

The air here smelled wrong. It smelled of ozone and coal dust. Ilyar pressed his back up against a wooden crate, his chest heaving, his ears pinned down against his head. Moments ago the hare had been gathering roots in the warren tunnels, and now he was... somewhere else. Somewhere unfamiliar. He remembered hitting cold, wet cobblestones. He remembered fleeing for the nearest shelter, this rotten old warehouse. The rain still hammered through the broken roof, pooling on the concrete floor. The wind howled through missing windowpanes, chilling his wet fur and assaulting his nose with industrial stench. He pulled his legs up against his chest, shivering.

Somewhere behind him, he heard the door latch click. Huddling up at the edge of the crate, he lifted one ear to listen. Footsteps. Two sets. One with a sharp rhythmic click, one with an irregular thump. Ilyar held his breath.

“Drift readings are off the charts, Sol,” came a voice, sonorous but gruff. “We’re near the epicentre, I think.” The speaker sniffed. “It stinks like the Drift in here.”

Another voice spoke, softer but crystal clear. “The rupture has closed, but only just. The ozone has not yet dissipated. We may not be too late.”

Ilyar poked his short grey-furred muzzle around the edge of the crate, and saw the strangest creatures he had ever seen. One was a tall, elegant figure, a coati, with shimmering violet-white fur that didn’t seem to hold its colours. They wore long, flowing robes in pristine white, layered across their body with calculated elegance. They looked frosty.

The other figure appeared to be a raccoon, or something like it, in light brown hue. Their long unkempt tail bore jagged, asymmetrical bands of dark brown on light, and poked out from a long brown overcoat which almost met the floor. As they turned, examining the room, he could see the raccoon was wearing a waistcoat, shirt and trousers under the coat. Finishing off the strange ensemble was a boater hat, perfectly cylindrical, tied with a ribbon of deep, impossible blue. They were resting their weight on an umbrella, regarding the warehouse with a suspicious eye.

Ilyar took a breath, careful not to make a sound, but as he exhaled he saw a wisp of condensation curl out past the edge of the crate.

“Did you see that, Sol?” asked the raccoon, pointing the umbrella just above where Ilyar was hiding. He scooted back quickly behind the crate, panicked. “I think we have an audience.”

“A Drift-shadow? It could have come through the rupture,” said the coati, and Ilyar felt a crackle of static in the air. “We cannot let it leave. You flank right, I will flank left. Be careful, Bentley.”

Ilyar’s fingers dug hard into his knees. The threat in the coati’s voice broke his paralysis. He slammed his paws into the concrete and bounded for the metal gangway round the ceiling.

“Hey! Wait!” called the raccoon, but Ilyar didn’t stop. His hands met the gangway and he swung himself upwards, but lost his grip on the wet metal and tumbled over the side.

The air below him suddenly thickened, billowing around him into a solid cushion. He hung there, suspended in mid-air, and his eyes met those of the coati who was manipulating the air around him. He let out a high, terrified squeal, the sound of trapped prey.

“What... Easy, easy!” yelled the raccoon, turning to the coati. “Let him down Sol, you’re terrifying him!”

“That is no shadow,” said the coati, gently lowering him to the ground with a calculated motion of their hand. “Living beings cannot pass through such a rupture. It should have dissolved into the void.”

Ilyar touched the wet concrete again and scooted backwards up against a pillar, staring at the two strange beings. His heart pounded out of his chest.

The raccoon approached, slowly, and kneeled a few metres away. Ilyar eyed them cautiously. Their eyes looked... warm. He noticed a gentle amber glow in them.

“Hi,” the raccoon said, their voice softer and quieter. “You’re not in danger, whatever you are. I’m Bentley. The stuffed shirt over there is Solivane. We’re not going to hurt you.”

Ilyar's nose twitched. The raccoon smelled of warm soil and wet fur. There was a note of something floral behind it, something oddly calming. He relaxed his grip on his legs just a touch.

"My... home," he stammered, his voice cracking. "The ground... broke."

"I know," Bentley said, their expression softening into sadness. "It's gone. I'm sorry."

"Am I... dead? Is this the beyond?"

"No," replied Solivane. The coati came closer alongside Bentley, static sparks rippling through their fur. "You have fallen through a rupture. You are safe. I do not understand *why* you are here, however."

"Come on Sol, you say that like he's just crashed your birthday party." Bentley gave a quiet chuckle and turned back to Ilyar. "Look kid, we don't know how you ended up on the floor of an abandoned old warehouse in the Docklands, but you're here now, so we may as well get acquainted. What's your name?"

Ilyar hesitated for a moment, his eyes darting between the two. "Ilyar. My name is Ilyar." He untensed his shoulders just a little, as if giving his name was an acceptance of this strange place. "Where am I...?"

Bentley stood and, spreading their arms wide theatrically, grinned. "Welcome, Ilyar, to Auremelion, city of dreams! Well, someone's dreams, anyway. Mine are more interesting."

"And dangerous," Solivane added dryly. Bentley ignored them.

"So... what happens now?" Ilyar asked, quietly. He relaxed his tall, twitching ears, though the rush of the wind still troubled them.

Bentley looked at Solivane, who took what seemed to be a brass pocketwatch from their robe and examined it. "We cannot leave him here. The seam is still radiating, he will get Drift-sickness."

"Well then," said Bentley, turning back to Ilyar and extending a golden-furred hand. "I guess you're our problem now. Come on, we'll get you somewhere warmer and safer than here. Marginally, at least."

Ilyar looked at the hand. He looked down at the root-fibre bracelet on his wrist, and the rough, tarnished tin crescent moon sigil hanging round his neck, all he had from his world except the memories. He looked back up at the two strange, powerful figures before him, and he understood he had little choice. He took Bentley's hand, and as he did he felt a strange sensation shoot down his arm and through his core - a feeling that he was suddenly part of a story much bigger than him. He pulled himself to his feet, dusting off his torn tunic and grasping his crescent moon. The three creatures made for the door.

They emerged from the warehouse into the chaotic mess of the Docklands. The air was thick with coal dust, smoke, and the tang of copper. Rough-hewn otters and beavers pushed carts laden with barrels and sacks of goods over the rain-slick cobbles; a stoat sailor leaned against a wall smoking a pipe, while two rotund bears in flat caps made their way tipsily from a bar on the corner back to work. Dense dark grey clouds overhead threatened to open up another torrent of rain.

Bentley strode ahead of the other two, waving their umbrella in the air along with the tune they whistled cheerfully. Ilyar clung close to Solivane, eyes and ears scanning the strange, disturbing scene around him.

“There is so much noise, and so much going on,” Ilyar whined, wrapping his arms around himself for comfort. “I do not understand...”

Bentley turned on their heel to face Ilyar with a smile, though they continued to walk backwards. “This is quiet, if you’ll believe me. Just wait ‘til we get to the city proper!” They looked the hare’s shivering, scared form up and down, and their expression softened. “Don’t worry kid, you’ll get used to it. For now, stick close and don’t step in the puddles. They can be deeper than you think.”

They rounded a corner onto a great wide avenue lined with thick trees, their leaves golden brown and gently floating to the ground.

“Oh,” added Bentley, “and maybe don’t look up.”

Ilyar looked up, and immediately regretted it. The grand stone buildings along the avenue towered over him like masonry cliffs and disappeared into the smog above. Balconies and bridges jutted out at awkward angles, criss-crossing the dull sky. A tangle of cables and wires crossed the street, so dense as to almost form a sheet to catch the rain. Down the centre of the avenue ran a vast iron viaduct, its trussed arches rising three or four storeys over the ground yet still dwarfed by the structures around them. The street, straight as an

arrow, carried on far into the hazy distance ahead. Ilyar paled, eyes wide, and would have collapsed on the crowded pavement were Solivane not there to catch him.

“It is... so much. Too much world.” Ilyar pulled his ears down over his face, shivering like a newborn lamb. Solivane looked down on the pitiful creature in their arms, giving the tiniest of smiles. “It is a lot of world, Ilyar. But you are safe with us.”

“Mostly,” Bentley added cheerfully, resting on their umbrella. “You’ve already done one impossible thing today, and it’s not even lunchtime. The likelihood of getting into any more cosmic trouble is vanishingly small. That’s probability, you know.”

Just as Ilyar righted himself, the ground began to shake - gently at first, building to a powerful rumble below their feet. A high-pitched whine cut the air, rising to a bellowing scream. Ilyar instinctively darted for a wall, brushing by a very surprised passing cat, and flattened himself against it.

“What... What’s happening? Earthquake?!”

Bentley looked at Solivane’s severe expression and couldn’t help but laugh. “No, Ilyar... Watch.”

They pointed their umbrella at the street corner ahead, and a moment later a massive shape tore around it - a tram, easily two storeys high, of peeling crimson paint on wood and riveted brass finishings. It ground round the bend with a hellish sound that cut right to Ilyar’s core. Its pole scraped on the overhead wire, scattering a shower of blue-white sparks on the street. It clattered past them like a mountain on rails, the harsh clang-clang-clang of its bell ringing in his ears.

“Do not worry, Ilyar,” Solivane said firmly, “It is on rails. It cannot harm you, unless you are in front of it.”

“Try not to be in front of it,” Bentley added, “It gets messy. Blood and paperwork. They might even make me explain myself.”

Ilyar, breathing heavily, steadied himself against the wall. “It... screamed.”

“It is late,” Solivane noted dryly, “Everything in this city screams eventually.”

Bentley tapped their umbrella on the ground twice, smiling at the two. “Come on now, we’re nearly there. I can almost smell the sewage.”

They continued down the avenue with Bentley setting a brisk pace. Ilyar looked around at the crowds. He felt so small here, brushing past endless streams of every creature he could imagine. Foxes in silks and top hats hurried to the theatres, a fat pigeon shopkeeper in overalls argued with a hulking brass and steam automaton. Some looked more like shadows than people, drifting silently by.

Finally they came to the end of the great avenue. Ilyar gasped at the sight before him. The cobbled pavement and brick canyon gave way to a vast canal basin, stretching almost to the edge of the smog. Down in the murky oil-slicked water, a patchwork flotilla of boats and barges sprawled across the basin, so interlinked with gangplanks and rope bridges that it appeared to be one huge floating organism. The sun was setting now, and the orange glows of gas-lamps dotted the little vessels, gently swaying in the breeze. The air was thick with the smell of smoke, spices, and damp wood. Ilyar gripped the railing on the edge of the basin, transfixed by the sight. Bentley slid up beside him, grinning like a fool.

“Welcome to the Floatmarket, kid,” Bentley announced, wrapping an arm over Ilyar’s shoulders. He felt that strange sensation run through him again like an electric shock. Bentley raised their other arm and pointed at a barge somewhere on the far edge of the flotilla. Its squat little funnel was puffing smoke rings into the basin air. “That one there, that’s my barge. House? House barge. Come on, let’s go.”

They made their way down the worn stone steps to the dock and stepped onto the Floatmarket. Ilyar grabbed onto Bentley’s hand to steady himself against the rhythmic sway of the vessels. “I have only been on a boat once before. I did not like it,” he said quietly.

Solivane’s ears perked. “And what happened?”

“I fell overboard.”

Bentley burst into laughter so hard they almost fell overboard, too.

“Unfortunate,” Solivane intoned gently, stifling the smallest of smiles. “Here. Across this gangway.”

Before them lay a wide, flat-bottomed barge painted in a cheerful, clashing patchwork of colours. Flowerpots containing all sorts of exotic plants lined the deck, and the wheelhouse more resembled a garden shed than anything else. On the prow, glistening brass letters spelled out her name: *The False Positive*.

“It’s beautiful,” Ilyar said as he stepped off the gangway onto the deck. The barge rocked slightly on a wave, as if acknowledging his compliment.

“It’s home, kid,” chirped Bentley, unlocking the hatch and opening it wide. A fug of pleasant incense smoke wafted out, tickling Ilyar’s nose. “I’ve got a spare bunk. Well, actually it’s more of a pile of rugs on some boxes, but it’s better than leaving you on the street.”

Ilyar smiled. The tension in his body eased just a little. Maybe this could be safe, for a while. Maybe.