

# 1

## GROWING PAINS

Likeable was not a word to describe the beast that lived in the Halfhouse. The one with the marred, knobby knees. True, there were three pairs of marred, knobby knees in that household, but one set was attached to filthy feet with long mangled toenails. That said, filthy feet and mangled toenails also belonged to the other two HalfHouse residents. Perhaps it's best to point out the nasty, conniving scowl of this beast, and the poky little eyes. Not to mention the foul smell. But there too we see no difference between the three.

Only one beast, however, had feathers! And a crooked, brown beak! And this beast was at present pacing the top floor room of the Halfhouse.

Now, just outside the window of this room, straddling a large tree branch, there perched a girl named Root Karbunkulus whose knees, feet, eyes, and smell were nothing like those of the aforementioned trio. She was a bit scruffy, true, but the long pumpkin-gold strands of her hair still had shine, and a daily dash in a rain barrel kept her inoffensively clean for the most part.

Root had spent her early childhood years in this top floor room beneath its gaping hole in the roof, petitioning stars and planets for freedom, and, more often, dodging a thunderous sky. Of all things in this world to have taken up residence in it now, the last Root fathomed was the Aunts' foul guard-rooster, Kluk. Yet, there he was, his ugly, meaty comb flapping like an...ugly, meaty comb, his neck half-plucked and strutting.

For those of you familiar with Kluk, you know a few of his oddities, the first being his name, pronounced Klook, with a long vowel, which is, yes, amusing, but mostly annoying. Something about that long vowel made this rooster feel like king of the coop indeed. Especially now, scoring up the ragged clothes of his makeshift bed. The clothes that did not belong to him and that were now fully covered in rooster crud.

“Those’re mine, you jerk!” Root whispered angrily.

The moon was high and bright, its icy beams reaching her like stalactites. Root ignored the cold in her cheeks and tried to come up with a new plan. Though they were only a single pair of trousers and two shirts, she needed them. She couldn’t keep wearing Fledger’s clothes. They were man-sized and in danger of falling off half the time. Her only other outfit had long outlived its welcome. It smelled worse than...well Kluk if she were being honest. Falling into sewer sludge will do that.

A boisterous spat below broke her concentration. She lowered herself on the branch to spy into the main floor window. She stifled a gasp. The Halfhouse had always been a wreck - every resident of Shade Howl knew that - but with Root no longer there to cook and clean, it was worse than she had ever seen it. Dirty plates were piled. Dirty socks were strewn. Grime had thickened, flies colonized heaps of useless ruffraffery. And there, in the centre of this dump and clutter, the other two Halfhouse residents stood.

The Aunts.

Do not be fooled by the familial term. These Aunts would force a toddler to scavenge the streets, *after* she had flossed their boggy teeth *and* popped all their nose

pimples. They were fouler than any Foul Fiend, truly.

At the moment, these ogreish sisters were arguing, which, again, was no surprise to anyone. Octavia looked fit to pummel as she bore down on the scarcely younger Carblotta. It was like watching a giant beet kicking a tall noodle. Root shuddered as she remembered the routine.

She looked away. And that's when she saw them – two beady, red-rimmed eyes. Kluk was practically filling up the whole window, and as his cocky head tilted in recognition, Root knew instantly that her number was up.

She leapt.

Her porch landing was soft - the Aunts heard nothing over their own yelps and curses. But Kluk was already chest-puffed and flapping down the stairs, sounding the alarm.

Root had one grace on her side, which was the second oddity of Kluk. Kluk's cockadoodle-do was a cockadoodle-dud. It came out more like a wheeze, and this gifted Root the few seconds she needed to make for the Halfhouse's iron gates.

She was nearly there, mowing down weeds and quack grass when the porch lamps lit and the door swung open, spilling a coffin of light into the yard. Rooster feet skidded across the deck.

“What is it Klukie?” Octavia lumbered out, her beady eyes peering into the night.

“Flamma!” Carblotta cried, and a sphere of light bloomed in her hand, bright enough to illuminate the grounds.

Root dove. To her misfortune, she landed beside a plant that the residents of Shade Howl resentfully

called Choker. And for good reason. The moment it sensed her, its tendrils reached in the dark.

Root pursed her lips and tried to inch away as the Aunts scanned for signs of their intruder. They knew better than to trudge the damp, shadowy yard at night. There were far too many carnivorous plants ready to gnaw up a limb or two.

While this kept Root safe from them, Choker was another thing altogether. Each squirm brought a sharp squeeze to her leg. Her eyes watered as she stifled a yelp.

“What’s that?” Octavia blurted.

“Spyrian char!” Carblotta said, and her orb lamp hovered further into the yard.

Root ducked from its encroaching light as Choker twined around her arms. Choker was making good progress on her torso too when at long last Carblotta said, “Ain’t nothin’ there, Klookie,” and the orb lamp retreated.

Kluk was the last to leave. While the Aunts shuffled indoors to continue their battle in peace, he ensured an ample amount of flap and wheeze, ensuring Root knew that he knew, and that he knew she knew that he knew. There was a distinct fowl scowl before the porch lamp was snuffed and darkness returned to the yard.

Now there was only Choker to contend with. Lucky for Root, in her attempts to escape, she scraped up against a Thrusting HornWeed. The HornWeed did what all HornWeeds do. It thrust. Root crouched as its biggest and pointiest horn landed in Choker’s thick stalk. The shriek, though blood-curling, went unheard over the Aunt shrieks inside, and as Choker turned its ire on the HornWeed, Root fled to the iron gates, down

Cork's Prowl, over Beacon Hill, and toward Fat Quail Square.

Not until she reached the sleeping hush of the square, did she slow her pace and catch her breath. What had she been thinking, returning to that vile place? She shook her head and made for the shadows, not wanting to be seen. Long fingers of frost had taken the shop windows hostage, and a wintering moon glinted in the icy waters of the fountain.

She passed Peabody Punt's Pie Pen, and from there, Parchment & Prose. She willed herself not to look inside their windows. Their memories were among the last spent with Fledger, and each reminder sunk sick and heavy in her stomach.

Shivering, she slipped down an alley and climbed a makeshift scrap pile to the rooftops. A warm chimney welcomed her, overlooking the pale smokestacks of a thousand more. She relaxed her shoulders. She was safe. No one could find her here.

At least that was the hope.

"Hey!"

Root looked down to see a boy in a slant of moonlight, waving. She shook her head. "Brecken? What're you doing up so late?"

His mouth opened to answer but then closed as he held up a finger. Root watched his body lift off the ground, smooth and silent as a balloon. Seconds later, his sheepish smile levelled with hers and his tall, lanky form stepped onto the shingles.

"I'd ask you the same thing," he said huddling close to the chimney. "Scooch, scooch."

Root moved over. "I was trying to get my clothes back from the Aunts," she explained. "But Kluk's using them for his bed. In my old room, no less!"

Brecken laughed. "No surprise there." He glanced down at Root. "What's wrong with what you've got on?" On her dour look, he shrugged. "Looks fine to me."

"Oh, please. Everything on me is Fledger's." She lifted the vast bulk of a man's sweater to reveal rope-synched trousers that were rolled up at her feet and three over-sized shirts tucked in at her waist. "I had to. I was starting to smell."

"Well, you're right about that." He wrinkled his nose, dodging her swift punch with a laugh.

A cold wind swept in billowing white whirls across the rooftops. They pressed closer to the chimney and fell into silence.

"No signs of him then?" Brecken asked at last.

"Nothing," Root said. "I've looked everywhere."

And this was true. Every single day since Fledger's disappearance she had searched building to alley, every drab, hidden corner of Shade Howl, hoping to find his tall frame and kind eyes.

Brecken straightened and faced Root. "Look, I know he's like the dad you never had and all, but I don't think you should stick around any longer."

"I can't leave, Brecken. What if he comes back?"

"What if he doesn't? And Picklepug finds you?"

"I've got my pardon."

Brecken scoffed. "You think a little piece of paper will stop the Guardian of Lanlynne? *He's* the law, Root. *He* decides. Here! You want proof!"

He held up his hand. Root winced; it was an unrecognizable thing hanging in a cold blue glow at his wrist.

“It’s so much worse!” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, which means yours will soon be too.”

Root pulled a sock-mitten off her hand. It was awash in the same strange blue glow as Brecken’s. Though not quite as withered, the tips had shriveled into an unliving black.

“This is some dark Ember like nothing I’ve seen,” Brecken said. “If we don’t get some help soon, I’ve no doubt we’ll lose our hands altogether.”

“That’s Picklepug’s plan, isn’t it?” Root said, bitterly. “Return to the Clade or else.”

“The Clade for you. The Crawlers for me,” Brecken shuddered.

Silence engulfed them again as their brains tried to make sense of the world below the rooftops.

Brecken turned and warmed his back against the chimney. “When he wanted you to stay in the Clade, you said he made it sound all grand and exciting. What if it is?”

“How can it be?” Root said. “He’s a Bratjacker. His only interest in kids is their price on the Soot Market. After *he’s* spent them dry. It’s all a ruse. Sooner or later the truth will come out.”

“I dunno. The Newsies say he took over because there was treachery in the Clade jury. That he’s bringing back order or something.”

“Of course they say that; he’s controlling them too!”

“What if we told the Newsies the truth, that he’s--”

“Who’s gonna believe a couple of kids that the leader of our country is a Bratjacker? If we even mention it, his Badges’ll lock us up for sure! Worse, they’d take us straight to him! To his big stupid fancy office in the Clade tower.”

“We’d just jump from the window again.” Brecken grinned. “I’m a much better Aerist now. I avoid the trees...mostly.”

Root didn’t take the bait. “I don’t think we’d be so lucky a second time.” Her voice grew small. “I just...I hope my friends are okay.”

The sinking feeling of her stomach now caught in her throat. She missed Lian and Dwyn beyond words. But she could never go back to the Clade. At least, not this Clade. The one she had joined had a noble mission to seek and restore great historic treasures. She had loved her brief time in its care. Not only had she and her friends found a powerful healing elixir, but they had done so on the wings of thrilling adventure. This new Clade, the *Guardian’s* Clade held nothing but dark clouds in its future.

Another long silence drew out between Root and Brecken. This time, Root broke it with a dreaded question. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

Brecken sighed. “Come with me. I can’t in good conscience leave without you. You did after all save me from that horrible Spiker.”

“Well, you saved me from the Guardian’s tower.”

“You saved me from the Soot Market. *And-*”

“I can’t go, Brecken. I can’t leave without Fledger. He means more to me than anything. I’m alive because of him.” She scuffed at a loose shingle. “What about you? Your hand?”



“The plan is to find a counter Stamp. Hopefully while it’s still attached.” Brecken met her eyes. “You sure?”

“Go,” Root nudged him. “Before the Badges are out.”

“I won’t be long so don’t go disappearing, Root.”

“Where’m I gonna go?”

“Good point. Okay...” He pulled out a long, white quill. “But first a little artful expression. You know how much the Guardian loves my personal touch.”

Root laughed. “Draw his eyes extra demon-y for me.”

“Will do!”

Brecken drew in for a hug. Root buried herself into his chest, afraid he would see the brimming tears in her eyes.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” he said, feet slowly lifting off the roof. “You better have some steaming Chorm ready!”

“Watch out for that--”

“Ouch!” Brecken rammed into the bell tower, grinned, and re-routed himself toward a distant alley where posters of Studaben Pickleug clung like omnipotent lords.

Root watched him land. A moment later he pulled off a poster and faced her, holding it high. She was too far away to see it clearly, but she applauded anyway. When he waved it again, pointing and crowing, she thought to join him - she’d always wanted to add swinewarts and lopsided ears to the Guardian’s smug face – but a shadow moved into the alley.

“Brecken!” Root screamed. “Badge!”

The shadow leapt into view, revealing a familiar grey buckled uniform and Dominion crest. For a moment Root's heart stopped; the Badge had Brecken cornered and was closing in. But her friend launched into the air, just dodging the man's reach. Root closed her eyes with relief. When next she opened them, Brecken was caught in the currents, and spinning toward the moon.

Loneliness gusted in with the wind, and Root suddenly wished to have taken him up on his offer. But now the Badge was in a furious march toward her. She slid the pitch and leapt to the next roof. And the next and the next. In short time, she reached her destination. Certain the Badge had long given up, she dropped into a dark yard and, ducking low, made her way to the door of the Copper Quill scribe shop.

This time last year, the Copper Quill was a port of fine books. One could spend days in its aisles, browsing strange and exotic titles, some with covers of bone or glass or soft fur, one with a live Pulpling living inside it, many harbouring secret codes and encryptions that even a great Lexik such as Fledger struggled to make sense of.

The Copper Quill had always been Root's place of refuge. Fledger had welcomed her through its doors since the first day he caught her, a small scavenger, raiding his garden. He made tea and a pot roast, and for the rest of her young years he taught her the meaning of love.

Now, under the frigid moon, the Copper Quill was in shambles. And Fledger was gone. The Guardian had not taken kindly to Root's rejection, you see, and his punishment came swift. On his command, the shop was taken to its knees. As to

Fledger, Root didn't know if he had been captured or if he fled. All she knew was that she missed him with an ache that never left.

Once inside, she breathed in the paper and ink smells of Fledger's work and dropped into his old chair. Grief and her cursed hand had made slow work of clean up - everywhere she looked, ruin gawked back - but it was home. A stack of books surrounded her, each one a lesson in Ember magic, dog-eared and underlined and practiced till sleep forced its hand.

She reached for *The Green Horns Guide to Cinchy Ember Stamps* when a sound startled her. This was not the usual coughing of pipes or wind through a broken window. This noise was human.

"Fledger?" Root's voice came like a squeak as she got to her feet and peered into the shop's kitchen.

"Keep it down there, missy or you'll bring about the Badges." The man stood from a crouch behind the counter with a small lantern in his grip. Between his bloodshot eyes and ruddy red nose, he did not look like he had come for dainties. What he *had* come for was in a sack slung over his shoulder where a great many of Fledger's belongings now poked out.

Anger seized Root. "Those aren't yours!"

The man laughed, now assessing a plate with quick calculation. "And I suppose y'think they're yours then?" He tossed the plate and looked at her directly.

"No," Root puffed up her chest. "They belong to Drace Marlowe Fledger, the owner of this establishment."

The man looked around. "Well, either this Drace Marlin Whosit is a poor housekeeper or he's no longer the occupant. I'd wager it's the latter. Now, hit the dirt

b'fore I lose my good manners.”

“He’s not gone! He just...left for a bit. He’s coming back! Could be back any minute, in fact! And he wouldn’t take kindly to you helping yourself to his property.”

“This property’s been abandoned for weeks. And I’m layin’ claim to it. Now, you got ten seconds t’scam or I’ll evict ya myself.”

His glare left her and landed on a cup. A very special cup. One of two that had shared tea and laughter and cozy autumn mornings. Fledger had inked an ‘R’ on it and always handed it to Root alongside a cookie. Now, the sight of it in this man’s grubby paws made her do something she had never done before.

“Flotus Char!” she cried without thinking.

The man jumped as his sack hovered off his shoulder and out of reach. “What the...?” He eyed Root carefully now. “How’d a street rat like you get Ember?”

“I’m not a street rat. I’m a Bone Grit...well, I was...Anyway, it doesn’t matter. The point is, I’m magic, so you better scam or *I’ll evict you!*”

Even as she said this, the sack faltered in the air and dipped up and down as if battling to stay aloft. The man noticed and a smirk spread into his face. “How long you been kindling that there Ember?” He moved from the counter, closing the gap between them.

Root grabbed Fledger’s letter opener. Its long twist of silver had a wide-winged bat on the end...and a nice long point on the other. She wielded it threateningly. “Long enough! So...s-stand back!!”

The sack, unable to hold its levitation, dropped to the ground with a defeated plunk.

“Uh huh.” The man’s eyes glinted with glee. He leered at Root and stepped even closer, tilting his head, “You look familiar.”

“Feterol!” Root cried.

At this, the man’s hands shot together behind his back. It was enough to sway his confidence. He dropped to his knees. “Please! You would take advantage of a poor Cold like me? No magic to defend himself!”

Root felt a surge of guilt. She knew moments like this intimately. Not long ago, she was in the same position as the man, a lowly Cold without Ember in her veins. “I...I’m sorry,” she lowered the letter opener. “I know what it’s like to be a Cold.”

He looked up, cloying sweetness in his toothless grin. “Do y’now?”

Root nodded. “Not long ago, I was scavenging like you.” She looked around the debris of the room and picked up a book. “Here, take this.”

“Oh me!” the man said. “But that’s hardly worth two thousand Junos.”

“Two thousand Junos!” Root laughed. “Not likely. But it’s worth a few meals for sure. It’s a first edition.”

“Well then,” the man slowly got to his feet. “I guess I’ll just take it...and you with it!” His hands – not bound at all, at least not anymore – shot out and sprung for Root.

“Retreten!” Root cried. At once her feet started stepping backward. “No, not me!” she hollered, fighting her slow retreat.

Sinewy arms wrapped around her. “Hold still you!” the man grunted, securing a tight grip. “Y’got the right Stamps there, missy, just not the strength t’hold ‘em.

Lucky for me.”

Pinning her, he reached for his collection of goods and moved for the door. He did not notice the brief shadow overhead until it was too late. The shadow belonged to a Numyn fruit bat, and this fruit bat was now in a vertical dive for his scalp!

“Hey! what the...!”

“Wingbit!” Root cried, as the sharp claws of Fledger’s beloved pet made contact.

“Ouch!” The man released Root and swatted at Wingbit as she dodged and swooped again, targeting his big, lumpy nose. “Get it off me!”

Root, still stuck in her Retreating Stamp, backed away as the man flailed and careened into a shelf. “Hurlen Char!” she yelled over his cursing.

Immediately, the fallen books launched toward him, each corner and hard cover leaving a fresh new welt.

“Why you little...!” The man staggered toward Root as Wingbit clawed out clumps of his hair.

He was almost upon her when Root reached for a chain in the ceiling, prompting a heavy attic ladder into his path. His head caught it and smashed through a rung, effectively pinning him. Root thought that might be the end of it, but with a roar he broke free of the ladder and made a furious charge toward her.

She raced into the kitchen, grasping and hurling anything within reach— spice jars, syrup cans, baskets, pots, even Fledger’s heavy pestle and mortar. The man didn’t even slow down. She scrambled for a bottle on the counter - flexible with a narrow tip. Facing the man, she squeezed the bottle as hard as she could. Its contents spurted in an arc and covered his face,

eyebrow to chin, in a great red splat.

All this garnered was a slapdash wipe and a brown-toothed grin. "That's all y'got? Tomato paste?" He was about to howl with laughter, but stopped abruptly - something wasn't right. His face suddenly broke into a blotchy sweat. He clutched his throat and looked at Root, who held the bottle with its label out:

*Gramma Geedle's Flaming Hot Tornado Sauce*  
*Earn the burn!*

There was a small firebomb at the bottom.

By the time the words struck, the man was panting, his mouth was drooling, and tears streamed his ruddy cheeks. With a wail, he scraped at the burning sauce. When a semblance of sight returned, he scanned for Root, but she was gone. Squinting past the counter, he noticed movement to his right.

Root had managed to scoot into a nook behind a giant sack, but she had grown since the last use of this hiding spot; her legs no longer fit. By the time she squeezed them in, it was too late. The man's wicked smile loomed over her. But Root was no fool. She flashed him the same wicked smile. At which point her fists struck each side of the sack with a great and mighty blow.

Flour exploded into the man's face. He choked as it clogged his throat and nose. When a second douse of Gramma Geedle's landed in his eyes, he shrieked and tripped blindly for escape.

Wingbit steered him along with nips and scratches, even holding the door open for him as he staggered out, letting in a blast of cold.

“You’ll pay for this, girl!” he yelled.

His last impression was that of a drunken ghost in heavy clogs on ice. When an alley swallowed him at last, Root collapsed into her chair and heaved air to her lungs. That was the most Ember she had ever used, and it had wrung her like a dish rag.

“Thanks, Wingbit,” she sighed as Fledger’s bat landed on her shoulder with an affectionate squeak.

Root went to pat her little friend, but a pain shot through her wrist. “Ow ow ow ow!” she lifted her hand to the light. Beneath its pale blue glow, she saw new swelling and bruises. It hurt all the way to her elbow now.

A sting in her eyes threatened tears. She was exhausted. She was alone, and she was scared. Every bit of her wanted to collapse into a surrendered heap. Around her, Fledger’s beloved scribe shop looked worse than ever, and she worried his heart would break to see it on his return. That’s when the first Whatif struck, piercing her without mercy.

*What if he doesn’t return?*

And, of course, as is well known, Whatifs roam in packs. The rest came hot on the heels of the first.

*What if he’s gone forever?*

*What if she can’t survive on her own?*

*What if her hand gets worse?*

*What if Brecken can’t find a counter Stamp?*

*What if Brecken doesn’t come back either?*

*What if he and Fledger are hurt or...or...?*

“What if, what if, what now,” Fledger’s sturdy voice opened like a great white sail above the others.



In the memory, Root straightened her spine. *What if, what if, what now.* It was Fledger's reply whenever she went on a worrying spiral. It meant: All whatifs, no matter their number, eventually lead to what now.

So...What now?

Root drew in a breath right down to her belly then, in its slow release, she looked about the shop with presence. Fledger was gone, yes, but as to anything else, her Whatif had no business. He was simply not here at the moment.

She continued her quiet observation. Debris littered the floor. The attic ladder had fallen from its hinges. Wet cold was stealing in from the broken windows. And the open cupboards of the kitchen now sat empty. Her *what if I starve to death* was quickly doused and replaced with the simple admission that there was no food - not forever, just right now.

A sound arose from the streets, spurring her heart into a sprint. *What if it's Badges? What if that squatter sent them after me? What if they take me to Death Flat?? What if I—*

It was the gentle nip of Wingbit that stopped Root mid-panic. She breathed again. Yes, Badges were likely to come – sooner rather than later. So then, what now?

With sleet in a slushy descent outside and sleep missing in action, Root came to it at last, the thing she had been dreading for weeks. In that moment, she made the hardest decision of her life.

She looked at Wingbit. "We have to go."

It was time to flee the broken bones of the Copper Quill, from its once warm hearth, teeming books, and tea, to the dark, cold and abandoned streets of Shade Howl.

## 2

# JIGGERS

Wingbit's shiny black eyes blinked, happy to see newfound courage in Root, and together they sorted through the debris of the mangled shop.

A mix of practical and wistful found its way into a wagon. Of the practical came a pot, a pan, utensils, an axe, a lantern, a handful of Junos (enough to buy a loaf or two of bread), and other such survivalings. Root also packed one of Fledger's bows and a quiver of arrows, hoping to forage memory for the lessons he had given her, and wishing she had paid more attention.

Of the wistful, Wingbit insisted upon Fledger's writing quill, the one they'd seen him ink and scrape across countless candlelit pages. His favourite.

A great many of Fledger's books also made it into their little wagon, many of them what Root knew he treasured most, and the rest on the topic of Ember. If she couldn't get any knowledge out of them, they would at least make good kindling for a fire.

Gradually, with heaviness in her heart, Root steered the wagon from the Copper Quill into Shade Howl's slumbering streets. Along the darkened square, a purple glow in the Luscious Leaf shop window caught her attention. Frost spilled across the pane, so she scraped a peephole with a fingernail. A dozen Spark Willows blinked back at her. Root had seen Spark Willows before. She had, in fact, seen one so big it housed tables. But these Willows were wintering. Their golden buds of light were cocooned under purple

leaflets and nestled in boughs of white. The result was an enchanted gleam, like plum lanterns in freshly fallen snow.

Root drew back and scanned the landscape with new eyes. She could see it now, the faraway mountain peaks, purple and sleeping, and bright blue Frost Berries in garlands and ground cover. It was Winterset - that festive time of year when all who entered a home brought with them twinkling bouquets and steaming pot pies. Instruments stirred in nimble hands, spoons slapped, and voices raised a roof. Winterset was comfort cakes after a feast, and games until midnight.

Root would have sunk to her knees in the unbearable sorrow of the occasion without Fledger, but there was no time for such things. Though Winterset meant the cold - the coldest cold - had passed, it would be a while before nighttime temperatures complied. Her hands were already numb. With Badges lurking, there was only one place she could think of to lodge for the night.

The moon had tipped toward the earth's other half by the time the Junke Lot came into view. Root trudged toward it. It was her only choice. No one would think to look for her there among the rusted heaps of scrap and metal. She wheeled her wagon under its iron arch and peered around. Cold night appeared in her breath and in the biting frost of old pipes.

“Flamma.” A golden glow billowed in Root's palm.

In its light, discarded trinkets flashed, brittle and silent. Shivering, she wheeled her wagon deeper into the Junke Lot's cavernous ribs. It was a frozen, ferrous wasteland, but it would have to do. She was dead tired.

She just wanted to rest, away from the Guardian's reach. Even his dutiful Badges wouldn't think to find her here, where rock and iron choke out the living.

The Junke Lot had once been a scavenger's hotbed. After the war, unused Ember Stamps were found among its rubble. Some had come from abandoned Ember shops, but most came from homes whose members had not survived.

Scavengers had arrived in throngs. Ember Stamps were pulled from their war-torn graves and promptly pressed into palms, blessing lucky finders with magic, and changing their lives forever. By the time the Aunts pushed four-year-old Root into the trade, the Junke Lot had been picked to a skeletal wilderness.

It was Fledger who had gifted Root with magic. He gave her the Ember Stamp that was meant for his son, had his son lived. She clung to the memory now as the lot's steel and tin silently watched her trespass.

Weakened by the skirmish in the shop, Root's hand had lapsed into ruin. It hung at her wrist, a dead thing. She wondered how much time she had left before the Guardian's curse made full claim of it. Would she survive? Would the Junke Lot take pity and salvage her as it had the rest of its mangled residents?

In times like this, she could have made true use of an Aer Pyre like Brecken. With a special magic like that, she would have set after him by now, Wingbit's clever navigation leading the way.

But no. Root's Ember had not blessed her with such an ability. She had been given a Wits Pyre. And while she would never belittle the gift - it had saved her life after all - it had become more of a curse than a blessing. Turns out, the ability to read minds brings all

manner of intrusions to the untrained Witsin. These unfamiliar voices had pushed their way in ever since Root's Wits Pyre had first bloomed. She thought she would go mad from their constant blabbering.

Jorab had warned her of their onset, and Root longed for his mentorship again. He was the only one who had a Wits Pyre like hers, and he had just begun to train her. But, like everyone else, he suffered the Guardian's rapid takeover and, for all Root knew, he too had fled the Clade, never to return. Now, she had to tune out the voices as best as she could on her own.

She spied a large steel crate that was turned upside down. Rust ate at it, and it looked cramped, but her eyelids were too heavy to care. She parked the wagon and attempted to lift one side of the crate. Her intention was to brace it and slip underneath, but it was much heavier than expected, and its iced surface made her single-handed grip nearly impossible. With a push of determination, she steered the crate into a tilt. But now she could feel her arm crippling under its weight.

Just as her fingers folded, she felt the crate hoist upward. She looked for the reason and found a creature of some sort. It was a dog, a mechanical canine with dented silver-spoon ears. When its eyes, a pair of field-glass orbs, met hers, a curly spring on its rear lifted and wagged. Root felt a rush of warmth; this odd mechanical dog was helping her. She summoned the last of her strength, shouldering the weight while the dog's paws extended, pushing the crate high enough to slip in a brace.

Just as Root was wondering who would do just that, another sound, something of a whirring, was heard on her left. A quick glance caught sight of

another mechanical creature, this one a fat, tarnished bumblebee. Its wire legs had magnetically grasped a long iron bar, and now a pair of pewter wings deployed it toward the crate. Once the bar was securely braced, Root and the dog released with a sigh.

“Thank you!” Root straightened to formally greet her helpmates.

“Eeb! What’re you two up to?” came a gruff voice.

Root turned and was surprised to see a woman approaching. She was adorned, head to toe, in the scrapments of the Lot. Indeed, she looked like she’d been born of them. A long leather coat, studded with brass knobs and countless pockets, trailed behind metal-cleated boots. From a nest of steel-wool hair grew a tall, rumpled hat, from which was housed a clock, a keyhole and all manner of gadgetry.

“Oh!” the woman spied Root and stopped her advance. A large magnifying glass unfolded from a hidden recess in her hat and placed itself in front of her eye. The eye, now disturbingly huge, scrutinized Root from top to bottom. “Didn’t know we had guests,” the woman said at last, swivelling her gaze to meet Root’s rounded stare.

“I’m sorry,” Root spluttered. “I didn’t know...I mean...is this private property?”

The huge eye now peered curiously at Root’s sickly hand. With a grimace, Root slipped it into her pocket. The woman stiffened and promptly returned the magnifying glass to its rightful slot in her hat. “That it is not, m’dear. This here’s the Junke Lot. A common rejectamenta t’some, but t’others, myself I’m speaking of now, and Eeb, o’course. And good ol’ God.” Here she gestured to the mechanical bee and dog now at her

side. "This is what we call home."

"Mew." A new robotic creature sprung out from behind Root's wagon, a nuts 'n bolts feline with large glass eyes that glazed from blue to green in the flickering lamplight.

"Yes, and you too, Tac!" the woman laughed.

Root heard a tiny machine-like whirrrr as the cat rubbed its copper form against her legs.

"Well now, looks like Tac's taken a liking to ya," the woman said. "What's your name, girl?"

"Root."

"Root, eh? Y'got a last name, Root?"

"Karbunkulus."

The woman drew back. "Carbuncle? Ain't that a blistry, pus-filled boil?"

Normally, Root would have stiffened with anger at this remark; she had suffered it her whole life. But now she knew better. "No," she said as she held up her good hand, revealing a grafted print across its palm.

"Well now, that's an innerestin' Ember Etch," the woman said, leaning in to examine what appeared to be a deep-red stone in the fleshy folds. "They're s'posed t'represent yer character, ain't they?"

"Uh huh," Root smiled. "It's a carbuncle, one of the strongest gemstones in the world."

A delighted laugh rose from the woman. "Well, I'll bel!" She reached out and gave Root's hand a hearty shake. "I'm Sussim. And well, you've met the rest of the gang."

Root nodded and smiled at the burnished faces.

"You plan on stayin'?" Sussim asked.

"If...I mean, if it's alright."

“Well, you’ll need a good fire if y’wanna last the night. Gets more’n cold here. Frost’ll have ya b’fore mornin’.”

Sussim spent another few seconds ogling and smiling, enough for Root to notice leaden teeth and assorted scars. A movement inside the wagon forced Root’s attention to yet another mechanical creature, this one peering out from her supplies. The creature turned a bulbous eye and bloated chin toward Root. It was a frog of crude silver.

“Gorf!” the woman yelled. “Get on outta there! That doesn’t belong t’you!”

The frog leaped with a croak onto Sussim’s shoulder and vanished into the folds of her hat.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” the grey teeth flashed.

“It’s okay.” Root smiled. She was actually rather smitten with these Junke Lot inhabitants.

“Right then, c’mon Eeb, God, Tac...let’s let our new neighbour get ‘erself settled.” Sussim nodded to Root. “We’ll be up there, if y’need anything.” She pointed to a giant duct halfway up a cliff of debris. A fire in its middle gave the impression of a blazing eye hovering in careful watch over the whole of the Junke Lot.

Root watched the woman leave, her tin-spun companions in tow. In truth, Root had expected to come across at least a few Jiggers, being that she was moving into a Junke Lot. But she hadn’t expected a woman to be living among them, claiming them as pets no less.

The Jiggers she had heard about were shapeless, scurrying scraps of hardware that had somehow come to life in Junke Lots, though no one knows how. There



were theories, of course. Chronicler, Irma Bentshoe claimed they drew life from ancient underground graves, while a few mystics thought it more the effects of rusting. According to them, rust was to Jiggers what blood was to humans. The metalsmiths chalked it up to the randomness of sparks over time, their long-held belief being that all life sprang from a single spark.

If there was to be any agreement among them, it would be that Jiggers, at any rate, were known as pests, certainly not pets. And that's what Root had believed until now. Now, when she thought of them, the world felt a little less lonely. Especially when one's world had shrunk to a cold metal crate.

Root peered into the black dome of night, hoping to spy Wingbit, but her little friend had taken to hunting down dinner, and would likely not return until morning.

Root decided to tend her new lodge. She would surprise Wingbit with a homecoming of blankets, books and firelight. When all were thoughtfully in place, she went to the wagon, seeking a fresh bandage for her hand; the activity had worked it into a throbbing ache.

Cradling it to her chest, she rifled through her supplies and noticed an opened canister. Her heart stopped. She snatched the canister and looked inside. Empty. Her entire pouch of Junos was gone, every last coin!

She fell against the wagon in a wave of sickness and clawed her memory for clues, remembering every step leading to the Junke Lot. Realization struck. *That frog. That Jigger frog!*

An image came into sharp focus: the frog's mouth.

There had been an unnatural bulk to it. Her Junos must have been hidden inside! That little tin brute!

Root looked way up to the Jiggers' blazing wheel of fire. Her eyes narrowed into angry slits.



Dense cloud darkened the sky, making Sussim's fire duct a burning banner for Root to hold target. By the time she reached the jagged lip of its entrance, her good hand was as bashed and cut up as the other. Goaded by anger, she stumbled over a rampart of iron slats and landed inside the duct.

It was much bigger than expected, a massive throat of echoing steel. Sussim was there with her creatures, sitting at her fire, humming a tune. Her half-gloved fingers tore paper into jagged strips that she fed into the flames.

God saw Root and hatched a hollow bark. At the same time, Tac appeared from the shadows and twined around Root's legs.

Sussim looked up. "Ah, decided to join us, didjya?"  
"Your frog stole my money."

Sussim's tune paused in her throat. A moment passed before she returned to her torn kindling. "Gorf, didjya hear that? She says you stole her money."

Gorf peered out from the safety of Sussim's hat. The bloat of his chin was noticeably smaller, Root thought. He swivelled a tin eye and shook his head in denial.

"Yes, you did! My Junos were in your mouth before you left!" Root stepped deeper inside the duct, accidentally tripping on Tac, who hissed and swiped a

brass paw across her leg. Root bent over in pain. A clean gash was already beading with blood.

“Tac!” Sussim cried. “That’s enough now. You too God!” She snapped her fingers. At once the dog dipped its tail and sat. Sussim turned a flushed face to Root. “Now why would Gorf do a thing like that?” There was something about her expression that made Root’s stomach hoist. “Why would he take a few measly Junos from you?” She held up one of the papers she had been tearing. “When we can get two thousand from the Guardian.”

Root’s cheeks drained of colour. Her own face stared back at her from the paper’s folds. The word *Reward* loomed above her image in large black letters. Below this, she read of her ‘Wanted’ status and two thousand Junos to the person who would lead to her whereabouts.

*Two thousand Junos*, that squatter had said. And, *you look familiar*. Now, Root knew why. And now she also knew that it was not a poster of the Guardian that Brecken was frantically waving.

Sussim licked her lips and casually tossed the page atop the others in the fire. Root watched the flames rise as a sinister smile spread across the woman’s face. Behind her, Root heard a noise. She ran to the mouth of the duct. Far below, she saw beams of light cutting across the Junke Lot. Badges! Sussim told them Root was here!

She heard a tongue cluck and turned back to see Sussim now flanked by her loyal pets. “Sic ‘er,” the woman said with chilling calm. The Jiggers erupted in pursuit.

Root leapt from the duct’s mouth onto a landslide

of scraps and cast iron. She toppled downward, slicing, bruising, ducking from the hunting beams. She reached the ground and was about to run when one of the light shafts found her.

“There she is!” a Badge cried.

Root darted from the white glare into a maze of lead bricks. There was no light here save for the grainy attempts of a Lot lamp. She took to shadows and, reaching a dark corner, paused to get her bearings.

Pain suddenly struck her heel with an intensity that drew her to her knees. When a second stab met her shoulder, she turned to see Eeb’s shining metal stinger rounding back, this time aiming for her head. Root swatted in defense, but only gained another stab in her palm. She stifled a scream. It was her bad hand, and the pain was unbearable. She crouched, cradling it while Eeb came in for another attack.

Something swooped. There was the sound of jarring circuitry, and a moment later, Wingbit flapped over to a perch and spit out what was left of the Jigger.

Root thought she would cry in relief. She pulled herself up and, with a nod to her little winged companion, set to follow. As Badges closed in, their shouts ringing off metal, she limped around a stack of pipe and scanned for escape. Aha! A hole in the fence! She ran.

Ahead of her, Gorf appeared and, with a casual croak, moved into her path. Root grabbed a large iron pipe and wielded it threateningly, biting back the searing pain in her hand.

Gorf’s two mechanical allies landed on each side of him. Tac hissed, flashing a pair of glowing red eyes. The serrated track of God’s teeth bared.

“No offense or anything, love. But two thousand Junos is two thousand Junos.” Sussim appeared beast-like out of the soot. “So, if y’don’t mind...” The chest of her coat launched open and extended a robotic arm toward Root. A cage of metal tusks grew into formation as it reached her. “...how ‘bout you be a good girl and step into this here receptacle.”

Root swung her iron pipe with all her might. The cage splintered off the arm and landed at Sussim’s feet.

Sussim grit her teeth. “Shouldn’ta done that.”

She clicked her tongue. At once God and Tac flew together and bonded like magnet to steel. Root watched as their parts began to twist and meld. Then, from the heaping piles surrounding her, the rest of the world’s rejections rose against gravity and rushed, pell-mell, toward the Jiggers, merging, connecting joints, splicing and contorting to life. In no time, a machine of massive, churning presence loomed before Root.

And there, in a brass nest at its top, stood the feverish form of Sussim. Her tin teeth smiled as the final scraps of iron morphed into a new, much larger mechanical arm. Root couldn’t help but notice that this arm did not have a measly little cage at its end. Rather, life-sized fangs of corroded steel flashed in waiting.

A witty quip poised on the tip of Root’s tongue and died; her brain had trumped it for action - as in getting the heck out of there. Now! She bolted as the serrated jaws snapped at her legs. Sussim’s metal monster trampled after her, now with a host of Badges on her heels. Root dodged around a corner and was about to duck into an over-tipped bin when Wingbit caught her attention, flapping about a tangle of accordion tubing.

“Are you sure?” Root gawked at the tubing dubiously.

Wingbit’s squeaks rose in urgency. Just as Sussim’s clawing knives appeared, Root dove.

She heard the Junke woman laugh as her monstrous Jigger lunged into the twisting labyrinth of hoses. Root had squeezed into a tube large enough to fit her, and was now in a desperate wriggle, inching further and further into claustrophobic silence.

She could feel the crushing weight of her route as she buried deeper into the tangled heap. Behind her, Sussim, joined now by the Badges, shrieked, and tore in pursuit. Root pushed on through the suffocating squeeze of her tube. She feared the whole pile might collapse and crush her, but instead she caught a whiff of cool night air directly ahead.

She wriggled faster now, making her way toward the growing hollow at the end. She could see light now - the dim glow of another Lot lamp - and there, Wingbit! Root squirmed forward and, with a heaving push, fell out of the hose.

It would have been a remarkable escape if not for the Badge lurking quietly in the dark. And the rough, strangling fabric that he flung over her head.