

## Adoring Mob - 1

"Mob Psychology."

And the brute crowd, whose envious zeal  
Huzzas each turn of fortune's wheel,  
And loudest shouts when lowest lie  
Exalted worth and station high.

Drip, drip, drip. The water pecked at Range's focus. He thought solitude paramount, and he found it in the temple's sub-levels. His limestone confines reeked of mold and moss, hidden springs feeding the ancient foundation's humidity.

*The lighting could be better, too,* he thought, chuckling at the misconception that he and his canine Skuhy brethren could see in the dark. He lit another candle and wondered whether his solitude had been a fair trade for the sun's rays, fresh air and any sound other than the constant dripping of water.

Attempting to force the annoyance from his mind, Range leaned closer to the Chilariti text. He ran a pawnail along the yellowing paper under the scripture's words, "The diamond vortex will provide salvation, unlocking it will allow ascension to the holy lands. And we will be free."

The passage made the fur on Range's back bristle. It wasn't often that the scholars granted him a leave from his duty. So he found himself surprised that of all the things he would do with this time, he would spend it reading the ancient Sundu prophecies.

In a way, it was torture. Believed extinct for decades, the Sundu had suddenly resurfaced. The evil cult believed this world

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was damned and that keys existed that would lead them to a Holy Land in another world. Legends held that the Sundu terrorized the royal families throughout the years to gain possession of the keys to the "*diamond vortex*", or Union as it is commonly called. The scholars had made the discovery of their return just days before and, while Range knew the common legends, his lack of deeper knowledge troubled him. And he now felt compelled to study their culture.

His canines gnawed at his lower lip as he re-read the passage. The fur on his back again stood and, now, he wasn't so sure this was worth all the trouble. Contemplating the reasons for the Sundu's return, he pushed himself from the text and stood. Just as he stepped away from the writing desk an amber orb snapped into the air above the Sundu tome.

Instinctively, Range dropped to all fours, crouching with most of his weight on his hindquarters. He was ready to strike. The orb's light mixed with the room's dust, showering everything in a dirty yellow haze, but Range could still make out the device.

It was a missapod, one of the securest forms of communication, and no threat to him. It captured the thoughts of the messenger and teleported them directly to the recipient. They were commonly used by the scholars with all the high politics required in their position, but generally considered too

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extravagant for the Skuhy adventurers. It was most unusual for him to receive one of his own.

Range relaxed and returned to the desk. He sniffed the orb, wondering whether he could sense its message without actually having to touch it. The orb's energy warmed his whiskers, but no thoughts revealed themselves, so he placed both paws on the device.

A man's friendly voice filled his mind, but it seemed somehow different, as if it were tinged with both excitement and fear. "Range, come quickly!" said the voice, and though he hadn't announced himself, Range knew it belonged to his friend Coriel. "I can't explain...even in an orb, but you must come to Solgrave. There are new clues for those who love its history."

That's all it said. Range released the orb. Every fur of his pointed ears prickled with excitement. Maybe, just maybe, Coriel had located the Staff of Ignedy and wanted to share in its discovery. Could anything else be as significant of a finding as to cause his friend to be so mysterious, especially in a missapod?

His gaze lingered on his backpack, which sat in a heap with stacked texts of all sizes. Range didn't hesitate. *The scholars won't know*, Range thought. *Never do. Of course, until it's all over.* Having nearly a full week before he was due back on assignment with the scholars, Range hustled to his pack, slung it over his shoulders and bound from the room. If he hurried, he

could reach Solgrave and spend a few days investigating before his leave was up.

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Solgrave's night sky glowed with moonlight and the flame of torches. It was barely enough to traverse the narrow cobblestone pathways of the old city. One misstep and Range would find himself soaking in one of Solgrave's hundred canals. And he hated water. His Skuhy fur only collected it like a sponge.

As the upright canine turned the corner of one narrow path and walked down another, he regretted his momentary contempt for the city. The soft singing clangs of the flags several stories above chimed across a canal that was littered with rickety docks to tie up gondolas. Lifting his muzzle, he inhaled the night's breeze. After all, as an archeologist, he revered Solgrave as his mecca and was here to save it.

And then there was the cryptic note from Coriel: *Come urgently. And something about clues for those who love history. Still, he thought, Coriel better have his own torch.*

As he passed, a gondolier and his companion stared. The gondolier's cigarette illuminated the protruding features of his face, the soft glow washing out his cheekbones like a *mascareri* and accentuating his expression. Range didn't like the man's demeanor.

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A voice echoing from the same direction matched the gondolier's scowl. "Why don't you walk on all fours like you were meant to."

The words lingered for a moment over the rippling water before another voice cut in, this one a whine, "come over and I might put you to work."

*I don't have to tolerate this.* Running a nail up the leather harness of his backpack, Range reached across his chest and slowly gripped the handle of a throwing knife.

Range sneered and inhaled deeply. A nauseous concoction of smoke, perfume and sewage made it difficult for him to detect how serious these two rejects were about starting some trouble. "I'm not game for a fight. I bid you gentlemen a good evening."

But when a cowled form moved across his line of sight, sliding slowly along the walkway on the opposite side of the canal, Range loosened his grip on his knife. His attention diverted, he barely heard the whining voice of the gondolier's companion, "Did you hear that! He bids us a good evening. Boy, our night isn't over by a long shot."

The gondolier stood and ashed in the canal. The ember sizzled softly when it hit the water.

These morons were serious. Range again tensed his hand around the hilt of his knife. With the sticking crack of leather, he slid the blade from its holster.

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But even with the situation in front of him, his eyes lingered across the canal and on the figure in the cloak. The dark form had stopped and turned in their direction, scrutinizing them, arms of the cloak crossed over its chest.

But Range didn't study the cloaked individual much longer. He had more immediate issues. The gondolier's buddy jerked from his seat. "Ready to play?" the man growled.

Range wasted no time contemplating a response. He flicked his wrist and let the knife fly. When it struck the man's boot, the tear of leather and the gushing rip of sinewy tissue preceded the man's bloodcurdling cries.

"Still want to play?" Range asked over the man's spurts of gasps and screams.

The gondolier tossed his smoke in the water. "My buddy will still put you in your place before the night's over."

Before Range could reach for another blade, a third voice came from behind him, a familiar, friendly one. "Titus, better let this one alone. He's all business and you'll be scattered with your ashes before you know it."

The gondolier stopped. "Coriel, you friends with this mutt? That's low even for you."

Range's ears hadn't failed him. His friend, Coriel, one of a few select human ones, stood behind him. The man had served as the gondolier on every expedition he'd been on to Solgrave. And

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Coriel was right, he could shred these idiots, but only if he must. He killed easy enough, but he wasn't a killer.

Coriel laughed at the sentiments of his fellow gondolier. "Not so low that I struggle to catch a fare. Good night, Titus. Come on, Range."

But Range hesitated. It wasn't because he had any lingering feelings about trouncing the gondolier and his friend. The cloak figure's presence had troubled him. And it especially bothered him now that the figure was gone.

After several seconds, he finally conceded to his friend's request and began hiking up the dark alley with Coriel. "What was so urgent it couldn't wait until my next trip?"

Coriel's broad shoulders shrugged in mock offense. "There was a discovery with clues about the Staff of Ignedya."

The merry din of a Carnevale party from the upcoming canal interrupted them. The lights from a grand hotel cascaded amber hues in the direction they headed at the alley's far end. Drawing closer to the celebration, Range thought, *the soul of the city didn't appear to be suffering*. The legends of the Staff of Ignedya held that it represented the spirit of the city, and its discovery would spare it a fate of crumbling into the sea. Over the past decades Solgrave had been sinking. And Range wondered whether he was dying with it, his spirit inextricably linked to finding the staff. Of late, all of his personal moments of truth seemed to rise and fall with Solgrave's tides.

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Coriel turned to him, the light glinting off the random white hairs in his stubble. "So, you haven't told me what you've been up to?"

"Between travels, I've been studying the Chilariti," Range said.

"What would you want with the ancient Sundu code? Those scholars let you have a life outside of work?"

"You mean like those people," Range said rather acerbically, as he gestured to the party. "Diluting your senses isn't what I consider fun. Any buffoon can do it."

"Fair enough."

It should have been apparent where Coriel was taking him. They had traveled this path several times before, but he was distracted, his whiskers prickling as if cut short. Finally, there was slight fluttering in his peripheral vision. Turning his head toward the movement, it was only an approaching drunk couple. Dressed in formal attire, they had come from the party, though the man's frock did somewhat resemble a cloak.

Frustrated by his inability to shake the feeling that more was present than he could detect, he worked his long snout into the air, hoping to sniff it out.

Range continued to study the couple as he and Coriel turned the corner leading to the main square and the Marciana library.

The couple matched his glare and in slurred words the man fought to keep his voice to a whisper, "I don't understand why

they allow such riff-raff to walk the streets. I thought the Duke was working to clean up this area."

His female companion countered, "Who do you think the Duke has cleaning up the streets. Dare say, not us."

"Good point," the man said, and the couple turned down the dark alley, away from them.

After several more minutes they reached the steps to the library without him sensing anything unusual. As they passed through the columns, walking toward the imposing main doors, Range noticed footprints in a film of dust. Subconsciously his nose itched and he sneezed.

A voice called to them from the shadows. "I'd say bless you, but you're late. I'd about given up on you."

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Coriel said. "Ran into some locals who aren't fond of Skuhies."

A slight man, dressed in robes wrapped loosely about his torso, stepped from the shadows. "And I'd thought the world had grown up."

"Most of it has," Range responded.

"Coriel, good to see you. Range, my name is Vito, and I'm a curator here at the library. Now that you're here," he said, motioning them forward. "You should have no issues with simpletons."

Range guessed the man was nearing eighty because Vito's posture resembled a slingshot, his upper torso drooped over his

legs. But with his sharp blue eyes set in a cranium framed with white, receding hair, there was something steely about his manner.

As the curator reached for the ancient door knobs, Range noticed the man's ragged and broken fingernails. Vito grabbed a single knob with both hands and leaned into the thick wooden doors. He pulled.

The door scraped across the ground and tugged at the adjoining door. And just as Coriel and Range were about to offer their help, the elderly man was able to pry it open. "The foundation is...settling..." he said between heavy breaths. "I hope you boys...are able to find some answers because...I fear we only have a few months."

They stepped inside and Range understood the urgency in the curator's words. Random lanterns throughout the great hall were burnt out, some hanging perilously from wires and shattered limestone. A long fissure ran along the ceiling and several missing fragments from stained glass windows invited the night's air into the building.

"So, the city has sunk to unstable levels?" Range asked.

"Not yet, my dear boy, but soon...soon."

Vito walked ahead, leading them through the main hall.

"This library was built in the 1500s. It will be missed by the world," Vito said matter-of-factly. And though his tone belied it and Range did not see the man's face, he could sense the sorrow

the man was feeling for the demise of the library and Solgrave. It was in every step. His gait was steady and deliberate, not from age, but because he cherished each imperfection in the floor.

After several minutes, they reached a winding staircase that led to the second floor catwalk. Vito turned and sighed, "This great building once housed Solgrave's Mint—there isn't enough money in all the world that could save her now. The store room is right up these stairs."

Range followed up the spiral staircase, carefully traversing the warped iron steps. "And what, specifically, do you have to show us?"

"One of Mulpnal's journals."

"The discovery made last week?" asked Range, his ears cocked in disbelief that he would be among the first to inspect a journal from Solgrave's premier scholar. A shroud of mystery surrounded the journals because Mulpnal was murdered and several of his texts went missing at nearly the same time the Staff was lost. Several authorities on Mulpnal believed a connection existed between the two. "If I understand it correctly, it hasn't even been authenticated."

Vito grabbed the doorknob, turning back to him, his eyes vague with surprise. "We were hoping you could do it."

"I know the signs, but it won't be official. You'll need to send them to Genizah for certification."

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Swinging the door open, Vito didn't comment on Range's notion of formality, but simply ushered them into the room. They complied and Range felt instantly transplanted into a time capsule. Vestiges of the mint equipment from the library's past adorned the storeroom, as old printing plates, scales and punch and die sets lay stacked in a corner, covered in cobwebs. Open crates and broken boards littered the floor. And standing perfectly parallel like huge dominoes awaiting a nudge, rows of nicked and dusty bookcases lined each long wall.

"Well, here we are," Vito finally offered. "You're free to look around, but stay clear of the locked crates. They are the Duke's personal collection--private family relics--and we're due to ship them any day. The text is there, on the table."

Even as Range registered the last of Vito's instructions, the old attendant was outside the room, forcing the door to close in its settling frame.

The hairs in Range's ears bristled. His intuition for suspicious behavior and Vito's otherwise brusque departure didn't sit well with him. Still, Range pushed his doubts to the back of his mind and turned to the trove that lay on the table.

Coriel was already handling the text, running his index finger down the weathered leather jacket. "How can you tell if it's authentic?"

Range stepped around the table, alongside Coriel, and in an act of obeisance lifted his friend's hand from the text. "There

are a number of marks, but the key is under the cover's lining. The original texts have the ink stamp of a crown."

Taking hold of the journal, Range ran a nail down the seam that fixed the binding to its jacket. He flipped open the cover. Water stains in mixed browns and greys threatened the integrity of the artifact's indicators, but he kept up hope the damage wasn't too bad because the glue securing the inside of the cover held fast. His fellow Skuhies would laugh, for he was more historian than adventurer and only he could attain such pleasure studying the details of a journal reeking of mold and smoke.

But there was not time for intense scrutiny. They were here to reveal the truth, to determine whether this was a fake or an authentic Mulpnal journal. Holding the journal open with one paw, Range, with the other, removed a razor-thin blade from his shoulder harness and brought it to the journal.

In one deft motion, he ran the blade under the jacket's paper backing. He returned the tip to the corner and used it to pry the inside cover away.

Once finished in freeing the backing, he lifted it. The journal indeed had been stamped with a crown, albeit smudged slightly by the water damage.

"So is it authentic?" Coriel asked.

"Has all the signs, but what's this?" Range said, his paw pointed to fine ink smudges under the crown.

Coriel leaned in and studied the markings. "I think it says '*Forgive me. A promise to Arnian.*'"

As the last syllable left Coriel's lips, the crates forbidden to them started to shake. Streams of light burst from every crack and hole from their pine planks, covering some areas of the room in a gauze of shadows and exposing others to view.

Range set down the text and walked to the crate. Rubbing the underside of his snout with his paw, he studied it for several seconds. "Dare we? I detected Vito was agitated by the mere presence of the Duke's crates."

Coriel shrugged. "Your call. But the Duke *is our benefactor for this project.*"

Range knelt and clasped the crate's lock, recalling the text's inscription. "All the more curious," he said to Coriel before again considering the crate and his actions. "I wonder if our friend the Duke realizes they are resting so close to the journal."

Dropping the lock, Range looked up at his friend and spoke with resolve, "Let's open it."

Coriel clapped his hands together, scanning the room. "Okay. With all of these broken boards, a crowbar shouldn't be difficult to find."

"We won't need one," Range offered, removing a slender metal tool from his harness. "I'll use something more subtle. I'd like to give the impression we never touched a thing."

"Oh. Right."

Range used a nail to pry three needle-thin spikes from the tool. Inserting the spikes into the keyhole, he twisted the pick with a wriggle of his wrist and held it for several seconds, his paw coiled against the lock's cold metal. Suddenly, it clicked and sprung open.

Using his free paw, Range removed the lock from the crate's latch and handed it to Coriel. Coriel slipped the lock into his jacket.

Range returned his attention to the glowing crate. "Now, let's see what surprises you hold."

Lifting the lid, it was easy to identify the object of their curiosity. A gnarled mahogany cane with a glass bulb at its head shone brightly and, as Range pulled it from the crate, its intensity increased. He winced, trying to block out the light to study the bulb.

"Do you see imperfections or some sediment in this bulb?" Range asked of Coriel.

"Bring it to the table. I'll drop the lamps and we can get a better look."

Range did as his friend suggested, but with every step the bulb glowed ever more radiant. When he reached the table, it was as if the whole of the sun were atop the cane.

Believing he could cheat the light, he turned the cane so the bulb hung over Mulpnal's journal, hoping the sediments shadow

would cast against the open jacket. As he drew closer, the hum of energy now began pulsing from the bulb. Despite the brightness and the ominous hum, Range forced his eyes to remain open. Blotches of red and green marred his vision, but even through the murk, he saw liquid sloshing back and forth in the glass, forcing an "Ahhh..." from his snout.

"What do you see?" asked Coriel.

Before he could answer, the hum shifted to a tea kettle's scream. The light became too much to bear and Range again had to shut his eyes, his eyelids trembling at the effort to conceal all of the rays.

Then the hiss died away. His eyes relaxed and Range considered a glance at the bulb. But just as he decided to do so, it exploded. Buckshot of glass shards and the fluid smattered his snout and paws.

Cocking one eye open, he finally dared a look. The bulb was missing, fragments of the glass clinging to the wooden head.

He cursed his stupidity, for the journal had been damaged, as well, now not only covered in glass, but the pages were also soaked with clear liquid and sprinkled with drops of his blood.

"You okay?" Coriel asked.

Range brushed the kernels of glass from the text. "Better than the..."

His voice faded into a blur of slow-motion. Flames crackled from the journal, a single page igniting and burning from the

edges to the center. A dense smoke billowed above it and wafted into a faint outline of a man's face. Range thought he recognized his features. It appeared to be the Duke's long-deceased younger brother Arnian.

Through the fireflies of ash, the outline spoke. "I'm the image of truth. My death, the loss of the staff, and the city's demise are no accident." The visage's eyes narrowed, pleadingly. "He murdered me! Clubbed me across the head because he made a deal with the Sundu and the only spirit the staff couldn't fix was his own. Search the canals, find the staff and bring me justice."

With a sizzle, the outline began to fade, then flickered and sprung to life again. "Be wary my friends, my brother is a sick man. I can offer you some protection, but I fear my brother will do anything to protect his secret. To save the city, we may lose her people."

Finally, Arnian's image disappeared and they remained silent for several moments, the only sound the residual crackle from the burning book.

Range turned to Coriel, whose eyes had rolled back into his head, and lunged forward to grab his friend's arm. Too late. Coriel's head collapsed to one side and he buckled to the floor.

There, Range studied him for a moment before he too felt woozy. His lower jaw hung loosely for several seconds and Range barely noticed the swallow of drool that slid from the corner of

his snout. An immense pressure built in his sinuses and his body involuntarily crouched closer and closer to the limestone floor. The coolness of the floor was somewhat of a respite before everything went dark.

It was light of day and he was back in the canals with Coriel. He lifted his nose to snuffle the crisp air.

Coriel nodded in agreement. "Absolutely beautiful weather."

Even for him, Range's senses were uncannily acute. Hues of primary colors popped against the otherwise austere tones of Solgrave's architecture. And his visual acuity was matched by his nose, aromas of brewing coffee and crème puff pastries wafted in from the cafes that lined both sides of the canal, fighting the must and spruce mix of the gondola.

Coriel shifted the forcola and turned the gondola off the grand canal and into the Rio Foscari. A dense smoke billowed from the canal, engulfing everything in a nightmare of darkness, yet Coriel powered on. Time hung.

As they drew closer, flickers of light flashed within the smoke. A serious fire ravaged the Duke's palace.

To Range's surprise, not a soul other than he and Coriel appeared in the canal; noone fleeing to escape and noone rushing to help.

Again, Coriel adjusted the forcola, but this time it was to stop their forward progress. Now just drifting, Range had a

perfect view of a palace balcony. It was as if the smoke parted specifically for the scene, huge curtains drawn to stage a great play.

And what he witnessed was unthinkable. Above him, in clear view, a younger Duke Tiviennco and his missing brother Arnian quarreled.

Cradled in both arms, Tiviennco held the Staff of Ignedyia. "Dear Brother, I've found a buyer. And, in return, I will indulge myself in the children."

"Tiv, you need help. I can find you help."

"It doesn't matter, little brother. The Sundu will soon rule all, and our lands will be hell for all worlds. I'm just getting an early start."

Through the fireflies of ash and passing scope, Range watched as the young Duke swung the staff over his head and down again in a violent blow across Arnian's head.

The younger man twisted and flipped over the balcony's railing. But Arnian caught hold of the staff. There he hung, blood seeping from the gash on his temple.

Clutching the staff tighter and pressing his legs into the balcony's low wall, Arnian looked into his brother's face. "You will never find it. You will never have them."

Arnian leapt into the heart of the fire, staff in hand.

Range growled at Coriel to pull the gondola closer to the blaze. Even after several attempts, his friend did not respond.

The fire now consumed everything and Range furiously searched for any sign of the young duke. He saw nothing but smoke, it building denser and denser by the second.

The bizarre murder scene was not the only thing amiss. His attention darted back to Coriel, but he was not there. Range leapt to the aft of the gondola, intent on locating his friend. Paw on the forcola to steady him, he peered into the water, searching its depths. Only a wry smile of mild ripples greeted him. Determined to find his friend, he steadied himself ready to dive in. But then the ripples faded into a storm of smoke, as the fire reached its zenith. Charcoal air blocked the sun's rays until-

Range opened his eyes. A new scene took place before him. An olive-skinned man with wavy raven hair and dressed in a cloak of matching color, clasped his hands around Coriel's neck. The man pressed his thumbs into Coriel's throat. Range's friend feebly ripped at the man's arms.

Range kept still, shifting to his side to attain a better angle. Pulling his haunches against his chest, he held the position for a moment. *Hold*, he told himself.

The man glanced at him. *Perfect*. Range bucked, driving his back paws into the assailant's knees. He connected cleanly on the knee nearest him. The man fell to his healthy leg, screaming in agony.

Range then flipped onto his stomach and rocked forward before shooting his back paws into the man's face. With a thud, the man's head bounced off the limestone floor.

Coriel rested next to him, gasping and hacking. "Put your arms above your head," Range said, helping him to his feet. "It will open up your throat and lungs."

As Coriel struggled to slip his fingers together behind his head, Range noticed a rustle behind the book cases.

Another olive-skinned man, dressed in a flowing raven cloak similar to the man's on the floor, juttied his head out from the aisle. Spittle fixed to his lower lip, the man snarled, "Misanthrope, you'll die before you can share your discovery with the world."

His adrenaline flowing and in complete disbelief the extinct Sundu cult was here, in Solgrave, Range stepped away from text to confront the threat. But he soon realized he was being drawn into a trap. Down the narrow aisle from the back of the storeroom, like a colony of bats, an army of more Sundu hurtled toward them.

Watching his brethren arrive, the man laughed, "It's time to give back the secret."

Range was curious whether *his discovery* and *this secret* had revealed the Staff's location, but not enough to stick around with the Sundu. He ran, pulling Coriel with him as he darted by.

They had little trouble prying open the door to the storeroom, but both of them skid to a stop as soon as they cleared it. Vito's body lay on the limestone, listless with a stream of blood working its way into every fissure of the floor.

"Pour soul," Coriel muttered.

"I think we found something not meant for us," Range said over the growing commotion in the storeroom. "That will be us, too, if we don't hurry."

Though the gaps in the broken windows showed dawn's light and mist, the library appeared darker inside. They rushed across the catwalk and down the spiral staircase, when Range realized everything wasn't right in the rest of the building. A horde of cloaked Sundu rose from the library carrels like ghouls clawing their way from the grave. But they couldn't turn back, so Range dropped to all fours and charged a Sundu waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. The grin stretched across the man's face gave Range extra incentive to level the guy.

With a tremendous crash, Range bowled him over and rolled to a stop on his back in the main aisle. Coriel fought his way to catch up, shoving one of the assailants over a nearby escritoire.

But then blotches of red, greens and yellows filled Range's eyes, a firepoker of pain shooting up his spine. On pure instinct, Range snapped and bit into the hands that jerked his tail. For a moment, the hands pulled tighter, but Range's strong jaws clenched, crushing bone until the hands were rendered

useless. Springing again to all fours, his rage allowed him to traverse the aisle. He bit or clawed anyone who crossed his path until he and Coriel reached the main entrance to the library.

When Coriel reached the door, he tugged. It scraped along the ground, and its companion door, but managed to open enough for them to squeeze through.

Oddly, the horde didn't follow, leaving them alone outside. The mist stopped and the sky illuminated a bizarre hue of pink, not the rose of dawn Range expected. Hustling down the steps, Range was ready to rid himself of the Mulpnal experience and begin investigating whether Arnian's murder and the Staff's location had any connection.

Yet they were greeted by one of the local citizens. The woman's eyes glowed in the light and she twitched nervously, lips pursed in an expression of hunger. "Congratulations!" she said with a forced grin. "The truth is known."

Range's ears itched. This woman wasn't in the proper state of mind. And she wasn't the only thing unstable. The city was now quaking, his ears detecting the barely distinguishable sounds of splashing water and shifting stone.

"Miss," Range offered. "I think it would be prudent to find shelter. The city's not safe."

The woman continued quivering her foot against the pavement. "It is you who should find safety," she said before returning a smile of gritted teeth.

The woman shot forward and wrapped both arms around Range in an engulfing hug. She continued to squeeze until Range's breath was nearly from him.

Coriel stepped in, pried the woman's fingers from Range's coat and forced him down the steps. The woman snarled, her smile locked on her face, but was otherwise vacuous in expression.

"What was that?" Range gasped.

Coriel shrugged. "Local hospitality. I've always said kindness was the most savage of attacks."

"I thought it was diplomacy--" Range said, turning to face a growing commotion that was working its way around the front of the building. "...was the death of progress. Speaking of death of progress--"

Coriel still hadn't noticed the crowd. "Well, you're a diplomat aren't you?"

Range tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the coming mob. The group possessed the same blank stare as the woman, a collage of half-moon smiles stretched across everyone's face. "I doubt any measure of diplomacy would kill their progress."

Both shuffled down the steps and ran for the canal. Range picked up the perfect sequence of passing gondolas. "Coriel. Follow my lead," he said, as he leapt out on the first vessel.

Before the gondolier could protest, Range skipped off and across a series of boats as if they were pads in a pond.

Coriel followed without incident, but when they reached the other side, Range stopped momentarily, surprised there had been no protests of any kind. Yet, after searching the gondoliers' faces, he understood why, each of them wearing the same sticky grin as the mob.

Coriel studied the mob across the canal. "I've got a bad feeling about this..."

With a splintering pop, Range kicked in the wooden door of a tenant building. "So do I. Let's get off the streets," he said, charging up a narrow staircase. "We need to get out of the city."

"So where are you going?"

"The roof."

Range figured getting away from the crowds would provide him and Coriel some safety, but he soon realized the cramped quarters put them in even greater danger. From every doorway residents emerged, all marked with the tense grimace. They all clawed at him and Coriel with the ignorant ferocity of toddlers at play.

Biting, kicking and thrashing at the onslaught of hands and arms, Range saw freedom: The door to the roof. He hurdled a diving attacker and turned up the final flight of steps. His paws bounding, he had nearly reached the door when his back paws were swiped out from under him.

Sliding back into the mob, he came face to face with another tense smile. "We hope the search for the Staff isn't the death of you."

Foreign hands tugged and jerked at Range's hindquarters and tail. "CORIEL!" he yelled, digging his front claws into the steps and holding until his friend could arrive.

But there was no need. A tremor rocked the building and the hands that once held Range were now gone. This respite was all he needed to set his back legs and bound the steps. He and Coriel crashed through the roof door without looking to see what had become of the tenants.

Though Range didn't need to. He staggered, brought to his knees by their high-pitched screams. He could almost visualize the building's collapse and its residents plummeting to their deaths.

Coriel tugged at his harness. "Range, we must keep moving."

Range gathered himself, the phantom screams still ringing in his ears, and leapt to the hotel rooftop.

Now running alongside the building they had fled, they had a vantage point to see the facade had broken free and slid into the canal.

"What's going on?" Coriel blurted. "Why is everyone attacking us?"

"I'm not positive, but I think we triggered a curse when we found the cane and experienced Arnian's explanation of his

murder. Remember the text's image said, 'To save the city, we may lose her people.'"

"Do you really believe that's what happened?"

"Not sure. But I get the feeling the Mulpnal journal and cane were never meant to be found together. Vito led us there intentionally."

"We didn't sign up to be saints."

Range cocked his brow. "Most saints don't," he said and stepped away from the ledge. "At this juncture, it doesn't matter. We need to reach the lagoon, get out of the city."

They crept low until they reached the hotel's marquee. Standing another half-story above the roof, the marquee provided an adequate lookout.

The canal and its accompanying walkways appeared deserted, but Range's prickling whiskers told him that all was not as it appeared. Even so, he knew they wouldn't have a better opportunity for a get away.

"When the breeze calms," Range said to Coriel, pointing over the hotel's ledge. "We need to drop to the awning."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Tell me if you see another way," Range said and pointed again, but this time at a dock. "We'll take one of those gondolas."

Range's whiskers stilled. "Let's go," he called and started to roll over the ledge.

But the mob arrived below. Coriel couldn't stop his momentum, flopping on the awning before he noticed the new threat. He gripped its frame unsure what to do next. They were trapped. So Range clung to the crumbling ledge, trying to devise a new plan. His paws clawed, nails cracking against dried stone that slowly gave way. He dug his nails in tighter and cursed an otherwise soothing breeze as every ripple of life upset the situation's tenuous balance.

How had it come to this, he wondered, as a tittering face popped over the ledge, pressed nose to nose with him.

"Peace be with you, friend," the man snarled, maintaining his stretched grin.

But "*And also with you*" couldn't escape Range's lips. As his nails finally broke free of the ledge and he slid from the awning, falling toward the canal all he could conjure in his head was "*to Hell with you!*"

He pulled himself out of the water and noticed the once quiet walkway was animated with activity. At the mouth of the canal, the mob of locals rumbled in their direction. But they were further from the dock than he had originally estimated, so he and Coriel had a chance. As Coriel dropped from the awning, Range noticed another stream of locals scaling the gutters to the ground. But unlike he and Coriel, they moved like rabid animals, forsaking their safety, and several crashed to the ground after a

three-story fall. Limbs twisted and broken, those who still could, lunged at Range.

With an entire city hunting them, they both raced toward the docks.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Range asked.

"Well, color wasn't highest on my priority list."

Range and Coriel leapt from the dock into the nearest gondola. Range untied it as Coriel positioned the forcola to move them into the heart of the canal.

Coriel garnered enough momentum to outpace both the rabid locals dropping from the building and those charging from the small tributary's mouth, but as they turned into the main canal, a new nightmare unfolded before them. In the rising sun, any other day the sights of a bustling, vibrant city would be a worthy memory, but today, Range and Coriel were navigating hell's plaza.

Another mob arrived and overwhelmed the bridge they passed under, tens of Solgrave's citizens diving into the water and clinging to the gondola's spruce planks.

Range fought them off best he could, tearing at their hands and using his back paws to kick them free of the vessel. But even as Coriel's experienced arms worked to shake the trespassers and push the gondola further out into the water, they took on more unwanted passengers.

Coriel groaned and yelled back to Range, "I can't free us—"

Just then his words were replaced with gurgles, the mob's momentum pulling the gondola into the water's depths.

For Range, Coriel's gurgles were soon replaced with the whispers of the dark.

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And in what must have been hours, the dark gave way to the shouts of light. Eyes still blurry, Range could make out warbles from his backpack. "Range...Range...Want a report on status."

Range forced open his eyes. Crumpled in a ball of wet fur among the reeds of a small sandbar, he lifted his head and pulled his harness free of his matted coat and reached into his pack.

"Range...Range...Are you there..."

He brought the communicator to his snout and cleared his throat, "...Range here."

As he spoke, he scanned the dune and the horizon, searching for any sign of Coriel. He pounded his fist into the sand. No staff, a city and a friend lost, his failure couldn't have been more complete.

Before he could speculate further about his friend's whereabouts the communicator crackled again. "Range, this is Elias. Sorry to cut your vacation short, but we must have you return to Genizah immediately. *The Sundu*...we know why they've returned."

"But I think I've found the staff."

"There's no time for that now. Besides, you two sure made a mess of things. As soon as the bulb broke, you unleashed a curse on anyone that used the local water supply."

The proximity of the Duke's cane to the Mupnal journal, Arnian's warnings of "we may lose her people," and the locals' sadistic trance all started to make sense: the curse was a security measure to protect the knowledge of the staff's whereabouts if the journal was ever discovered. *Great, the water,* Range thought. No one in the city could avoid contact with it. Again, the scholars seemed to have all the answers, *after the fact.*

Range bared his fangs and growled into the communicator. "But Coriel, I have to go back for him."

The communicator buzzed a final time. "Range, under no circumstances are you to re-enter Solgrave. It's still quite dangerous. And, Coriel is fine. He became *one of them* as soon as he ingested the water, but the effects will wear off in time."

"But why didn't I?"

Through the crackles, Range heard a faint "*Gsshh! You're a Skuhy.*" There would be no more questions. Now, nothing but static uttered on the other end.

Disgusted and tormented by his losses, Range swung his backpack over his shoulders anyway, his loyalty to the scholars winning out. He only hoped whatever this new, urgent task was

that it would prove more successful and more beneficial than the nightmare he was leaving behind.

Despite the scholar's orders and today's failure, he knew, someday, he would have to return to Solgrave. It wasn't for Coriel—he could ensure his safety once he arrived at Genizah. But finding the Staff was a different matter.