

The Marchioness Travels West: Part I

by Jay Philia

Zebulon

Her ass caught Zebulon's eye. The globes swung pertly, rising rings straining black bustle. *Thwump/left, thwump/right, thwump/left*. The vixen's plumpness veered in perfect rhythm. He stopped, his black boots scraping the city's cobblestone.

"Here's your chance, Arac, help a fella out," he said. He pressed a knob on his wristwatch and, with a sound like a chorus of zippers loosening, the metallic straps around his wrist became undone. Eight pincer-like points, four on each side, unsheathed. The watch gears spun wildly, and the pincers pranced up his arm and across his chest, climbing up the back of his neck and stretching across his face, legs sheathing back into each other to form a sort of patch over his right eye. Zebulon pressed another knob and the clock face moved to the side, to be replaced by a thick piece of glass.

Thwump, thwump. There the booty was, magnified tenfold. He could spy every weave of wool as it threatened to burst from the plumpy push of its fleshy master. He practically drooled as the doughy pudge heaved melodically, hypnotizing his eyes as blood pooled to his phallus. Then, all too soon, the draped derrière disappeared into the throng of mourners mounting the Basilica steps. He blew out a slow whistle as he pressed a knob, prompting the arachnid automatica to climb back down toward his wrist.

"Extra, extra! Marquess slain! Just One Coin! Read all about it!"

A pipsqueak of a paperboy had pounced. Zebulon jostled and Arac fell, busted bits of spring and gears littering the muddied gaps of cobblestone. Zebulon crouched and pocketed the pieces. He rose, his wiry frame double that of the child. The soot-soiled hawker cowered, dewy eyes widening as the sun glinted against Zebulon's military medals.

"Sorry sir, real sorry sir. Paper's free, course, for you sir," the child cried. Grey, grimy rags piled atop bone-thin limbs. Hair fell past the boy's shoulders and nothing more than mud covered the boy's feet.

Zebulon snatched a paper and read the headline.

MARQUESS SLAIN!

Assassination Turning Point In "Shadow Shoot-outs"

Marchioness to Deliver Eulogy Today

"I'll have you know that I am the Royal Military escort of the Marchioness," Zebulon said. The boy's lips began to quiver. Zebulon crouched down to the child's

shoulders. He reached into a pocket with one hand and grabbed the urchin's arm with the other. Gently flipping the child's wrist, he placed a Fifty Coin into the shaking palm.

"You listen to your mum, alright?" Zebulon said. The child blinked. "Your mum still alive?" The child nodded. "Good. You listen to your mum. You buy her a nice roast tonight." He slowly pressed the child's fingers against the oversized Coin and gave the closed fist a couple pats. He rose from his crouch and sprinted up the steps of the Basilica.

Marietta

The unforgiving mahogany of the chancel pew mashed itself against Marietta's meager buttocks. She truly felt like a pincushion doll: an alabaster beauty on display, more useful as trinket than tool, tingling from the pain of a thousand jabs that everyone knew were there, but that no other soul could feel. She'd resolved to bite the bullet of public grief though she swore her teeth would shatter. Everything would shatter.

For as she sat, she could feel it all sliding away, like wax sliding down the stem of a candle. Reality itself began to slide and slip and drip down, down, down out of her grasp. She gazed into the green glow of the Neolec lights, but could see nothing but her husband, reciting his wedding vows as he slid an emerald ring down her finger. She gazed into the black tufts of hair on the back of the Arch-Pastorate's head, but could see nothing but her husband, saddling his onyx thoroughbred in the back stables. A panic soon set in, a liquid chill sliding down her back to meet the tingling of her pew-pain. For fast approaching was the one part of the day that demanded she rise above the gear-and-whistle automatica of decorous ritual.

Last night she'd bartered the sleep she knew wouldn't come, purchasing another shift in the dungeon of despair to prepare. She scooped out her heart, mangled it, wrung out the blood, scooped the blood, sweat, and tears into an inkjar, then chickenscratched a sorry simulacrum of a eulogy for a man who had no right to already be dead. It was pretty enough for the public. Enough lies and banality to be sweet enough to swallow.

Now, however, she didn't know if she could even rise from her pew without fainting, let alone deliver the only spoken sendoff for the love of her life. Her grief was like a rising tide, the waters rushing through the Basilica and up the chancel, lapping at her boots, her bustle, her bustline. Her throat. No one else was getting wet, no one else could see the water, and here she sat, like a pincushion doll on a beach, seconds from drowning.

Then, she saw him. Zebulon Graves. Sitting there in the front pew of the nave. An inscrutable stare on his face that she sculpted with ease into a sneer. His pianoman fingers were fidgeting with something. Was it a watch? Did the bastard not deign the funeral of her husband worthy of his time?

Suddenly, the waves stilled, the tide turned, and the water went out to sea. A fire took its place, a hissing, spitting, white-hot fire, rushing from the maw of a dragon. Now

she could see nothing but Zebulon Graves. His black hair drenched in grease. His shoes splotted with mud. His wiry frame as erect as his infamous, indiscriminate, interminably venereal penis.

Marietta pursed her lips, now quaking with an even fiercer feeling. Since grief could not see her through, fury would have to sustain her. She may well drown tonight, but today, now, she would roar.

Zebulon

“I shall close with a quotation from our Holy Scrolls,” said the Marchioness, winding down her surprisingly passionate eulogy. He knew he was just being paranoid, but he could have sworn she’d spent most of her speech staring straight at him. No, not staring—glaring.

“It taketh two keys to turn the door of the heart,” the Marchioness continued. “That whensoever one key rusts, doth one door close and two souls part.”

Zebulon returned the locket to his breast pocket and sprung to his feet the moment the Arch-Pastorate finished his final blessing. The Marchioness was crossing the chancel faster than he’d bargained, and, much as he’d prefer to hobnob with the plump rump he’d seen *thwump* earlier—apparently the cheeks belonged to an eager-to-please-Duchess with an oft-absent husband—he had a duty to perform.

“Your Ladyship,” he said, reaching the Marchioness not a moment before she reached the nave. He bowed his lithe body respectfully, crisply laundered uniform bending neatly at the folds.

He caught it then, he was sure of it. A distinct sense of disdain. She didn’t so much look at him, but slice him and dice him with her eyes, daggers jutting through the criss-cross gaps of her black laced veil. Her red painted lips pursed, falling flat and out like pancake batter in a stunningly obvious grimace.

“Lieutenant General Graves,” said the Marchioness. “Once again on leave, are we?”

“No, your ladyship,” said Zebulon. “Today I serve as your Royal Military escort back to the Margriavate.”

What little color had been left in the woman’s face disappeared, as if sucked out of her flesh by ravenous leeches. Her eyelids twitched but she didn’t blink.

“Oh praise be,” she started to say, in little more than a whisper. Her tone dripped with sweetness, nearly saccharine. Perhaps he’d misread her cues. She was grieving, after all. Then, “the man responsible for my husband’s death is here to ensure my safety. Good thing I’m wearing sturdy shoes.” The Marchioness hissed these words with more venom than a beadsnake, then heel-turned and barreled towards the backdoor of the Basilica.

Zebulon huffed, then followed, snaking between mourners in a rush to catch up. The Marchioness reached the exit of the apse and went through, sunlight streaming briefly before the door closed again.

“Your Ladyship!” he screamed, opening the door and dashing down the back steps. “Your Ladyship! What, are you going to outrun me?” She’d fused into the street traffic now, a black-blob in a sea of bodies. He put his training to use, visualizing her path and sprinting to cut her off at the pass. He whizzed in, out, and in-between the carriages and passengers, the bell and yells. Both her speed and stamina surprised him.

“What, are you going to outrun me?” Zebulon repeated. The Marchioness was keeled over, gulping for air. She stood mere steps from the ticket line for the airship, her indeed sturdy shoes crusted with mud. Several ticketers gawked at the site, no doubt recognizing the Marchioness from the day’s paper.

“You think the Royal Military would allow you to travel back by yourself, given...everything?” Zebulon said. Calm, cool, and collected. The Marchioness, on the other hand, looked ready to retch, but instead took another several breaths before straightening herself out, glaring once again as she spoke.

“I’ve been outwitting, outrunning, and *outgunning*—” here she shocked Zebulon with a peak of her hidden holster— “men far better than you my whole life. Do you think I need your protection? That wasn’t a service I was aware you were capable of offering.”

The ridge of his lips twitched. Zebulon practically had to clamp down his tongue.

“Your Ladyship, as Lieutenant General of the Royal Military, I have been charged as your Crown-sent protection on your voyage back to Margraviate Moundharsh,” he said.

The Marchioness stared—icy, unblinking. Then, she simply nodded sadly, her shoulders slumping in defeat, as she purchased a ticket and proceeded to board the airship, Zebulon steps behind her.

The green glow of the Neolec lighting guided them as they trudged up a slight and shallow set of stairs. Zebulon smirked silently at the Marchioness’s pitiful rear, which he could tell from years of experience was all bustle and no butt. She slid open the hanging door of the skydeck, and at once the other passengers—ladies and lords all, but of lesser standing than the Marchioness and empathetic to her urgent need to be alone—scuttled to make themselves scarce.

The Marchioness sat on a garishly ornate orange pouf abutting the window. The airship began to rise and Zebulon took his post at the back of the room, eyes scanning both his charge and the entrance. The view tempted his focus; the swirling spires of the Pastoriateship, the glittering, golden Dome of the Capitolate. High above either of these, the bulking, heaving mass of the Royal Palace and its Crown Tower, set in stone high above the city.

“You know, I’ve always hated The City,” said the Marchioness, just loud enough for Zebulon to hear her and blink in surprise. Who in their right mind could hate The City?

“Perhaps I always knew it would kill him. Someone in this City—the voice would call out from some tower, barking an order that would send my husband to his doom.” The Marchioness’s voice sounded limp, weak. Zebulon knew he would have to do it now.

The airship offered them far more privacy than he'd dreamed of, and she would surely need time to collect herself after hearing the news.

"Your ladyship," he started, crossing the airdeck.

"Oh, please do not take my grief-stricken ramblings as an invitation for idle conversation," she said, slumping forward as if in pain.

"This is not chit-chat, your ladyship," said Zebulon. One eye still set on the door, he pulled up a pouf and squatted.

"Unless you're going to tell me that my husband miraculously isn't actually deceased, I don't want to hear it," she said.

Zebulon blinked once again. Perhaps this would be easier than he thought.

"Well, your ladyship," Zebulon began, "this might be difficult for you to wrap your head around, but that's exactly what I'm going to tell you. No one in the Royal Military, the Pastoriateship, anyone, no one in this world knows it but me, and now, you. The truth is, your ladyship, that funeral service was a sham. Your husband is still alive. Not well, but alive, and we can still save him, you and I, but only if we hurry, and only if we work together."

Marietta

Her ears began to ring, nearly as loud as the beating of her heart. The room seemed to spin, and Marietta to spin with it. What was this man, this knave, this fraudster, huckster, fabulist failure of a fool saying?

Marietta stood, and through blurred vision saw Graves jump up from his pouf, a look of concern on his face. She paid it no mind, wading through the deafening *thu-thumps* of her manic heart, navigating the gyroscopic spins of the airship that seconds prior had been steady but now seemed to her to be whizzing helter-skelter, like some sort of popped balloon. She managed to make it to the soldier, who was poised as though she were a waddling toddler taking its first steps.

"Now you listen here, Zebulon Graves," she said, wielding her index finger like a jouststick and poking sharply into his chest, though the movements made her less steady still. "I can live with my husband being dead. Though every day more I will be but a ghost of myself, I can live. I can live—I can well and truly *live*, if my husband is alive. But false hope. If you f—if you *dare* feed me false hope," here she grabbed the collar of Zebulon's uniform and squeezed it tight enough for him to start to choke—"if you dare to say he is alive, out of, out of some sick, depraved joke, or out of your own irresponsible zest for happiness at the expense of truth—" here she let go of the collar as the man began to cough, an earnest panic setting into his face.

"If you lead me for one second to believe that the man is alive, only for me to find out later he is, in fact—as the whole world over admits—dead...I will have you discharged so fast whatever infedelious cunt you're fucking will snap your prick clean off as you're whisked off to the Royal Penitentiariate faster than you can say 'fair tribunal.'"

She turned, unsteadily, then zipped around to face him again. “And I’ll visit you, Graves. I’ll visit you in your cell. Me and my dogs. I’ll pour hot gravy on your balls and watch as my hounds devour—”

“Your ladyship,” Graves said. He said it calmly, which stopped Marietta in her tracks. Her breath caught. “Your ladyship,” he repeated, softer still. Silence. *Thu-thump, thu-thump*. Her heart, and the steady exhaust of the airship, was all that filled the air. “Whatever...wooing I may do on leaves,” the man said delicately. “Whatever white-lies I may fill the ears of...” the man trailed off, then started again. “May I die a thousand deaths before I lie about this: General Maximilion, my commanding officer, my comrade-in-arms, my friend. He’s alive.” Zebulon stepped further towards her and said in little more than a whisper: “Leo is alive.”

Something in her cracked. She shrieked and stumbled backward to her pouf, barely catching herself. She began to sob openly, tears tumbling down her cheeks and into her gloves. Whatever Graves thought of such a breakdown, she frankly didn’t give a damn. Her whole body heaved, breaking and cracking and fulsomely spewing all the grief she couldn’t share at the service. Somehow, she believed this wicked, bratty man, and somehow, the fact that Leo wasn’t actually dead made the fact that he should’ve, could’ve, would’ve been dead feel all the more real.

“I c-can’t do this without him,” she spluttered. Her whole body shook. She spasmed in pain.

“You won’t have to,” Graves said, his soft, gravelly whisper barely audible above her sobbing. She stopped and took in a massive breath, pulling out a flash of white from her wrist to dab away her tears.

“Leo is alive?” she asked, her voice steadying. The airship seemed steady now too, and her view of the sparsely populated grasslands proved a small mercy.

“Yes,” said Graves, crouched by her side. Somehow, he’d procured a glass of water. She took it, barely holding it steady between both of her gloved hands. She drank gingerly.

“Where is he?” Marietta said, handing the glass of water back to Graves. She watched as his brow furrowed. He took the glass all the way back to the cabinet at the skydeck’s backwall, and moved much slower back to his pouf.

“Your ladyship, how much did your husband tell you about the ‘shadow shootouts?’” Graves asked as he dragged a pouf and sat alongside Marietta.

“Nothing, of course. Those are military secrets. It would be high treason for him to have discussed anything of that nature with me,” as Marietta said this, a familiar, haughty tone returned to her voice, buttressing her spirits.

Graves looked again towards the door, uniform bending again at the creases.

“Then I’m about to commit high treason,” he said, in an even lower whisper. Marietta steeled her gaze.

“General Maximilian is alive, but is being held hostage in the UnderWorld. His only hope is for us, you and I, to go to the UnderWorld and return him to our world.”

Zebulon

He watched as a thousand thoughts seemed to flash behind The Marchioness’s emerald eyes at once. Just as he was about to brace himself to be choked out once more, she turned calmly to look out the window and simply said:

“So the rumors are true.”

“Rumors?” Zebulon said, concerned. Word getting out of the War on the UnderWorld could certainly complicate their mission.

“You know how servants talk,” said The Marchioness, who seemed to realize at once that Zebulon had never employed servants, let alone knew how they talked.

“Anyway,” the lady ventured onward, “there have been conversations circulating, chiefly among the wives of the soldiers, that there’s a reason why there’s never been a body recovered from these ‘shadow shoot-outs.’ Why no assailants have ever been captured—” at this Zebulon sought to interrupt, but she charged forward. “Oh, yes, the odd excuse of ‘escaped Penitentionates’ or ‘rogue urchins.’ Please. How long do you think the public would believe that roving bands of orphans were murdering soldiers, and somehow disappearing the bodies?”

The airship was lowering now, approaching its first stop. Zebulon did little more than look out the window at the stream of passengers disembarking. The afternoon sun bestrode the sky, a gusty wind barreling through the fields of grain.

“Still, it is no small shock to have it confirmed. By the man responsible, no less.” The Marchioness said this with no small glee. Zebulon raised himself to his full height, and went to pour himself a glass of water.

“Soldiers are allowed one leave a year,” he said, as he placed the pitcher down with a slam.

“And how lucky for you to take yours before a big expedition!” said the Marchioness.

“I thought you said you didn’t know military secrets?”

“I certainly know when my husband is going to be gone. Once again, you underestimate the basic intelligence of civilians.”

Zebulon huffed and took another drink.

“And with that, Graves, I think I shall retire to my resting quarters. We’ve hours to go until Moundharsh, and I think I shall get some rest. Something tells me I’m going to need it. I presume you will take guard?”

Zebulon nodded and followed the Marchioness to her cabin, standing squarely on the other side of the folded slat of balsa wood. He sighed and grabbed the busted bits of his arachnoid invention. It was an easy fix.

His mind cleaved in two, focusing both on the mechanics in front of him, and the machinations ahead of him. The plan was going better than he'd hoped, but there was one more part of the mission to divulge. A lady like her, a *prude* like her, she'd revile. He reached up with his free hand to massage his still sore neck. Just what would she do to him next, when he told her that their greatest currency going forward wouldn't be gold Coins, but her own body?

Zebulon

"This is Noircheval," said the Marchioness.

They stood in the stables of Margraviate Moundharsh, the sprawling estate of the Marquess. She'd opened the gate to the stall of a towering black steed, its eyes ablaze and its tail flicking like a whip.

The airship had landed them on the grounds just before dusk, and they'd marched straight there.

"He's a beauty," said Zebulon. "But is he tame?"

"Tame?" asked the Marchioness, and Zebulon could hear the sneer in her voice as clearly as he saw it against the yellow light of the stable torches. "Is anything with a soul truly tame? We can ride him, true as any beast can be ridden."

Zebulon nodded. "Then we must set off at once. We needn't bring anything. I've a friend who will lend us some... matériel for the journey ahead." The Marchioness squinted but didn't question him. Could she tell there was something he was hiding?

"I ride in front. He is my horse, after all," said the Marchioness, who proceeded to mount the beast, thrusting her foot into the stirrup and swinging her leg over with aplomb.

"Yours? I'd assumed he was..." Zebulon began.

"Of course not," she interrupted. "Leo always took Onyx on his expeditions with him. So wherever my husband is now..." her tongue didn't venture toward the grim terminus of her sentence, but merely motioned for Zebulon to join her on the horse. The man obliged, landing with a thud astride his spine. Noircheval neighed with clear agita. Zebulon's crotch slid into place against the bony backside of the lady. Zebulon smirked slightly, even if her ass felt practically concave compared to most of his intimates.

"Alright you spineless piece of shit," spat the Marchioness, her jarring venom slapping him back into focus. "Where are we going?"

"West," said Zebulon. "And we must ride with haste, before dawn comes. The supplies we seek are not being exchanged through...legal means."

"If the Crown has abandoned my husband, then I shall have no qualms about abandoning the Crown," was all the Marchioness said, and gave Noircheval an instructive kick. The horse neighed again and galloped off into the night.

Marietta

Traversing through the thickets, Marietta tried to settle into her own thoughts, in spite of the presence of the rider behind her. Graves would bark the occasional direction: “left here,” or “follow the sagebrush,” but mercilessly did not attempt to chatter.

The UnderWorld. Her husband was alive, but held hostage in the UnderWorld. Clearly, if this fool would risk high treason to rescue him, he thought there was still a chance of Leo surviving. Though how the two of them could better the forces that had bettered her husband, she had no idea. Why a man feckless and reckless enough to have caused such undue anguish in the first place, why such a man was now bothering to right his wrong, she had even less insight into. Perhaps the prick of his anemic conscience was for once outweighing the force of his blood-glutted prick. Speaking of which, if anything grew against her bustle during their journey, Marietta made the mental note to pistol whip the bastard until he crossed to the UnderWorld the traditional way.

Luckily for him, nothing grew. The moon rose, the stars shone, and the occasional screech owl would pierce its voice against the stillness of the night. Little else happened, and the journey took its toll. They rode for hours, Marietta’s legs stiffening in their stirrups. Finally, just as the moon crested the sky, Zebulon barked for her to slow down.

“We’re nearing base camp,” he said. Noircheval slowed to a trot. They wound their way up a steep hillside and into a dense clump of trees beside a marsh. Marietta looked between the leaves. Billowing throngs of smoke rose towards the heavens, the wispy offspring of dozens of small fires that rose from the neighboring glen. Noircheval stepped into a small glade and the view disappeared.

Graves noiselessly dismounted. “Your ladyship, we are at the edge of the base camp of the Royal Military. I cannot impress upon you enough how,” the man hesitated, “*dangerous* this part of our mission is. Only one man can know we’ve even been here. His name’s Glimer. He will procure us the weapons we need. For a price.”

Marietta narrowed her eyes. There was something the bastard wasn’t saying.

“How much?” she asked, her voice deep and smooth, moonlight twinkling against her green eyes.

“Your ladyship, if you would dismount the horse, I can explain the, er, mechanic of—” Graves spluttered.

“How much?” Marietta spat, her voice rising and clipped. The man smiled faintly. It wasn’t cute. The moonlight drowned in his black bushel of hair. He made for his wristwatch with one hand then seemed to think better of it.

“Your ladyship, the Crown...pays us generously. Soldiers don’t often want for Coin. But there are things, of course, that deployed men lack. That they can’t get in the service.”

Marietta’s eyes widened and blazed like the basecamp fires. Fast as a beadsnake, she sprung down from Noircheval and grabbed the pistol from her holster, pointing the

weapon point-blank at Grave's forehead. The man gasped, raising his hands above his head.

"You mistake me, Lieutenant General, for some common whore," said the Marchioness, wheezing with malice. "When I am, in fact, a faithful wife of a faithful husband." Each word she volleyed with as much force as the bullets buried in her chamber.

"Your ladyship," Graves began, choosing each of his words with a medician's precision. "You are quite right, of course. And out of the utmost respect, for your faithfulness and fidelity, I have devised a...a sort of workaround. Such that we may procure what we need to save your husband, whilst also saving your...virtue."

Marietta inhaled deeply. Slowly, she returned her gun to its holster.

"Explain," was all she said.

"Of course, your ladyship," Graves said with a nod, lowering his hands and clasping them together. "You see, I am an inventor. In the mechanical arts, particularly." Marietta glared, awaiting more.

"Yes, well," Graves continued. "Let me show you Arac, for starters."

"Erich? Who's Erich? I thought we were meeting a Glimer fellow?" Marietta said.

"Oh yes, you're right, your ladyship. Arac is not a who, but a what. In fact, right now Arac is being used as my wristwatch!" The man tilted his forearm to show her. "See? But look," he said, his pitch rising with excitement. The man pressed a knob on the wristwatch, and the thing's metallic tendrils slipped off his wrist and shifted into mechanical spider legs; it crawled up and around the man's torso and mounted itself atop his eye.

"Heavens!" Marietta gasped. First, Neolec lighting. Now, this contraption. The modern age was moving too fast.

"So you see, your ladyship," said Graves, having pressed another button so that the device would crawl back down and become a wristwatch again. "My skills in the mechanical arts are top notch."

Marietta scoffed audibly. "And just how is your little Erich thingamajig going to satisfy your prurient associate?"

"It's not," said Graves. "But this is," he said, and he whisked from his breast pocket another metal device, shaped rather like a flattened sphere, a massive, exposed gear taking up one full side, with several knobs on the other. The whole thing was far smaller than the palm of his hand.

"And what is this? Benjamin? Or is it Michael?" Marietta asked sardonically. "Or perhaps it has a female name. Henrietta? And let me guess, does this also turn into a spider, eight legs with which to fondle men at their leisure?"

"Your ladyship, I'm sure your husband spared you the more...lascivious details about some of the men in the Royal Military," Graves continued. "But suffice it to say, many men here have a rather peculiar, rather *particular* taste in womenfolk."

Marietta could not tell what drew more of her ire: the sloth of this cretin's buildup, or the obvious lewdness to which he was clearly culminating.

"Buttocks, your ladyship. The men are most enamored with large buttocks."

Zebulon

The Marchioness blinked. Zebulon had clearly caught her by surprise.

"I see," she said slowly, though he was certain she did not. In fact, a dense cloud chose that precise moment in which to roll over the moon, and soon the both of them could quite literally see very little of each other.

"And how, Graves, does this other little trinket of yours translate to *buttocks*?"

Zebulon smiled, though he could tell his pallid, hairless face, so often winsome to the ladies, was gaining none of the Marchioness's favor.

"This automatica—which I have not named, yet—it, uh, accentuates, which is to say," he began to splutter.

"Just spit it out, you little shit," said the Marchioness. He could see her fingers start to twitch, and he eyed her holster.

"It makes your backside grow," said Graves.

Marietta said nothing, but simply traced the palm of her hand alongside the bridge of Noircheval's nose. Zebulon couldn't tell if she had once again quietly resigned herself to her fate and had no further questions, or if she found the whole endeavor too unbelievable to merit words.

"So you're saying the fate of my husband depends on some pervert and his untested plaything?" The Marchioness infused a cruel docility into her tone.

"It...I'm sure it works, your ladyship. I've run many tests. And yes, this will ensure we get the supplies we need to retrieve your husband."

"How does it work?" she said, and through the mist he could see her sneer. Ah. So, she didn't believe him. Not at all. She was simply playing along. Though for what purpose he couldn't tell. Perhaps she knew he was her only guide to the UnderWorld.

"Well," Zebulon said, turning the device knob side up. "This first knob, you press it," he did so "and out comes this, I call it the corollary." A tiny, thin, U-shaped piece of metal ejected itself from a hole near the first knob. "You place the corollary in the back of your mouth—it attaches itself firmly above the gums. And that sends signals throughout your entire bloodstream. It has the same gear patterns as the main device, but of course invisible to the naked eye. And meanwhile it's sending even smaller gears—nontoxic, of course—through the bloodstream. And you control it all from here, the main device."

Zebulon couldn't help himself. He spoke faster and higher-pitched. He smiled. Nothing got him as worked up as his inventions. Well, nothing but ass, he supposed. But to combine two of his great passions, a machine to increase ass? How could he not smile? Even if the Marchioness seemed less than pleased. Livid, even.

“Fine,” was all the Marchioness said, and she placed out her palm to take the corollary.

“R-really?” Zebulon said.

The Marchioness smirked again. “Lieutenant General, you do know I have no faith whatsoever in any of your abilities, right?” Her tone couldn’t have been more patronizing if she’d reminded him of the need to wipe after a shit.

“Yes, your ladyship,” Zebulon said.

“I have all the doubt in the world about you,” The Marchioness continued. “About your claims to be an inventor, about your claims that this...steel staple will do anything but grind against my back molars and perhaps choke me to death. Yet the one thing I cannot get myself to doubt is that you know my husband to be alive. So. Here we are,” she said, and she placed the corollary against the back of her mouth.

Her eyes widened in shock and pain, and Zebulon could tell the corollary had affixed itself to her gums.

“Here, your ladyship,” he said, handing her the device. “You should be in charge of it. Touch the second knob to start, then turn the gear clockwise. Slowly. It’s all reversible, but go slow. We’ll just do a test before we see Glimer. And remember, it’s all for your husband.”

Marietta

Acid reached her tongue, and she licked away the small trickle of blood from where the staple had clamped down into her gums—seemingly on its own accord. Her heart began to beat again. Could this japester be for real? Had he invented an impossible device for the sole purpose of...widening women’s backsides?

He was staring at her patiently, which if anything kindled her fury even more. She grabbed hold of the device, careful not to touch the gear. She met his gaze and glared. Finally, dreading uncertainty more than anything, she touched the knob and delicately moved the gear ever so slightly. First, nothing. Then:

“Oh!” Marietta cried. A warmth seemed to rush from her mouth, to her chest, her arms, her legs, and finally, it settled in her backside, making every inch of her rump tingle. Suddenly it stopped.

“What happened?” she asked, now awash more with curiosity than rage or rectitude.

“Well, your ladyship, well done in being prudent, of course, but you shall have to turn the gear more than than to have a visible effect,” said Zebulon.

Marietta scowled, but then placed her thumb purposefully atop the gear. She turned it; one, two, three ticks it made. She stopped turning the moment she heard Graves gasp.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing, your ladyship,” said Graves. Another scowl. Silence. The hoot of an owl. Then:

“Ohhh!” Marietta cried out again, forcefully so. Her heartbeat quickened, and she again felt the rush of heat spread throughout her body, blasting into her buttocks. A gurgling noise, and then, she could feel it: she was growing. The heat in her buttocks spread, not to her legs but to more of her butt; she could feel more, because there was more of her to feel. Out and out her butt pushed, straining her undergarments and poking against her dress and its bustle. Her mind abandoned the impossibility of it all, and her body embraced the pleasure. Because the warmth, the heat, was not that of a sunburn. It felt more like the refreshing inner warmth brought by drinking a scalding cup of tea on a cold winter’s eve. Butterflies fluttered across her stomach, and, much to her surprise, a wetness formed between her legs.

Then, after mere moments, the growth stopped. Marietta sent gasps of relief into the night. She placed her hands atop her new mounds to feel their weighty vastness: each cheek surpassing a skittles ball. Her eyes widened and she looked to Zebulon.

She saw it instantly: a clotted hardness pressing against his trousers. His eyes as wide as hers. She thought she should yell, but found that she couldn’t. After all, her own undergarments were all but dripping from her own form of arousal. She continued to gasp, her breath calming, her ass cooling.

“Well,” she finally said. “It appears it does work after all. Now,” here she finally reclaimed some of her sense, “you mentioned it was reversible?”

Zebulon coughed awkwardly. “Yes, yes your ladyship. Simply turn the gear back, and it will reverse.”

Marietta paused for a sliver of a second; some part of her simply did not want to reverse the gear. Didn’t want to go back to being flat. Then, the hand of decorous ladyship guided her own, and she turned the gear back three ticks.

“Oof,” she exhaled, as a clammy coldness swept through her veins. The shrinking proved as uncomfortable as the expansion was pleasurable. It was a surprisingly achy process; she felt herself becoming less, and her hand nearly twitched to stop the gear.

“So, we have your little show all worked out. What now?” she said, a regular temperature slowly returning to her posterior. She smoothed out the backside of her dress and pressed the knob on the device to turn it off.

“We must go on foot to meet Glimer,” Zebulon said. “If it all goes well, we’ll get everything we need to rescue your husband.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Marietta sneered, tying Noircheval securely to a sturdy sycamore.

“Then we shall all be courtmarshalled and hung.”

Zebulon

“If supplies are all we need, can’t we procure them elsewhere?” The Marchioness whispered. Their booty-born truce had fast evaporated as they made their way down the hill and towards the edge of base camp.

“The supplies we need can’t be bought at a general store, your ladyship,” said Zebulon, who was starting to return her snark with some of his own, thinly veiled by the obligatory honorific.

“Like what?” she asked, clearly dubious.

Zebulon stopped his descent. The Marchioness stopped too. “Your ladyship, do you know anywhere else where we can procure guns and ammunition specifically designed to destroy those already dead?”

The Marchioness sniffed haughtily and turned her head, but said nothing. They resumed their trek. The rolling hillside stopped abruptly, and about fifty yards further stood a steel shack with a barricaded door.

“Glimer will have bribed the guards, of course,” said Zebulon. They stood behind the trunk of a great oak. “Now to find out if Glimer remembered to stay in the shack himself.”

“Remembered?” The Marchioness said.

“Well, your ladyship, he does not want for ale.”

“Oh, praise be,” the Marchioness said with a roll of her eyes. Zebulon reached for his wristwatch but paused.

“Now, your ladyship, I appreciate the difficult position this puts you in. But I want to assure you that, underneath it all, Glimer is a true gentleman. He would never do anything untoward.”

The Marchioness simply narrowed her gaze into a glare. Zebulon cleared his throat and activated Arac.

“Alright, friend, let’s see if anybody’s home,” he said, pressing another knob. Arac slinked into spider form, and crawled quickly across the slimy dirt to the steel door. Zebulon winced in seeing how close the shack stood to the valley that was basecamp. The fires were clear and crisp, the first line of the tents of his compatriots not a hundred yards from where they stood.

Arac meanwhile raced up the door of the shack, stopping halfway. Seven of its pincers had managed to poke into the steel, securing itself parallel to the door. The eighth pincer raised itself, then knocked rhythmically: *ting, ting, ting, ting, ting...Ting! Ting!* Arac flung itself from the door, dropping to the ground just as the steel began to swing outward.

“Who goes there?” rang out a deep voice, hidden in the darkness of the shack.

“An old friend and compatriot true,” said Zebulon. Nothing but the stirring of the wind came in response, and Zebulon nearly started to panic as he felt Arac settle back onto his wrist.

“Such as these are always well met here!” said the voice, and out stepped Glimer. Messy patches of orange hair swept across his scalp, and a warm smile reached up towards his beady eyes. A long beard belied his youth, and his gregarious spirit roared over and above his short stature.

“Come, your ladyship, we must run,” said Zebulon, receiving only a huff in response. Zebulon and the Marchioness ran the small distance, stepping into the auxiliary armory.

In a flash, Glimer hopped back in, closing the door behind him and giving the Marchioness a look-over. Her lips curled, and Zebulon could see her hand twitch, ready to reach for her gun.

“Well Glimer, thanks for your help,” Zebulon said quickly. “We’ll be in and out of your hair in just a moment. Only need to pick up a few—”

“Oh, happy to help, Graves, happy to help,” Glimer said with a smile. “Now as for payment...” he continued, the congeniality dropping from his lips like so much shit from a bull.

“Oh, you’ll get your payment, Glimer—” Zebulon started to say.

“Think I’d like a little bit upfront. Just so’s we’re all on the same page,” Glimer said.

Zebulon caught eyes with the Marchioness, whom he could tell was stewing. But much to his surprise, before he could say anything else, it was her ladyship who dove in:

“Fair enough,” she said. Glimer smiled.

“Well, a biddy who’s game, that’s quite a change of pace,” said the soldier with a sneer.

Here the Marchioness’s face turned quite dangerous, however, and Zebulon feared that Glimer’s sewertongue would ruin the whole game. The Marchioness simply rose to her full, unbridled height, walked over to the expectant Glimer, and craned her neck to stare down directly into his eyes.

“I am not a ‘biddy,’ and you will not lay a single, solitary finger on any piece of my anatomy, lest you should have me rip your digits from your hands and use them to scoop out your slimy, lascivious eyeballs.”

Glimer struggled for a bit with the meaning of the Marchioness’s words, then looked over to Zebulon in frustration.

“Can’t touch her? Then what are we doing here?” Glimer started to whine.

“You’ll get something better, you cretin,” said the Marchioness, clearly taking control of the situation, to Zebulon’s irritation.

The Marchioness took a few steps back, then turned around, her backside facing them. The meek yellow light of the shack’s antechamber fell onto her black bustle.

“Pshh,” said Glimer. “Mostly fabric, that is. Hardly seen one smaller.”

“Oh? You’re saying you’d like it...bigger?” The Marchioness said.

Zebulon smirked. He had to admit, she played the part well. As much she seemed to loathe it.

“Bigger? What do you mean bigger? Course I’d like it bigger, we’d all like it big—” Glimer’s protestations melted into sheer awe. For the Marchioness’s ass indeed began to embiggen. Zebulon heard a faint gurgling sound, and then the bustle of the dress moved outward. He heard a faint gasp from her ladyship, and watched with ravenous glee alongside Glimer as the folds of frills moved up and around to make way for more ass.

“That’s just a taste, Glimer,” the Marchioness said, twirling round to face them, her face reddened and eyes wide. “But first, our supplies.”

Glimer stared off into the spot where her ladyship’s bustle once stood, then shook his head. “Right,” he said, still transfixed. “Follow me.”

Glimer walked a few steps and opened the door to the main room. Zebulon and the Marchioness followed him, entering a labyrinth of iron shelves, each one stacked to the nines with weapons of all sorts: pistols, rifles, maces, axes, clubs, swords, sabers, longbows. In the far corner, Zebulon even caught sight of a flamethrower.

“Now, you’ll not need any of these, of course,” said Glimer, scampering past shelf after shelf.

Zebulon followed, frowning as he watched the Marchioness’s bustle slowly deflate.

“These, however,” said the stout soldier. He pointed to a shelf abutting the flamethrower. A neat row of flame-colored pistols lined the top of the shelf. The shelf below housed a row of nearly identical guns, except that each of them had a large lead balloon above the handle.

Zebulon immediately grabbed two of the regular pistols, handing one to the Marchioness. He then grabbed the balloon gun, and began to reach for the flamethrower when Glimer stopped him.

“Hey now, you think the brass won’t notice if our top fireforcer goes missing?” Glimer said loudly. Zebulon could taste the whisky on his breath.

“I am the top brass, Glimer,” said Zebulon. Glimer sneered.

“Fine,” Glimer sighed. “Now, about the rest of that payment...”

The Marchioness crossed her arms in disdain, but turned around all the same.

“Yeah, that’s it. Grow bigger,” Glimer wheezed in anticipation.

Zebulon heard the gurgling sound, and saw as her bustle began to—

Clang! Clang! Clang! A deafening series of knocks came from the door to the shack.

“Quick,” Zebulon said to the Marchioness. “You hide back here. I’ll go speak with the guardsmen. They won’t suspect anything from me. Come Gilmer.” And the two men ran to the antechamber of the armory.

Marietta

Shit! Not only had the guardsmen interrupted their surreptitious acquisition, but in the startlement of their knocks, she'd moved the gear of the device more notches than she cared to count, dropping the device in the process.

Marietta closed her eyes and struggled to breathe. Her heartbeat quickened as the rush of warmth flooded her body. She had to grab the device, turn back the gear. But it all felt so—

“Gooood,” Marietta said, cupping her hand to her mouth, shocked to have said it out loud. More and more the warmth flooded into her bum, and more and more her bum became. The cheeks pushed outward, flesh rubbing against the lace of her undergarment. Undergarments pressed against dress which pressed against bustle. Marietta had never before felt so strong, so powerful. So sensual.

“Guh!” Marietta tried to bend forward to grab the device, but her center of gravity had warped and instead she wobbled. She flailed her arms, desperately trying to balance herself, but she toppled backwards as her ass amplified further. Her glutes, each larger than her head, cushioned her fall. She squealed as her own weight pushed into the softness of her mounds. For they had grown not only in mass, but in sensitivity. The padding of her bustle pressed into her unfurling folds and sent shockwaves of pleasure up her spine and to her clit, which again became wet.

Breathing deeper still, she heaved herself forward and onto her knees. But her thick, fleshy mounds heaved forward faster than she could, pressing into the heel of her shoe and sliding outward. The widening ripples of ass grazed past every pebble stuck in the grooves of her shoe, and each cold, stony surface sent a shockwave of pleasure and a drop of ecstasy. Each second brought a widening expanse of flesh, a fight between the urge to grow and the need to stop.

“Why can't we go back there?” A rough voice echoed from the antechamber.

Marietta shifted her head towards the doorway. Graves and Glimer were clearly having trouble with the guardsmen. She needed to grab the device, and now, before she was caught ass-up stealing military supplies.

“Because I am your superior, Hennswick, and I said so,” she could overhear Graves saying, with much the same tone he used with her.

“You're on leave! You're not in charge of this outpost!”

Marietta's asscheeks, meanwhile, had seemingly met their match, and pleasure had turned to pain. Rolls of buttfat had crashed into the whale-bone firmament of her high-end bustle, and now swatches of ballooning skin dug in between each of the bustle's ribs. She grimaced through the discomfort and flung her torso forward, her hands hitting the cold steel floor. She heaved forward once again, attempting to drag her body forward even if she could not stand up.

Crack! Marietta panicked at what she first presumed was a gunshot, before realizing it was the splintering of a rib of her bustle. Her butt barreled ever outward: even whalebone could not cage it.

Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack! A cacophony of snapping followed, filling the air with a noise like popcorn popping. Her bustle broken, her freed flesh ripped through her dress and undergarments as well, exposing itself to the chill of the shack. She had now reached truly outlandish proportions: each buttock billowed ever outward, wider than the wheels of the King's horse carriage, still with no signs of stopping. Blinding waves of pleasure sent spasms through Marietta's whole body, her pussy gushing and flooding the floor of the armory.

"WHO'S IN THERE?" came that same voice from the other side of the door. Marietta blinked through the excruciating pleasure, her fingers grazing the device just as the door slammed open.

Zebulon

"Stand back! I must insist on going first. This could be a dangerous invasion. Trust me, Hennswick. The things I've seen, you can't imagine. Do you want us to be at your funeral, next?" Zebulon felt slimy using Leo's ersatz death as a means to manipulate his subordinates, but it worked. They held back, Glimer too, and he sprinted through the labyrinth of shelves. He knew the Marchioness was unused to the necessities of military life, but for her to give away her position within five minutes? He squinted in anger.

"I don't see anything," he yelled back. "Likely just one of the canisters that Glimer forgot to—" he stopped midsentence. There, not a yard from where he stood, wobbled the two largest buttocks he'd ever seen in his life. Shiny white skin stretched out in impossible parabolas, forming twin hunks of heaving flesh that each surely weighed more than he and Glimer combined. Dimples speckled the gelatinous mass, and sweat slid down its slopes. In all his safety testing, he'd never managed to swell an ass that big—never dreamed it possible! Strips of cracked white bustle and shreds of ripped black fabric littered the floor beneath the butt. Attached to the butt was of course the Marchioness: hair askew, face red, eyes delirious. She seemed to have only just reversed the gear, and sure enough her bottom slowly, slowly, slowly started to recede into itself.

"What are you doing?" Zebulon hissed, ignoring the throbbing in his trousers.

The Marchioness tilted her head up. "Dropped the device," she said with a whimper.

Zebulon grimaced and shifted his gaze.

"Nothing back here!" he yelled.

"Oh really?" Hennswick called back.

Zebulon turned to Marietta. "This is..." he wanted to say reckless, or dangerous, or impertinent, but all he could say was "impressive."

Marietta moaned in response, and Zebulon blinked in shock.

“Er, yes, well, your ladyship, we have to get out of here, now,” he said. “Hennswick and I are not exactly on the best of terms after I beat him out for a promotion. If he catches you back here...” he glanced back but could hear nothing but whispers.

Marietta responded by trying to push herself up off the floor, to no avail. Her ass was shrinking quite slowly, each glute still surpassing the size of a naval mine.

Zebulon crouched, grabbing each of the Marchioness’s arms with his own and pulling, his breath catching from the strain. The lady’s torso rose, and she gingerly shifted her legs to bolster herself. Up went her straightening knees, and in went her flattening glutes. The Marchioness’s legs trembled, the weight of her butt still far too great to stand up on her own. But stand up she did, and faster than Zebulon thought would be possible.

Just not fast enough.

“We’ve had enough trickery, we’re coming back there!” yelled out Hennswick, whose footsteps drew closer.

“No!” said the Marchioness, dazed but drifting back to her senses.

“Don’t worry, your ladyship,” said the Zebulon. He transferred her arms to a shelf, which she gripped tightly to steady herself. He grabbed a large patch of torn fabric and tied it around her waist. It didn’t cover her rump, but at least hid her front.

“I’ll try to stall, but get ready to run,” Zebulon told her. He sprinted to meet Hennswick and practically ran into him.

“I told you, it’s nothing,” he said, staring down his subordinate. He and Glimer and Hennswick and his two lackeys all stood but one corner-turn from the Marchioness.

“And I told you, you are not the commanding officer of this outpost. I heard a noise that sounded like fucking gunfire, and I’m going to lay eyes on what it fucking is!” Hennswick was screaming now, rabid, and Zebulon doubted anything short of a drawn gun would stop him.

Zebulon paused, as yet unwilling to draw arms against his own army. Hennswick seized his chance and ran past him.

“Aha!” Hennswick cried, pointing at the Marchioness. Zebulon was relieved that she had managed to find an angle to obscure her ass.

The Marchioness looked mortified. Blood rushed from her face, her lips trembling in anguish. She couldn’t even fix her bird’s nest hair, both hands still gripping the nearest shelf to keep herself from falling. The way the yellow overhead light hit her, she practically looked like a prostitute. Though perhaps, Zebulon mused, this could play to their advantage. Perhaps Hennswick wouldn’t even recognize who she was.

“Well, well, well. Grimy Graves at it again. Not content with fucking tramps from The City, he sneaks into the armory to impress his biddies now, does he?” Hennswick said. His lackeys laughed, but Zebulon just breathed a sigh of relief.

Hennswick was over the moon with his discovery. The gleam in his eye, though doubtless kindled with whiskey, now roared like a fire from the spark of scandal.

“This is it, Graves,” Hennswick spat. “You’re done. Spilling Royal Military secrets to a fucking tramp? Once the Inquisitor General hears about this, it’s all over for you. And besides,” here Hennswick stepped a hairsbreadth from Zebulon, sneering up into his face. “Your talentless little General Maxi ain’t around anymore to stick his prissy little neck out for you!”

Crulick!

All five men turned at once, to see the Marchioness holding a cocked gun—one meant for mortal men—and aiming it squarely at Hennswick.

“I may be jus’ a simple tramp,” she said, with an accent that nearly made Zebulon giggle in spite of the seriousness of the situation. “But I canst abide by insubordination of a great General like Maximilion. You best let mes go and get back to my home.”

Hennswick stared at the Marchioness, more dumbfounded than alarmed. Then, his face soured, and Zebulon could see his fingers twitch towards his gun.

Thamp!

Quick as a beardsnake, Zebulon rammed his head into Hennswick’s, causing the toady to tumble backwards.

“Get him!” yelled one of the lackeys, and Zebulon jumped out of the way of a drunken fist.

“Run!” he said, grabbing her ladyship’s free arm. They zipped and dodged through the maze of steel shelving, her outsized ass slamming into a protruding barrel just as they reached the antechamber.

Clasashshsh! A thousand loose bullets exploded onto the floor of the shack, and Zebulon could hear his compatriots fall over themselves as he and her ladyship skittered to the foot of the hill, which was steeper than he remembered it.

“Push me up!” yelled the Marchioness. Each of her girthy glutes still dwarfed her head, and she couldn’t quite ascend such an angle. Zebulon didn’t hesitate, pressing his bare hands against her bare ass. He pushed, and she made the first, most difficult step up the face of the hillside.

“We must go faster!” Zebulon insisted, though he could hear her ladyship huffing and puffing just as fast as she could. He turned round and saw the door to the armory start to swing.

Zip! Zip! He fired two warning shots above the door frame, then scampered up the hill.

Thisp! Thisp! Two shots from below landed in the trees above their head.

“What the fuck are those fuckers doing?” Zebulon roared. His were warning shots. Those felt personal.

“Almost...there,” wheezed the Marchioness. In spite of the literal bullets breezing above their heads, he had to admire not only her ladyship’s loyalty and tenacity, but...her ass. It simply amazed him, the way it wobbled with wild abandon as they clambered upward, moonlight splashing off its shiny surface like raindrops off an umbrella.

“Noircheval!” said the Marchioness, smiling, as they breached the glen.

“Here, your ladyship, I’ll help you mount,” he said. The Marchioness paused to look towards his face—illuminated only by the celestial bodies above. An electric tension pulsed, something new that wasn’t there before. Just saying the word “mount” to her ladyship seemed to foment a feeling between them.

This!

The sound of another gunshot snapped them back into the urgent task at hand. The Marchioness put one boot in the stirrup, and Zebulon grabbed a massive glute and lithe leg and helped position her atop the horse. Zebulon mounted with ease and off they went, Noircheval galloping against the wind.

Marietta

The ceaseless thumping of Noircheval’s gallops helped lower her heartbeat. Her mind took far longer to calm down, if indeed it ever would.

She’d just had the most thrilling sexual experience of her life, and it wasn’t with her husband. Or any man, for that matter. She’d pointed a gun at a member of the Royal Military, which should all but secure her a lifelong sentence at the Penitentiary. And now, she was riding fast towards who knew where, with an ass the size of a great harvest pumpkin, a soldier’s crotch bumping against her bare flesh with every gallop. Whatever would Leo think?

Could Leo still think? Had the ghouls of the UnderWorld tortured him beyond the depths of sanity? Could he still walk? Did he still have a soul? She shuddered at these questions, and, as she so often did, pivoted to focus on the task at hand.

“Where are we going now?” she asked, yelling to be heard above the rising wind.

Graves had been silent too, no doubt thinking about his own imminent court marshaling.

“That little stunt of yours has sealed off our options, your ladyship,” he said.

“I told you, Lieutenant General, I dropped the device!” she said, though whether at this point she could say she regretted it was another matter.

“I’m talking about your threat to Royal Military personnel,” Graves said. “They’ll have put everyone on high alert. Put out a notice of a rogue actor. This makes our travel to the portal all the more dangerous.”

“Portal?” asked Marietta.

“The portal to the UnderWorld,” Graves responded, and Marietta’s thoughts whipped back to Leo. “There’s only one, heavily guarded,” Graves continued. “We may have snuck through before, but now..”

Shame, despair, and rage swirled through the pit of Marietta’s stomach all at once.

“So you’re saying there’s no hope?” she practically screamed.

“Never, your ladyship. We shall simply have to go with plan B. I have a friend who can help.”

Marietta's stomach dropped deeper. "Is he as...charming as Glimer?" she said. "She," corrected Zebulon, "is as charming as a cactus full of honey."

Marietta fell silent once more. She'd not heard that expression before, and strongly suspected that Graves had pulled it out of thin air.

Zebulon

It normally would've taken every ounce of restraint to not grow hard as a rock. Given Noircheval's steady sprint, he was practically humping a bare buttocks with mounds the size of a small boulder. A dream size, really. Or, it was his dream size. Now that he'd seen bigger—oh, so much bigger...well, now that was his dream size. Normally, this would have been his brain rut: booty big, booty bigger, booty even bigger. Except.

Except he had just fired shots at his own subordinates in the Royal Military. Now even if they managed to find Leo, let alone rescue him, let alone return him to their own world...what kind of world would they be returning to? One in which Zebulon would be court marshalled. And what of Leo's wife? Even if Hennswick and Glimer were too stupid to recognize the Marchioness, surely a criminal sketch artist and the suddenly leaderless staff at Moundharsh would put two and two together?

Still, what choice did they have but to keep going, if only for Leo's sake. Perhaps Sÿra would know what to do.

Marietta

They rode for nearly an hour. After a while, Marietta could tell her ass would not be shrinking down to its original size, at least not anytime soon. For now, she was stuck with two jack-o-lantern sized mounds. Whether it was from the icy strain of her shrinking flesh, the stress of the shootout, or her earlier stumble onto the hard floor of the shack, she wasn't sure, but she soon found herself quite sore. She couldn't imagine asking Graves how much longer they had to go, however. He already thought her to be a prissy, puerile bitch. She wasn't going to prove him right.

Forest turned to open plains, and the wind slapped her face. The temperature grew colder as the evening grew older, and Marietta wondered more about this other friend of Graves. Who was she, and how could she possibly help them? Finally, as they approached a small farmhouse near an open field, Graves instructed Noircheval to slow down.

"Is this it?" Marietta asked. She had to force herself not to shiver.

"Yes, your ladyship," said Graves. Now that they were both bandits in the eyes of the Royal Military, it felt almost like an antiquated formality, him using her honorific. Still, Marietta said nothing, silently accepting his help as she slid off her horse. She knew she would look an odd sight to whoever this person was: her funeral dress absent from

the waist down, a strip of ripped black fabric tied in front of her slit, and nothing at all to cover her massively plump behind.

Kpew! Out of nowhere a shot fired into the air, and Marietta ducked for cover. Noircheval whinnied and jostled.

“It’s me, ya old bat!” was all Graves said, calm and collected.

“Zebby? That you?” came a voice from the farmhouse.

“Yes, Sÿra, it’s me!” Graves said, sounding exasperated.

“Dag gammit, you gave me a scare! Thought you was coyotes!”

Marietta slowly rose from her squat. Approaching her was the oddest looking woman she’d ever seen. Instead of long, ladylike locks tied in a bun, her nearly bald scalp had only several gray spikes spouting this way and that. Her light brown face was warped with wrinkles—Marietta figured she was in her fifties at least. The woman carried a long shotgun in one hand and an old-fashioned oil lantern in the other, and as she crossed the overgrown grass of her front porch, Marietta could see that she wore a thick man’s shirt and—Marietta almost gasped—men’s pants!

“Whoah there!” said the woman, whom Marietta guessed was named Sÿra. Marietta could not tell who drew this stranger’s gaze more: herself, or Noircheval.

“Mighty beautiful steed,” said Sÿra, and Marietta got her answer. “And a mighty beautiful woman,” Sÿra added. Marietta smiled meekly and nodded. Suddenly Sÿra’s eyes lit up. “You’re the Marchioness! The Marchioness of Moundharsh!”

Marietta’s cheek flushed red, and Zebulon shifted uncomfortably. As if sensing the discomfort of all three guests, Sÿra stepped forward and rubbed the bridge of Noircheval’s nose. Noircheval blew a steady exhale and calmed instantly.

“You...seem to have a way with horses, Miss Sÿra,” Marietta said, which the Marchioness truly did find comforting. Rarely had she met someone who was kind to unknown horses and cruel to unknown humans.

“Been round ‘em all my life,” Sÿra said. “Now come on in before you catch cold.” Sÿra turned toward the farmhouse and, after briefly stopping to tie up Noircheval, Marietta and Zebulon followed.

“Sit, sit, sit,” said Sÿra, pointing them towards a splinter-laden table. The whole house, upon closer inspection, seemed to Marietta to be falling apart. The main room consisted of a rust-laden stovetop, a small if well-made bed, a blackened but roaring fireplace, and a few rickety armchairs. An overstuffed bookcase stood near the fireplace, each of its shelves bowing, fit to break. Crumbs, cobwebs, and dust bunnies littered every nook, cranny, and flat surface, and cracks in the roof sent a cold draft through the room in spite of the fire.

Marietta sat next to Zebulon at the table. The chair wailed like a banshee as she pressed pound after pound of her ass into the thankfully cushioned seat. She’d never before had to worry if a piece of furniture would buckle underneath her weight, and she quite disliked the sense of unease it espoused. Just as she recovered from that indignity,

she gasped aloud at the sight of her husband's face, suddenly staring back at her. For lying atop the table was yesterday's newspaper, plastered with the headline "MARQUESS SLAIN!"

"Oh, sorry dear," said Sÿra, who leaned her shotgun against the wall and grabbed the paper, placing it on a pile by the bookshelf. She placed the lantern in the center of the table and walked to the stove.

"You're lucky!" said Sÿra, and Marietta took great offense, until Sÿra came back carrying a pot and two bowls. "I just made my famous chili!"

Marietta realized in that moment just how hungry she truly was, and while chili wasn't a dish she'd ever been presented with at the Margraviate, the aroma alone made her mouth water.

"Now how on earth, Sÿra?" said Graves, as Sÿra scooped two bowls full of plentiful portions. "It has to be nearly 3 o' clock in the morning and you happen to have just made chili? How could you have known I was coming?"

"Oh, don't be silly, Zebby. I had no idea! But you know my damn hip. Keeps me up all damn night. Tossed and turned and finally decided to take a break and get to cooking," said Sÿra. Marietta looked to the perfectly kept bed and the twinkle in Sÿra's eye and figured there was something she wasn't saying. "Now eat up!" Sÿra commanded, and both guests dropped the subject, filling their bellies in silence as Sÿra stoked the fire.

Given the state of her surroundings, Marietta abandoned any pretence of decorum and housed her food. Just as she set down her spoon, Graves began to speak.

"Sÿra, we'll need to—"

"Zebby be a dear and go get some more firewood," interrupted Sÿra. Marietta looked to the hearth, which was already cluttered with more firewood than could possibly be safe.

"Sÿra, we're in a hurry, and quite frankly," Graves started to say.

"Zebby, now I know you're not forgetting whose house this is," Sÿra said sternly. "Go out and grab some firewood. This lady here deserves some rest and relaxation. It's girls time, honey, so give us a spell and then I'll take you wherever you need to go, no questions asked."

Now Marietta could see what Graves meant about a cactus made of honey.

"Fine," said Graves, his chair screeching against the cracked wood floor as he stood up and walked outside. "One hour, Sÿra. Then we must fly," and with that he closed the door and walked out into the cold.

Sÿra smiled at Marietta, and in spite of herself, Marietta found herself smiling back. She thought that she should have more of her guard up, but also figured that if she'd wanted to, Sÿra could have shot or poisoned her already.

"Come lie down for a spell, darling," said Sÿra. "I'll give you a massage."

Marietta hesitated. She'd not received a massage before, at least not by anyone other than her husband. But to be frank, her ass ached. So, sliding clumsily out of her chair, she walked gingerly to the bed and sat down.

"No, no, lie down, darling. Ass up. I know what part of you needs massaging, hon. And don't worry, nothin' seedy. You're far too young, dear," S`yra cooed.

Marietta blinked. She'd certainly not met a woman like this in any of her social circles. Still, the woman's aura of nurturance seemed too genuine to question, and her rear's discomfort too pronounced to ignore. So she sat up and climbed onto the bed, delicately laying her stomach against the surprisingly soft mattress.

"That's it, darling," said S`yra, who began to rub her hands together. Marietta could smell some sort of lavender scent enter the air, and hear the woman rubbing something on her hands. Perhaps massages and chili were this old maid's areas of expertise?

"Alright, here you go," said S`yra in warning, yet Marietta still jumped once the cold, slick hands of the stranger touched her exposed expanse of buttocks.

"No, that's ok, darling. Relax. I'm a healer," S`yra said. "Human touch, there's nothing like it. Course, I don't care for touching menfolk, but I don't blame you dear. Zebby's landed many a maiden."

Marietta almost bolted out of the bed. S`yra sensed her anger and pulled back her hands.

"I am not involved in any way with Graves," she seethed. "We are on a confidential mission, that is all."

"Oh, oh of course not, right," said S`yra, though Marietta detested something about her tone. Marietta took a few breaths and relaxed again. S`yra placed her hands back on Marietta's glutes and began to rub the balm up and down. Marietta had to stop herself from moaning. Something about the woman's balm, or her touch, or both, made her flesh tingle in much the same way her growth had earlier.

"Of course," said S`yra, seemingly more convinced. "You love your husband deeply, I understand."

"Yes," winced Marietta, through a particularly deep pushing of S`yra's palms into her ass fat. "I am unyieldingly loyal to him."

"Mmm," said S`yra, and Marietta could practically hear her head nod. "As was I to Priscilla. She's gone now, of course," and here Marietta could hear S`yra's voice waver with sadness.

"Still, I never stopped loving Priscilla. I reckon you'll never stop loving your husband. But love ain't finite, either," said S`yra. Fingers squished into the folds of smooth, slickened buttocks, kneading the doughy mounds and sending spirals of pleasure throughout Marietta's callipygous neural circuitry.

"Mmm...what do you mean?" Marietta asked, her breath rougher. It seemed like only part of her was there, in that rotted farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. Most of

her was floating on a cloud, far above the chilled room, far above the Royal Military, or The City, or the Crown.

“Well, I’ve just always felt that a heart filled with love always has love to give,” said Sÿra. Her hands were moving quickly now, spreading Marietta’s fleshy, peachy plumpness with vigor. Marietta could feel a wetness start to spread once again between her legs, and if she had still been there, in that grungy farmhouse, she would’ve felt a sense of shame, or at least embarrassment. But instead, she felt sheer joy, elation even. She let an audible moan escape.

“That’s it, darling. Release. Release it all,” say Sÿra, cupping handfuls of buttoflesh with increasing speed. “Zebby’s a bit of a mess, it’s true. Been a tomcat as long as I’ve known him. But his heart’s in the right place, ain’t no doubt about that.”

Marietta was barely listening now, could hardly even hear above the internal roar of desire and pleasure. It just felt so good, so yummy, for her ass, her flesh, her plumpness, to be played with. It felt good to feel good. To feel desired, to feel big, to feel and be...too much. The heat of her cunt began to rise, and she began to moan louder.

“Uhh, uhhh, more,” said Marietta.

“Yes,” said Sÿra. “Yes, darling. Feel deep. Feel it all.”

Marietta felt it all. Every push into her thickness, every rubbing of her rump. She felt Sÿra’s hands work their wonders, gliding fiercely this way and that across her unwieldy wobbles.

“Uhh,” Marietta moaned.

Skleet, squirt went Sÿra’s palms, rubbing in fervent, round circles against her pudge.

“Uhh, uhh, uhhh,” Marietta could hardly breathe now: the tension, the pleasure, it was as if each touch sent shockwaves of ecstasy from her ass through to her clit. More and more she moaned, and more and more the unbearable pulsing of pleasure grew.

“Uhh, uhh, guhUHHHHH!” Marietta squealed like a pig, a flood gushing from her gash, her legs trembling violently, her ass jiggling wildly, her whole body writhing as if possessed by some spectral force, spasms of pleasure causing her to convulse and cum again, and again, and again.

After a final series of squirts, Marietta turned to her side. She panted slowly, beads of sweat forming on her brow. She looked up at Sÿra, who smiled knowingly.

Twice now, she had crossed what she’d once thought of as a line: climaxing without her husband. She knew what she thought about it, but somehow those thoughts were somewhere else, at least momentarily, much like she herself wasn’t really there. She was still floating, descending slowly from the clouds above. She couldn’t psychically think such thoughts, not in her present state. All she could do was feel. She soon crossed another line, past consciousness and into a deep but gentle sleep, feeling deeply like she was on cloud fucking nine.

Zebulon

“Thank you, S`yra,” said Zebulon. The two stood in the back of the farmhouse, next to an oversized wicker basket. Above the basket roared a large, targeted flame, which filled the silken insides of S`yra’s hot air balloon.

“Nearly there,” was all S`yra said in response.

“Good. I’ll go wake her,” said Zebulon, motioning towards the farmhouse and the resting Marchioness.

“Oh no no, you take this,” said S`yra, handing Zebulon the control for the burner. “Jus’ keep it steady. I’ll go get our little princess. Wish she could sleep more.”

“As you’ve said repeatedly. But we must go now, dawn will be here within the hour,” Zebulon said through gritted teeth.

“Alright, alright,” said S`yra. “I’ll just say this, then, Zebby.” The old farmer leaned towards the young soldier. “This one’s a keeper.” And before Zebulon could provide the thousand and one reasons why such a prognostication was preposterous, the woman strutted back to her farmhouse, and Zebulon was left alone with his thoughts.

Keeper my ass, he thought. Still, he had to admit that physically, the Marchioness was becoming more and more his type. And the loyalty she showed to Leo in the shack, as foolhardy as it was...it caused a stirring in his heart. Before he could reflect any further, both women came marching forward, and the new look of the Marchioness nearly made him giggle.

S`yra had clearly lent her some of her clothes. A thick, dark brown, button-up corduroy shirt had replaced the top of her funeral dress, and was complimented by a deep red utility vest. Far more astounding than that, however, was her bottomwear. She’d managed to fit into a pair of blue denim pants, her hips tautly pinched by the seams of the fabric. Zebulon had to stop himself from whistling, and held fast to the newly formed sense of anticipation to see her from behind. Below her pants were a pair of leather boots. She looked like she belonged on this farm, like she’d lived there all her life.

“You ladyship,” was all Zebulon said. The Marchioness nodded curtly.

“Well then, I hear tell we best get a move on,” S`yra said with more than a little snark. She opened the door of the wicker basket and the Marchioness moved forward. Zebulon’s mouth watered at the mere sight. Her two succulent, symmetrical orbs took his breath away. The denim pants seemed painted on—he couldn’t imagine how she had actually gotten into them, so tightly did they press into her flesh. Her glutes wobbled as she walked, each step causing a wide swing of her cheeks. Her butt seemed nearly as inflated as the hot air balloon. Zebulon entered the basket after the ladies, and found it quite a snug fit.

“Bit more weight than she’s used to, but we’ll be alright,” said S`yra delicately.

The Marchioness looked away shyly, folding her arms. “I didn’t imagine we would be using a...hot air balloon,” was all she said. “Are they quite safe?”

“Oh sure, safest form of air travel! I don’t trust those airships myself,” said S`yra. “And don’t worry, I’ll take real good care of your horse.”

The Marchioness looked sadly over to Noircheval as the balloon started to rise into the crisp, early morning air. Zebulon took deep breaths as the altitude rose and his oxygen lowered.

“Your ladyship, this is not going to be easy, but it’s our only choice,” he said. She once again did not look directly back at him, but stared off into the distance.

“I will do what must be done,” she said.

S`yra smiled sadly as she lit the flame, rising the balloon ever higher as the wind pushed it west.

“Now you know Zebby, there’s no way of being real precise about these things. I can get you close to where you’re going, but can’t guarantee to be right on target,” said S`yra.

“Well unfortunately S`yra, our mission this morning calls us to be completely precise. The Pool we’re aiming for isn’t very wide, and we must hit it dead center,” said Zebulon.

“Pool?” said both S`yra and the Marchioness at once.

“I thought we were going back to base camp?” said the Marchioness.

“We are. Near there, anyway,” said Zebulon. “But that’s not our true destination. We need to get to the Crossing Pool. It’s the only way to enter...” here he looked guardedly at S`yra “the UnderWorld.”

S`yra’s face darkened, but she said nothing. Neither did her ladyship.

“Because of...last night,” Zebulon continued, “the Royal Military will be on high alert. In fact, they might already suspect that I am planning to enter the UnderWorld. Not many of them know that that’s where the Crossing Pool leads, of course. But they’ll send the cannon fodder to guard it by land. I don’t imagine them anticipating me—us—arriving by air.”

Silence overtook the trio, the wind batting at their faces as the balloon leveled out.

“Do you mean to say,” said the Marchioness slowly, “that you expect me—us—to jump from the balloon into this pool?”

“Yes, your ladyship. That’s precisely what I mean.”

Marietta

Her head began to spin. It’s not that she minded heights, or pools. But jumping from such a great height into such a small pool..

She went to turn around then realized that the diameter of the basket and the width of her ass didn’t allow for it. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been forced into such tight quarters with strangers before. And she couldn’t begin to process what had transpired with S`yra. Realizing just how exhausted she was, and that she’d somehow

fallen into her own thoughts, she forced herself back to surroundings, into a conversation that was quickly growing heated.

“And I’m telling you, sir, you are not lighting my balloon on fire!” said S`yra, arms crossed and face in a scowl.

“S`yra listen,” said Graves, whom Marietta noticed with a start was holding aloft the flamethrower from the armory, “this is a high-grade, military-precision instrument. I will aim it precisely. In fact, here,” he said, thrusting the flamethrower towards the woman. She paused, before hesitantly accepting the weapon.

“Unless you want her and I to leap to our deaths,” said Graves, sending a chill down Marietta’s spine despite her hardy clothing, “we have to be precisely on target. I doubt we’ll have to use her more than a couple of times.”

S`yra stood silent, holding the flamethrower with disgust. Suddenly she looked over to Marietta.

“What do you think, Marchioness?” S`yra asked.

Suddenly both sets of eyes were on her, and Marietta could barely think. But she knew how she felt.

“I would do anything for my husband,” she said. “This seems like a risk we have to take.”

Zebulon nodded and smiled. S`yra nodded and frowned. They spent the next twenty minutes flying in silence, with Zebulon occasionally consulting a compass, and S`yra adjusting their altitude to keep them going west.

Then, suddenly, Zebulon activated Arac, peering down below through its magnifying glass. Rays of the sun had started to rise across the horizon, the moon dimming its gleam.

“We’re above basecamp. S`yra, can you find us an air current that will take us northwest of here?”

“I can try, but I think we’ll have to go lower,” she said, pulling a cord and releasing some of the hot air from the balloon.

“I suppose that can’t be helped,” Graves said nervously. Marietta’s stomach churned. What if they were spotted? Surely the Royal Military on high alert wouldn’t hesitate to shoot down an unidentified airborne object?

More darkness disappeared as the sun climbed higher.

“We’re as close as we can get without using the flamethrower,” said Graves, peering downwards. “S`yra, you have to try it. We need to veer more west.”

S`yra grimaced but grabbed hold of the flamethrower. Taking aim as best she could, she pulled the trigger and shot a volley of fire into the mouth of the balloon.

Fshhh!

Marietta fell instantly as the balloon lurched forward and the basket lurched back.

“Too far, S`yra!” Marietta heard Zebulon cry as she struggled to stand. “We’ve gone too far west, we have to go east by just a bit. Then we’ll be straight over it. Shit!”

“What!?” Marietta asked.

“I think we’ve been spotted,” said Graves. Sure enough, a voice from below cried out:

“You are in a Royal Military no-fly zone. Leave immediately or we will open fire!”

Marietta’s blood ran cold. What a stupid, stupid fate: getting shot to death attempting to enter the UnderWorld.

Fshhh!

Marietta fell again before she could spiral any further; Sÿra had shot forth another volley of flame.

“Perfect, Sÿra. See, I told you it’d work!” said Graves.

“This is your last chance! Leave now or we will open fire!” shouted the voice. Marietta could see the soldiers now, on horseback and encircling the pool; the sun had risen high enough and the morning mist had all but disappeared. They were closer to the ground than she’d thought, but still plenty high so as to make the thought of jumping bone-chilling.

“Quit your crowing, Zebby, and go! I’ll be the only one left for them to open fire on!” said Sÿra.

Graves nodded and opened the basket gate, gripping the side of the basket with one hand.

“We’ll jump together, your ladyship,” he said, holding out his free hand.

“What?” said Marietta. She began to shake. She said she’d do anything for her husband, and she meant it, but did jumping to her almost certain doom truly constitute loyalty and love, or merely suicidal sacrifice?

“I’m not ready,” she said.

“On three then,” said Graves, grasping her hands. “Three.”

“We are preparing to open fire!” came the voice from below. “Three!”

“Two,” said Graves,

“Two!” said the voice.

“One,” said Graves, and they jumped. Marietta heard a *Fshhhh!* Sound from above as Sÿra fired the flamethrower, the balloon roaring heavenward at the same time that Marietta and Graves plummeted downward.

“One!” shouted the soldier, and Marietta heard a volley of shots ring out the instant her body hit the water with a bone-shattering smash.

She screamed, and icy-cold water flooded into her mouth. The water began to spin violently. She choked and shook as she sunk deeper and deeper into the torrent. Her eyes closed and her heartbeat stilled. Suddenly she saw her grandmama, lying on her deathbed. Then her grandfather, on the day he died, then her mother, her father...the late butler of Moundharsh. The visions of the departed flooded her mind’s eye as the pool’s icy waters flooded her lungs. Then even her mind’s eye went black and she saw nothing but darkness as she struggled to breathe.

Zebulon

Pain. A steady throb of pain, pulsing against his head. Slowly, deliberately, he opened his eyes. A hazy green light blinded him, and he closed them again. He blinked rapidly, attempting to adjust to the sickly, wispy green that glowed from everywhere and nowhere all at once. He looked down at the hard, barren dirt that surrounded him in all directions. Above him was a black, cloudless sky.

He looked at his hands. Something felt off. He realized he wasn't cold. Nor warm. He felt nothing. Like he wasn't alive. He pressed his forefingers against the wrist opposite Arac and waited. The faintest of beats slid through his veins, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Then he panicked again. Where was the Marchioness? He stood and searched the horizon. The Crossing Pool stood a few feet to his right. A hundred or so yards to his left was a figure, lying still against the dirt. He ran towards it, the sound of his hard boots crashing against the hard dirt, making a muted series of *thushes!*

"Your ladyship," he said, turning the Marchioness onto her back. Her face was paler than he'd ever seen it. "Your ladyship," he said, louder, scrambling to clasp her wrist and find a pulse. Suddenly her eyes began to twitch, opening and blinking fervently against the blinding green glow.

"Where...are we?" she asked. Zebulon frowned as he found her pulse, even weaker than his own.

"Welcome to the UnderWorld," he said, grabbing hold of both of her wrists and helping her stand. She dusted the dirt off of her ass, Zebulon jealous of her fingers. She turned around in a full circle. Everything looked exactly the same. Dirt and nothingness in all directions, and all shrouded in a chilling green glow.

"Where is my husband?" asked the Marchioness, a panic rising in her voice.

"I don't know," said Zebulon, taking out a compass. The arrow pointed west, then east, then north, then west again. It began to spin round, slowly at first, then faster and faster, til the arrow flew up and cracked the glass casing.

"Fuck!" said Zebulon, throwing the compass to the ground, breaking it into pieces.

"You don't know?" said the Marchioness. "You don't know!? Aren't you the grand man with the plan? The Lieutenant General who knows everything?" Her voice was dripping with more than just sarcasm. It was caked with fear and despair. Zebulon watched as a tear rolled down the center of her cheek and landed against the hard dirt of the desert, seemingly the only liquid for miles. With a start, Zebulon reached for his stomach. He'd had a huge helping of Sÿra's chili, yet he no longer felt full. Nor hungry. He prodded his mouth with his tongue and found that he wasn't thirsty either, despite the desperate dryness of the environs.

"Your ladyship, this is a strange place," he said. "I know very little about it, besides that we are very clearly not supposed to be here." Zebulon's eye squinted against the

constant, burning green glow. He turned back to face her ladyship. “But I will tell you everything else I know about the UnderWorld, from the only other time I’ve been here.”

The Marchioness steeled herself and nodded. “Fine,” she said.

“First,” said Zebulon. “Pick a direction. We have to start going somewhere.”

She hesitated, then simply started walking forward from where she stood.

Zebulon followed, and spoke at length.

“I know you blame me for your husband’s...kidnapping,” he said, unsure of how to phrase Leo’s unique situation. In spite of it all, he couldn’t help but leer at her luscious, denim covered cakes. He had the urge to press his face into them. He shook his head to focus.

The Marchioness, meanwhile, said nothing. Only the clamps of their boots against the ground filled the air. Zebulon pressed onward.

“It’s true that I was on leave, earlier than usual. I’d received a wire that my mother was dying. That I would need to get to the City immediately. So I requested an emergency expedited leave status and received it.

“I was still too late,” Zebulon said. The green glow started to make him dizzy, so he focused his gaze squarely at the twin mounds of denim ahead of him.

“By the time my airship reached the City, my mother had passed,” he said, his voice wavering ever so slightly. “But I went to the funeral. It was there, at the funeral, that Glimer alerted me that the RME, the Royal Military Expedition, had started. I was supposed to have gone, of course, but Lee—General Maximilian went instead.

“I felt that I had betrayed him. That was always supposed to be my expedition. I didn’t want...the General to have to go it alone. He shouldn’t have had to go at all. So I went as fast as I could, horsebound, to the Pool. To here. The UnderWorld.” Just saying the word seemed to weigh him down, made putting one foot in front of the other more laborious, like there was lead in his boots.

“I saw them. The Dead. I saw them kidnap him, your ladyship. I saw them ride off on their bone horses to who knows where. I tried to follow but...I knew I needed ammo, and...reinforcements.”

More silence. The Marchioness had not interrupted once. He almost questioned whether or not she was paying attention, but of course she must have been holding on to every word. Whether his explanation made her hate him more or less he couldn’t tell, and was too afraid to ask.

“So that is all you know about the UnderWorld?” the Marchioness suddenly said, her and her plumpness moving ever forward.

“One more thing, your ladyship,” said Zebulon. “One of the Dead. Turned to face me. Said to me, clear as I’m speaking now: ‘if you want him back alive, stop your wicked ways.’”

The Marchioness stopped walking and turned to face Zebulon.

“Stop your wicked ways?” she repeated, her pale face frowning in confusion.

Zebulon avoided her gaze, instead staring off into the still indiscriminately duplicative distance.

“Your ladyship,” he said slowly. “Do you recognize anything about the green glow? Anything that you’ve seen before?”

Zebulon turned to watch as a slow, horrifying realization spread across her face.

“Neolec lighting?” she said, referring to the new form of lighting that was spreading across the City and into each and every landed estate in the land.

The Marchioness started to shake, and Zebulon quickly moved to grab her with his arms. Her lips trembled as she spoke, quaking seemingly with rage and horror.

“M-my husband...sacrificed himself for LIGHTING?” she said. She screamed, a loud and wild and piercing wail against the green glowing nothingness of the UnderWorld.

Zebulon looked around nervously. “Your ladyship, please understand, we were under strict orders from the Crown. I could not refuse service, nor could your husband.”

Zebulon wasn’t sure whether the Marchioness would scream again, or slap him. So when instead she broke down in sobs, leaning into him, weeping deeply, he found himself unsure of what to do.

Slowly, hesitatingly, he reached his arm around and gently patted the back of her vest. And, in spite of the plumpness of her lumps being in such close proximity, he found himself unable to see them, for his own eyes had grown cloudy with tears.

Marietta

Too tired to feel ashamed, after a short while Marietta simply wiped away her tears and resumed her trek without saying a word. She could tell Graves was gawking at her ass. Most of her simply didn’t have the energy to be angry at him. A small part of her, perhaps larger, in fact, than she dared admit—liked the attention.

She certainly had more pressing matters on her mind. Sheer survival, for one. She struggled to catch her breath, though her pace was hardly faster than glacial. The green glow seemed to stab at her eyes even when she closed them. Then there was the hopelessness of it all. Of everything. How would they ever find her husband in such a desolate wasteland? What sort of life could they hope to return to, with such a calculatedly cruel Crown that would barter lives for electricity?

A voice began to whisper to her.

Giiive up.

She was quite sure she made it up. Until it happened again.

Giiiiive uuuup.

She glanced back at Graves, who was staring docilely at her ass. The rank, guttural whisper didn’t remotely resemble his voice. It couldn’t be him. And she was sure it wasn’t in her head. She would never think such thoughts. But, now that these thoughts were there, they started to make sense. Give up. She could just...give up.

Her pace slowed further. The green light glowed brighter. Her thoughts drifted to the dirt below her. It wasn't so hard. Perhaps it was just the right firmness...a fitting resting place.

Giiiiive uuuuup. Perhaps the voice came from the green glow itself, which shone brighter than ever. Maybe if she stopped moving, it would dim, just enough for her to fall asleep. Maybe if she stopped moving, she would see her husband...they could be together again.

Giiiiive uuuuuuup!

"Look, your ladyship!" Graves called out, and suddenly the voice disappeared, and the green glow retreated.

Marietta squinted to where the soldier pointed, and saw a dark spot on the horizon.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," said Graves. "But it's something, and that's a good sign. I don't think this place is...good," he said, clearly struggling to string together words. "I feel like we've been here for days already," he added.

"Imagine how my husband feels," said Marietta softly, quickening her pace.

"It looks...like a building," said Graves.

Marietta's stomach did a somersault. Perhaps it was a jail? Perhaps they were mere moments away from reuniting with her husband. She wondered how the Dead treated their prisoners. How they would treat them. She placed her palm against her specially made weapon.

"Good thinking, your ladyship," said Graves, though his voice sounded weak.

Marietta practically broke into a sprint, though she could hardly feel any oxygen reaching her lungs no matter how deeply she inhaled.

"Guns up," wheezed Marietta.

"Your ladyship," said Graves. "Perhaps we should investigate. We don't even know what this place is. This might not—"

"No time," interrupted Marietta, growing dizzy by the second. "My husband. He might be dying. Goodness knows we are," she said, and in her heart she knew it to be true: the living were simply not meant for these lands.

They drew closer. The structure was made of wood, or at least a facsimile of it. It rose two stories above the ground, and the face of it was pocked with nearly a dozen windows, their panes drowning in grime. A pair of saloon doors stood at its center.

Marietta and Graves marched to the saloon doors: pistols raised, faces grim.

"Graves, I know you are Lieutenant General. But my husband is on the other side of those doors," said Marietta. "In other words, I'm pulling rank," she said, with a certain swagger she hadn't felt since before they landed in what was truly beginning to feel like hell.

Graves, to Marietta's surprise, simply nodded in response.

“Three,” said Marietta, clutching her red pistol with both hands.
“Two,” she said, her and Graves leaning gently against each of the doors.
“One!” she yelled, and the pair burst through, pistols and hackles both raised.

Zebulon

One thing happened that Zebulon expected, and many more that he did not.

If the energy hadn't been drained from him, he would've fought more against the Marchioness's incompetently cavalier attitude. As Lieutenant General he, in fact, should've pulled rank, if only to demand a scope out of the premises.

So he was not very surprised, after the two of them went in guns blazing, that they should be met in return with a row of guns staring right back at them.

What surprised him, what indeed seemed to surprise everyone in the room, was that both the inhabitants and the intruders were all among the living—at least, to varying degrees.

“Who the hell are you?” asked a man who stood behind the bar. For the saloon doors clearly led to a saloon, not some sort of Penitentiary, as the Marchioness had presumed. Rows of round tables stood atop dilapidated wooden floors. Most of the tables were empty, but a dozen or so card-playing men were scattered across a couple of them. One man sat at an upright piano in the back, paused in his playing to point his pistol. To a one, these were the palest men Zebulon had ever seen, and the light behind each of their eyes had dimmed to a flicker.

“We come in peace,” said Zebulon, quickly taking over for the Marchioness, who had frozen at the sight of so many loaded weapons.

“I..” started the Marchioness, voice quivering. “I am looking for my husband. Do you have him?”

The room roared with laughter. The laughs were hollow, coming more from memory than mirth. Zebulon doubted true mirth could bloom in such a barren place.

“No, we don't have your husband, or your sister, or your brother, or your mother,” said the man at the bar. “Put your bullets down, the lotta ya,” he said, pointing to Zebulon and Marietta, but the rest of the room as well. Slowly, everyone complied.

The pair walked over to the bar as the others went back to their business. The pianoman eked out a major-chord melody, each note flatter than the last. The barkeep, like all the other men, wore a military uniform, though of which kingdom Zebulon could not discern. Lines formed deep grooves into his face, and muttonchop whiskers flushed his jowls, while his scalp held but a handful of hairs.

Marietta pulled out a barstool and sat, her ass pushing against the creaking wood and flowing heartily over the sides. Zebulon leered before sitting down himself.

“On the house,” said the barkeep, sliding over two empty mugs.

“Thanks,” Zebulon mumbled. “What is this place?”

The barkeep smirked. “This is the saloon,” he said, as if it were obvious. “Drink up. You’ll need it.”

Zebulon and the Marchioness exchanged glances. They each grabbed a mug and pressed the rim to their mouths. Zebulon almost choked. It was full, though with what substance, he couldn’t tell. It certainly wasn’t liquid, but seemed heavier than a gas. Whatever it was, each swallow seemed to bring more oxygen to his lungs and fire to his belly. The despair of the UnderWorld still lurked, but it sure was muted.

“Thanks,” said Zebulon. He reached for his pocket, but the barkeep stopped him.

“Don’t take Bover Coin here,” he said. “You’ll want a room, I’m sure. You’ll need to win some of our Coins with some poker. ‘Less you have some UnderCoin?”

Zebulon blinked in shock. He couldn’t imagine them having their own currency.

“S’what I thought. Go join that table,” said the barkeep, pointing.

“We’re actually quite pressed for time,” said the Marchioness. “We can’t stay the night, certainly. We need more information on how to find my husband. He was taken captive by the Dead.”

The barkeep’s face darkened, the candlelight falling into the folds of his scowl. “Trust me, lassie, you’ll not want to travel by night. You think the green glow of the day’s bad, you ain’t seen nothing yet. Just let yer man play some poker and get you a room.”

Zebulon could practically hear the Marchioness biting her tongue.

“But if it’s information yer wantin’, you’ll have to talk to him,” the barkeep pointed again. Zebulon followed the arc of the man’s frail finger, and saw a figure he hadn’t seen before. In the very back, near the piano, sat a man covered by a dark cloak. “He’s got all the knowhow of these lands. He’s no angel, but he won’t harm you. But” here the barkeep leaned forward with a treacherous smile “he’ll only tell...for a price, if you know what I mean, lassie.” Here the barkeep barked another false, flat laugh.

“Wonderful,” sneered the Marchioness. “What’s his name?”

The barkeep laughed again, a more full, robust laugh, but still not a happy one: the tremors of his vocal cords seemed to vibrate with a heavy cruelty, rather than a deep joy. “We don’t know our names down here, lassie. This is the UnderWorld.”

Zebulon exchanged another worried look with the Marchioness. The pair left their empty mugs at the bar and took a few steps away from the nameless barkeep.

“Well, what do you think, your ladyship?” Zebulon asked.

“I think it’s clear,” she said, a sense of haughtiness returning from the life-giving draught. “You should go win us a room for the night—I think we were lucky to have survived our walk thus far, and who knows how much farther we have to go to find Leo. We need to rest up, and prepare to travel in the morning. If they have mornings here... Meanwhile,” the Marchioness glanced over to the cloaked stranger “I still have the device. I shall simply have to...utiliize my assets to procure as much intel as possible.”

Zebulon nodded. It did seem the only way forward, but he wanted her ladyship’s input nonetheless.

“Don’t be afraid to use your weapons, if he gives you any trouble, your ladyship,” said Zebulon.

“I can hold my own,” was all the Marchioness said before slinking away. Zebulon had no doubt that she could. He watched as she sat down next to the cloaked man. She made a series of flirtatious gestures, and then her and the stranger stood and climbed up the stairs. The Marchioness waved at Zebulon, then disappeared.

“Room for one more?” Zebulon said, waltzing over to the table the barkeep had directed him to. Three dead-eyed souls stared back at him, unblinking.

“You gotta ante,” said one, voice little more than a whisper. “No Bover Coin!” he added, after Zebulon attempted to toss one in. Zebulon frowned.

“Something you value,” said the same man, with a grin. Zebulon blanched at the man’s teeth, few and far between and as black as his boots. The only other thing of value he had...no, he couldn’t.

“Ante!” roared the man. “We don’t got all day!”

Zebulon choked back a giggle, which he knew would be poorly received. For time was indeed the only thing these men possessed in spades. Turning his smile into a frown, and though a knife seemed to stab his very heart, he took out the golden locket from his breast pocket and placed it with the other chits.

The mere sight of it seemed to pour life into the other men. Light flew back to their eyes, and they each sat up straighter.

“My deal,” said the whisperer, hands shaking as he whisked out the cards.

Zebulon looked at his hand. Ace of hearts and a pip. Quickly and quietly, Zebulon pressed a knob on Arac, which turned spider and slid down the table, one card held between two of its pincers.

“Pardon me sir, you’ve missed me one,” said Zebulon, waving his one card. The whisperer stared at Zebulon inscrutably, before tossing another card his way. Another pip. But no matter. The board held the ace of spades. Arac crawled up a leg of the table and across its underside, carefully avoiding showing its pincers between the slats. In position. Now, all he needed was a distraction.

“Oh barkeep!” Zebulon yelled, waving his hands like a maniac. “What’s a fella got to do to get another drink around here?!” The three men stared at him, mouths agape. In a flash, Arac swapped the ace of spades for this pip. The barkeep scowled but stomped over to their table, slamming a mug down.

“For yer tab,” he said, marching back to the bar.

“Thank you, barkeep!” said Zebulon, who with a broad gesture made a grand show of drinking the elixir. The other players stared transfixed at his mouth, and his rudeness, while Arac placed the ace of spades into his hand.

“Beginners lucks, gentleman,” said Zebulon immediately, tossing out his twin aces on the tabletop. The men groaned. Zebulon sneered. He’d cheated at poker before,

but it was never this easy. He snatched back his locket, grabbed his winnings, and marched to the bar.

“How much for a room?” he asked with a grin.

Marietta

“Like what you see?” cooed Marietta. She pushed her ass outward, the already-stretched denim straining further. She stood facing the wall, ass towards the cloaked stranger, who sat stiffly atop his bed. A mirror was propped against the far wall of the room, such that Marietta could keep watch over the gentleman’s face and share in his view of her rear.

“Lovely,” said the man, his voice a fraction of a whisper.

“So..” Marietta said, voice honey sweet. “What information might you have regarding—”

The man cut her off with a loud grumble. Marietta sighed.

“Of course,” she said, a smile belying her impatience. Marietta braced herself, for she doubted the denim of her pants would endure more growth, but what choice did she have? Besides, it felt rather pathetic, fretting about being nude in the UnderWorld. “I’m sure your intel is very valuable. I will give you what you wish. What you’ve ached for, but never got. My one rule is: no hands. No touching. But feast your eyes...on this!”

She pressed a knob on the device, and then moved the gear forward. She almost gasped: for the first time since crossing the threshold, her body felt something. A thunderous gurgle sent a flood of inner warmth throughout her body, landing, as always, in her buttocks. She felt her flesh ram against the walls of sturdy denim, her heartbeat finally filling her lungs with air. She felt alive.

“Good gravy,” said the man, sitting up even straighter.

“Oh yes,” sang Marietta, leaning into her role. “There’s more where that came from,” she said, turning the gear further.

“Mmm,” she oozed, unable to stifle her moan. The warmth returned, as did a heated wetness between her legs. Her ass pushed and prodded outward, fighting fiercely against the denim. The seams that ran the length of her crack started to split, as did those on either side of her hips.

“Oh my,” the figure whispered, his pale knuckles turning even whiter as he gripped his knees in erotic anguish.

“It...mmm,” Marietta struggled to breathe, though not from the ambient ennui of the UnderWorld. Her whole body felt flushed, and every inch of her buttocks felt on fire. Her cunt was soaked, and it took every bit of self-restraint not to reach out and stroke her clit.

“Want it bigger?” she finally said, through gritted teeth. She knew he did. More to the point, *she* did. Her whole body screamed for it. She wanted her ass bigger. She wanted to be bigger. To grow bigger. She twisted forward the gear with wild abandon. Suddenly,

“Guuuuuh!” she came, a sudden squirt of pussyjuice staining the panties she’d borrowed from Sÿra. She leaned forward and pressed her palm against the wood paneling of the wall. She didn’t think it possible to sweat in the UnderWorld, but here she was, drenched. And the growth had only just—

“Mmmuh...more!” she said, as more of her grew. Her plump mounds barreled outward, ballooning her blue denim. Seam after seam unraveled and split, until finally, her tush thwarted the threads.

Riiiiiiip! Her ass tore through the crack of her pants. *Riiip! Riip! Riiiiip!* Her buttflesh tore through two spots on her left hip and one on her right.

“Mercy,” whispered the stranger, who was squeezing together his hands so tightly they were now turning red.

But Marietta could pay him no mind; she gazed deeply into the mirror, focusing squarely on her roundness that was actively rebelling against any sense of sartorial suppression. The four blobs of broken-loose buttflesh each heaved forward, each a separate, growing mass that longed to unite with the other.

“Yesss,” hissed Marietta, as if possessed by lust. She turned the gear yet further without thinking.

“Gnuuuuuuh!” she screamed, slamming a palm against the wall as another torrent of pussyjuice gushed down her gams. Her ass burned white hot, and then tore through the rest of her threads like a blade through silk. *Riip! Riip! Riiiiip!* The buttflesh oozed out and through the holes of denim, widening them and making the whole idea irrelevant. A clump of frayed fabric hung limply below her cheeks, which were now huge, heaving, and fully naked. She ran her hand down the vast expanse of sweaty, shiny, smooth skin, and nearly jumped when it pushed back against her hand and oozed outward even more. Already she could not imagine a woman alive—or indeed, in the UnderWorld—who had a larger expanse of ass than she. No tailor would wish to clothe her. It would take a window curtain’s length of garment to cover just one of her buttcheek’s, let alone both of them.

“Mercy, mercy, mercy,” Marietta heard the cloaked man whisper. He said the words over and over again, like an incantation, and Marietta truly felt like her ass was casting a spell over both of them.

The most surreal part of it all was the more-ness of it: her ass seemed to be pumping waves of pleasure throughout her body, certainly to her clit. But with each passing second, there was more of her ass to send more waves of pleasure, with more intensity with each wave, more depth and density to her mounds, more surface area that tingled, more sweat atop her flesh, more moaning, more pleasure, more, more, more.

“Guuuuuh!” she moaned, and thrust her cunt forward.

Fshhh! Fsshhh! Fshhhh! She orgasmed three times in row, bursting forth like a dam and splattering the wetness onto the floor. Her ass began to gurgle loudly as it grew, and Marietta braced both hands against the walls for balance.

Shit! She thought, her hands streaking against the wall as she began to squat, the weight of her globes bearing down on her like a pair of anvils. Lower and lower she fell, her twin peaks plummeting below her thighs, her calves, until finally they pressed onto the wood floor.

They'd reached truly unbelievable proportions: once again, the size of naval mines, such that her legs now didn't even reach the floor, but simply splayed across the vast, billowing expanse of the front curves of her buttoflesh. And still they grew. Further they rose, Marietta rising with them. The cloaked stranger gasped with glee, though for all Marietta cared, he could have been in another room. She felt all alone in her growth, all alone in her greed, all alone in her carnal resolve and gelatinous roundness. So much so, that without any further hesitation, she took one hand and placed it against the hot wetness that was her hole.

Shlick! Shlick! Shlick! She rubbed herself fervently, desperately, ravenously.

Fshhhhh! Fshhhhhh! Every few rubs of her clit and her whole body would shake, wobbling atop her buttocks and causing ripples of her rumpflesh as her pussy roared with its hot wetness afresh. Marietta closed her eyes, gritting her teeth and squeezing a handful of her butt. She laughed out loud: what could fit in her hand had once been an entire buttcheek, but was now a preposterously small—and shrinking—fraction of her gargantuan glutes.

She was far more butt than woman now, and she felt herself slowly rising towards the ceiling as her spheres swelled still.

Creeeeeeeeeeekkkk!

A hardness hit her left cheek just as a nails-on-a-chalkboard screech propped open Marietta's eyes. Her buttoflesh had reached the dresser in the center of the front wall, and was pushing it across the floorboards.

Shlick! Fshhhh! Marietta gave herself one last gut-wrenching, teeth-clenching, slit-drenching orgasm, then turned the gear back. The growth stopped at once.

Marietta sighed. She sat stranded atop twin mounds of what was surely a literal ton of buttoflesh, heaps upon heaps of smooth, silky ass, the front curves of which were covered in layers and layers of hot, clear cunt-cum. She sighed once more. Whatever else she thought of Graves, this device was surely one of the greatest things to happen to her. Indeed, one of the greatest inventions of all time.

Marietta

“Thank you again, sir,” said Marietta. “You have been tremendously helpful. I must now go and tell my traveling companion everything.”

Thrrrp!

She went to leave the room, and found herself quite stuck: though her buttocks had shrunk a great deal over her and the cloaked man's conversation, it was still larger than the width of the door.

"Hmm," Marietta said through pursed lips. Her carnal inhibitions had shrunken too, replaced by frustration at the indignity of having buttocks bigger than a doorway was wide.

"Sir, one last thing. If perhaps we could lift, just for now, my no touching rule. It appears I need a bit of assistance in, er, taking my exit," she said.

"Yes," said the man, his voice pregnant with gleeful expectation.

Each of the man's cold, clammy hands landed with gentle thumps against her naked buttocks, and she nearly jumped from the chill.

"Gnaaaah," groaned the man, and Marietta could tell it was more from exertion than pleasure. She thrust herself forward, and together, straining, they managed to loose flab after flab of supple assflesh from the vise of the doorframe.

"Oof!" Marietta said as she nearly stumbled into the opposite wall. "Thank you," she said through pursed lips. She turned to watch the man grin and nod his head as he slowly closed his door.

"Well," said Marietta, straightening her shirt and adjusting her hair. "Now to find Graves." She walked down the frayed carpet, her singularly sized buns nearly knocking against the sides of the hallway with each rhythmic swing. She dreaded the perilous climb down the shallow staircase into the bar brimming with lecherous looky-loos. Before she reached the first step, however, she saw it. The last door of the hall bore a piece of parchment, with six letters chicken-scratched atop it: GRAVES. She took a chance and opened the door.

"Oh thank goodness, Graves," she said, after squeezing her rump through the doorway. "I hate to say it but I'm rather glad to see you. I've much to impart. The gentleman was, well he was actually rather helpful. He gave me this: it's an UnderWorld compass. I imagine it will be of tremendous use for us. He said we must keep going west, which is thankfully the direction in which we've already been traveling. The Citadel of the Dead, is where we must go. Sounds tranquil...Oh, but we mustn't travel at night, under any circumstances., just as the barkeep said. Oh, and—"

Choooooo!

Marietta almost jumped, then realized it was a snore. Graves had been fast asleep throughout her explanation.

"Oh," she said, frowning. She walked over to his side of the bed and laid down the special compass on his bedside table. A flash of gold on the bed caught the light, and her eye. It was a locket. She gasped. It was the same thing she'd seen Graves handling at the funeral, which, good lord, she surmised, must have been barely a day ago. She felt the lack of sleep catch up to her, and lying in the bed—even sharing one with Graves—suddenly didn't seem so bad.

But something else caught her. Something her mother had always warned against, but her father had always encouraged. She'd grown to cling to its use, its necessity, even. Even if it had killed a thousand cats, she didn't care: curiosity always got the better of her. She grabbed the locket, shaped like a heart. His poor mother, she thought. Poor Graves, too. She unclasped it.

All the breath in her body seemed to vanish all at once. Her heartbeat pounded against her eardrums. She could feel it before she could think it. An icy despair crawled over her whole body, a shivery fear of betrayal. It was like the water from the funeral had returned to wash over her once more.

For staring back at her was not an elderly woman whom she'd've presumed to be Graves' mother. It was a daguerreotype of her husband. Further curiosity beat back the icy waters of paralysis. She unlatched the photo and saw a weathered piece of parchment. She glanced at Graves. Still asleep. She unfolded the parchment, her heartbeat loud and deep as a cannonblast.

It was a letter. In her husband's hand. As she read, tears rolled down her face and stained the stationary.

My darling Zeb,

Not a night passes in which I do not think longingly, lovingly, of you. Every inch of my soul so desperately seeks your companionship. My aching manhood yearns for your own. How deeply I wish to once again nestle your arms in mine. How we might together sing our favorite song, and drink deeply of our favorite whisky.

I fear the times ahead will not be good to us. But I am more committed than ever that we should be good to each other. Please know that each letter you send is like a balm for my heart. I hope the same is true for you of mine.

Yours always,

Leo

Marietta began to breathe in spasms. The walls were surely caving in on her. She dropped the letter, the locket, and the device. She stumbled to the door and squeezed through the doorway, trudging through the dizzying, disorienting pain of her breaking heart, making her way down the hallway and down the stairwell and through the bar.

"Miss you can't go out there, it's past nightfall! Miss!"

She heard a voice, but not its meaning. She trudged forward, the green glow now faint, but still grinding into her retinas. She fell to the ground, her overgrown ass imprinting into the dirt .

She wailed and whimpered, pain oozing through her vocal chords, oozing through her shaking sobs. The pain. The sheer, sheer pain. She clenched her hands into fists and hit, hit, hit the hard ground, the physical pain causing her to finally stop choking and inhale a desperate, spasming breath.

She couldn't hear, over her sobs, the galloping of horses, or the drawing of swords, or the blazing of flames.

"You...are now our hostage," came an otherworldly voice, somehow both deeper and higher pitched than anything she'd ever heard.

"What?" Marietta said, looking up. Five riders surrounded her. Their bodies each glowed green, and seemed to be made almost entirely of light, not flesh. They each sat astride massive, fleshless horses; the creatures consisted of bone and nothing else. The spectres held flaming swords, the orange light of the fire contrasting harshly with the darkness of the night. Black holes stood where the ghoul's eyes should have been, yet Marietta felt that the riders were staring right through her flesh and into her very soul.

Marietta reached for the gun that wasn't there, the gun that she'd left back in Graves' room. She tried to stand, but just then one of the riders reached forward, his body bending unnaturally, stretching outward. He grabbed Marietta with one hand by the collar of her shirt and lifted her, as if she weighed less than a feather. One of the riders made room on his horse, and Marietta landed with a thud in front of the ghoul. She had never felt more alone, in either this world or the world above. She quaked with silent fear as the rider tied her to the fleshless horse so she wouldn't escape.

Hostage in tow, the band of ghouls rode off into the vast abyss of the UnderWorld.

End of Part I