



DEMOKRATIA

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PAT BITT



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PROLOGUE

The polar lion's weary heartbeat flooded its ears. It gasped an out-of-rhythm breath as its consciousness returned and it awoke staring at the back of its eyelids. The blurry darkness offered comfort, and it clenched its eyes tight. It felt it was on its side, lying against a cold stone street. By a chill in the air, it surmised it was night or early morning. It tensed and relaxed its muscles from its head to its tail, monitoring for injury. A dull ache echoed in the back of its skull and a general weariness weighed its body down.

Slowly, the animal opened its eyes.

The first thing it saw was the body of a young man lying on the ground, staring back with lightless eyes.

A chill shot up the polar lion's spine. Against the protests of its tired muscles, it lifted itself off the ground onto all four paws. An arctic white mane trailed behind its feline head turning and observing its surroundings. Mud-brick walls rose up along a stone-paved street, bluish white in the moonlight and dotted with irregularly placed windows. Carts, crates and canvas sacks of various sizes and shapes lined the walls, clustering up near wooden doors. A star-spattered sky sprawled out above the city.

On the ground, the young man shifted his gaze up to the polar lion.

"You're awake?" he whispered with a fading, hoarse voice. "Thank goodness. I was scared I was going to have to die alone."

His dry mouth hung open with his cheek pressed on the cold ground. A dirty tunic wrapped around his thin frame. He lay completely still with lifeless limbs at his sides.

"Don't worry. I don't think this is your fault," he continued. "I should have known it would come to this." He stared somewhere past the animal. "Should have known..."

The polar lion nudged the young man's arm. It rolled limply and fell back the way it had been resting against the hard ground. His chest stopped moving. Each shallow breath he chose to speak cost a precious second of consciousness.

"You'll find another to carry the torch," he said. "Stay in the city. Boranassians are good people."

His finger twitched. He was trying to reach the animal, but an unmistakable stillness overtook him. His eyes never finished closing.

The polar lion bowed its head before the corpse of the young man for a long moment.

“Over here!” a voice called.

The polar lion’s onyx eyes shot open. By the time it figured out which direction the voice came from, footsteps followed, and five men brandishing swords turned the corner from down the street.

“Of all the rotten luck; it really is an escaped polar lion!” one soldier said, staring at the animal. He switched to a two-handed grip to control his shaking sword.

Another’s eyes widened when it saw the dead body. “Cursed beast has gone mad!”

The polar lion stepped back, head turning from man to man. None of their eyes had any sympathy. It took another step back and bumped its paw into the body. It only stole its attention from them for a fleeting second. Absentmindedly, it dragged the sky-blue fur of its paw across the ground, as if it was wiping off the touch of death.

One of the soldiers cried out a command. They readied their blades in an attack formation and took a cautious step forward. On reflex, the polar lion uttered a warning growl, but clammed up once it realized how threatening it sounded.

“The Circus wants us to bring this thing back alive?” a soldier gulped. “Right. When fish fly!”

A low wind swept through the street, carrying a chill unusual for a summer month. The soft glow of oil lamps filled some windows. No faces appeared in them, though curious voices traveled in unintelligible whispers out into the street. All their doors remained closed. A few rats sniffed their way out from behind some clay containers, drawn towards the corpse, but halted by the standoff.

The polar lion widened its stance. It checked one last time for any sign of understanding from the soldiers. Their eyes were wide, with quivering pupils, but they were focused on it with intent.

One of the rats squeaked.

Another lamp came on in a window.

The lead soldier shouted.

“Attack!”

The polar lion turned and ran. A fury of footsteps followed behind. The polar lion turned a corner into an alleyway, vaulting over an overturned

cart. A trail of light was left in its wake as lamplight filled the windows it raced past. The hushed whispers from indoors turned to curious yells as the city awoke from the commotion. The lion turned another corner onto a darker street, and the battle cries of the soldiers fell further behind. Slowing its pace, it spared a glance behind it. Large awnings overhead blocked the moonlight and darkness blurred the alley it had come through.

“There it is!”

The polar lion skidded to a halt as another group of soldiers rounded the corner ahead. It whipped around as a sword came down next to it, just missing its tail. The soldier pulled his sword back, shocked he came so close to getting a hit. The other men rushed past him after the fleeing polar lion.

Gaining a fair amount of distance, the polar lion passed the alley it came through and continued down the street. It ended at a three-way intersection, in which part of the first group of soldiers suddenly emerged out from behind a mud-brick building. With no time to stop, it carried its momentum and lowered its head. The soldiers planted their feet and raised their swords. The polar lion shoulder-checked two soldiers into the walls with the force of a rolling boulder.

A sword tip nicked the lion on the thigh as it dodged past the rest. The moon slipped behind monolithic clouds, darkening the street ahead. The polar lion barreled on at full speed regardless. It cleared any obstacles—a parked chariot, wine barrels and crates—with only a second’s notice as they manifested out of the darkness before it. No landmarks stuck out to it, though it placed its location as a residential neighborhood near the city center. Side streets and alleys branched off in every direction and, given its unfamiliarity with the territory, it feared the second group of soldiers might flank it. It turned at random, hoping it would be enough to throw them off. After a few turns, it was forced to brake to a halt.

A stone wall split the alley in two. After nearly crashing into it, the polar lion glanced around. A pair of baked clay containers stood tall enough to make good cover. It ducked behind them as windows were lit up by oil lamps, piercing the darkness. It made itself as small as it could and held its breath. The clouds covering the moon retreated, slightly brightening the alleyway. The shouts of the pursuing soldiers grew louder. Bootsteps on the packed earth reverberated down the alley walls, off the clay containers, and into the lion’s pounding ears.

Its muscles ached as it held them tight like a coiled spring to compress itself down behind the containers. The bootsteps drew closer, then stopped in front of the alleyway. It bit down on its tongue to take its focus off the

breath it was holding. The soldiers muttered, and then pair by pair they ran in the opposite direction. The polar lion let off biting its tongue and sighed.

"It's over here!" a single soldier, still standing at the mouth of the alleyway, called to his comrades.

"What? Do you see it?"

"No," he held his sword out to the lamplit windows, "but what else would have woken everyone up?"

The polar lion took a defensive stance, no longer concerned if part of it stuck out past the clay containers. Its tail scraped the wall, and it turned to size it up. Under the pressure of being sighted, the wall looked possible to scale as a potential escape route. It bent down and braced to jump before the cautiously advancing soldiers could attack.

The polar lion shot out from behind the containers. Some of the soldiers gasped. At the height of its jump it pushed off the neighboring wall to ascend a little higher. The wall jump brought it just short of the ledge, barely catching it with its front paws. The lion swung back and forth trying to climb, its back exposed to the soldiers.

They took advantage of the vulnerability. They charged at the polar lion, swinging their swords at its back legs. It dug its claws into the wall to stabilize itself, but before it could climb higher a blade tore at its thigh. Another scraped the fur away on the opposite calf, and it let out a guttural roar. The sheer volume of the bellowing sound froze the soldiers for a split-second. It was just long enough for it to dig its claws back in and climb up. The soldiers got a few more swings in, but they only caught the tip of its tail.

The polar lion risked looking down at them from atop the stone wall. Half the men had already dispersed, dashing out of the alley to find another route. The others made no effort to climb after it. Some cursed the animal. Others looked relieved there was no confrontation. Assured of its safety, the polar lion jumped down on the other side of the wall.

Pain shot through its cut-up thighs and calves when it hit the ground. It winced, craning its head to assess the damage, when a blunt force tackled it from the side. The polar lion lost its balance and fell. Then something dug its teeth into its leg.

With a single fierce kick, the lion flung a lean-muscled hound off its leg and into the narrow alley it came from, and it landed with a thud in a pool of shadows. It rose back up, revealing an angular silhouette. The whites of its bared teeth contrasted with the surrounding darkness. It growled, and then two more sets of teeth flanked it.

Three hounds of similar color and breed stepped out of the shadows in an arrow formation. Their low grumbles and growls melded together in warring disharmony. The polar lion backed up. It couldn't run, locked in a stare-down with the lead hound. Its mouth twitched and it let out a throaty warning; the kind only cats could make. With its eyes on its opponent, it almost didn't notice the silhouette of a man walk up behind the hounds.

The man lit a match, the scraping sound echoing off the alley walls. The matchlight painted wavy shadows on the dull metal muscle cuirass he wore. He raised the match to a bone-marrow pipe hanging from the side of his mouth. A petasos hat cast sharp shadows down his scruffy face.

"Finally, something to hunt around here," he said, taking a long puff from his pipe.

The polar lion's eyes flicked from the lead hound to the man in the petasos hat, who released the smoke from the side of his mouth with a satisfying hiss. The hounds continued their guttural growls, the corners of their mouths shaking with tension. The man flicked his wrist and the match went out.

"Sic him."

The hounds leapt forward. The polar lion rose to its hind legs and roared. It swatted them off with a swing of its massive front paw. The attack cleared enough space between them, and it turned and ran.

"Nico! Labros! Go!" the man shouted. All three hounds began barreling after the lion. "Aes, stay with me." The man clicked his tongue, and the lead hound turned around and came back to him.

At the mouth of the alley, the polar lion found itself in a similar labyrinth to the one it just escaped from. Buildings and houses were pressed tight together, forcing it to slow on turns. It raced in and out of shadows, a little more careless about hitting walls and crates—Nico and Labros were much faster than the soldiers it had previously evaded. The two hounds gained on the lion's heels. They snapped their jaws just when they were within reach, flinging long lines of saliva, only for the polar lion to pull ahead.

Accelerating out from a corner, the polar lion crashed headfirst into some wooden carts. It rolled through, keeping all four paws on the ground. The debris from the smashed carts did little to stall the hounds, and they rammed their way through after it. Ahead, more carts, spare wheels, and crates littered the side street. The polar lion lowered its face and charged forward, sending broken boards and wheel spokes splintering in its wake. To dodge the wreckage, Nico and Labros jumped up onto and across the

roofs of the undamaged carts lining the alley. They gained speed, and soon they were running directly parallel with the polar lion. It sensed them just outside its peripheral vision, closing in for the kill.

Nico shot from the top of a cart. At the same time, the polar lion rocketed off the ground. They collided in mid-air. Nico bounced off the lion's shoulder like a pebble thrown against a boulder. The polar lion landed on the cart, bowing the wood underneath its weight. It leapt again, reaching for a low roof. Its chest slammed into the edge, and its bottom legs scratched the side for leverage. It scrambled with its front paws to anchor itself, dust and dirt gently drifting down from where its claws tore at the building.

Labros jumped to their side of the alley. It landed on the same creaking cart damaged by the lion's weight. The hound sprung after it and the cart burst at its joints with a loud crack. Labros threw itself at the polar lion, jaws open and ready to take a bite out of its side. From where it was hanging, the polar lion twisted its lower half and shoved a clawed paw into the hound's nose. Labros yelped and fell back to the ground next to Nico, circling and barking fiercely at their escaped prey. Without a second to lose, the polar lion hoisted itself with a burst of strength up onto the rooftop.

With its paws on a solid, flat plane, the polar lion took a moment to catch its breath. The stars and the moon shone bright overhead, reflecting off the array of rooftops outstretched before it. Most were flat and roughly the same height, confirming its suspicion that it was in a residential district just outside of the city center. To its north, that center was marked by the Archon's Tower, a colossal government structure that pierced up from the skyline. Wooden cranes, pulley systems, and stockpiles of stones and slabs surrounded the tower; a construction project had been started to add more floors to what was already the tallest building in the metropolis. Amidst the construction the polar lion sensed plenty of potential places to lay low and hide. It jogged in the Tower's direction, starting to feel the bite and the cuts in its legs. It stretched and attempted to shake it off, but a shrill cry from above froze it mid-action.

Its gaze shot skyward. It scanned the dark clouds, which crawled along the night sky with glacial indifference. The yellow moon hung high. A black shape flew across it and then shot down low, pulling its wings in close.

The polar lion's eyes were still on the moon by the time the falcon shot past it, drawing a long scratch along its shoulder with a sharp talon. Its mane blew sideways from the wind stream, and its knees bent in recoil from the wound. Beyond the edge of the roof, the falcon swooped back

around. It flapped its massive wings to brake and landed on the leather gauntlet of a tall woman standing at the edge of an adjacent rooftop.

The woman's dark hair settled from the falcon's landing, falling around sleepy eyes and long features. She wore a long navy-blue tunic that blended in against the dark night behind her, with dark leather greaves and chest armor. In contrast, her skin and hair glowed in the moonlight, and together with the falcon on her right hand it created an image of ethereal beauty. With the cool indifference of a storied hunter, she tilted her head to the side and sized up the polar lion. The falcon mimicked her. She whistled and raised her gauntleted hand. The falcon shot back out.

The bird zeroed back in on its target. It arced around the polar lion like an angry hornet, constantly diving in from different angles and making it dance to dodge. The woman watched the battle from the safe distance of her rooftop. She yawned, and behind her a trap door opened. A second later, the lead hound Aes jumped up onto her roof. Its owner, the man in the petasos hat, followed shortly after. The hound ran up to the woman with a puppy-like trot, and she bent down to scratch its ears.

"Hey Aes," she said. The hound barked in reply, panting cheerfully.

"Lydia!" the man in the petasos hat called to her, brushing straw off his pants that he'd collected on his way up.

"Timon. I was wondering when you'd get here." Lydia said.

"I've been here. I was just—" Timon looked up from dusting himself off and froze.

"What is it?" Lydia asked.

"You look stunning in tonight's moonlight."

"Ugh, stop," she covered her face with her hands. "I just rolled out of bed for this."

"I'm serious," Timon closed the distance between them. "Your profile could lend its shape to a queens's crown."

"Shut up," she smiled, playfully keeping him in the corner of her eye.

Timon smiled back, and Aes returned to his side. They looked on at Lydia's falcon darting at the polar lion on the opposite roof.

"Looks like being stationed in the city isn't going to be as boring as I thought," Timon said. "We've got a murder victim in the streets, and our prime suspect is an escaped polar lion from the Kyrillos Family Circus."

"Not the kind of thing we're usually summoned for," Lydia said.

"Sure," Timon shrugged. "But who else to handle it besides the top two soldiers in Boranassos?"

"We're the top two?" Lydia asked with false incredulity.

“You were there at the feast after we fought the Xakrans in the Battle of Helygra when the Archon himself said as much...” Timon stopped, noting her trying to keep a straight face. “You’re messing with me.”

Lydia laughed. “What are you doing after this? I’m up now, so we might as well have some fun.”

“First things first. Let’s finish the hunt.”

Lydia met his eyes. Holding his gaze, she stepped forward and arched herself in a stretch, throwing her arms up and pushing her chest forward. She untensed with a sigh, and then shook her arms out. Any fatigue in her eyes was replaced with the steel glint of a warrior. Timon held Aes back and watched as Lydia marched forward and leapt over to the next rooftop where the battle was taking place.

“Methepon!” Lydia shouted, her voice louder and pointed. She whistled sharply.

Methepon let out its shrill cry and curved back around to her. With its wings spread in a glide the falcon arced around Lydia’s shoulders, who with a shout threw her arm down in command as if she were swinging an ax. Methepon threw its wings down and came out of the arc with a burst of speed. It zeroed in on the polar lion from above, and the lion tensed in its stance. Right before the falcon struck the polar lion sprung to the side, cracking the thin roof with the force of its launch. Methepon pulled up at the last second before it would have collided with the roof, talons scraping the cracks left by the lion. It swerved back over to Lydia.

While the falcon was creating distance to gain more speed on its next lunge, the polar lion seized the opening and ran. It dashed to the edge of the roof and hopped to the next, knowing it could only get so much of a head start on the falcon. Lydia’s eyes widened in surprise. She ran after it, stopping where the roof ended.

“It’s running? Odd.” She whistled for her falcon, “Methepon, don’t let it get away!”

The polar lion glanced back and saw Methepon shooting past Lydia, its wind tousling her hair. The falcon cried out and locked onto the lion. The polar lion faced forward and jumped to another flat rooftop. It shivered, feeling the falcon’s eyes on it like its desire to kill was tangible. The feeling overrode any pain in its legs, and its lungs expanded to their limits to keep it running. Without sight of its pursuer it was at a disadvantage, and it was depending on that tangible fury to warn it when the falcon was close.

It didn’t have to wait long to sense it. The falcon cried and began its descent. The polar lion’s fur stood on end. It slowed down, ducking

abruptly mid-run. Methepon scraped the air right over its head. It let out another cry, and the volume at close proximity rattled the polar lion's ear drums. Accelerating out of its dodge, it sprung over a dark side street and onto the next rooftop.

Several feet up, Methepon flew parallel to the polar lion. It tilted its body and the angle of its wings cut the air. It pulled them in and dove at its prey. The polar lion evaded each attack by decelerating or ducking. It changed course as some roofs were too far to jump, and as a tactic to throw off the falcon. The roofs got higher and more uneven as they neared the Archon's Tower in the city center. Suddenly the intervals between attacks widened, and the lion lost its sense of the falcon's presence.

It landed onto a roof with a hollow thud, feeling it bow beneath its paws. The roof cracked and caved in behind it, but it kept its eyes forward. It scanned ahead, uneasy at the falcon's disappearance. The moonlight poured down. Wispy clouds dimmed the stars. The night was quiet again.

Finally, Methepon cried out. The polar lion looked up. Methepon rained down from substantially higher in the sky, like a burning meteor. It was aiming ahead, where the polar lion was going to be. After its series of swooping attacks, it had calculated the perfect killing blow. The polar lion realized it too late.

Its paw pushed through the thinning rooftop. The material caved in, and the polar lion fell through a moment before Methepon tore through the air where it would have been standing. Its cry was drowned out by the collapsing stucco and tiles.

Within the building, the polar lion crashed into and bore a hole through an upper wooden floor. It tumbled to the packed earth on the ground floor, tiles and debris raining down on it. It covered its head with a scratched-up paw, eyes clenched tight, until the sound of the shattering stucco ceased. Cautiously, it raised its head. The small crashes of a few more falling roof chunks lagged behind the commotion, followed by Methepon's cry from above. Looking up, the polar lion saw the falcon through the hole in the roof, a silhouette circling in the starry black sky.

Shaking off the dust, it got up and looked for a way out of the building. Lit up by the moonlight coming through the hole, the room revealed itself to be a supply depot. Clay pots, tablets, and piles of straw pressed against the walls, and a wavy path beneath the sloping stacks led to a wooden door. The polar lion staggered over to it. With a weak nudge, it pushed the door open. The door's hinges squealed, and on the other side it found itself

on a narrow street lit by torches suspended from the sides of the buildings. Up the street staring back stood Nico.

The polar lion turned its head the opposite way, where Labros paced at the mouth of the street. The torchlight warped the hounds' shadows to demonic heights. Labros let out a sharp bark. The clack of its jaws snapping shut sent an eerie echo ricocheting off the walls. The polar lion glanced up and down the street, seeing no way around the hounds. With slow steps they began closing in; shoulders high, heads low, and ready to spring. The polar lion backed up into the doorway. Nico and Labros pounced, their nails scraping against the street.

Any hopes of a back entrance were dashed—the polar lion quickly realized that the front door was the only way in and out of the moonlit building. It surveyed the room again, and saw a discolored patch on the back wall. With no time for second thoughts, it charged forth. It rammed the wall shoulder first, shattering the weak mud-brick. The collapsing bricks kicked up a plume of dust.

On the other side of the wall was a wide room with a domed ceiling. Several hallways branched out, and some were being filled with approaching torchlight and startled voices. The polar lion barely registered the sounds, eying a door at the opposite end of the room. Carrying its speed, it dashed straight through and rammed it down like it did the wall. The door exploded into wooden chunks and splinters that hit the ground in a chattering rain. Close behind, Nico and Labros leapt through the hole in the wall, dissipating the swirling plume of dust.

Finding itself on a main street again, the polar lion barreled down the middle and headed for the city center. A burst of adrenaline temporarily relieved the pain in its wounded legs, delaying it for later when it was safe. A dull sensation throbbed at the bottom of each paw, nearing total numbness, as they came down hard on the stone street to push the polar lion to its top speed. The sound of its own heavy breathing filled its ears, accompanied by the rapid hard thuds of the hounds' paw-falls not far behind.

The cityscape grew more varied as they neared the center. Less residential and more commercial, the buildings differed in height and style. The polar lion raced past empty open-air store fronts—textile shops, metalworking houses, bakeries—where in a few hours, once the city awoke, some citizens would shop without knowing of the chase that had occurred.

Without the twists and turns of the alleyways to slow them down, Nico and Labros ran at top speed, gaining rapidly on the polar lion. The polar

lion lowered its head and pushed itself harder. The street opened to a wide town square—it was nearly to the construction site around the Archon's Tower. Tall cranes encircled the structure, like monoliths in a field orbiting a great stone monument. Within the maze of equipment and supplies the polar lion felt it should be able to lose the hounds.

A falcon cry pierced the air, reverberating off the square's stone-tiled ground. The polar lion was already out in the open when Methemon's shadow zoomed over it. It was entirely vulnerable, and while it had been able to evade most attacks on the rooftops, it didn't want to chance it with Nico and Labros on its heels. It barely had time to react when Methemon swung down from the right. It swerved and ducked without breaking its stride, though the maneuver cost it valuable speed. The hounds lurched forward, snapping their jaws in hopes of taking a bite out of the lion's ankles.

They barked as the polar lion pulled out of reach, and Methemon's cry resonated overhead. The falcon would swoop down for another attack any second. Sixty feet ahead lay the fence marking the perimeter of the construction site. Beyond that stood a three-pulley crane that had been left holding up a massive stone block overnight.

With adrenaline blocking out most of the pain it would feel, the polar lion charged for the pulleys at the base of the crane. Nico barked, much closer than the polar lion realized. The ravenous hound lunged for its leg as it dove for the pulleys. Botching the jump, the polar lion fell into them instead, snapping the cables and feeling the pulleys pinch its fur. It rolled uncontrollably into the base of a neighboring crane. Nico swerved to the left as a snapped cable whipped past.

The whole crane tilted. The stone block jolted downward, stopping and swinging momentarily as the cables tangled up and caught at the topmost pulley. Under such tension the pulley burst into pieces. The cables were sucked up to the top of the crane and through it—the stone block pulled them with it as it fell to the earth.

It landed with a thunderous crack. The boom echoed throughout the town square, shattering pottery and shaking houses as the earth quaked from its impact. A colossal dust cloud spat out from under it, coating the site in an impenetrable fog. A second boom and a wooden rain followed; a series of scaffolding caved in as another crane collapsed down on top of it.

Methemon pulled up, feeling the shock from the destruction in its bones. From a safe distance, it circled the growing dust cloud from above. Its eyes skimmed the scene furiously, but the cloud didn't clear up. It circled several times, watching for any movement. After a few moments,

it realized it was no use. Without sight of its prey, Methepon was forced to relent for the time being. It let out one last cry before arcing away from the site, disappearing within the depths of the starry sky.

Within the cloud, the polar lion rose from where it rolled. It blinked out the dust until its vision adjusted. Tired and barely conscious, its body lifted itself automatically. Faint silhouettes of the Tower and the construction equipment surrounded it, obscured by the thick sheet of dust. A bark sounded off from an unknown direction, and the dust seemed to swirl in response. The broken base of the crane creaked as the polar lion hopped off it, traveling deeper into the fog to get away.

Another disembodied bark echoed through the wreckage, followed by another broken chunk dripping off the damaged cranes. The polar lion tripped as it climbed onto an unknown structure. Slowly it lumbered higher, and every distant bark made it want to go faster than it physically could. Its nerves electrified when a wind carried the sound of the hounds panting past its ears, making them sound closer than they were. With a heaving exhale, the polar lion pulled itself from a pile of rubble up onto the rooftop of a building at the base of the Archon's Tower.

The dust cloud was thinning. The polar lion saw a small shed at the other end of the roof. The pain began overriding the adrenaline rush, and it winced as it pushed open the shed door with its forehead. It tumbled inside and collapsed. The shed was narrow and the lion's back hit a shelf, knocking over a bucket. A pungent liquid spilled out from it onto the floor, but the lion hardly noticed. Its eyes were weighed down, but it fought to keep them open. It couldn't rest until it was sure of its getaway. It turned to face the door, curling up and shivering. Moonlight seeped in through cracks in the walls, but it was mostly dark inside. On the shelves above it were more buckets, bottles, and carefully laid out crushed and dried plants. The polar lion waited. Its eyes closed again, and its head tilted down. It shook itself awake, and right then it heard the sound of four legs stepping onto the rooftop.

The hound barked. Another set of legs patted onto the roof. Another bark. The polar lion lay frozen, the silence as thick as the dust cloud below. Without moving its head, it turned its eyes toward a crack by the door. Thin wisps of dust drifted low to the rooftop. The angular silhouettes of the patrolling hounds broke up the clouds, their noses to the ground.

The polar lion's heart skipped a beat. The hounds didn't need sight to track the lion through the cloud—they had its scent. Unfreezing, the lion glanced around the shed. Its gaze landed on the spilled liquid in front of it.

It planted its paw in it and then raised it to its head. It rubbed its face and mane and anywhere else it could reach without making too much noise. It pawed as much of the vinegar-smelling chemical out of the bucket as it could, stopping when the low panting of Nico and Labros neared the shed.

The polar lion held its breath. It smelled the chemical strongly from where it lay, but it couldn't be sure if it was enough to mask its presence from the hounds. They were close enough now that it could hear them sniffing, their prying noses brushing up against the base of the door. A long moment stretched out as Nico and Labros surrounded the shed. Their sniffing ceased, though their presence could be felt right outside.

The night grew quiet. The polar lion's eyes shook, contracting in a sharp focus on the door. Somewhere above it the moon was passing overhead, and the city would be waking up soon.

Nico barked. Before the chill finished shooting up the polar lion's spine, Labros barked back, and they scampered away from the shed. Through the crack in the door, the polar lion caught sight of the hounds retreating to carry on their search. It didn't dare move. The pungent vinegar-smell permeated the shed. The polar lion was as still as the corpse it woke up next to earlier that night.

The sky cleared and the shed brightened in the moonlight. The polar lion relaxed its tight muscles. All at once its body screamed sleep, but it fought to stay conscious a little while longer. Its paws were numb and its limbs surged with pain, from the bite in its leg to the talon-cut in its shoulder. Its breath shook. Even though it knew it was inevitable that it would pass out, it still worried if it would be safe there for the night. But the construction site was still, and, illuminated in rays of moonlight, the dust had begun to settle.

The last thing the polar lion saw that night was the back of its own eyelids as its weary heartbeat flooded its ears.

ACT ONE
OUTSIDERS

THE CHILDREN OF BORANASSOS

The black shape of a pair of crows flew in front of the morning sun. They circled around in the cloudless, ocean-blue sky, answering the caws and calls of other distant corvids. The pair swooped down low and flew across the lyceum yard, past a young girl whose wide gray eyes followed their every move. She brushed her dark hair behind her ear. The temperate late summer air felt good on her arms, and she knelt down to adjust an array of sticks she had laid out on the grass before her.

She was at the edge of the lyceum yard, which consisted of rolling grassy fields that stretched to a tree line to the west. Behind her, the lyceum roof, supported by carefully carved columns, peeked out from over a hill. Voices carried over to her from the main building where most students grouped up and spent their morning minutes before classes. She was alone so far out in the field, sitting on her haunches and staring up at the birds.

The crows circled back around the girl. She added a whittled-down stick to the shape she was making in the grass. She connected the corners and looked back up to the crows, checking their behavior. While high up, they stayed within range of her, as if tethered to the array of sticks.

“How’s the weather going to be today?” she asked, setting her hands on her knees.

A moment passed, and then the crows split apart. They arced around like a figure eight being drawn with two hands from the outside in.

“Unfavorable?” The girl’s eyes surveyed the solid-blue, cloudless sky. “Are you guys sure?”

Louder voices from the lyceum spiked and disturbed the silent wind blowing throughout the field. Some other crows cawed from within the trees over the hill.

“Okay,” she shrugged. She moved a stick from one end of the array to the other, changing her question. “What’s my day going to be like?”

The crows circled around, cawing at random intervals. A minute passed of them flying around with no deviation from their normal behavior.

“What’s my day going to be like?” the girl repeated, adjusting a stick without taking her gray eyes off the sky.

The crows curved abruptly to fly in the figure eight shape again.

Unfavorable.

“That’s no good,” she said distantly, as if it made no difference to her.

She took a deep breath and rearranged the sticks to form a different question; the real question that was on her mind that morning. From a small pile at her side she added a few more sticks and formed a more complex shape, scooting back a few inches as it encroached on her space.

A trio of students appeared over the hill behind her. One’s hazy summer silhouette pointed to the girl, and the other two threw their hands over their mouths in stifled laughter. With the grass muting their steps, they snuck over to her.

Rocking on her heels, the girl finished her question and watched the crows above carefully.

“What are the odds...” she trailed off, rubbing her palms against her knees. “What are the odds of me being able to continue my education?”

Her eyes focused on the pair of crows, contracting in the bright sunlight. A lone cloud appeared in her peripheral vision, drifting lazily across the blank blue canvas of the sky. The crows started a response, but then a sudden kick scattered the sticks in the grass. The crows cawed wildly and flew off.

“Hey!” The girl stood up, lips puffed out.

The trio of boys laughed and slapped each other on their backs. One with long greasy hair and a protruding brow kicked the sticks further apart, snapping a few beneath his sandal. A few low aftershocks of laughter escaped their mouths, and they surrounded the girl.

“What are you doing out here, Corina?” the shortest boy sneered.

“None of your business, Loukas,” Corina crossed her arms, turning her head to the side and sticking her nose in the air.

“Looked a lot like mysticism to me.” Loukas picked up a stick and waved it around like a wand. “Talking to them birds again?”

Corina continued staring off to the side indignantly.

“Probably ‘cause no one else wants to talk to her, eh Thales?” the greasy haired one said.

"Why would they, Markos?" Thales said, sniffing and wiping his red nose with his whole forearm. "She just nag and correct them all day about rhetorics and grammar."

"*She'd*," Corina said automatically. Her eyes widened and her cheeks reddened as she caught herself. "Darn it."

Her expression elicited another round of laughs from Loukas, Markos and Thales.

"No one's going to want to marry you next year if you're such a stickler all the time." Loukas snapped the stick he was carrying and tossed it in the air. "Hey! Hey you crows! Is Corina ever gonna find a husband?"

The crows flying overhead weren't the same pair from moments earlier. They flew without intent as a few more solid white clouds rolled in from over the horizon.

"You hear that?" Loukas put his hand to his ear, leaning to exaggerate the motion.

"I whittled these myself..." Corina muttered under her breath, kneeling down to start gathering up the sticks.

"I heard it," Markos said. "The crows said, uh, they said she's a know-it-all and everybody hates her."

"Everybody 'cept Iosef," Thales sniffed.

Loukas and Markos both shot him a look.

"Yeah, but he can't be bothered to show up to class anymore," Loukas said. "And somebody's gotta look out for you, Corina. I am lookin' out for you, you know."

"How so?" Corina said without looking up.

Loukas knelt down and put his face an inch from hers. He laid his hand on hers, freezing her from gathering the last few sticks.

"Mysticism is illegal, ain't it?" He exercised the low range of his voice recently granted by puberty. "Imagine if someone else caught you out here."

Corina was caught in his shark's stare, suddenly uncomfortable. The sun was behind Loukas, and his hair covered his face in shadow. Before she could pull away, he pushed down hard on her hand, releasing her grip on the sticks. They fell back into the grass without a sound.

"Who cares!" Corina stood up and raised her voice to be heard over the boys' laughter. "The teachers have better things to do than worry about mysticism as inoffensive as talking to animals!"

"For the smartest one in our class I'm surprised you believe that crap!" Loukas spat, crossing his arms.

"Yeah, animals can't talk," Markos added.

"I'm the smartest in our class *because* I believe it might be possible!" Corina argued. "Not everything that's been discovered already is all there is. And there's evidence that mysticism has some credibility."

"Like what?" Thales sneered.

"Like the fact that it's banned. Why would it be illegal if it was just superstition?" Corina started talking faster. "There's legends, and stories—some are recent, too! There're rumors about a legendary beast tamer outside the city walls that can make animals talk like we can. That has to be based on something!"

"That's not evidence, genius," Loukas waved his hand. "Rumors and conjecture."

"What's *kin-jek-sheer*?" Markos asked, sounding out each syllable as if it would help answer his question.

Loukas elbowed him in the rib. With surprising speed Markos grabbed his forearm, and Loukas wrestled for control of it. Corina and Thales casually took a step back, used to this everyday occurrence.

"Fine. I have my own findings then," Corina continued. "The crows were right about what they said this morning."

"Oh?" Loukas said, turning his attention away from Markos mid-grapple.

"They said I was going to have a bad day, and then you guys showed up."

Markos got the upper hand and flipped Loukas onto his back. He landed with a soft thud, snapping some of the whittled sticks in the grass. Markos offered him a hand, but he swatted it aside and lifted himself up.

"Aw, did we ruin your day then?" Loukas turned to Corina, as if his skirmish with Markos hadn't occurred. His breath wasn't even harried.

"Yeah, why don't you make some real friends?" Thales jeered.

A soft wind rustled through the grass and through Corina's hair. Each of the boys held a smirk, waiting for her to say something so they could continue their volley. She sighed.

"I don't know about these two, but you're not that dumb, Loukas," she said. "Aren't you the least bit curious of the world outside of what we know at the lyceum? Outside Boranassos?"

For a split-second Loukas appeared taken aback, but he shook it off fast enough save face in front of his friends. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by another voice.

"I'd save your breath if I were you, Corina." A fourth boy a head and a half taller than the others suddenly walked up between them. "A bird won't know to fly if it's never seen the sky."

“Iosef!” Corina, Markos and Thales all said in unison. Corina was the only one that sounded happy. Her eyes lit up, while Markos and Thales’s faces went white. They took a few steps back. Loukas spun, shooting each of them a glance that was at once betrayed and peeved. He turned back to Iosef to see Corina skipping over to his side.

“Oh, so you are still in our class!” Loukas projected his voice and puffed his chest out a little further.

“Are you staying for class today?” Corina asked, leaning forward on her heels.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Iosef said, adjusting a goatskin pack slung over his shoulder. “Was gonna hang out by the aqueducts, work on a new piece I started the other day. You wanna come with?”

“I—” Corina started.

“Careful there, Iosef ol’ pal.” Loukas took a long step and closed the distance between them. “You miss too much class, you’ll end up as stupid as this one here,” he nodded to Corina. Behind him Markos and Thales looked on like spectators at a sporting event, leaning in in anticipation.

“But...” Iosef thought for a moment. “She never misses a day. So how would she be stupid—”

“Oh, you should’ve heard her earlier,” Loukas threw his arm out in an exaggerated gesture. “Go on, Corina. Tell him what we caught you doing here.”

“I was practicing mysticism and communing with the crows,” Corina stated matter-of-factly.

“Cool,” Iosef said.

“Cool?! What, you believe her?” Loukas circled Iosef, keeping his face close to his. “The legality of it aside, come on! You think mysticism is real? That there’s things like legendary beast tamers that can make animals talk?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Loukas threw his hands up to the side of his head, tightening his fingers into pointed hooks. “You always annoyed me, Iosef.” He took a deep breath. “Look, you can’t just breeze back onto the lyceum grounds and not expect a good ol’ welcome back rally!”

Loukas stopped nose to nose with Iosef—only his nose only came up to Iosef’s chest.

“Whaddaya say I personally welcome you back?” Loukas worked his low range again, hoping it was enough to distract from the slight shaking in his eyes.

Markos and Thales grabbed each other's shoulders and rocked back and forth. Hushed, high-pitched noises of anticipation escaped through their teeth. Iosef glanced back at Corina. She looked just as excited as they did, with hungry eyes rooting for her contender. He sighed and set his pack down.

He turned to Loukas and their eyes locked. Another wind blew through the field, carrying the warmth of the morning sun. The grass pricked at their ankles through their sandals. Iosef held the same neutral expression he walked up with, while Loukas shook to contain his tension. With slow, barely perceptible movements, Loukas bent his knees and leaned forward, getting into a fighting stance. After a few more seconds, the wind stopped. Corina, Markos, and Thales held their breath.

The clash of a bell broke the silence.

Iosef raised his arm. Loukas flinched, turning his head and throwing his arms up to protect himself. Iosef paused, a puzzled expression on his face, and then raised his arm the rest of the way to scratch the back of his head through his dandelion yellow hair.

From over the hill, the class bell rang out in a series of whole notes echoing the first. The distant voices of the other students decreased in volume as they began funneling inside the lyceum's main building. Loukas lowered his arms in stiff increments, blinking in disbelief.

Corina jumped and let out an excited exclamation. Markos and Thales' shoulders sunk, and their mouths hung open. Loukas stole a quick glance back at them, and they immediately recovered and switched to an expression of what they thought was appropriate outrage. Iosef had already picked up his pack and turned back to Corina.

"Hey!" Loukas shouted. "Hey, I wasn't done with you!"

"Anyway, want to go down to the aqueducts?" Iosef asked.

"Well, I am ahead in my first class, so I can afford to go," Corina combed the grass and gathered a handful of her sticks. She pointed one at Iosef. "But I do have to come back in time for history!"

"No problem."

He held his pack open for her and Corina dropped her sticks into it. He threw it back over his shoulder and he and Corina walked to the southern edge of the lyceum yard.

"What? You're both gonna skip class?" Loukas shouted after them. "Not a good look; it's our last year! Wait until the teachers hear about this! Hey! Are you listening to me?"

Corina turned around and stuck her tongue out at them. Loukas' fingers curled into fists. He opened his mouth to fire off another taunt, but a murder of crows suddenly flew overhead, cawing loudly. The three boys ducked, glancing up at the flock warily, the shadow of their wings rippling across the grass. After a moment, Loukas untensed. He slapped Markos on the shoulder and they turned back towards the lyceum.

At the southern edge of the yard, Iosef and Corina arrived at a high wall extended perpendicularly out from the tree line. Grass and weeds climbed up from the base and out from between cracks at various heights. An iron gate marked the center, and Iosef held the gate open for Corina, which swung open with a heavy metal creak. They stepped out onto a narrow path with a steep drop off on the righthand side. Not far below them, tucked within wide gray mountains and surrounded by stone walls, lay the city of Boranassos.

The Archon's Tower marked the center, its unfinished top floors reaching up into the solid white clouds and deep blue summer sky. Massive temples surrounded the tower, with sculptures depicting heroes of old within the decorative friezes. Several political offices and monolithic statues situated themselves between them, arranged in a manner that never made the skyline too crowded. Rivers and aqueducts snaked throughout it all, converging at the center and running all the way back out into the mountainsides. Higher up, stadiums and multi-level amphitheaters were carved into hillsides opposite of the lyceum.

Iosef and Corina took in the sight of the city for a moment before continuing. The dirt-trodden path segued into a series of earthwork stairs. They began down the steps, startling a pair of rabbits out from behind a small shrub. After a few turns the stairs leveled out, and they came out by an empty sporting stadium with terraced seating. They walked through the shadows of its arches and the thick-stumped olive trees lining its lawn. Behind the stadium was another stairway, and they followed it to a narrow-walled, open-ceilinged stone passageway. Vines and flora crept along the walls, and square windows filtered in the sunlight. As they neared a tall, thin gate at the end of the passageway they could hear bargaining voices, the rustling of coin sacks, and shouted proclamations advertising their goods. The shape of a writhing crowd of people showed through the bars of the gate. Corina pulled it open, and they entered the bustling marketplace.

The marketplace occupied nearly the entire eastern edge of the town square. Rows of stalls and vendors butted up against each other, fighting for premium space under the high wooden roof and leaving little room for

aisleways. Nonetheless, people shouldered their way to their desired stalls, navigating through the crowd with practiced efficiency. Mothers wearing long, loosely folded peploses dragged their children by the hand, men leaned on vendors' counters putting the pressure on a bargain, and the presence of foot-soldiers on patrol staved off the pickpockets with relative success. Some shoppers carried baskets woven from flax, and some muscled two-wheeled carts down the dense aisles, sweeping armfuls of fruit into them and telling the vendors to put it on credit. Competing smells of soaps, spices, dry foods and elixirs wafted through the air, combining into a strong and colorful scent that was unique to the Boranassos marketplace. The roof cast a cool shade on the daily commerce, aided by a line of older buildings nestled up against the border of the marketplace. Alleys and gated passageways formed between the buildings, one of which Iosef and Corina emerged from.

Corina kept track of Iosef by his height and followed him as he gently pushed his way through the swathes of citizens. At one of the stalls, a red-bearded farmer swung his arm out advertising his goods and Iosef had to duck under it. He kept moving, turning his head to check if Corina was still behind him, and bumped into a table where a sun-burnt woman was carefully measuring grains on a scale. The scale wobbled and the woman swore at Iosef. He grabbed Corina's hand and pulled her along as the sun-burnt woman continued cursing them. They laughed and Corina's face turned red at his touch, though she hardly noticed as they weaved through the stalls.

A family with a gold-furred dog on a leash cut them off as they neared the edge of the marketplace. The dog barked at them as they passed, and Corina let go of Iosef's hand to pet it. The family pulled the dog along and Iosef and Corina pushed through the last of the crowd and into the wide-open space of the city square.

They squinted their eyes from the pale-yellow sun, no longer protected under the marketplace's long roof. About to step out into its warm rays, Corina suddenly put her arm in front of Iosef. A clacking sound resonated off the stone-packed ground, and a horse-drawn chariot sauntered along two feet in front of them. The skinny driver waved at them courteously. They waved back. When it was clear, they jogged across the square, passing other chariots and clusters of citizens and enjoying the open air as compared to the packed market.

A multi-layered, round fountain stood at the center of the city square. Twelve feet from the fountain stood four tall news pillars at each point of

the compass, consisting of clay tablets that could be inserted and taken out. The tablets contained updates on city news, political decisions, and discussions on science and philosophy. Iosef and Corina weaved around one of the pillars. Midstride, Iosef scooped up a coin off the ground and flicked it towards the fountain waters, but Corina skipped forward and intercepted it. He gave her a look, which she returned with a wry smile. They passed the fountain, and she tossed the coin over her shoulder, listening for the plinking sound of it hitting the water. They steered around a group of people reading from the next news pillar and ran across the rest of the square to the political quarter.

The political quarter's main street was marked by a larger-than-life statue of a man holding a circular shield and spear. He wore a battledress that served as a predecessor to the modern military's armor, decorated in bronze borders with intricately carved patterns. A fierce glare shot out from his stony eyes, watching over the city square. An inscription named the figure as GALLO THE GREAT – DEFENDER OF BORANASSOS, THE FIRST DEMOCRACY. In the shadow of the statue, Iosef and Corina returned to a walk, no longer needing to dodge around chariots and traffic.

Behind Gallo the Great, the street was split by a botanical divider. Each section of it showcased a curated garden, and opulent fan palms lined the streets. The people walking wore clean tunics of bright colors. Despite being on the other side of the square, the distinct smell of the marketplace still hung in the air, along with the wafting stink of what was left behind by the horse traffic. The streets were wide, and each building and office took up a large percentage of each block. More so than any other district, the political quarter demonstrated the overarching themes of Boranassos' architecture.

Everything was built to a larger scale than was necessary. Iosef and Corina passed doorways four times their height, and the fan palms reached up past long, dramatic windows framed in ornamented sills. Each door and window revealed a vortex of a hallway, with smooth, paved floors and tiled designs. Columns wider around than ancient trees supported arched roofs. It was all tied together mathematically in its design, constructed in golden ratios that mimicked those found in nature for an awe-inducing effect.

Iosef and Corina passed the offices and forums where the political decisions were made that determined the fate of the city. The men entering and exiting these buildings carried themselves with grim, furrowed brows and stoic scowls. Everyone in this area was there for a purpose. Iosef and Corina received some looks, being the only children just passing through.

Corina noticed, but Iosef kept on walking forward, indifferent to their stares. The last building on their way onto the next street was a one of several temples of heroes throughout the city. Its walls were painted in vivid colors, with murals depicting historic figures and battles. Between the columns, Iosef and Corina could make out the colossal forms of statues honoring these figures, and they felt their presence from where they stood. Beyond the temple the gardens stopped, though the wide streets continued into the outer downtown area.

They knew they were out of the political quarter by the sight of a bony old man in a barrel wearing nothing but a loincloth. It wasn't just the fact that he was half-naked that made him stand out; the elderly made up only a sliver of Boranassos' population, so it was rare to see someone so wizened and wrinkled. He sat outside a pottery shop and stared at Iosef and Corina through dark, kiln-glazed eyes. Ahead, the street opened into an array of guilds and workshops.

Some, like one glass and metalworking studio, had an open front where passersby could see the processes which the guildsmen worked. A worker opened a furnace to pull something out with a long pair of tongs, and a wave of heat fell over Iosef and Corina's skin, making them squint. Above them the tall arches of an aqueduct stepped down onto the corner of the street, bouncing back up and reaching over to the next street. They turned to follow it.

They passed several more pottery workshops, most specializing in vases but each with their own signature touch. Theaters and acting studios, which were considered trades, also populated the street, wooden signs jutting out over their doors. People stood outside, workers either taking a break or scoping out other shops. Iosef and Corina picked up tidbits of their conversations, ranging from the latest tax agreements affecting them to last month's show at the Kyrillos Family Circus.

They followed the aqueduct around another corner and the civilian conversations faded. The streets became more dirt and less stone, and their footsteps made less noise. Soon they were the only two souls on the road, arriving at a meandering river dividing up the districts.

The street ended in a T-shape, running parallel to the river. Iosef and Corina walked past the edge of the street to where the rocky ground tapered down into the water. The river caressed the rocks, creating a gentle sound. Overhead, the aqueduct crossed the river like a bridge, bouncing stone arches rising from the cerulean water in two places before continuing further into the city on the other side. Iosef and Corina took long, irregular

steps to traverse the angular rocks, and made it to the base of one of the arches. Each slab of stacked stone dwarfed the children; its scale alone was a testament to Boranassian engineering. The massive arch rose up from the ground just before the river's edge. A small peninsula formed around it, allowing them to walk to the other side of the arch, obscured from the road.

"I really was just going to scratch my head," Iosef said as they turned the inside of the arch. It blocked out most of the sound on the other side, giving it a sense of privacy and nature within the urban sprawl.

"Uh huh. Of course," Corina grinned. "Either way, you won."

Iosef ran his fingers across the stone arch, coming across a painted black rectangle, corners dripping down. The stone felt as cool as the shade it cast. He shrugged off his goatskin pack and set it down.

"Loukas sure has changed," Corina said. "He's such a jerk now."

"I mean, he was always a little..." Iosef crouched down to reach into his pack, pausing to find the right word. "...*competitive*. Ever since our first year."

"You know you could take him, right?" Corina leaned on the wall next to him. "You could take all three of them, honestly."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Three versus one?" Iosef took out a rolled-up cloth. He laid it on the ground and unrolled it to reveal a palette, a series of brushes, and jars of different colored paints.

"I've seen you lift eight sandbags at once in gym class and throw all of them like they were dust balls! You should use that strength once in a while."

"That's not the same as throwing a punch. Hitting another person." Iosef opened the jars of paint and began mixing them on a palette. "I'm just not a fighter. I don't know why everyone thinks I am."

The smell of the paints hit his nostrils and he smiled. He stood up, armed with a brush and palette, and took a step back from the stone wall before him. He studied the empty space, the base layer he'd painted previously, imagining the next shape before his brush made contact.

Corina looked up at the apex of the arch, the sky and its clouds in her peripheral vision.

"Could be because Ionno was the strongest fighter in town," she said. "He sure left his mark."

Iosef froze just before he began to paint, his brush hand hovering an inch from the wall. He cast his eyes down. Corina looked over to him and felt a jolt from his reaction.

"I'm sorry," she backpedaled.

"It's alright," Iosef shook his head, throwing a flat curl of hair out of his eyes.

He sighed, then put his brush to the wall. Slowly, deliberately, he began blocking in layers, constructing a shape he saw in his head. Corina watched as his shoulders relaxed and listened to the deep breaths he would take as he fell into a sort of trance. She smiled, and knelt down next to his pack to fish out the whittled sticks she used for her mysticism.

"You know me pretty well, right?" Iosef asked.

"I would hope so," Corina stepped over to the edge of the water and sat down on her haunches.

"So you get where I'm coming from, right?" Iosef smoothed out an edge of paint that began to drip. "I feel like no one understands me. I see it in the way they all treat me; they'll step out of the way when I walk by, flinch when I raise my hand, and never question me about anything. It's a bunch of little things, but it adds up. Everyone seems to think I'm this hundred-foot tall, fearless warrior, but that's not how I feel, you know?"

"Did you ever consider that maybe you are?"

"Everyone—my parents, teachers—all want me to be this person for some reason and so they just see what they want to see. Everyone's indifferent to what I want."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Pssh, beats me," Iosef shrugged and set his palette down. He rinsed the thicker brush he was using and traded it out for a finer one. Corina had begun arranging her sticks in a formation by the water.

"I think you're stronger than you realize, Iosef. In fact, I know this for a fact." She tripped on her tongue and decided to play it up. "A fact, Iosef, a fact. Indeed, a fact. A most factitious fact!"

Iosef laughed, and she reddened a little.

"So you could say," she continued once he finished laughing. "I know you better than you know yourself."

"Creepy."

Corina made a face at him that he couldn't see, when a trout suddenly jumped up from the water in front of her. Wet droplets landed on her hands and she immediately reached for her stick formation, wondering if she had beckoned the trout. She scanned the water, and a few moments passed with no further action.

"I know what it is that I want," Corina said eventually. "I want to keep learning things. I never want to stop. I feel like the second you stop learning

is the second you stop living.” She glanced back at Iosef, still working on his painting. “You should keep learning things too. You might find what it is that you want.”

Iosef shrugged.

“The problem is I can’t continue my education after this year,” Corina rocked on her heels, back to staring into the water. Her gray-eyed reflection stared back. “We’re thirteen now. For girls that’s when you’re done. After this year I’ll be married off and I won’t be able to go back to the lyceum.”

“Sure came quick, didn’t it?” Iosef said.

“Yeah.”

Iosef lowered his brush and glanced over his shoulder. He watched her for a moment. A cool breeze drifted over from the water, and Corina brushed her hair behind her ears. He turned back to his painting.

“It might not be all bad,” he said. “You’ll learn about making textiles, and counting grains, and managing a household, and raising... uh... a family, and... uh...” He shut his eyes and cursed himself silently. “That sounded better in my head.”

“It’d be something new to learn, I guess,” Corina said. Then she straightened her back, projecting her voice out over the river. “But I like going to the lyceum! I like learning from the teachers there. Getting married doesn’t bother me so much—why do I have to leave the lyceum though?” She rolled her shoulders back down and pushed a stick in her formation with her index finger. “It’s like you said, everyone’s indifferent to what *you* want.”

“The unfortunate truth,” Iosef said, punctuating it with a firm brushstroke. “I’ll trade places with you.”

Corina laughed. “No offense, Iosef, but I think you’d make for a terrible homemaker.”

“Never said I’d be any good. I just don’t want to have to go to school.”

“Why not? You’re as smart as me in most subjects, and better in a few. Only a few, but still.”

“Maybe that’s it. It’s just boring. There’s nothing for me to do.”

“You have to start asking your own questions. Like what geometric methods are best suited to tracking the movement of wandering stars? Or like why are some rhetorical devices more effective at persuading an audience than others?”

“Like...” Iosef paused to think. He pivoted to see her still on her haunches. “Like do your legs ever fall asleep always sitting like that?”

“Yes, and it feels like I’m levitating when I get up. It’s great. You should try it some time.”

Iosef laughed, and Corina smiled. In front of her another trout splashed, drawing her attention back to her stick formation. She stood up and walked backwards over to the arch, eyes on her formation and hands out for balance on the rocky ground. She stumbled, but caught herself on the wall beside Iosef. He glanced from his painting over to her, eyes following her as she bent down to pick out a piece of chalk from his pack.

“Can I use this?” she asked.

He nodded, and Corina took a step to the right to give his painting its space. Near the bottom of the arch she recorded the pattern of the sticks by the river. She glanced back at the river’s edge to check her accuracy, and when she was done she returned the chalk to Iosef’s cloth roll.

Standing next to him, she watched him work for a moment. He had the base layers complete, a combination of blue, black, and white shapes that suggested the form of a two-headed eagle. Currently he was slowly trailing his brush down the arch’s giant stones, adding an outline to define the head, wings and talons.

“So what’s this new piece you’re working on?” Corina asked.

“Just an eagle design I thought of the other day,” Iosef said without taking his eyes off his linework, moving in faster, longer strokes.

Corina cocked her head to the side. “Why does it have two heads?”

“Cause I messed up the first one—” His brush hit a bump in the stone, abruptly sending a thick line straight through the second head he was working on. He frowned. “Guess it’ll have three heads now.”

“Cool,” Corina said. “Your six-legged bear is still in the alley by the circus. I saw it there the other day on my way to the market with my mom.”

A small laugh escaped through Iosef’s nose. He tore his attention from his work for a minute and shared a smile with Corina. He swallowed and turned back to the wall before his face could turn red.

He stepped back, figuring out what to do next on his now three-headed eagle, and Corina found a spot leaning on the wall beside the painting. She encouraged his work and from there their conversation wandered like vines up a gateway. They worked their way down from talking about the big things, their worries and cares, to the feather-light little things, the everyday and the mundane. Eventually they spoke of nothing of any consequence, trading words with a blissful easiness that only time spent together could generate. The river glistened in the sunlight and the shadow of the aqueduct’s arch gradually shortened.

“What time is it?” Corina suddenly asked. She looked around, her gaze landing on her stick formation still by the shoreline. She went over to pick one up and walked with it a few feet out from under the arch. Iosef watched her as she planted it between some rocks in the ground as best she could. She got it to stand straight, noting the length and position of its shadow.

“Darn, I have to get going! My history class should be starting right now.” She scrambled back over to the rest of her sticks and gathered them up. “Are you going to come to class? You should, you know.”

Iosef glanced back and forth guiltily.

“Iosef!” Corina scolded.

“I was going to check on some pigments I left drying the other day in another one of my spots. High up, so they get a lot of sun.”

“Alright, fine,” Corina said. “But it’s my last year, so you should come some of the time.”

“I will,” Iosef said, already back to work on his painting.

“Okay,” Corina said, adjusting the bundle of sticks under her arm. She studied him for a moment and then turned to make her way back up to the street. The rocky ground formed an uneven path, and she climbed up it in wide steps. She stopped halfway up and turned back to Iosef.

“We’ll still hang out like this, even after I’m married, right?”

Iosef put his brush down and smiled. “Of course.” He gestured to the archway and the river. “This will always be our spot.”

Corina smiled. She hiked the rest of the way up to the street, and then she was out of sight, on her way back to the lyceum. An air of solitude fell over the riverside of the archway. In the absence of their conversation, the running water and distant urban noises succeeded the soundscape. Iosef took a deep breath and set his brush down with a stretch of his shoulder. He turned around and looked out over the river, taking in the scenery. Sunlight sparkled on the surface. Multicolored pebbles and sediments were visible at the shallow bottom, naturally arranged in swirling, chaotic patterns. A cool air hovered above the river and traveled through his loose chiton tunic.

In the middle of the water a trout jumped up with a splash. Iosef shook his head, the sound snapping him out of his trance.

“Guess I’ll go check on those pigments.” He walked back over to the three-headed eagle on the wall. “Can’t really finish you without them.”

He gathered his supplies in his cloth. He rolled it up and returned it to his goatskin pack. He slung the pack over his shoulder and navigated up the rocks. With his feet back on the road, he glanced at the archway. The

side with his artwork was not visible from the street's angle. He thought to himself that it really was a private pocket of nature. Adjusting his pack, he headed down the road back towards the city square.

Iosef passed back through the guild shops and the political quarter and set foot onto the high traffic city square again. Dodging chariots, he turned north this time, past the news pillars to where the square met the perimeter of the Archon's Tower. During the construction a low wooden fence had been set up to mark off the work site, painted a cautionary yellow. Usually the public had no reason to come up to it during their everyday business, but that day a crowd pressed up against it, fanning out like spilled hay. Iosef eyed them curiously.

Behind the fence and between the ranks of spear-armed soldiers standing guard lay a massive three-pulley crane on its side. Its long neck had broken in several places, zigzagging between the remaining scaffolding that it didn't take down with it. Other cranes stood tall, undisturbed in the chaos, and looked down on the wreckage like it was a fallen member of the pack. The few offices and buildings at the base of the Tower were scoffed and coated in a layer of dust. One had a beam sticking out of its window, and a few soldiers poked through the surrounding rubble.

Iosef walked up to the edge of the crowd and peered over everyone's heads.

"Can you imagine if it collapsed during the day, with the square's usual crowds?" one onlooker said.

Another man shook his head, "I thought they built these cranes better than that."

A soldier soundlessly conversed with a group at the front of the crowd, drowned out in the chorus of speculative murmurs. Iosef skirted around the crowd, giving them a wide berth. He reached the corner of the perimeter and turned to follow the fence, glancing over his shoulder to be sure no soldiers were looking his way.

"That's a little too close..." he muttered under his breath.

I.II

MIRO

Iosef picked up his pace. The city square's traffic resumed its normal pattern around the corner of the fence. He dragged his finger along the gapless posts, until halfway down the light of the other side filtered through. It was a narrow gap, but Iosef had discovered that with a little nudge he could split the posts enough to squeeze through. He leaned back on the fence near the gap and took a second to survey the citizens and chariots hurrying around him. He waited until his sense that everybody was too busy minding their own business kicked in, then slipped between the posts with a thief's non-presence.

On the other side of the fence, a cluster of buildings bunched up at the base of the Tower. Short, wide streets and narrow alleys cut between them, populated by log rollers, stone slabs, and wooden scaffolding. Through one of the alleys Iosef could see the fallen crane. None of the investigating soldiers wandered into his quadrant, and he let out a sigh of relief. After a few turns, he hoisted himself up a scaffolding. He monkeyed up the rungs, knowing exactly which ones would support his weight and where to reach for handholds. At the top he hopped off and landed onto a flat roof with a small shed at the far end.

His eyes widened and his shoulders dropped, causing his goatskin pack to slide off.

Beside the shed was an overturned shelf. Shattered glass vials and thin stone trays lay at its base in a scattered assortment of clashing colored powders and pigments, like multi-colored ant hills. Iosef ran over to the shelf and knelt in front of it, his back to the shed. He ran his fingers through the ground powders and hopelessly watched it sift back down. The darker blues and blacks left light stains on his fingertips. His face cycled between confusion and anger as he picked up a broken vial to examine the

damage. It fell out of his hand, clinking in a pool of the tiny shards that once comprised its whole.

“Curses! I thought these would be safe up here—”

A creaking sound erupted from the shed, like something bumped up against the shelves inside. Iosef turned. The door was ajar, but a massive moving object blocked the light that should have been visible through the cracked, aged wood. An instinct kicked in and Iosef got halfway up to his feet. The hair on his neck and arms stood on end. He couldn't tear his gaze from the door. The shadowy mass inside the shed rose to its full height, hitting another shelf. The sound sent Iosef's heartbeat into overdrive. Another bump. Then, the door hinges eked out a rusty whine as a blue muzzle nudged it open.

A massive polar lion stuck its head out of the doorway. Streaks of dark green paint tainted its sky-blue fur and arctic white mane. A particularly large green spot encircled its left eye. It squinted in the sunlight, blinking at Iosef through the paint.

Iosef screamed.

He stumbled backwards, his sandals pushing aside the hills of powdered pigments and glass vials. His heel hit the raised edge of the roof and he started to fall backwards. He flailed his arms until they caught on something—a scaffolding rail from another platform that rose up past the rooftop. Iosef gripped the rail tight, struggling to shift his weight back to his feet. In front of him the polar lion took a step out from the shed, locked onto his eyes and moving with the jerky motions of a startled animal assessing whether to fight or flee. Iosef stared back, able to see his reflection gulp in the lion's onyx eyes.

The scaffolding suddenly shifted. A jolt of shock surged through Iosef's body. Then he felt himself being pulled away from the roof. A wooden screech shot out from the base of the scaffolding, followed by a few snaps, like logs in a campfire. A string of exclamations escaped Iosef's lips. His heel latched onto the ledge, nearly sideways as the scaffolding careened away. He was unable to let go, suspended over the long fall down to the street.

The polar lion pounced toward Iosef. With a reaching stretch it swept its paw around Iosef's back just before he was out of reach, and with natural strength flung him back onto the roof. Iosef landed in a rolling tumble, kicking up dirt and dust. He immediately unfolded into a runner's stance, head spinning wildly until he found the polar lion standing amongst the scattered powders and pigments.

They both froze. Iosef shook imperceptibly, his heartrate at the level of a small earthquake. The lion stood firm on all four paws, with its back arched and mane blowing in the breeze. The green paint around its eye looked like warpaint, and somewhere in the back of Iosef's mind pure awe fought to be registered within the fear and confusion.

The crash of the scaffolding collapsing to the ground broke the silence. Neither Iosef nor the polar lion flinched. Iosef's blue eyes shook while the lion's remained focused and still. They watched each other, their subconscious minds gleaning as much information as they could from nonverbal signals and micro-expressions. The noon sun warmed the rooftop. A gentle wind kicked some of the pigments and dust up between them.

A boy and a beast, in the shadow of the Archon's Tower.

Finally, the polar lion rolled its shoulders. A low grunt slipped through its teeth, and it stepped off the colorful pile of pigments and broken glass. Iosef tensed, but the polar lion only sauntered over next to the shed. It stretched its legs, extending past its already impressive eight-foot length. It shut its eyes tight and rolled its neck, feeling the stretch from its head to its back toes. Then it plopped down onto its stomach and began licking its paw.

Iosef watched, still too wary to move. The polar lion wet its paw with its tongue and then brought it up to its face. It rubbed at the paint around its eye in a futile attempt to clean it off. Iosef watched several repetitions of this motion. Slowly, he raised himself back up to his full height. The polar lion either didn't notice or didn't mind, still intently washing its face. It examined its paw and, seeing no color coming out, recommenced licking it.

Iosef dared to move. He took a step to the side, hands half-raised at his waist in a calming gesture. He finally caught his breath with a shaky inhalation through his nostrils. The lion still didn't acknowledge him. Feeling enough of the tension of the initial encounter dissolved, he tore his gaze from the beast and reassessed his surroundings. He stood in the center of the roof. Behind him was his goatskin pack and the scaffolding he originally climbed up. He calculated the likelihood of escaping; if he could make it to the scaffolding the lion would have no way to follow him down. It wasn't that far of a dash to that end of the roof.

He stepped back, half-turned toward the scaffolding, but then bit his lip and glanced back towards the polar lion. It was still rubbing at the paint, grunting quietly. Iosef lowered his shoulders and stared at his feet for a moment. He grimaced, then turned back and began walking towards the

shed. He froze, fearful that he suddenly moved too fast, but the polar lion remained concentrated on its task. Straightening his back, Iosef closed the distance to the shed.

Only a few feet from the animal, Iosef realized just how large it was, and another pang of fear clawed at his stomach. Its sides expanded and contracted with each heavy breath. Iosef noticed a long cut in its shoulder, a dry and muted red buried within clumps of blue fur. He looked over the lion and saw a few more cuts and wounds on its hind legs. It paused with its tongue on its paw and spared a glance at him out of the corner of its eye. He kept his hands up, giving it a wide berth as he approached. He pushed open the shed door, turning his back on the lion. The salival sounds of its tongue told him that it remained where it lay, unconcerned with his vulnerability. Quickly, he reached under a shelf hanging diagonally. He fished around until he pulled out a bottle, a rag, and a canteen.

With the items in his arms, Iosef knelt in front of the polar lion. He swatted away the thought of how easily his head could fit between its mighty jaws. He took a deep breath and set down the canteen. He held up the bottle and the rag in front of the animal.

The polar lion lowered its paw from its brow and peered back at him. Its tongue flickered a few times out from its mouth, cleaning up extra saliva.

“Paint remover.” Iosef uncorked the bottle and poured a thin, pungent liquid onto his pigment-stained fingers. He rubbed them together and the color slid off, revealing the skin of his fingertips beneath. “See?”

The polar lion eyed his hand and cocked its head. It sniffed the air, nostrils and whiskers twitching, and then it faced Iosef again. Keeping his movements cautious, slow, and deliberate, Iosef poured a little of the solution onto the rag. He raised the rag towards the lion’s head and held it there between the two of them. He waited to see the lion’s response, and to his surprise it lowered its head.

“Close your eyes,” Iosef said. “It will sting if it gets in them.”

He put the rag to the polar lion’s brow and began rubbing in small circles. He wiped lightly at first, pushing around the green paint until it started to come off. The polar lion kept its head lowered, eyes clamped shut. He felt the hard contours of its skull beneath its thick fur. The act of not only being so close to such a creature but touching it cast a blanket of surrealness over Iosef’s mind. He realized he was holding his breath.

“Consider it...” he exhaled, wiping the last of the paint out with slightly rougher pressure. “...thanks.”

He pulled the rag back, and after a few seconds the lion opened its eyes. With the paint gone it revealed a face of natural grace and majesty, even with the patch of fur around its eyes still flattened down and wet. Iosef corked the bottle of paint remover and traded it for the canteen. He undid its cap and turned it to pour the water out onto his rag.

“This is to rinse—woah!”

The polar lion lurched forward suddenly, lapping up the water from the canteen with its tongue. Iosef’s body froze completely and the water kept pouring out from his tilted hand. Staring forward, his startled mind barely registered the sight before him. He listened to the drinking sounds of the lion until his heartbeat came back to him. Blinking out the disbelief that he was somehow still alive, his eyes moved before his limbs and he watched the polar lion quench its thirst. The surreal feeling in his mind only amplified.

“Thirsty, huh?” Iosef’s mouth twitched in a nervous smile.

The stream of water started thinning, and the lion moved its lips closer to the mouth of the canteen. Iosef tilted it so that the rest of the water could flow out and the lion drank it feverishly. He poured until the canteen was weightless. Even after it ran dry the lion tilted its head and ran its scratchy tongue over the mouth of the canteen, gathering up every last drop.

Its stomach growled. The boy and the lion’s eyes met.

“Easy...” Iosef’s voice skipped like a stone on a lake.

The polar lion gazed upon the boy, but the primal panic that overtook his mind and body before didn’t flare up. His eye’s drifted towards the various wounds up and down the lion’s legs. The lion also appeared calmer—the movements of its head, tail, and paws were seamless, without any startled staccato. Its head followed Iosef curiously as he stood up, and its tail flipped behind it.

“How about I get you some food?” Iosef brushed off his tunic. “Just run to the marketplace and be right back? Yeah?”

The polar lion blinked.

“Alright!” Iosef looked to the scaffolding he originally climbed up. “Going to start walking away now.” He took a cautious step. “I’ll be back!”

For the first few steps he walked backwards, unable to turn away from the lion. It watched him with its paws crossed in front of it and flipped its tail again. Nothing about its demeanor sent any warning signals racing through Iosef’s brain, but he still kept his guard up. Halfway across the roof he found himself turning around so that the edge didn’t surprise him. His breath shortened when the lion was out of sight, and he quickly

scooped up his goatskin pack. When he stepped onto the scaffolding and twisted himself to descend, he saw the polar lion laying right where it was, still watching him.

He flashed a smile towards it, more to reassure himself than the wild animal he suddenly found on one of his rooftop spots. Then he slid down the scaffolding.

“What am I doing?!” he said under his breath.

With his feet on the ground, Iosef made his way back towards the gap in the fence he came in through. He ducked through it and immediately assimilated into the traffic of the city square. When he was several yards away, he glanced back and craned his neck to take in the Archon’s Tower. Many stories up, construction workers that appeared as small as his thumb were hammering nails and waving in a stone slab hoisted up by a crane. At the top, the sun’s rays highlighted the ever-expanding skeletal framework, glaring through and forcing Iosef to shield his eyes.

Near the edge of the square people lined up outside the long-roofed marketplace, still in peak business hours. Iosef used his height to shoulder his way through and most people got out of the way for him. Ducking under hanging plants, trinkets and tapestries, he arrived at a butcher’s stall. Various meats wrapped in canvas lined the table, coating the corner of the marketplace in a cold, bloody smell. Behind the table a butcher bent over a stack of meats on a wheeled cart tied to a pair of donkeys.

“Iosef!” The butcher stood up, cracking his back. “Yer just in time. Was just packing up for th’ day.”

“I’ll just be in and out,” Iosef’s hand hovered in a line above the meats. “How’s business?”

“Good, good! Pigs we purchased last season ended up bein’ a wise decision, though th’ hunters we trade with have learned a few negotiating tricks that’re keepin’ us on our toes.”

Iosef nodded, then picked up a wrapped package. “How much for this hind meat?”

“Two silvers, friend,” the butcher said over his shoulder, turning to throw more packages on the cart. The donkeys neighed.

Iosef shifted his goatskin pack around under his shoulder, sifting inside for his coin purse. He counted what he had, then stopped and sighed.

“What’s th’ matter?” the butcher asked.

“It’s just I was saving up for some cinnabar,” Iosef said. “To make pigments out of,” he added after seeing the butcher raise an eyebrow. “This wasn’t a, uh, planned expense.”

“Hm,” the butcher scratched his chin. “Then it’s on the house! Your family’s been good to mine with their irrigation routes.” He tapped the table with his palm, then held it out to the remaining wares he hadn’t packed up. “Grab another for yourself. A boy your size will grow to be a fine warrior someday. Like Ionno was.”

Iosef shrugged and stared off to the side. “I don’t know. After what happened my mom did a one-eighty and wants me to be a politician now.”

The butcher turned to him, leaning with one arm on the table. “Nonsense. You got warrior’s blood in you. Don’t waste it.”

Iosef gave him a weak smile that quickly faded once he turned back to his cart.

“He means well, he just doesn’t understand,” a voice carried over from somewhere in the dense marketplace.

Iosef’s ears perked up, accompanied by the strange feeling that someone coincidentally vocalized what he was thinking. He scanned the crowd.

“Who?” another voice asked.

“Giorgio Kyrillos, the owner of the circus that polar lion escaped from,” the initial voice said.

Iosef stiffened at the mention of the polar lion and looked around a little more frantically. He found the source, two men walking past a stall of rugs and tapestries.

He turned back to the butcher. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to inform my family of your generosity.” He scooped up the wrapped hind meat in his arms. The butcher waved and replied, but Iosef didn’t hear him, jogging over to tail the two men talking.

“He’s saying that he doesn’t believe the polar lion killed the kid,” the first man continued.

“Sounds like he’s just trying to save face,” the other said.

“It’s dishonorable. He should take responsibility for his animals.” The man shook his head. “A killer polar lion on the loose. Not what I expected to read on the news pillars this morning.”

Iosef did a sharp turn and started heading for the center of the square. He stepped out from under the marketplace’s roof and into the sunlight and open air. Barely noticing the people he passed, he arrived at the fountain. The news pillars cast short shadows around it. Iosef circled the pillars, listening to the rushing water in the fountain, until he found the clay tablet with the story he was looking for.

“*Polar Lion Escapes From Circus, Kills Animal Worker...*” Iosef read aloud. “*Last night at around the midnight hour, chaos erupted when*

Miro, a polar lion from the Kyrillos Family Circus, violently escaped into the city streets.”

Iosef paused and silently reread the first lines before continuing.

“Omir Floros, one of the animal tamers employed by the Circus, alerted authorities of the rogue beast. Floros attempted to help soldiers contain the threat but was tragically struck down by the fleeing lion. Citizens are warned to take caution today as soldiers have yet to hunt down and neutralize the beast.

“When asked, Circus proprietor Giorgio Kyrillos II cast doubt that his animal was responsible. ‘It’s so out of character,’ Giorgio explained. ‘Miro was always one of our most intelligent and cooperative animals. I highly doubt he would attack, let alone kill, Omir, whom he loved very much.’

“The Kyrillos Family Circus, known for dominating the entertainment world with exotic animals and extravagant acts such as The Perilous Ring of Fire, The Elephant Riders of Pelyria, and Gigi’s High-Flying Tightrope and Trapeze Act, will be closed during the investigation of Floros’ murder. Stratton Floros, local politician and father of the victim, refused to comment.”

Iosef’s brow furrowed. He read the story again to himself, soundlessly mouthing the names “Miro,” “Omir,” and “Giorgio” as he read them. Shifting the meat under his arm, he then stepped over to the edge of the fountain and sat down. The stone was cool, the occasional stray water droplets spraying his back, and the sun above warmed his skin. Around him people walked in circles in the great city square, carrying the sounds of conversational fragments, horse hoofs clacking, and wooden wheels creaking. Iosef heard none of it, squinting and looking up at the Archon’s Tower just north of the fountain. He reflected on what he learned from the news pillar. After a few moments to himself he sighed, got up, and walked back towards the gap in the fence of the construction site.

The scaffolding creaked as Iosef climbed up it. He grunted, exerting more energy to lift himself up with one arm and holding the canvas-wrapped hind meats in the other. He hoisted the meat up over the edge of the roof and lifted himself up after it. He picked up it, dusted off the canvas, and peered cautiously around the roof. The shelf was still overturned, lying in a pile of the shattered glass and spilled pigments. The wooden shed stood in its corner, the only other feature defining the flat roof.

The polar lion poked its nose out from the shed, sniffing the air. Iosef walked over, stepping over the empty canteen strewn across the floor. The polar lion’s eyes tracked the movement of the meat under his

arms, and Iosef set the package down a few feet in front of the shed. He untied the wrapping and rolled the hind meat out, which landed in place and shook gelatinously. Its cold, raw smell rose up in the air. Iosef took a few steps back.

The polar lion lowered its nose to the ground. It stepped out of the shadow of the shed and sauntered over to the meat. It stopped with its nose a few inches away and looked up to Iosef.

“All yours,” he motioned. “I prefer mine cooked, anyway.”

The polar lion blinked slowly. It wrinkled its whiskers and then with a grunt turned its attention to the two slabs of meat. With spear-like teeth it tore into the hind meat, laying down in front of it and placing a paw atop one piece to better pull from it.

Iosef sat down on the raised edge of the roof, mesmerized by the dining lion and its wet chewing sounds. Without taking his eyes off the rare sight, he reached into his goatskin pack and pulled out a bundle of dried meat strips. He leaned forward and sat with his elbows on his knees, ripping into a piece of the jerky with his teeth.

They sat in silence for a moment, each eating their respective meals.

“Your name’s Miro, huh?” Iosef said between chewing.

Miro grunted from the back of its throat. He thought it might have been an acknowledgment, but the polar lion was most likely just tearing into its food.

“You’re from the circus?” Iosef swallowed a bite. “Oh, and my name’s Iosef. Iosef Fortunado.”

He indicated himself with a hand over his chest. Miro looked up at him momentarily, then resumed ripping off another chunk of hind meat.

“My family does irrigation work for the city,” Iosef continued. He took a second to swallow his food, then spoke with a cautious cadence. “So, I just read a news story about you. About Omir Floros.”

Miro stopped mid-bite. It stared forward, mouth hanging open with chunks of food resting on its tongue. Low, airy breathes escaped out its open mouth. Then it readjusted itself, switching which paw held down the meat, and resumed eating.

“The circus owner said he doesn’t think you did it, and I kind of agree,” Iosef said. “You saved me, after all. And you seem,” he searched for the right word, “*docile* enough.”

A sudden urge to test the polar lion’s docility came over him. He set the dried meat strips on the ledge beside him, inhaling through his nostrils and setting his shoulders back. He sat still for a minute, drumming up the

courage to reach his hand out. The sunlight reflected off the polar lion's mane. Before he could think too much about it, he raised his hand and placed it on its head.

Miro purred and rubbed its head up against his palm. Iosef ran his fingers through its arctic white mane, then the polar lion returned its attention to the meat. It turned it over and took another large bite. Iosef sat there with his hand still outstretched, jaw hanging open in astonishment. Eventually he shook his head and reeled in his arm.

"But if you didn't kill Omir, that means someone else did..." He sat back down. "If only you could talk."

Iosef and the polar lion continued eating in silence. His words hung in the air, echoing in his mind, and he found himself staring out over the rooftops sprawling out around the Tower. The city stretched out as far as he could see in every direction, with distant gray mountains marking the horizon. His vantage point suggested serenity, separated from the bustling activity on the street level. He sat for a while, listening to the close yet quiet ambiance of the city around him.

Then his eyes lit up.

"If you could talk..." Iosef repeated, turning back to Miro. The polar lion looked up and met his eyes. "Miro, I have an idea."

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