

1. MEETINGS AND MESSENGERS

“We will die down here. The walls will cave and the ocean will rush in to silence us. More and more I feel it, the inevitable end of Azryl, the great Old City. The Curse that holds us underwater will suffocate us. The flooded Dead City grows as hasty patches upon patches fail, shrinking the Old City. We huddle in Azryl, pretend we are anything but ephemeral. Water gave us life. Water will be our death.”

—Diary of W. Pelgin, noted scholar

No one of sound mind ventured into the Dead City. That’s what Pik’s letter-giver had said, signing a ward against his chest. Descending further into the cursed place, Pik very much agreed. He had no need to be here, except for his own silly curiosity. His nosiness would get him into trouble, that’s what his pa always said. In his worn shark-leather boots, Pik had tiptoed through places most people would never see again, places most people wouldn’t want to. He didn’t fear curses that never actually seemed to curse anyone. *Unlike the surface...* The thought brought a shiver. He brushed dust from his red uniform – it always seemed to gather dirt, unlike other messengers’ – and forced himself

onward.

Pincy scuttled behind him, his carapace dropping to the dust every so often so he could dig around. He paused, dug again, and squeaked as his pincers snagged a beetle.

‘At least *you’re* having fun,’ said Pik, watching Pincy crunch the beetle.

A beard of dust coated Pincy’s tiny face from when Pik’s boot had accidentally kicked up a cloud of dust earlier.

‘Come on, boy. It’s better if we do this together.’

Pincy’s four eyes blinked up at him.

‘All right, all right. It makes *me* feel better if we do this together.’

Pik inched forward and the reassuring clicks of Pincy’s feet followed. The tower behind him groaned, creaked. It set his nerves on edge. Even the sponge walkway seemed to shudder with his footsteps. He peered into the black depths of the ocean to check no Gods were watching him, predicting a cave-in. If he’d seen the Gods gathered, he’d have fled the Old City faster than when he was late delivering messages.

Guided by stuttering lights that whispered and buzzed over his shoulder, he inched through the arched tunnel, eyes focused on every joint, every potential weakness. The hum of the lights was worse down here, the flickers constant, and he recalled hearing that at one time they had not buzzed. He

dismissed that as nonsense.

He spotted a drip sliding down the doorway, but it turned out to be a spider.

‘Idiot Pik.’

He watched the spider weave to the floor. Such a tiny thing, surrounded by such a vast city. It really didn’t belong here, and Pik wanted to pick it up and move it, but there was nowhere else for it to live. Pincy darted forward and snatched it up.

‘Pincy! Drop it. *Drop it now!*’

Pincy held up his two prizes, dancing in a circle. Pik reached down to free the spider, but Pincy sidestepped him and squeaked. Pik swooped down and grabbed Pincy, then held him in front of his face.

‘Drop. It. Now.’

Pincy squeaked and let the spider fall to the floor. For having such strong claws, his grip could be gentle. He nipped Pik’s nose.

‘Hey!’

Pincy blinked up at him innocently.

A giant shape flew past in the ocean, making them jump. An anvil shark. It zigzagged into the distance, to be swallowed by the depths. Those unfathomable, compressing depths...

The pervasive silence got too much. Suddenly, Pik’s daring venture into the Dead City seemed silly compared to the weight of water squeezing the old walkway. How many people had suffocated in past

collapses? How many had heard the terrified screams of their friends before the safety barriers crashed down to doom them? The Gods had watched, silent.

Pincy wriggled until Pik set him down.

The next building held the wilted dignity of a once-great chamber, like the Great Dome where the Bearer of the Broken Sceptre feasted. The ornate staircase to the tower above should have gleamed white, but it sat grey with a shroud of dust. Pik wanted to explore, yet the opposite walkway beckoned, leading to the next building, and the next, and the next... until eventually he would reach a barrier: the Dead City proper, not just abandoned parts of the Old City that people still called dead.

Those barriers intoxicated him. Once he'd seen one, he needed to see them all. His feet carried him through the corridors and walkways and downward pipes. The air was thick with dust and history, and his chest was thumping, thumping. Towers of red, green, blue, silver, white – he sped past them all, past spires and pods and routes that would take him to mini districts long forgotten.

The floor creaked, but he didn't – couldn't – stop. Ahead he saw no light. He slowed reverentially. Here, by a passage under a tower, a see-through barrier faced him. He placed his palm on it, feeling a shock of cold. A small patch of condensation covered one side, and he wiped at it. Beyond, a half-flooded walkway

stretched ahead leading to another barrier holding back an ocean-filled room.

Pik's ears pounded like the water he imagined rushing in centuries ago. He didn't know why he was here, why he did this, but it seemed wrong to live in the city without paying respect to those lost. Here, he was closer to those who died. He'd even seen a skull in one flooded room. And as he remembered that, the horror of it gripped him again. People who swerved the Dead City were blind to the threat facing them.

Movement caught his eye.