, drinking and chatting, soaking in the atmosphere and enjoying the warmth generated by so many people packed together in one place.

Then, I caught sight of something heading toward me in my peripheral vision. I turned to look, only to see a huge, man-sized spider lumbering in my direction. My instincts raced ahead of my brain, and a tiny spark of fear jolted my belly. Only then did I realize that this wasn't a huge spider but my friend Jester, wearing an elaborate costume with eight furry legs jutting out from his torso, and a huge, black hump on his back.

"Happy Scamp's Eve, everyone," he told us.

Finally, it was time for the parade to begin. A procession of monsters roamed through the middle of Coiner's Way, each more hideous than the last. There was a dragon as big as a shed, with scales as black as coal. It opened its mouth, presumably to breathe fire, but the effect fell flat and all that came out was a puff of smoke.

"Phew," said Janey. "I was worried about that one. Had the fire effect been half-decent, it would have stood a chance of winning."

Next came a parade float shaped like a ghost ship, with barnacles clinging to the side like scabs, and a whole crew of ghostly pirates roaming around on the deck. One of them, I noted with amusement, was Phil. He was in his element on that phantom ship, charging around the deck and yelling pirate-parlance curses – softened on account of all the kids present - at the parade spectators.

On and on they went. A giant goblin with a belly big enough to fit a wagon inside, a gnarly tree with evil-looking fairies sitting on the branches. There was a float of zombies, a huge sea monster with hideous tentacles, a mysterious shadow wraith with glowing eyes. And then, toward the end of the parade, came a monster I knew all too well. A multi-headed creature wearing silly hats, lacking the fearsomeness with which it once stalked my artificery efforts. Sitting on the back of the float, messing with tinkered levers and making the heads turn this way and that, was Master Cooper, his eyes set deep in concentration.

"You guys did a really great job," said Paisley. "Very fearsome."

"Yet fun at the same time," added Chris.

Paisley nodded. "Exactly what I want in a monster."

As the evening ebbed on, I began to feel my nerves tie themselves into knots. This worsened when Master Cooper joined us, his face red from the effort of working the monster. I could see the tension writ in his face, and the effect transferred to me with ease.

Soon, the moment we had been waiting for came. Mr. Leabrook, the manager of Sunhampton Market and Coiner's Way, took to a small podium just in front of the King's Head tavern. Contrary to the spirit of the evening, Mr. Leabrook hadn't made the slightest of effort to dress up, and instead wore his usual shirt, tie, and trousers.

He waited for the crowd to hush, growing visibly annoyed that his mere presence seemingly wasn't enough for folks to be quiet. Normally I wouldn't have been on Mr. Leabrook's side, since he was about as grumpy a person as you could ever meet. Tonight, though, I was on edge, and I found myself actually wanting to hear what he had to say.

Chris, sensing my discomfort, used his town crier voice to politely coax the parade crowd into being quiet.

An almost silence descended upon us all as we awaited the results.

"Thank you all for coming," said Mr. Leabrook, in the tone of voice one might use to read a shopping list. "A great event, a nice parade, and so on. Anyway, here are the results of the Scamp's Eve parade competition."

Chapter 13

Coming second in the thirty-third Sunhampton Scamp's Eve parade hadn't bothered Master Cooper at all. In fact, as this was the best placing in the parade that any Cooper had ever earned so far, he rode the crest of this victory – because it was still a victory, in many ways – for the whole of the next week.

He whistled while he washed dishes, hummed while he cooked spaghetti with red wine anchovy sauce for us (this was one of his favorite dishes), and he spent the whole of more than one happy evening in a hot bathtub, buried in soap bubbles and with the book reading device telling him about what the necromancer's butler was doing.

“Maybe there's something to this relaxing lark,” he told me and Janey after a night of pampering. “Artificery's my profession, and it'll also be my hobby. No point pretendin' otherwise. But maybe I can find other ways to relax when I don't have a set of artificer's tongs in my hand. In fact, part of me's thinking about getting another pair of hands around here.”

“Another artificer?” said Janey.

“Just a thought.”

I felt a stab of jealousy then. No, not a stab. More like a prick, as if I'd accidentally pricked my thumb on a thorn. I wondered why Master Cooper wanted to get another artificer to work here, and why he hadn't asked me to leave the store and come back to the craftstead, if that was what he needed. If he wanted to cut back on working even more, fine, but why ask another person when I was right here? Wasn't my work good enough?

But these thoughts were just that – thoughts. They weren't me. It was easy to get caught up in a feeling when a particularly strong one came to visit your mind, and even easier to assume that feeling was your whole identity. A person doesn't see that it's raining outside and tell themselves,

‘I am the rain.’ So why did we see jealousy in our heads and tell ourselves ‘I am jealous?’ Or worse still, ‘I am a jealous person.’

I tried to sit back in my own head like a neutral observer, watching these thoughts – generated with such complexity from one single utterance of Master Cooper’s – until they dissipated on their own rather than me acting under their influence.

Maybe I wasn’t completely successful, because Master Cooper said, “Not a qualified artificer, Lewis. Don’t worry, I’m not replacing you. I want someone to do the hard, boring things. That should free up my time so I can sit back more and just work on the jobs that take my fancy.”

“Which is what we agreed before, if you remember,” said Janey.

“Aye, I know. I suppose I let my workload build up again. I know I need to relax. I don’t have forever, do I?”

“Jack!”

“Only being honest. Time waits for no person.”

The mood became a little somber, and I don’t think any of us had been quite prepared for it.

It was unfortunate that Paisley chose that very moment to jump into the doorway dressed in her Reaper of Souls costume and say in a guttural voice, “I have come to collect a soul.”

When we had recovered from the shock – and Paisley had apologized profusely while clearly still suppressing the urge to laugh- Cooper explained his idea further, telling us that rather than employ another artificer, he was putting real thought into taking on one, last apprentice.

I had done a good job managing my flicker of jealousy earlier, but this snuffed it out completely. I quite liked the idea of having another apprentice around. Someone I would be senior to in crafting rank, yes – no point pretending that I didn’t have an ego. But also someone I could help nurture in our fine craft. I enjoyed the idea of passing on my own meager

artificery knowledge to some young boy or girl. Showing them what having a craft could mean, how it could give you a place to go in your mind that no external person could touch. That it'd mean you could never get bored. I wanted to help teach someone the artificery basics and then watch their passion bloom as they realized what a beautiful thing artificery was.

“What do you reckon, then?” said Master Cooper.
“Should I do it?”

“You’re asking me?” I said.

“Of course. You’re part of the business.”

“I think it’s a good idea, Master Cooper.”

“I’ll keep my ear to the ground, then.”

Following the parade, Duggie Fernglass and a group of volunteers cleaned up the cobbles of Coiner’s Way, returning the mercantile street to normal. Or at least, an approximation of normality. Could a street ever be classed as normal when it had monsters lurking on every corner?

Some of the parade contestants from abroad, it seemed, had just left their huge parade monsters here in Sunhampton rather than take them home, which left Mr. Leabrook with the question of what to do with them.

Three afternoons following the parade, my store bell rang and Mr. Leabrook strolled in, his shirt sporting not even a single wrinkle, his tie fastened so tight against his neck that I wondered how he could breathe. He looked around my store, at my shelves with their expanded inventory and the walls that Ophelia and I had painted, and he turned his nose up ever so slightly. It was a subtle enough gesture that I couldn’t quite call him out on it, yet could still see quite plainly what he thought about an artificery store.

Mr. Leabrook was an enigma in that his job was to oversee the general smooth running of Coiner’s Way, which meant keeping all the merchants happy, the shoppers happy, and generally ensuring that lots of gold flowed through our little street. Even with that being the case, Mr. Leabrook

seemed to have disdain for merchants of all kinds, be they market traders selling simple things like mugs or plates, all the way up to people like me trading artificed items. I felt bad for him, in a way. He clearly didn't enjoy his job, yet something about it kept him chained right to it.

The only things that did make Mr. Leabrook happy were rules. Rules, fines, verbal warnings, written warnings. A day spent changing the wording of a market bylaw was a pleasant day indeed, even more so when one change or another brought a procession of unhappy merchants to his door. For as much as Mr. Leabrook complained when merchants visited his office to discuss rules, he secretly loved such occasions, getting a strange thrill from the verbal sparring sessions.

"Mr. Cooper," he said. "It's nice to see you have finally decided to open for business."

"Morning, Mr. Leabrook!" I said, overly enthusiastically. I'd decided after our last sour encounter a while ago over market licenses that this was how I'd deal with him. That, rather than bicker, I would be nice. I hadn't really gotten the chance until now. "Can I get you a coffee? A little bite to eat, maybe?"

This seemed to disarm him. I had read about it in – of all places – the Necromancer's Butler. In it, the necromancer had been involved in a longstanding feud with his neighbor, an accountant who lived with his husband and their adopted children. The accountant didn't appreciate zombies trespassing in his garden, while the necromancer was incensed that the accountant's children were constantly kicking their footballs against his tower walls.

'Have you heard this? I've just got wind that that damned neighbor of mine is going to visit the town officials and petition to have my tower license revoked. He doesn't know that I know, but he can't trust all his friends, the fool. I'll show him,' the necromancer said. *'His dog passed away last week, did it not? Well, let's see the look on his face when it reanimates!'*

‘But sir, perhaps it is not wise to use your powers in such a way,’ replied the butler. *‘If you know that your enemy is going to pick up his axe, then sometimes it is best to coat it in honey, first.’*

‘Why?’

‘The sticky sensory feeling will give him pause, sir, just long enough to make him think twice before using his axe in anger.’

The necromancer paused, deep in thought. A soft look seemed to settle upon his eyes. In his expression, as he beheld the butler, was a look of deepening respect.

‘I am in awe of you,’ the necromancer replied.

Now, I didn’t take all my life advice from a book about necromancers, but I felt like it gave me a good way to deal with Mr. Leabrook. He was the kind of person who fed off negative energy. Matching his grumpiness with my own was like throwing cooking oil on a fire, so instead, I would coat his axe in honey.

Mr. Leabrook paused after I made my offer of a hot drink or snack, looking down at his polished shoes and then back up again, as if a carefully rehearsed plan had gone astray.

“I’m going to talk to all the merchants today,” he said. “I’ll follow it up in writing, of course. But the gist of it is this; the arrangement of the parade, and the cleanup we still have to finish, will make a hefty dent in town funds. Add to that the fact that some ignorant individuals just left their parade monsters here for us to dispose of, and there’s not much water left in the can. Rents on Coiner’s Way are going to increase, Mr. Cooper. I hope you will relay this to your master.”

“We’ve only had our tenancy for three months or so.”

“Nevertheless, I suggest you check the written agreement. Rents can be increased with one month’s verbal notice, though I will do so in writing as a matter of politeness.”

In my peripheral vision I saw our sales ledger sitting on the counter, mocking me. Just last week, Jester had gone

through it and made a detailed record of the store's profit and expenses so far. It was too far in the red for my liking, and I desperately wanted to make it black. The sale of some goods and the odd jobs I'd done here and there were a good start after my lengthy procrastination. And now? Well, any rent increase was likely to just set me back further. It wasn't that it would make it impossible to turn a profit; of course it wouldn't. It would, however, rob me of enjoying the progress I had already made.

"I think you're forgetting something," said Paisley.

She was leaning against my store doorway, a half-eaten sweet roll in her hand. She took a casual bite and chewed it while staring at Mr. Leabrook.

"Ms. Porter," said Mr. Leabrook, in the kind of voice one might use to announce it was your turn to clean the toilet.

Paisley took a casual stroll through my store, inspecting my shelves and casually picking up an artificed item here and there, while saying, "It's true, Mr. Leabrook, that you can increase the rent of anyone who has a property on Coiner's Way. But you must give us just cause."

"I have. There's a whole parade to clean up after."

"Cleanup for the Scamp's Eve parade is already accounted for in the market and Coiner's Way finances that you are legally obligated to announce each year."

"Ah. But there are unexpected costs. Those giant parade monsters that ignorant people have left lying around."

"The parade monsters need to be taken care of, yes. But that's no concern of yours. After all, if they aren't on Coiner's Way or the market plaza, they're nothing to do with you, are they? You aren't the town mayor."

"There's a huge, fat goblin propped up against the King's Head tavern! It's a tripping hazard! Not to mention the giant bloody dragon in the middle of the street scaring half our shoppers away."

"It's not a real dragon, you know," I said.

“Hmph.”

“If the monsters are off the Way by tonight, you really won’t have any just cause in increasing rent,” said Paisley. “Will you, Mr. Leabrook?”

“I suppose not.”

Moving the giant goblin and dragon was more difficult than we expected. The parade monsters looked well-constructed from the outside, but their flourish and decoration belied a rushed job inside. Take the goblin, for instance. It was a huge figure of cheap tin shaped into the form of a goblin. The tin could be scrapped for a few gold coins, perhaps, but the cost of transporting it back to wherever it had come from probably made that pointless. Hence, its owner had just left it here.

Under Paisley’s leadership, the merchants of Coiner’s Way got together and moved the huge goblin away from the King’s Head, and we then dragged the dragon from the middle of Coiner’s Way. We also ridded Sunhampton of a giant bat, a creature with a lion’s head and a scorpion’s tail, and a ten-foot-tall skeleton with glowing red eyes.

After the rest of the merchants filed away to return to their shops, Paisley and I discussed what we should do about the leftover parade monsters. They weren’t our responsibility, but we couldn’t just leave them there like mounds of monstrous scrap.

“The Fiends might like them,” I said. “Imagine using one of the monsters as a prop in a play.”

“How would they transport them around?”

“I could make them an artificed cart.”

“This is all getting rather complicated,” said Paisley. “We just need to get rid of them in the most efficient way possible. Uncle Jace once owned a stake in a waste company, but I think he sold his interests. Hmm.”

“Hmm. What about if I speak to Bert Reeve?”

“The guy who lives on Upton Lane?”

I nodded. “Ophelia visited him when she was helping out with Grub-and-Gab. He was part of the Dog and Bone theatre troupe when he was younger. They’re still going, and they’re a much bigger outfit than Lisabeth’s Fiends. If they need big monster props, then they’d surely have the means to transport them to places and store them.”

The Dog and Bone theatre troupe were, as it happened, delighted to get hold of a giant goblin, a huge bat, and a dragon bigger than a house. What’s more, they had a storage unit southwest of Little Flitwick where they could store them when they didn’t need them in a play. They even agreed, as part of getting such huge props for free, to loan them to Lisabeth’s Fiends if they ever asked. This was a request I had made since I was sure Toby would like to be able to call on giant bats and goblins as tall as garden sheds.

After a few letters sent back and forth by express post, the collection was arranged. A couple of evenings later, I headed back to the craftstead after spending the day in the store. I had finished later than I would have liked, a fact I measured not by the time on the clock but by the volume of the rumblings in my stomach. I was putting in longer hours in the store in an effort to play catch-up with our finances. Though I had unplugged whatever mental gunk had been blocking me from opening the store in the first place, I still felt a gnawing unease about the whole thing. I felt bad; that was the size of it. I wanted to repay Master Cooper’s trust in me, and this meant I would just have to apply a little more sweat than usual until the books looked better.

Rather than force myself to walk up the hill to strengthen my leg muscles as I usually did, I allowed myself the luxury of taking the artificed cart. Standing at the bottom of the hill, I gave the bell a tug. It wasn’t long before the cart appeared as a dark shape rolling gently down the crest, the lamp attached to the front of it bouncing up and down as the cart hit bobbles in the grass.

We ought to put some lights up on the hill, I thought. It’s way too dark here in winter.

I was so tired that when I climbed up onto the artificed cart and leaned back into the seat, I fell asleep almost instantly. I only woke when the cart reached the summit and stopped with a jolt. Blinking, it took me a minute for my consciousness to place itself, and in my sleepy state, I found myself wondering how I had reached the craftstead when it seemed only minutes ago I was locking the store for the evening.

“There you are,” said Master Cooper, standing in the lamp-lit doorway of his workshop across the yard. “Wondered if you’d gone to the King’s Head or something.”

The lights were on in Master Cooper’s workshop, as well as in the living of the main house across the yard. Through the partially closed curtains I could just about make out Janey lying on the sofa. She liked to do this some evenings; just light the log fire, pour herself a glass of wine, and then read a book until her eyes started to close.

I climbed down from the cart. “Just had a few things to finish in the store, Master Cooper.”

“Well, get your arse in here.”

The craftstead workshop was a cozy little cove of air warmed by the smithing forge and lit by the many artificery lamps placed here and there. It never changed, and that was part of its draw to me. A childhood traveling with the Five Fiends meant that consistency wasn’t a word I had learned until I was much older.

Whereas, the craftstead workshop would always have the forge at the end of the room. The tinkered tool cutting and sharpening machines. Shelf upon shelf laded with jars filled with screws and nails. There would always be tools lying around, materials left on workbenches. These things were reliable.

I stood there and took a deep breath, filling the center of my crafter’s soul with the very smells that nourished it. Miodes, sawdust, forge smoke. The aromas were inseparable from the emotions that came with them, those of belonging, of happiness.

“How’s the store doing?” asked Cooper.

“Jester said he was going to give you a copy of the books, Master Cooper.”

“No, I’m not asking about the figures. I trust that those will even out soon enough. I mean how are you liking it?”

Now there was a pearl of a question. I found I hadn’t really asked myself it lately, and I took a moment to consider it carefully.

“I feel bad it took me so long to open,” I said. “Especially if it put you under any strain. But I’m determined to make it better.”

“Strain?”

“That was why you were restricting my miode use, after all, wasn’t it?”

Cooper gave a knowing smile. “Was it?”

“Oh. It was a lesson, then, I presume?”

“I told Flo that until the store opened, you had no need of miodes. You don’t use miodes to make some shelves or paint walls, after all. So, by that logic, any trips you made to our side storage shed were ones of procrastination. I said to her, *‘The minute he’s finished decorating the store and wants to make actual inventory for it, let him use whatever miodes he wants. Until then, restrict him.’* Although, I understand you came to a little bargain, you and her.”

“I suppose it was all for the best,” I told him. “If I hadn’t struggled so much in getting the store open, I don’t think I would have really realized what was going on in my head.”

“Oh? I thought there wasn’t much space inside that noggin of yours for things to be happening. But come here, anyway. I want to show you something.”

When I took a seat on a stool next to Master Cooper, he unbuttoned the left cuff of his shirt and pushed it up, revealing his forearm. There, fit snugly around his wrist, was his token

bracelet. This was a master-level bracelet and thus could fit ten token coins at the same time.

Master Cooper ran his finger along the tokens he'd set in the bracelet, finally stopping at the third from the end. This, he quickly pried loose. He held the little token up to his eyes, squinting at it. He seemed to be deep in thought. Then he flicked it toward me using his thumb.

I caught the token. "What's going on?"

"My father gave me that token, Lewis. I've been waiting for the right time to pass it on to you. Lately, with everything you've done with the store, and the help you gave me with the parade monster...well, you're becoming a fine crafter. I'm pleased you've realized that not everything we learn about our craft is related to theory or practical skills. A large part of our crafting is done within."

"That sounds a little mystical for you, Master Cooper."

"It's those damned books I've been listening to. The butler's always going on about 'look within' and that sort of thing."

I turned the token over in my hand so that I could see the symbol etched on it. It appeared to be a sea of faces staring out from the metal. I knew that if I placed the token inside my bracelet, I would be given more information about it via token text. It wasn't good practice to do that, however. Nobody ever put a token inside their token bracelet without knowing what it was or what it did.

"What is it?"

"That's a legacy token," said Master Cooper. "A Cooper legacy token, to be more exact. Wear it while you're crafting, and sometimes you'll get insights from the people in our crafting lineage. Most of the Coopers in the past were crafters of some discipline or another. Not always artificery, though."

"Our lineage? I'm not related to you by blood."

"You're a Cooper, Lewis, and that's all that counts. We've collected all sorts of waifs and strays over the years, our family. You're not the first to join us from another

bloodline. In any case, don't be scared if you hear the odd voice or two when you set the legacy token in your bracelet. And take note of this; the wearer of the token slowly adds their own legacy to it.

“Everything you craft, every insight you get about artificery, it will slowly weave itself into the coin. Who knows, my lad? Somewhere down the line, some young Cooper yet-to-be-born might wear this token and hear you give them insights as they craft. More likely than not, they'll just hear you prattle on about sweet rolls. But anyway, there you go.”

“Thank you, Master Cooper. This is beyond any gift I could have hoped for.”

Chapter 14

Soon, the opening night of the play that Lisabeth's Friends were performing in Full Striding was upon us. Although Ophelia had given us all complementary tickets, fate had weaved its wicked web, and when the night arrived, only I could attend.

Jace Porter was on the verge of completing the buyout of a large-scale dye factory in Stow, which meant that Jester had found himself with some emergency accountancy to do. Chris and Paisley were out on a mysterious errand that just couldn't wait, while Phil Brownhill had booked a week of sailing lessons from an old sailor who had a rickety-ex merchant ship that he kept moored at a dock not far from Port Vesta. Master Cooper and Mistress Janey were away on a weekend trip to see one of her cousins, which they had arranged long before the play was even announced.

This meant I would have to make the journey to Full Striding alone, and it wasn't promising to be a pleasant trip. Though we were edging ever closer to spring and the next holiday on the calendar – Spring's Rise – it felt like winter was launching one last assault on us before it gave up for the year. Snowflakes had appeared first thing that morning, and they only grew in volume as the day wore on. By the evening the whole of Coiner's Way was covered in a blanket of white. Duggie Fernglass had spent the whole day gritting the cobbles with a special alchemical salt he'd bought from Janey, but even that couldn't compete.

The only mercy was that the travelers' roads between Sunhampton and Full Striding had been well-traveled right from the crack of dawn. The effect of horses' hooves and wagon wheels rolling back and forth along it all day meant that though the road had been touched by snow, it wasn't made impassable by it.

Early that evening, I took a quick bath and dressed in what I thought was my best shirt and smartest trousers. I

polished my boots, splashed cologne on my face, and spent much longer than usual in front of the bathroom mirror, trying to tease my stubborn hair into something approaching presentable. I imagined that if my new Cooper legacy token was set in place right then, some wise phantom of Coopers past would tell me to just give it up.

Remembering the token, I took it out from my token pouch and set it in my token bracelet. Though I wasn't going to be doing any crafting tonight, it often took your token bracelet time to adjust to new tokens, and for the tokens to adjust to the bracelet. The only cure for this was time. So, if I started wearing the token now, it would hopefully be fully integrated soon.

Going out of the craftstead and down the hill and onto Coiner's Way, I started to head toward the town's northern gates, where the last commuter wagon of the evening was waiting, ready to take folks to Full Striding. My plan was to ride the wagon there, watch the play, and then spend the night at a tavern in the city. There were plenty of places that offered rooms in the city, so I didn't foresee any problems there.

Just before I headed to the wagon, I gave a glance toward my store, where I was surprised to see a dim glow coming from the window.

"Douggie," I said, catching sight of the Coiner's Way maintenance man as he struggled to make a flickering street lamp stay lit. "How long until the commuter wagon leaves?"

"Twenty minutes, Lewis."

I dashed over to my store and unlocked it. I had brief, ludicrous thought that someone might have broken into the store. A burglar, perhaps. But things like that didn't happen in Sunhampton, I told myself.

This proved true when I walked through the store and to the workshop, where I realized that I had simply left a lamp on the last time I was there. Nothing more sinister than that. As I reached to turn it off, something on a shelf on my wall caught my eye.

Oh, no.

A cold dread seeped into my chest. I reached toward the shelf and picked up an envelope. It was Ophelia's letter, the one her grandmother gave her. Her talisman, her little symbol of optimism and love from her beloved relative. She had left it here for me to artifice against damage and weather, I remembered, but I had just been so busy lately that I had completely forgotten to do it. Worse, since I hadn't seen Ophelia in a few weeks, I hadn't had the chance to give it back to her before her play.

Damn it, I thought. She told me that she reads the letter before every performance. It calms her nerves enough to go on stage.

She could have sent a letter asking for me to return it before the play, of course. But perhaps she had forgotten, too, and would only remember that she had left it here when she stood backstage and looked for it, only to discover it was gone. Or maybe she was just being her usual self; too nice to send a letter urging me to hurry up.

I had to get it to her. But now, it seemed too precious a thing to handle. It was just paper and words, of course, but it meant so much more to her. My mind treated me to visions of what might happen if I took it with me to Full Striding but perhaps misplaced it along the way, or maybe dropped it into the snow where it would get soaked and ruined. I didn't even want to think about having to explain something like that to her.

Leaving it here wasn't in question, and I didn't have time to artifice any weatherproofing into it, since I didn't have the correct miodes to hand. I was determined to get it to her safely. But how?

Then, with a smile, I realized that I had the perfect means of transporting a fragile slip of paper through winter weather. The seed transportation system. If it could carry rare seeds safely across Easterly, then it was surely capable of protecting a letter.

It might even be a good way to test it, I thought. One last practical evaluation before Reuben comes here to take a look at it.

The commuter wagon was almost full tonight. Some folks were going to see the play in Full Striding, no doubt planning as I was to spend the night in a tavern. Other people on the wagon were visitors from Full Striding who'd spent the day in Sunhampton and now wanted nothing better than to get back home, light their fires, and maybe even look out of their windows and watch the snow fall from the nighttime sky.

I paid for my place and then took a seat toward the rear end of the wagon, next to a man who was laden with gifts that he'd bought for his wife's birthday. He must have really wanted to make her happy, judging by his generosity. Most of them, I noted with a smile, were from Paisley's store.

I sat there with the seed transportation system tucked under my arm, and the letter safely inside it. We made pleasant small-talk for a while, before the rhythmic sound of the horse's hooves combined with the long day the man had had, lulling him into a gentle sleep.

He had barely had the chance for a few snores, however, when the cart lurched to a stop. The commuters muttered about the holdup, then started to complain to each other when it became an extended stop. I felt my nerves begin to present themselves, and I agitatedly tried to calculate how much leeway I had in getting to Full Striding before the curtain opened.

After another five minutes, I had had enough. Leaving the seed device on my seat under the careful watch of the man with all the shopping bags, I hopped off the wagon and into the dark, snow-filled nighttime air. Walking around the wagon and to the front was a battle against icy wind, but I pushed through until I was standing beside the driver's seat.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

The driver, a woman bundled up in what looked like two winter coats with the hoods pulled up so I could barely see her face, was standing by her horses.

“Road’s icier than I thought,” she said. “Horses are slipping. Wheels are slipping.”

“Don’t they have winter treads?”

“Usually. Not this wagon. Not these horses. All the winter wagons are already being used. But the Easterly Wagon Agency never cancels a trip, never misses a journey. That’s our promise. We had to borrow this one, you know. Thought the roads’d be fine from being used all day, but there you go. Fate laughs at its own jokes, as they say.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“Turn back while we still can,” she said. “I’m not getting stuck in the middle of nowhere all night.”

Turning back meant returning to Sunhampton, not something I would normally dread. Tonight, however, turning back meant failure. It meant I couldn’t be there to support Ophelia and I couldn’t give her treasured letter back to her.

My mind was covered in treacle, slowing any solutions down way before they could arrive. If I was back at the craftstead where we had a material shed, miodes shed, and a huge workshop, a situation like this would be no problem. But out here on the cold travelers’ road, barely a quarter into our journey towards Full Striding?

Damn it! I cursed myself for not leaving the house with the exact miodes that I needed right now. But, then, how would I have ever known which miodes to take? Should I just carry every miode in existence around with me at all times, just for the rare cases I needed them in an emergency?

I leaned back against the wagon, feeling the cold reality of defeat just as starkly as the freezing chill in the air. I would just have to apologize to Ophelia for not only not being there to watch her play, but for holding on to her letter longer than I had expected.

‘Why not just ask your fellow commuters what materials they have to hand? You never know. They may have the means for you to make an alchemic paste of some kind.’

This came to me not as a thought exactly, but not quite like a voice, either. It was inside my head, of that there was no doubt, but it didn’t sound like the usual mind-monologue that narrated my everyday life. For one, the voice was that of a woman. Middle-aged if I had to hazard a guess based purely on tone.

The legacy token, I thought. Though I hadn’t worn it long enough for it to be integrated into my bracelet perfectly, it must have begun working.

I tried talking back to the voice by directing my thoughts.

Do you really think someone on the wagon will have something useful?

No answer came. I supposed the token granted me less of a dialogue with Cooper’s ancestors, and more just gifted me with little nuggets of their wisdom whenever they felt it was appropriate.

Returning to the back of the wagon, I climbed up and faced the commuters. They were agitated now, and it seemed I had interrupted a heated debate of some kind from the looks on some of their faces.

“The road’s icier than expected, and this wagon isn’t fit for winter travel,” I told them.

Groans met mutterings and even the odd curse.

“Then why in the name of the lord and ladies below did they let us ride it?” asked one person.

“The Easterly Wagon Agency never misses a trip, apparently. But we might be in luck. You see, I’m an artificer.”

“I doubt a self-stirring cooking pot will help us right now, young man,” said an old fellow sitting beside his wife.

I chose to ignore him. As an artificer, I was used to the fact that some people regarded our craft as a fanciful one, and

that they believed we made nothing but useless trinkets.

“I don’t suppose anyone here has any miodes with them?” I said.

I was met with many shaking heads and variations of ‘no.’

“And I suppose I’d be correct in assuming that nobody here is experienced in working on wagons and happen to have winter treads and horse cleats?”

Again, the same response. I drummed my finger against my chin, lost in thought.

“Ah! Are there any mages amongst us?” I asked.

It seemed like the commuters regarded this as my most ludicrous question yet. I was almost forced to admit that there was no way that we were going to get this wagon to Full Striding.

Then, one woman raised her hand. “Me. I mean, I’m not a mage. Dear me, no. But I have a few spell scrolls with me. I called in at a spell scroll shop in Larking before I went to Sunhampton. My granddaughter’s going to enroll in mage college next term, and there were some scrolls on their required material list.”

“What do you have? Anything related to fire?”

The woman opened up a leather satchel resting on her lap. The sound of rustling paper came from within as she searched through it, her face turning into a frown, and then a look of deep disappointment, until without warning, it changed into one of unmistakable optimism.

“What about this?”

I stepped forward and read the scroll. It was a scroll of minor campfire, a cheap and fairly common scroll type often used by mage-rangers to create fires in hostile conditions.

“We might be in luck,” I said.

Though perhaps luck wasn’t quite the correct word. Preparation was more like it. Preparation married to

chance. As an artificer, there was one thing I did carry around with me. Not long after I had earned the initiate rank, Master Cooper had gifted me with an artificed toolkit. A leather pouch with a metal zip, its small size – compact enough to fit in my pocket – belied an interior large enough to store smaller versions of the tools we artificers always used. There were tongs, goggles, and even a miniature miode pool.

“Can I buy the spell scroll from you?” I said.

“You can have it for free if you get us moving. I’m freezing my bloody arse off, dearie.”

Under the gazes of the commuters, I disenchanting the miodes from the spell scroll, opting to use my ability to do it almost instantaneously, rather than the slow, manual way. Then, I used abilities on my Enchantment and Tinkering skill trees to add the campfire miodes – which I had split into quarters to dilute their effect – onto the horses’ shoes and the wagon wheels.

The effect was a very gentle heat that didn’t damage the shoes or the wheels, yet was enough for them to gain traction over the ice. It wouldn’t last long, I knew, since the miodes I had employed weren’t of the best quality. It was enough to get us moving, however. The feeling of motion and the sound of the horses’ hooves had the same effect on us as if we’d all drunk a mulled wine each. Bad moods were broken, frowns were artificed into smiles. Rather than the usual commuter wagon silence where folks stayed inside their own little worlds in their heads, this wagon became one of conversation and jokes. By the time we reached the wagon station at Full Striding, such a camaraderie had formed between the commuters that we all let out a little cheer. The wagon driver, rather than receiving admonishment at charging us all to ride in a wagon unfit for winter, actually received a generous collection of tips.

“Tell your granddaughter good luck in college, Beth,” I said, watching the spell scroll lady depart with her leather satchel.

“Much obliged. Now hurry yourself over to the theater.”

When I arrived at the Palladium Theatre in the eastern quarter of Full Striding, I had a task getting myself admitted via the back entrance, which the staff members and actors used. A burly woman dressed in a thick winter coat stood guard, and she was less than persuaded by my explanation that I really needed to see the troupe's leading lady and give her a letter.

"You don't understand," I said. "I know the Fiends. I lived with them, once. I just need to have a quick word with Ophelia."

"More than my job's worth to let you inside. Sorry."

The woman's frame was so big that she covered almost all the doorway, providing no way to sneak past. The only hint of the inner theatre beyond the door was a little gap between her knees, through which I could just about see a dimly-lit hallway.

"Toby!" I yelled, spotting the leader of the Fiends leave what I guessed must have been his dressing room.

Toby spun on his heel with much more grace than one would expect from someone of his size. He looked toward the door, but could no doubt only see the back of the security lady and nothing else.

"Toby!" I tried again.

"Lewis? Is that you?"

"Any chance you could have a word here, please, Toby? I just need to see Ophelia."

Toby approached us. The security lady moved aside with a muttered apology, but I reassured her no apology was needed and that if I were in her shoes, I wouldn't have let someone like me inside the actor's part of the theatre, either.

Seeing me properly now, a grin grew on Toby's face. "Lewis! My dear boy, seeing you is like a little parcel of joy given to me by the gods."

Although I knew Toby and I was fully aware that his flattering ways held little weight – just as it wasn't wise to put much stock in his anger, either – I felt myself become warmed by his greeting regardless. Remembering my mission, I asked him, “Where’s Ophelia’s dressing room?”

“Just down the hall, next to mine.”

“Great,” I said. “Sorry. I need to hurry. We’ll catch up later.”

Toby caught my sleeve. “She isn’t in there, Lewis. She’s by the curtains. We’re about to open.”

I sprinted through the theatre’s inner corridors like I was being chased by a horde of demons. I took one wrong turn, then another. I hit dead ends, I doubled back on myself. I began to wonder if this wasn’t a theatre but a maze, and whether I could ever find my way out.

Taking a right turn and then a left finally rewarded me with the sight of huge, billowing, crimson curtains awaiting at the end of a corridor. Standing there beside them, alone even among the other Fiends, was Ophelia. She looked to be murmuring under her breath, no doubt rehearsing her opening lines to herself.

I rushed toward her, my heart beating like a thunderous round of applause. Just as I neared the end of the corridor Ophelia turned and saw me. The look on her face was one of surprise. A pleasant one, I hoped, though my mind was racing too much to analyze it.

“Ophelia! Sorry I’m late.”

“Lewis-”

“One second.”

I placed the seed transportation device on the ground, knelt, and opened it up. From it, I took the letter, before straightening up and handing it to her.

She took it from me, a wide smile spreading on her face like rays from the sun’s early morning rise. She looked at the

letter, and then the seed system on the ground. Finally, her eyes gazed into mine.

“The Easterly postal system is definitely improving,” she told me.

“I’m sorry that I forgot to artifice it,” I said. “But bring it with you the next time you come to Sunhampton, and I’ll add the miodes while you wait. How’s that for service?”

Chapter 15

The Fiends' performance was so well-received that they were booked to play another four nights at the theatre in Full Striding. I abandoned my plans to leave the next day and instead booked a room for three nights at the Duck and Goose Tavern. I spent the next day catching up with the Fiends, who celebrated their successful performance with an overly indulgent meal at an expensive Full Striding restaurant called Easterly Spices.

My second night there, I saw the play again. It was no less effective for repeated viewings. Cobby was hilarious, Big Henry played a fearsome villain, and Toby, as ever, tried his best to dominate every scene he was in. The star for me was, of course, their leading lady. The second night of their play ended with an even bigger round of applause, and Toby and his exhausted troupe found themselves having to stay at the theatre for two full hours greeting their many well-wishers.

I spent the following day with Ophelia, where she was determined to find, amongst Full Striding's many bookstores, something new to read now that she had finished the Necromancer's Butler series. It turned out to be a tougher errand than we expected.

"Nothing's grabbing me," she said, as we scanned the shelves of a bookshop named Pickett's Pages.

"That's the problem with finishing a good book. The one that follows it has a lot to live up to."

"Well, I can't just not read anything else ever again... can I?" she said.

"How about I choose something for you? Just picking a book is half the battle sometimes. Do you trust me to do that?"

She grabbed my hand. "Maybe! Let's see."

All times must end whether they're good or bad, and it was with regret and a strange loneliness or a sense of something missing, that I paid for my fare on a wagon back to Sunhampton.

After its last blast of snow, Winter had finally given up, and though the official start of Spring was two days away, the blanket of white was gone, and the landscape of Easterly had turned green again. For this journey, there were no hold-ups, no need for me to use my skills.

At least I had familiar company on the way home. I had missed the midday Easter Wagon Agency wagon, and so instead took a space on a private cart bound for my town. This turned out to be one that I had ridden on before; Samantha Tillwright was journeying back to her farm after visiting a farmer's market.

"How are the chickens?" I asked.

"That tincture you made works like a charm. A disgusting charm, but still. It keeps the foxes away."

"It also works on tax inspectors and bill collectors," I said.

Samantha laughed. "Oh – I forgot to tell you. I might be a little hard to find if you need me for anything in the near future. I won't be in town much, and I certainly won't have time to make any of my pies."

"The farm's getting busy?"

She nodded. "Always. But I enrolled at a veterinary college, too. I'll have to travel to Hattersdale twice each week, as well as working my fair share on our acres. There'll be lots of studying to do, I imagine. The way I see it though, is that all this time will pass anyway. It might as well pass in a way where I get to become a veterinarian."

"That's great, Samantha. I really admire you for doing it."

"Thanks, Lewis."

I've always found that as great as it can be to take a trip or have a holiday, it doesn't take long to get back to your old routine. So it was with me, where I soon found myself constantly busy at the store. Whether it was replacing stock that I sold, creating new things so that I could rotate the inventory on my shelves, or completing custom artificery projects, I barely had a minute to breathe.

One afternoon, however, fate seemed to smile on me, and I found myself with no customer projects to complete, and few jobs or chores that I could reasonably class as urgent. This meant that I had the time to just sit on my chair at my sales counter, a cup of coffee to hand, and do nothing except stare out of the window and watch the ebb and flow of Coiner's Way. The shoppers walking hand in hand as they passed my window. Paisley chasing after a customer who had forgotten to leave with their change. Spruce Wilkinson sending his delivery boy out to take food to a customer who couldn't make it to the café.

I focused my attention a little inward, too. Not to myself and my inner thoughts, but to my store. At the painted walls, polished floorboards, the shelves filled with artificery odds and ends. I appreciated how different this place had looked just a month or two ago.

It was at that moment that a figure appeared outside my door. They knocked three times, then turned the handle. They did so a little forcefully, actually, in a way that caught them by surprise and made them stumble over the threshold almost as if they hadn't expected the door to actually be unlocked.

Now inside my store, they straightened up and faced me. There, dressed in a thick winter coat, woolly scarf, woolly hat, and gloves, was Reuben Bates. His face was red but not through the cold; it was officially spring now. In fact, Spring's Rise was just a week or two away. The weather had taken a pleasant turn – one that meant wearing excessive winter clothing was only a good idea if your aim was to get sweaty.

“Reuben!” I said. “Good to see you.”

He took off his hat, unwrapped his scarf from his neck, and then unzipped his coat. Underneath it, he was wearing what looked like five layers; a couple of thick jumpers and at least three shirts.

“Cup of coffee?” I said.

“Please.”

“Nine sugars?”

“Just the six, actually, Lewis. I’m cutting down.”

I had been expecting Reuben’s visit for a while now, having sent a letter to the Historical Seed Society – sealed using my personal wax seal, of course – advising them that Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown had finished their seed transportation system, and would be obliged if someone came out not only to decide if they wanted to use it, but to also pay us for our work.

I was pleased that it was Reuben who had visited. I thought they might send someone else since the society had members traveling all over Easterly. I liked Reuben, and I appreciated his passion for his work. I really wanted to see what he thought of my work, in turn.

That evening, Reuben joined us for dinner at the craftstead. It was one of those rare nights where none of us had any obligations whatsoever, and like metal filings under the pull of a magnet, we’d found ourselves drawn together there at the little house atop the great, sloping hill.

Dinner had been an orchestra in which we each had our own parts to play. Mine was to provide bread. This was easy since all it meant was a trip to Rolls and Dough, where Mrs. Grant was more than happy for me to buy a large portion of her stock. It was late afternoon when I went, after all, and the bakery was due to close. Mrs. Grant hated throwing away food, and this meant she often found herself knocking on doors on her way home, offering the bemused occupants a loaf of five-seed bread or a half dozen glazed buns.

Tonight had taken a rare turn in that Paisley and Chris cooked for us all. Paisley's cooking, for all her other talents, was about as effective as leaving a bunch of ingredients in proximity to a fire and hoping they somehow combined into something resembling cuisine. Chris, meanwhile, was an adept chef – in skill, not in official ranking – and took the lead, with Paisley content to, just this once, abandon her own initiative and follow his instructions.

We often struggled for cutlery as it was, and tonight we were stretched way beyond capacity, with not just having Reuben as a dinner guest, but Flo Anderson and Jace Porter, too. When Chris and Paisley served up a chicken and dumpling casserole, I ended up eating from our old chopped tomato tin, while Master Cooper and Janey drew lots for who would get a bowl and who would eat from the casserole pan. Cooper won, but then graciously allowed Janey use of the bowl.

After all the casserole was gone and we were sat contently smoothing the cracks of our appetite with the various types of bread I brought for us to nibble on, Master Cooper stood up. He made a circuit around the table, making sure all of us had wine – or in Janey's case orange juice since she wanted to open the store early tomorrow – in their glasses.

“A toast,” he said. “Don't worry, don't worry, no speeches from me. I'd just like to say how lovely it is to have you here - even if you eat all my food and threaten to leave me penniless. A special mention to Mr. Bates here, who has not only paid Cooper and Cooper for our superb work, but has chosen our system to be one of the five used to carry some vitae-panacea seeds from some tomb or other to an herbatorium. Forgive me if I don't care about the details that don't relate to artificery, Mr. Bates.”

“Quite alright,” said Reuben.

I had made a study of the herbologist while he'd been dining with us. I couldn't help but be struck by how much he seemed to enjoy being here. I supposed that someone who spent as much time traveling as he did must yearn for home, sometimes. I used to travel with the Fiends, so part of me

could relate. But back then, I'd never yearned for anything because my home was always with me. Not the carts we slept in or the places we visited. Home was my mother. It was Big Henry, Colby, Mel. Even Toby.

"A final toast to Lewis Cooper here," said Master Cooper, "For doing perhaps eighty percent of the work on the transportation system."

"Ninety-five percent," I said.

"Ah – but you're forgetting the master's rule. I was being nice to you there, laddo. Technically I'm still your master, so all of your work belongs to me."

Cooper meant this as a joke, and I definitely took it that way. At the same time, it did have the effect of prodding at a thought that I'd had more than a few times lately. Opening the store, running it by myself - it had set me thinking. I would quite like to be completely my own person, I had decided. I wanted to earn the journeyman status and become a crafter in my own right. I'd still work *with* Master Cooper, but not *for* him. I wanted to be free to work on a project here, a different project there. Who knew? In time, perhaps I'd want to travel Easterly again, just as I did in my youth. Only this time, as an artificer.

"Oh!" said Master. "Just one more thing. I completely forgot."

"We've drunk our drinks now, Jack. If you want to make more toasts, you'll have to step up your hosting duties," said Janey.

"As you say, my love."

Reuben stood up. "Allow me. As a thanks for your hospitality."

Reuben toured the table pouring wine into glasses. With our drinks refilled, Cooper raised his glass once more.

"This one's to Flo Anderson. It won't have escaped your notice that she has tightened up our little operation, and we're damned thankful for that. Well, we've had a chat, haven't we, Flo? It must be spending time in proximity to a master like me

that's done it, but Flo has decided that she'd like to learn even more about our craft. Everyone, I'd like you to meet my new artificery apprentice."

Jester and Phil exchanged surprised looks, before raising their glasses. I caught Flo's eye and smiled. I had known about this for a few days now; Master Cooper had sought out my advice before agreeing to take her on as an apprentice. It had been a touching gesture on his part, to sound me out like that. He didn't need to. I had told him that Flo would make a fine apprentice, and that Cooper and Cooper – Artificers of Renown was lucky to have her in whatever capacity she worked for us.

It came to my attention just then that Chris and Paisley were whispering to each other. They seemed to be...well, not arguing over something, but certainly having a frank discussion. Finally, Chris nodded to her.

Paisley moved back her chair. "Chris and I wanted to say something, too."

My friend looked unusually thoughtful then. Not anxious, not exactly nervous, but somewhere in that area. She caught her Uncle Jace's eye, who gave a nod.

Paisley continued, "We'd just like to say that Chris and I have decided to rent a house together. We found one on Yellow Leaf Avenue, a stone's throw from Jester. I don't want to get too excited yet because Mr. Bullbrooke is the landlord, and he's had a few offers. But if it goes well, then...anyway, no use getting ahead of ourselves. We've filled out a rental application, and we're waiting to hear back."

"I can have a word with Mr. Bullbrooke," said Jester.

"You could?"

"We've had...discussions...recently. Let's just say he doesn't take Jester Hugill lightly anymore. As long as you've made a fair offer, I can probably get him to give your rental application serious thought."

Just then, Jace Porter gave a nod to Jester that was completely different from the one he had given to his niece

minutes earlier. The merchant seemed to be able to convey a whole lot with those nods of his. This one spoke of mutual respect. Not between a merchant and his accountant, but between two friends. Two professionals on equal footing.

Sometime after dessert, there was a knock on the kitchen door. Master Cooper looked around the table, no doubt counting how many of us were here, and wondering who on earth could have wandered up to the craftstead at that time in the evening.

I, on the other hand, knew exactly who it was. I stood up. “Reuben, there was someone who I promised I would introduce to you,” I said.

I crossed the kitchen and opened the door to reveal Hattie Greaves. Seeing the busy kitchen, she looked a little uncertain. I gave her a hug and invited her in. “Reuben, this is Hattie Greaves. Hattie, this is Reuben Bates, of the Historical Seed Society.”

Reuben stood up so quickly that his chair toppled over. He stared at Hattie as though she was a two-headed dragon standing there in the kitchen.

“Hattie Greaves,” he said. “You’re *the* Hattie Greaves?”

She shrugged. “That I am, dearie.”

“I’ve wanted to visit your garden for years, Hattie! I meant to do so the last time I was here, but I heard all those tales of bears roaming near your cottage, and things about fairies.”

“All true,” said Hattie with a smile. “Every last word. Only, the bears will let you pass through safely if I tell them to.”

Reuben looked around the table, staring at our faces and hoping we would clue him in about whether this was just a joke. Finally, he made up his own mind and laughed.

“Do you think I could visit your garden before I leave in a few days’ time?”

“I’d be delighted, Mr. Bates. In the meantime, I wanted to pick your brains for a moment or two...”

Hattie took a seat around our already cramped table and asked one of the many questions she had for the herbologist. Jace Porter, meanwhile, began to quiz Paisley and Chris about things like their furniture budget, their plans to save gold for a rainy day, and a myriad of other issues to do with moving in together. Ones that both the merchant and uncle parts of his brain really needed answers to. Then, out of nowhere, Master Cooper launched into a story of how he’d once found himself locked inside a zoo at night and had to snuggle up to a warthog to stay warm, soon bringing half the table to tears of laughter.

I sat and listened to the chat flow this way and that, thinking of nothing at all, content to just enjoy the night for what it was. Appreciating it for that slither of joy that I wouldn’t have given up for anything.

The end of book 4 – thank you very much for reading.