



GOOD DOGS
STAY IN KANSAS.

BAD DOGS
GO TO OZ.

TOTO

A. J. HACKWITH

PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS FROM HELL'S LIBRARY

The Library of the Unwritten

“This book is so much fun, and you should be reading it. Trust me. Stories about story are some of my favorite kinds. This book definitely makes the list. I am so glad I read this.”

—Seanán McGuire, author of *The Unkindest Tale*

“A muse, an undead librarian, a demon, and a ghost walk into Valhalla.... What follows is a delightful and poignant fantasy adventure that delivers a metric ton of found-family feels and reminds us that the hardest stories to face can be the ones we tell about ourselves.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Kit Rocha

“Hackwith has artfully penned a love letter to books and readers alike and filled it with lush, gorgeous prose; delightfully real characters; a nonstop, twisty, and heart-wrenching plot; and an explosive ending that gave me chills.”

—K. A. Doore, author of *The Unconquered City*

“A delightful romp through Heaven, Hell, and everything in between, which reveals itself in layers: an exploration of the nuances of belief, a demonstration of the power of the bonds that connect us, and a love letter to everybody who has ever heard the call of their own story.”

—Caitlin Starling, author of *The Death of Jane Lawrence*

“Like *Good Omens* meets Jim Hines’s *Ex Libris* series; a must-read for any booklover. Hackwith has penned a tale filled with unforgettable characters fighting with the power of creativity against a stunning array of foes from across the multiverse.”

—Michael R. Underwood, author of the Stabby Award finalist *Genrenauts* series

“The only book I’ve ever read that made the writing process look like fun. A delight for readers and writers alike!”

—Hugo Award finalist Elsa Sjunneson-Henry

The Archive of the Forgotten

“This book pulls apart what a book is, what a book could be, and gets to the soul of what it means to tell a story, all while delivering queer chemistry and intricate world-building.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Powerhouse fantasy.... Writing in stirring prose, Hackwith imbues her high-concept metafictional tale with color, action, and high-flying emotion. This imaginative ode to the power of fiction is sure to delight.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Hackwith’s writing is just as beautiful as before...inventive worlds and wonderful prose.”

—The Nerd Daily

“If you like high-stakes adventures, found family, magic, and a little dark humor, this is the perfect book for you.”

—Seven Acre Books

The God of Lost Words

“Hackwith’s poignant, imaginative series sends readers on an amazing journey, with profound prose that will capture hearts and minds.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“The plot of this final volume has its exciting twists, but the real payoff is Hackwith’s complex characters.... The character development throughout the series, the polyamory and queer representation, and convincing fears and desires all combine to make characters that feel real, and that will earn readers’ full investment.”

—*Booklist*

“Hackwith suffuses this story with love in many forms, deep thoughts on reading, and variations on reality.... It’s the perfect finish to this inventive saga.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY A. J. HACKWITH

Novels from Hell's Library

The Library of the Unwritten

The Archive of the Forgotten

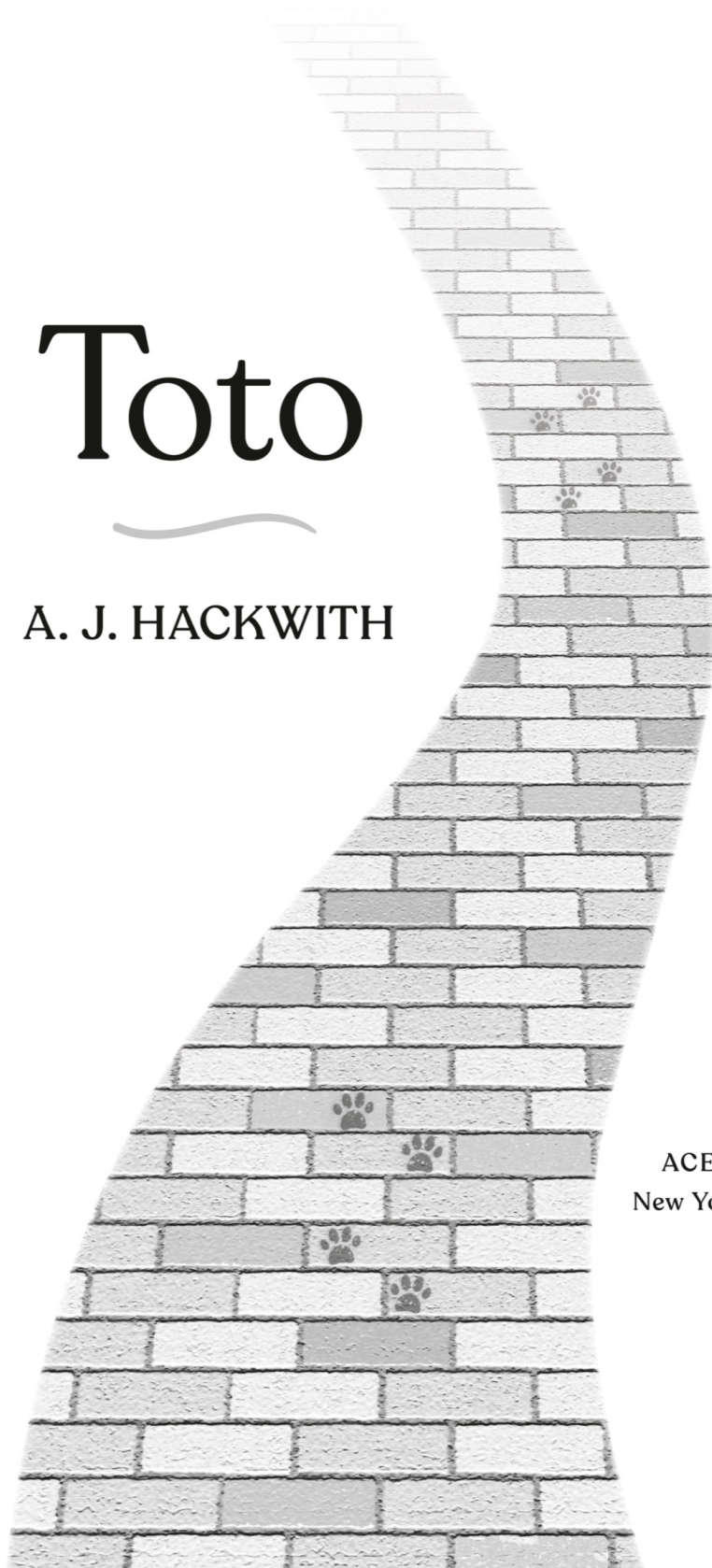
The God of Lost Words

OceanofPDF.com

Toto



A. J. HACKWITH



ACE
New York

OceanofPDF.com

ACE
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2024 by A. J. Hackwith

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

ACE is a registered trademark and the A colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hackwith, A. J., author.

Title: Toto / A. J. Hackwith.

Description: First edition. | New York : Ace, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024002313 (print) | LCCN 2024002314 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593546574 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780593546581 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3608.A254 T68 2024 (print) | LCC PS3608.A254 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20240329

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024002313>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024002314>

Ebook ISBN 9780593546581

Cover design and illustration by Adam Auerbach

Book design by Daniel Brount, adapted for ebook by Kelly Brennan

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

pid_prh_7.0a_148715760_c0_r0

OceanofPDF.com

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

This one's for all the dogs whose ancestors crept toward a campfire and found something worth protecting, loving, and saving in us. May we all be a little more worthy of it.

For the dogs I've loved: Gin-Gin, Jig-R, Splash, Mei-Mei, Morgan.
And for Mochi and Zelda, who are as fuzzy and brave and terrible as any girl could ask for.

OceanofPDF.com

THE LITTLE GUYS WERE SINGING again.
Again.

Look. I've got nothing against the Munchkins, as they call themselves. (Yeah, I made that face too. Sounded like a snack to me.) They'd been nothing but welcoming so far, and I doubt many rural folk would have been half as welcoming if an alien spaceship had crash-landed on top of their town. But we'd, in an act of pure ridiculousness, landed on the head of some town bully, and everyone was just *off-their-rocker* thrilled about it. They had not stopped singing about it since we crawled, shaky on our paws, out the front door. Everyone was just being folksy and hospitable as *heck*, and Aunt Em had drilled into Dorothy the kind of basic Midwestern manners to be polite and grateful.

But the singing.

Here's the thing: I am a little dog of no musical training, but when a gang of grown men in shorts and suspenders and holding candy clubs stepped forward and started serenading Dorothy about a league of traditional masculinity and men's rights, I was inclined to slow-fade into the bushes. I don't care if they called themselves something cute like the "Tartpatch Gang." Take it from a dog who has accomplished many calculated hijinks with his sterling reputation intact—you can get away with a *lot of terrible shit* when you're small and cute.

I snuffled around in the dirt long enough to be reassured that, at least, the dirt smelled like normal dirt in this land, and not like...chocolate cake or something. The dirt was so rich, it almost made my nose itch, and there was not a trace of Uncle Henry's CropXtreme™ fertilizer anywhere. I

didn't even smell a pesticide, and the leaves on the bushes above me were untouched. Overhead I spied butterflies the size of saucers, but I couldn't hear the constant drone of gnats or horseflies anywhere in the Technicolor rotoscope of a village we were in. I don't know how far from home the tornado had carried us, but it was obvious this...well, wasn't Kansas.

Not that I was in mourning: Kansas was the *worst*, okay? Flat of geography and philosophy, the good people of Kansas embraced gray as a state of mind. As a *vibe*, one might say. My whole life was pretty much limited to the farm, the joke of a town, and Dorothy's pocket screen. What life I *had* made had all been screwed over when the sheriff and her cronies got to the Gales' and—

The thought made me drop to my belly under the bush and stare out at the Tartpatch Gang shitheads with their little candy batons as they did their little patriotic goose step around Dorothy. I kept an eye on her out of habit. She stood there, smiling awkwardly in a way only a painfully anxious sixteen-year-old Midwestern girl can. I was probably the only one who noticed how her shoulders were retracting toward her ears, as if she could magically turtle into her oversize black hoodie. It had *How do you want to do this?* emblazoned in red letters on the back, which was a catchphrase from our favorite pocket screen show. I always thought it was kind of funny, because it was a question no one *ever* asked a young person, not even once. No matter how constantly Dorothy wore the hoodie. Usually she was just told *how things would be done*. Underneath she still had on the navy skater dress and the checker-print leggings she had been wearing when I burst into her room after...

Right. That.

Even here, in the middle of what was either a crazy fairyland or a dying fever dream, I still couldn't let it go. Betrayal has a way of sticking in your throat like a chicken bone, and the Gales had done the worst. Well, at least Aunt Em and Uncle Henry had. Sheriff Alice had shown up with an overblown charge about how I'd been seen in Mrs. Brumley's stupid ol' garden—oh, I'm sorry, on a law-abiding citizen's *private property*—again and had committed *crimes*. She couldn't overlook them this time. Sheriff

Alice was here as *The Man*. The *Man*! Cranky ol' Mrs. Brumley had reported me to *The Man*! And the sheriff arrived with a nervous-looking older woman carrying a large net and a tiny cage. The sheriff was waving some kind of paper and insisting that my family give me up, hand me over to the lady who introduced herself as the animal control officer. I thought that was just a story made up to scare weaning pups! Like...like restricted-diet dog kibble! But no, the animal control lady was here to take me. Intending to haul me off like some kind of *livestock*!

I remember lolling in the hallway, smug and at ease, listening to Sheriff Alice lay out her case and waiting for it. Uncle Henry wouldn't even bother to get up out of his La-Z-Boy if I knew him. He'd just give that nasty ol' badge a look over the top of his paper and that would be *that*. Aunt Em would shrug her shoulders with a sweet, helpless smile (as if she wasn't the one who told *everyone* their sits and stays around here) and introduce the polyester butts of those two uniforms to the door.

But then Uncle Henry looked silently at Aunt Em. And Aunt Em looked at her hands. And I heard a gasp from Dorothy. Right before Aunt Em mumbled, "We can't go against the law, girl. Understand, not with the way things have been since the ways things went last spring..."

"No..." Dorothy said, though I had a hard time hearing it over the creaking chair as Uncle Henry *stood up* and my pulse kind of exploded in my head.

I was a *Good Dog*, okay? A *good* dog! I didn't chew shoes or get onto the kitchen table or chase the chickens (too much). I didn't dig holes or run away. I learned *sit* and *stay* and *come* and I slept next to Dorothy on the bed every night, watched every pocket screen show with her, and protected her from every bad dream and selflessly defeated every Cheez-It crumb that dared to fall from her fingers. I kept rats out of the cellar and made sure not a *single* mailman or delivery truck snuck up on the farm! These were Good Dog things, and I'd always been told the lines between Good Dog and Bad Dog were simple and clear. I was the best Good Dog I knew how to be and had been since Dorothy had brought me home as a pup.

And my family was just...handing me over? Like that?

I didn't believe it; I was in shock. That's why I had no fight in me when Dorothy scooped me up, still arguing my innocence. At least she still believed in me, I guess. I could smell salt on the air, and I think it was instinct to try to lick the tears off her cheek half-heartedly, which made her cry and squeeze me more tightly. Then suddenly it was Uncle Henry's hands on me. Uncle Henry's big, calloused farmer's hands, which had always been the ones to pick mud from my fur or pluck me up out of danger when I fell in the hog pen as a clumsy pup. His hands closed around me and he was wresting me out of Dorothy's arms now, shoving me into a fusty, weird-smelling, shoddy cage that the awful animal control lady had brought.

And...and then, Dorothy was sobbing and Aunt Em was gripping her shoulders to hold her back, her own face turned away, and Uncle Henry was there, just looking at me through the bars, and I wondered if that was the sad, reassuring face he gave his hogs as he sent them off.

I wondered if the hogs had been so certain they were loved beforehand too.



WHAT HAPPENED NEXT? OF COURSE, I...I escaped. Stupid Animal Control Lady had brought a cage meant for—I don't know—rabbits or kittens or something. Not a determined and mentally anguished terrier. She threw me into the open back of her pickup truck and didn't realize I was gone before she got even halfway down the drive.

If I hadn't still been in shock, I might have been smarter. If I had been smarter, maybe none of this would have happened. I might not have ended up on my belly, beneath some Technicolor rosebushes, listening to suspiciously patriotic men with candy cane batons sing about brotherhood right now. But I wasn't being smart right then. I was being dumb; I was still trying to be a *Good Dog*.

I ran right back to the farmhouse, and at least had the sense to sneak around the side and bound up the back way into our—I mean, into

Dorothy's—bedroom. I was lucky the window was still open, as the wind was picking up something terrible with the storm moving in.

Dorothy was there, crying her heart out. Uselessly, in retrospect. What good was crying going to do me as I was being sent to critter prison? At the time, maybe it tugged on my still-reeling emotions, because I jumped up on her bed and burrowed under her arm for comfort. That snapped her into action, and she wiped her snot off on her hoodie quick. It didn't take long for us to concoct a plan to run away until this whole mess blew over. Maybe to the big city, to Topeka even. Anything could happen in Topeka!

Here's a tip I'll give any other pups out there for free: if your teenage human suggests running away during a tornado to solve your problems, don't. Because we got barely a mile away in the ripping rain before the sirens kicked in and we panicked. We turned back for home, only to get there in time to find everyone else had piled down into the storm shelter (real ancient, *antique* farmhouses like ours don't exactly have solid basement foundations; ours had been dug straight into the dirt until Uncle Henry retrofitted it with some metal and bags of cement years later—see if they tell you that in the glowing HGTV walk-throughs) and we made it only as far as the bedroom before...well.

Dorothy once showed me on her pocket screen a video of a demonstration of the power of tornadoes. It's the sort of disaster porn that kids growing up in the Midwest are kind of immune to after a certain age. The clips are pretty terrifying to *me* at least: impaling a telephone pole with a piece of straw, flipping a roof upside down and setting it back down on a house...The list goes on.

Our farmhouse is old as dirt. In the living room Aunt Em has a plaque given to the Gales by some historical society commemorating the farm's being in their family for a hundred years or something, and the house is part of the original homestead that's been around nearly as long. So I figured if a tornado hit the house, it'd just disintegrate. But I was wrong. I lost track of the details of the ride, because Dorothy was squeezing me tightly enough to make me poop a little, but when it was all over, we opened our eyes and were still in what was *mostly* a bedroom. Only a quarter of one wall had

kind of cracked to let a giant swath of the bluest sky you've ever seen stream in and...*everything* had changed.

Everything.

Including me.

OceanofPDF.com

OUR INITIAL STUMBLE OUT OF the wreckage of the farmhouse had been inelegant—Dorothy’s forehead was scraped from a tumble on the way home, and I had run through enough mud and kicked up enough dust that I wasn’t winning show ribbons anytime soon. But we barely had time to get clear of the sagging porch and take in the lurid purple tulips *the size of Dorothy’s head* that were holding it aloft before we were being greeted and heralded as *fucking heroes* by an entire village of people dressed like manic pixie Lolita influencers.

(I learned about Lolita fashion when Dorothy took a passionate dive into fashion for the length of exactly one spring break trip to Kansas City. From which she returned and Aunt Em accidentally saw the total on her Sephora cosmetics receipt and that was the end of Dorothy’s influencer dreams. We still scroll through the cool photos on her pocket screen, though. Just as well; Dorothy smells more like herself in hoodies and sneakers.)

Some of these villagers could have made a killing on the pocket screens. They had the hair, the pastels, the big puffy sleeves and dresses. No one in Kansas dressed this fun; that’s for sure. Had we landed in Japan? Dorothy was constantly dreaming about how overseas there was better, cooler, more artistic “expression of self.” All the cool street fashion on the pocket screens seemed to be tagged from Japan. But...uh, this didn’t look like any part of Asia, even to a little dog of littler brain.

They weren’t Japanese; they were Munchkins. Proudly so, we learned when Dorothy politely tried to refer to some of the gathered crowd as “little people,” and an old grandmother who had ushered out the younger members of the dancing troupe pinned her with *such* a look.

“We are not *little*,” she said, radiating exasperated patience and smelling to my dog nose like a kind of frustration that may have meant she’d had to make this correction quite a few times before. “Munchkin heights vary greatly, if you would spend enough time among us to notice. How would you like it if I just took one look at you and reverted to calling you a gross, hulking t—”

“Nan!” One of the league dancers gasped, jumping in with her tutu aflutter. “You can’t say that!”

“What?” The old woman jutted out a mulish chin, scoffing. “It’s not like I was gonna use the G word and call her a gi—”

“Nana Twiddlebee!” The young girl’s cheeks flushed as pink as her hair as she turned to Dorothy. “Please ignore her. We found out too late her generation got way too much cinnamon in their diet—”

“And yours is poisoned by starin’ at them shiny rocks from the city. Bah...” The Munchkin elder threw up her hands and Dorothy and I decided it was best to just keep our mouths shut for the rest of the pageantry.

That seemed like a solid strategy until everyone started hollering and pointing at a soap bubble that had appeared in the sky. It began floating closer, or at least I thought it was getting closer. Until I realized it was also growing...rapidly. Its surface had that oil-slick rainbow sheen. It grew with a chromatic shimmer that made my nose twitch and made a tiny, old-wolf-ancestry voice buried in my lapdog skull say, *Oh, that is some nonsense*. And I backed the fuck up.

Dorothy, of course, had no such old-wolf voice and she stood there with hair askew, blinking as the bubble swelled to human proportions and floated into the town square to land with a pop on the pavers in front of her. As the soap bubble’s film broke, it dispersed over the head and shoulders and *freaking giant poofy skirt* of a woman done up to look like Monarchist Barbie™. Her dress pulled attention first, especially from those of us forced to dodge the skirt’s circumference. It never quite settled from its unfurling motion, pulsing out from her in a froth of dawn pink and magenta that succeeded in being both a ball gown and a barrier. It crested upward to culminate in a sweet, heart-shaped frame of fabric around her bosom, which

had unfortunately caught Dorothy at eye level. Impressive women had that effect on her, I'd noticed. It wasn't helpful that the newcomer was graced with a silvered laurel crown and a long, ornate wand that she gripped in one hand and tapped lightly in the other with absolute confidence and authority.

Her face, like her figure, was sweet and pristine as Aunt Em's porcelain collector's dolls. Her eyes lit on Dorothy and flickered from painted on to sharp saw-grass green and back. She abruptly turned and positioned a lacquer smile for the diminutive mayor of the town, who had greeted us.

"Where is the witch who defeated my sister? Is this the witch?" Her voice was soft and strangely childlike for a woman as tall as she was. It immediately made my ears flick. Doubly so when she pointed directly at me.

"Oh, no..." Dorothy spoke up, startled out of her silence. She hurried to scoop me up. "Toto's my dog. He didn't do anything, I swear! I'm Dorothy. Dorothy Gale," she added after a moment.

"Well, Dorothy Gale..." The woman in the pulsing pink dress pressed a finger to her chin in deep consideration. "I am Glinda, and if what my little birds tell me is to be believed, you are the one who killed my sister."

"Killed? I didn't! I would never—" Dorothy clutched me a little more tightly in protest and I squirmed to remind her that even innocent dogs contained important things like ribs and organs. Her grip loosened. "There must be some mistake. There was a tornado, and our house—"

"Landed on my terrible sister, the Witch of the East. See?" Glinda swayed across the courtyard, gesturing with her wand, which might as well have been a grenade launcher with how the Munchkin residents scattered. The line of sight cleared to reveal our sad, slumped farmhouse, and now a corner under the porch steps that we'd missed before seemed obvious. Particularly the...stockinged feet that protruded at incredibly unnatural angles from under the brick foundation.

I sniffed the air just enough to confirm a bitter iron scent. That really should have hit me in the face the minute we stepped out, but I'd missed it entirely. Shock, I guess? Giant-tulip perfume overload? Though now that I

was sniffing, the bricks were also dusted with a faint smell like pennies and lime that had nothing to do with the dead body.

“Jeebus!” Dorothy not quite swore, in the way she got away with around the farm. She took a half step forward. “Has someone tried to get her out of there? Or checked a pulse or...”

“An excellent idea,” said Glinda, with a powdered-sugar kind of zen. She glanced to the side, and it seemed almost as if two Munchkins in bright orange jackets had been waiting for the signal. They jostled forward and hunched over the crumpled legs, conducting fluttery examinations that looked *very* unscientific, but my only point of reference was those old *CSI* memes that Dorothy informed me, with a bored air, were so dated and unrealistic, so who was I to judge? Finally, the older of the two Munchkins pinched a stockinged toe in the air and dropped it with finality.

“Thoroughly dead,” he pronounced.

“Well, there you have it.” Glinda smiled with an intense serenity for a woman who’d just confirmed the death of her sister. “Seeing as only a witch can kill a witch, I suppose the question remaining is, are you a good witch, or a bad witch?”

“I don’t even own a tarot deck!” Dorothy admitted with some embarrassment. “I mean, I’ve been getting into cottagecore, maybe, and collecting some cool crystals, but...”

Glinda interrupted Dorothy’s distressed rambling with a clap of her hands. “Only bad witches are ugly. So you must be a very good witch indeed.”

Dorothy’s entire face began to bake a faint shade to match Glinda’s dress, even as she tried to stutter her mouth open to—*one would hope*—object to such an objectively untrue and body-shaming line, which does *nothing* but uphold meaningless societal beauty standards that I *knew* Dorothy believed were bullshit...

...but, oh, nope. Too lost in the blushing. *Goddamn it, teenagers.*

This announcement wasn’t news to the Munchkins, but it started another round of lauding and laurels, now presided over by Glinda, who seemed all too ready to take the reins. I caught her glancing back to her sister’s

stocking feet occasionally, and then back to Dorothy. Perhaps the death bothered her more than she let on, and for a moment I revised my opinion of her.

Jeez, Toto, get your act together. You'd think one betrayal would have taught you.

A gaggle of Munchkins in poofy skirts and with syrupy high voices were harmonizing about Dorothy's beauty and how the village wanted to capture it in a marble bust to honor her—*For duck's sake, girl, don't let them make a bust of you. Statues are for colonizers. Colonizers!*—when Glinda's glossy candy expression curdled, and she tilted her chin into the wind. I followed suit, detecting a change in the breeze but nothing else. Still, something made my ruff spike into raised hackles a second before a shriek scattered the gathered crowd.

Someone had thrown a smoke bomb into the center of the square.

Well—maybe? That was my first thought, based on those videos from protests on Dorothy's pocket screen. But there were not enough humans in big black bite gear around, thank dog. And so far, this Munchkinland—Munchkin Country? I was vague on the geopolitics—didn't seem the kind of place for that. Still, smoke erupted out of an explosion in the brick pavers, and the gathered villagers ran for cover like they expected the worst. Glinda, of course, scooped a possessive arm around Dorothy and stood in the middle of it all like a prom queen.

I couldn't tell if witches were just that powerful or that *stupid*, but I took half cover behind her skirt as I waited to find out.

The smoke was velvet thick, enough to make the Munchkins choke and cough. I had the passing thought that maybe it meant the singing would be over. Then I immediately felt guilty for said thought, if only just a little. But a little dog could take only so much, right?

The pressing concern was that the smoke kept on going, battering back the gathered crowd. Even Glinda deigned to take a step back with a disgusted face. The manicured hand that had been resting assuredly on Dorothy's own now slid up toward her shoulder and curved around her back

in a vague way that might have made me uneasy if we weren't currently being invaded by oil-colored fog with a mind of its own.

Finally, the smoke cloud finished its expansion and split open like a flower, swirling apart at the seams to reveal another woman. This one looked dressed up to attend an entirely different party than Glinda. She was an inkblot in the midst of the Munchkin village's riot of color. The newcomer wore black from head to toe, a ragged tunic over bleak leggings shoved into chunky, clunky work boots that had seen better days. Uncle Henry would have called them "shitkickers" when Aunt Em wasn't around to smack him on the arm for language. Over the top the woman wore a long, sleeveless...vest? Cardigan? Robe?

Look. Dorothy and I spent a lot of time on the pocket screen during the Lolita-influencer phase, but she got bored after one season of *Project Runway*, so the best I can say is, it was a formless, hooded length of black fabric that twisted and sank around her like a pool of shadow, and had lost its sleeves somewhere along the way in order to show off the length of her tattooed, faintly green arms.

Her skin, not the tattoos—which were a normal shade of also black. She was a dappled shade of delicate moss green all over, and it was the only color on her. Her hair was a shaggy bob the color of raven feathers—were there feathers in there? I wouldn't have been surprised. And it bracketed equally dark eyes. The angry smoke gave a final lash and coiled up into her chunky boots like animated shoelaces as she stepped forward, glaring daggers first at Glinda before, finally, taking in Dorothy.

The first word out of her ink-stained lips was venomous: "Murderer." She took a step toward Dorothy, and I growled on instinct.

"Don't," Glinda said, not in the voice she'd been using before, but in a warning tone altogether harder, colder. She lifted her chin, and with it her tone, recovering that saccharine sugarplum-princess smile. "I wouldn't be so hasty if I were you." With a lazy wave of her wand, she gestured toward me. *Yeah, that's right, bitch! Back on up!*

...Or, rather, she gestured to Dorothy's feet, I realized after a moment, as the newcomer followed her gesture with her gaze and hissed at what she

saw. Dorothy looked down, as did everyone, and all attention turned to what *should* have been the very scuffed pair of sneakers she had on earlier in the day. Instead, Dorothy stood in a pair of something that Aunt Em would have *never* let her wear for being “too loud.” They were low metallic heels with neat clasps over the arches of her feet and bows on the toes. And more importantly, the entirety of the shoes *glittered* with thousands of infinitely tiny, faceted bits of quicksilver, blindingly white gem light.

“The silver slippers!” The newcomer’s lips snarled into a confused expression as she first glanced at Glinda, then returned in open hostility to Dorothy. “You have no right to those. They belong to my...family. Take them off. *Now.*”

Dorothy blanched, and what little color remained in her face drained away at the idea of having stepped into the middle of some inheritance feud. She lifted a foot to begin prying at the heel, but Glinda caught her wrist. “They must be awfully powerful if she wants them so badly,” she observed.

“I didn’t mean to take them,” Dorothy said, hurriedly, caught between calming the goth girl who looked ready to murder her and displeasing the tall power princess whom she had been, to put it frankly, following around like a kitten. “I don’t want power,” she whispered to Glinda.

Glinda’s immaculate lips twitched as she looked at her as if Dorothy had spoken pig latin.

“They’ll be of no use to her. She wouldn’t know how to use them,” the woman in black said, with a matter-of-fact but not (I think) unkind tone as she frowned at Dorothy. I realized, belatedly, that she was a tiny woman—much shorter than Glinda’s supermodel height, and even shorter than Dorothy, who was not abnormally tall for a teenager. Her clothes and fury had thrown me off at first, like a Chihuahua with a big bark. But now she’d stopped advancing on her and had folded her arms, momentarily looking at her not as a threat but as a...confusing problem to solve. “They’ll only bring you trouble.”

Dorothy again raised her heel to try to unbuckle one shoe, and again Glinda stopped her with a *tsking* sound. “I wouldn’t,” she warned softly.

“As long as you wear those slippers, the Wicked Witch of the West cannot harm you.” She made it sound dire, and Dorothy stiffened.

“I just want the slippers. They’re what’s rightfully *mine*,” the woman called the Witch said, a dark plum flush starting to stain her pale mint cheeks at the accusation as she glowered up at the serene faerie. “You don’t have to drag her into this, *Sister*.”

“The silver slippers have chosen Dorothy.” Glinda again touched Dorothy’s shoulder like she was a prize. The tension growing between the two faeries was making the fur on my scruff hackle. I shifted anxiously, giving myself a little cover behind Glinda’s ridiculous pink skirt.

“The *slippers* didn’t choose anything, I think,” the Witch muttered.

Dorothy cleared her throat, interrupting the standoff, and both strangely dressed women looked at her with varying levels of surprise. “You two are...sisters too?” she asked with a glance back toward the crumpled farmhouse. Probably thinking about what Glinda had said about the other sister. I know I was.

“To the tragedy of all.” Glinda glided forward a step, resting her wand against her chest like a forlorn soap opera star. She began reciting with a singsong voice, “Four daughters of Lurline’s grace, we—set to bless the lands be—north, south, east, west—the faeries given of Oz’s bequest.”

“Whose bequest?” Dorothy asked, furrowing her brow at the riddle.

“Don’t listen to her. She makes bullshit up as she goes,” the Witch cut in, rolling her eyes. I began to like her for a moment. She snapped her fingers, and a small black notebook appeared between them. She scribbled in it and hummed. “Dorothy, of Kansas, it says. You live with an aunt and uncle too?” She said it in a dull voice, as if reading from a phone book.

“Leave my aunt Em out of it,” Dorothy whispered.

The Witch’s lips thinned. “I was just asking.”

Dorothy’s shoulders tightened, one hand coming to her chest as she glanced between Glinda and the Witch of the West, uncertain. The Witch let out an unkind laugh. “Well, I can see she’s done her work already. Fine. I’ll give you one more chance to do the right thing. *Give me* the magic slippers, you little thief.”

Glinda's hand came to rest on Dorothy's shoulder again and she gave a reassuring squeeze. I edged out from behind the pouf of the skirt and came to stand beside Dorothy with my scruff turning extra scruffy. As much as I didn't like Glinda's vibe, we could agree on this one thing: bullies sucked.

"No," Dorothy said after a careful, steady moment.

The audible gasp that rolled around us like a cloud reminded me, belatedly, that all of this was being observed by the gathered Munchkins. God, for a singing people, they could be silent when they were passing the popcorn over some good messy drama.

The Witch studied Dorothy's face. Her notebook snapped shut and disappeared. "Have it your way. Try taking them for a joyride." Her gaze flicked to her sister. "I can always find them. Since they're supposed to be *mine*."

"So you keep saying, yet they did not appear on your feet," Glinda said placidly, smile never faltering. "Run along, Little Sister."

The Witch shook her head and extended her hand. Now black roiled out, and a broom appeared. "We'll talk again, Dorothy Gale of Oz. I'll find you soon, my pretty." Her dark gaze flicked to me as she began to sweep the broom around her. "And your little dog too."

With that promise, she pivoted on her heel, completing a swift rotation with her broom, which bloomed a wall of that same velvet smoke around her like a curtain. Of course, when it cleared, she was gone.

The Munchkins' silence had been audible, but the ensuing gossip and questions were deafening. They crowded around Glinda, rallying for answers. Which meant I was the only one to notice when Dorothy blinked at the spot of clearing smoke and muttered with deep, anxious confusion, "Did...did she just call me pretty?"

Teenagers.

“WELL, THEN, THAT WAS QUITE a rude fuss, wasn’t it?” Glinda clapped her hands and, as the smoke cleared, swanned around the courtyard, parading with the mayor as if she were an elected official of the village and not a handsy, bubble-riding witch. Dorothy inevitably found herself trailing after her, hoodie tugged around her for comfort.

“She seemed awfully upset. She’s your sister—”

“Half sister at best. She may be a faerie but she’s always worked queer magic, had strange thoughts about lesser creatures and how things should be done.”

“Lesser creatures?” Dorothy echoed warily.

“Beasts, nixies...I hear she even collaborates with those awful *Rooks* in the mountains!” The bald little mayor of the town spoke up, wiping his sweaty brow as if the scandal sent him breaking out in the salty perspiration that primates are prone to. “Everyone knows they are cursed, dirty folk. They have to have done something wrong for their own mountain to be turning them to stone like that. Dirty flying monkeys—”

“No need to scare our guests with such language,” Glinda cut in loftily. The only fear Dorothy had developed was for the mayor, and she was taking one solid step away from his vitriol. I didn’t blame her. In Kansas, anyone who pinned language like that to an entire people was usually eager to turn their eye on anyone different.

And Dorothy and I were very different.

Thankfully, Glinda took over the explanation. “The dark magic like that works its way in over time, you see. It melts the soul slowly from the inside out, like sugar pane left out in summer.” She shook her head. “Don’t worry

about it. She and the East were bad eggs, black sheep—but you already took care of the East for us, didn't you?" Glinda motioned carelessly to the crumpled farmhouse and to the toes of the corpse now thankfully hidden by a sheet some helpful Munchkin had draped over it. "You have done me a *personal* favor at that. So I will do this to send you on your way."

Dorothy blinked. "On my way? But I don't—"

"You want to go home, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. Of course I do," Dorothy said, as if Glinda's saying it immediately made it true.

"Then you need to go to the Emerald City and seek out the Wizard. The..." She paused, her smile becoming a fraction more pressed. "The Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz. He and he alone is the one who can make your wish come true and send you home. Go see the Wizard, and all your problems will be solved."

"The Emerald City? But I just got here. Is there someone who can take me? Do you have a..." I could see Dorothy's thoughts go exactly where mine were going, to the shows on the pocket screen. "Do you have some kind of teleportation magic or..."

"Oh, of course not!" Glinda, the lady who'd just *floated in on a magic bubble*, laughed at our ridiculousness. "I do admit it's an awful long way, but I have no doubt you'll make the journey just fine. All you need to do is *never take off the silver slippers, for any reason*. Do I make myself clear?"

"Why are these slippers so important?" Dorothy said with a slight sharpening to her gaze. My human might have been socially anxious, but she was no idiot. "They are starting to kind of pinch...."

"*Never take them off*," Glinda reiterated, sweet as a switchblade. Then, as if that answered anything, she half turned and parted the crowd of surprisingly coordinated Munchkins. They'd gotten with the program quickly, following Glinda's lead, and were abruptly all too glad to see their "savior" leave on an ill-prepared and poorly explained road trip. "Wear the magic slippers and follow the yellow brick road. It leads all the way to the Emerald City. You can't miss it."

“There’s not even a bus?” Dorothy asked, but she’d caught on to what the answer would be at that point. I found the lack of infrastructure on what was supposedly a main thoroughfare to a capital city *extremely* suspicious right off the bat. But Glinda was not giving us time to ask the locals about it. She already had Dorothy by the shoulder, and the village’s mayor was grandly granting her a picnic basket of provisions for the journey. Yes, a *picnic basket*. The basket seemed too small and folksy to contain a waterproof tent and a sleeping bag, so I *really* hoped this country was better populated than the mushroom town houses and giant-flower-courtyard vibes we were getting at the moment. The ladies who had greeted us with flowers provided us with surprising little sachets of herbs that should keep away pests, and the baker even tucked an extra packet of hard biscuits in Dorothy’s basket for me, improving my parting impression of the Munchkins overall. The Tartpatch Gang, for all their bluster about manly protection, didn’t offer to escort us or even give up one of their multicolored batons for self-defense. *Typical*.

Glinda did not give Dorothy a chance to look back—or for me to linger and ask questions. She stood at the gate to the village like a big pink poodle, waving serenely as Dorothy started hesitantly away from the welcoming crowd. “Find the Wizard, and trust the silver slippers, my dear!” she called, already shimmering with that soap-bubble kind of magic.

There was something too squeaky-clean about that faerie woman.

A few more yards down the road, I skittered ahead and barked at Dorothy what I hoped would be an obvious question. Thank dog she hadn’t had all her wits knocked out of her.

“There’s no use going back,” she answered, though she had slowed to turn in a circle, taking in the fields of strange bluish grass fields tidily marked with green posts in every direction. Rural, yes, but so alien from anything resembling our flat, gray Kansas. “I don’t think there was anyone in the village who could help us. They seemed like they were having a hard enough time as it was.” Glinda had, I supposed reluctantly, been truthful about that. Dorothy picked at the lace of her hoodie as she started forward

again. “And the way that mayor’s son looked at me made me *really* uncomfortable.”

I’d missed that entirely! My ears went back as I danced in a circle, but Dorothy was already walking on. Clip-clopping awkwardly in her—let’s be honest here—gaudy new metallic shoes. She’d always favored those sneakers with the white rubber toes and wore heels only when Aunt Em made her, usually for a candle thing. I always knew it was an important night when Dorothy (and Uncle Henry, under protest) had to put on uncomfortable shoes and Aunt Em put on perfume. I got told to wait at home while they all went out, and they came back smelling like an old place full of candles and fusty things and expensive dust.

If the Emerald City was a candle-thing kind of place, they were going to be out of luck. Aunt Em wasn’t here to force Dorothy to do anything.

And me? I was done waiting anywhere. This was a new place. A *weird* place, but new and full of a startling lack of leashes. Being a Good Dog had only gotten me sold out to animal control, and maybe...maybe? Maybe I was done with that too.

THE FIELDS JUST DID *NOT* end. That was one thing that this new Munchkin land, Oz, had in common with Kansas. You could walk and walk, and look and look, and there was still more useless agriculture spread out like a lead blanket, holding down the land and discouraging the least bit of interesting hillock or architecture from cropping up. The worst parts of Kansas didn't even have *trees*. Farther west, it was like someone had just taken a paint scraper from that part of the state until they hit halfway into Colorado.

At least here the colors were eye searing enough to provide a little bit of variety. Dogs are technically color-blind, but since we'd landed in Oz, I was beginning to doubt that too. Dogs also aren't supposed to be able to talk, but with the way the Munchkins had acted back there in the village, I was beginning to wonder if a lot of rules were more suggestions here in Oz.

I tested that particular "suggestion" out on Dorothy again, for the hundredth time, around the fifth hour of walking on the yellow brick road. "I think that Glinda lady was telling us whatever she needed to in order to run us out of town. Don't you think she could have given us equipment? One of those shiny rocks that the old lady mentioned? Couldn't they at least have given us a *map*? Everyone gives tourists a map! It's like...tourist rule number one!"

Dorothy worried at the string of her oversize old hoodie as she scanned the road with a small stitch of worry between her brows.

I grumbled and picked up the pace to trot circles around her. "D, buddy. I, Toto, your loyal hound, can talk. Bowwow. This is every dog lover's

dream, I guess. Say something if you can understand me. Nod. Blink twice.”

My hopes jumped into my throat as she glanced down at me...then crashed again as she just scooped me up with one arm and kept walking. No blinks, no nods. Just an absent scritch under the jaw, which was nice but standard for our relationship.

A knot of frustration built in my stomach as we walked. We were stuck in some kind of bullshit fairyland, and that presented a world of opportunities, maybe, but Dorothy was stuck in the same old stupid Kansas status quo. Listening to authority, going gaga over the first pretty power princess who gave her a sparkly gift and told her she was special, and she was *still* not listening to me. Why, I bet if the sheriff showed up again...

I had probably hit my head in the tornado crash. That's the only reason I had for why it took me a full six hours into this fever dream to realize it. The sheriff wasn't here. The Gales weren't here. The dreaded animal control in this world seemed nonexistent. In fact, the rules around animal ownership and licensing seemed pretty lax, if what I saw in the Munchkin village was anything to go by. I came here with Dorothy, but there was no real existing institution enforcing that I stay with her....

There was not really a reason I *had* to be a pet here at all.


It was a good thing that Dorothy was carrying me, because if she hadn't been, that thought would have stopped me dead in my tracks. As it was, I felt thousands of years of ancestor lapdogs rise up from their graves to glare at me as I let that possibility roll around and fully unfurl.

Jeez, guys, chill. I wasn't making any hasty moves. Obviously, I was... fond of Dorothy, yeah. I'd practically raised her from a pup. And she'd turned out all right after we got past that rough age when she tried to dress me in doll clothes. She was still on my cool list, I guess. She spoke up when Aunt Em and Uncle Henry tried to sell me out to the authorities. She cried and argued, even if it was demonstrably ineffective. And she was down to run away (like an idiot).

She was a good kid. I couldn't leave her in the lurch in a weird place like this. But maybe once I knew she was going to be okay...Well, we

would have to see. A dog kept his options open, after all. Didn't he?

Oh yes, he did. But for now: a dog let himself get carried. His tootsies were sore from those frickin' yellow bricks.



WHEN A BLACK DOT APPEARED above the sunflower fields in the distance, I almost didn't trust it. I leaned forward in Dorothy's grip, and the motion caught her attention. She slowed, and when I protested being put down, she followed my line of attention outward until she saw it too. "Oh...a tree, maybe?" She squinted. It was well past noon now. "It'd be good to get some shade for a rest. No gas stations out here." She gingerly carried the basket the Munchkins gave her in the other arm. I think the novelty of a woven basket was wearing off and she was eager to eat some of the food weighing it down. Honestly, me too. I hoped they were a Cheez-It-revering culture, myself, but I'd take any kind of meat in a pinch.

We continued another half hour, and the dot grew. As we came over a gentle slope, the wind shifted and I picked up a new smell. Smoke. Old and faint, the kind of smell from a fire that's days burned out, but still it put me on alert. Now I wiggled until Dorothy put me down, and that was how we approached the crossroads and discovered it.

The yellow brick road continued on, as Glinda had said it would, but I'd been noticing for a while that, along with yellow, a red brick had been running alongside. This was the intersection where it spiraled off. I could see where the red spun off to the south, growing into a road of its own of bright scarlet pavers.

To the north was not a paved road, but a rough little country road that dropped between fields. That was the direction the smoke came from, and I might have been more curious about that had we not been presented, there in the corner of a field, with a blot of warfare in the middle of Technicolor arcadia.

The green and yellow sunflowers were thrashed back to reveal black scars of rich dirt, and that had been trampled to a hard sheen by what must have been numerous booted—no, I saw claw marks there too—feet. Scorch

marks preceded places where a blue fence had been reduced to cinders, and the faint scent of spoiled sunflower oil hung in the air as I crossed the fence line cautiously.

At the center of this, looking like they had been built in a slapdash hurry, were a spindly platform and a frame I recognized only from the old Westerns Uncle Henry insisted on watching when it was his turn to pick the shows at dinner. The kind with a rope overhead and a trick hatch in the floorboards.

The rope was occupied. A limp, gangly silhouette hung from the noose, shaded by a wide-brimmed hat somehow still on its head, which was tilted down at a geometrically horrific angle. I heard Dorothy stop behind me, which was probably for the best. Everything here smelled wrong. But Bad Dogs didn't just tuck tail and run, so I tip-tapped forward, picking my way around rough churned earth until I could reach the stairs of the gallows.

Details resolved as I got closer. The hanged figure was a man, heavily clothed in a workman's garb, including boots and gloves. He must have worked in heavy brush, because everywhere I saw bits of dried grass and other greenery clinging to him, even sticking up from the tops of his swaying boots and the cuffs of his tied sleeves.

But I didn't...smell him. As a farm dog, I have a passing acquaintance with what a dead thing smells like. Things die on farms: pigs, chickens caught by coyotes, that kind of stuff. So I knew the smell of decay, and its absence was *weird*. The puzzle drew me up to the top steps of the gallows before I could think better of it. Still, all I could smell were fresh and drying herbs and grasses. It was—

“Cut a poor man down?” a hoarse whisper said.

I peed a little before my bum hit the bottom step as I fell ass over snoot. I'll admit it. I sent up the alarm with a *brave* and professional series of high-pitched barks. Dorothy came running to the foot of the gallows and skidded to a stop as the hanging man raised one tentative gloved hand and gave the slowest, smallest wave. The motion sent him softly swinging.

“Cut a poor man down, please, miss?” the *abomination* said, because obviously that thing was not natural. Even its voice was eerie, low and dry

as if it wound wheezily through the earth itself before emerging from the shadows of that wide, floppy hat. I growled low and waited for Dorothy to sound the retreat.

Instead, there were several beats of silence during which she seemed to just freeze. I didn't dare to take my eyes off the threat swaying from the gallows, so I can't tell you what went across her face before she let out a strange sound. And jumped forward into action. "Of course. Oh, you poor thing."

What. It was *my* turn to stand, as Dorothy clopped up the stairs and danced around the platform for a couple moments before figuring out how to untie the rope. "Oh, you poor thing, and you talk too! Oh, how should I —"

"The crows have been terrible picking at me lately...."

"Crows!" Dorothy cried as she worked at the knots. "Of course, you poor scarecrow, and such a wonder that you talk..."

Listen. An argument could be made that I should have rushed forward to her side. That I should have done my duties as a canine protector and lunged, ripping the throat from this abomination before he could speak again and protecting my human companion. For a larger dog, it'd be practically mandatory. Smaller dogs, we're expected to bark our heads off and be the terror of ankles everywhere. I hear you. Up until yesterday, I might have even agreed with you.

But those are Good Dog arguments, and we are far, far out of Good Dog territory here. A Good Dog wouldn't be in this situation. A Good Dog wouldn't have been sent away by his family, right? I had to believe that, so what did that make *me*? Was I...? Maybe my own personal dog philosophy was in flux, but I knew for sure it had *nothing* in its clauses about hanging "scarecrow" mudderpuppers. That's for sure.

When the rope came free, the hanging monster hit the ground below like a sack of hay, which, it turned out, he mostly was.

As he stood, I couldn't help but get another look at him. What I'd mistaken for general natural debris was actually bits of grass and vines trailing out from every seam of his clothing. As he rose, I finally looked up

and got a glimpse of his face underneath the hat. There was...skin, of a sort. But it was patched and leathered, like something that had been abused and repurposed from its original state. And where his eyes should have been, there was nothing but shadow, which did not precisely stay and lie as shadows should, but spilt and coiled from his eyeholes like erratic lashes.

He appeared to glance my way with that bottomless gaze, and there was a flicker there that could have been a glimmer as Dorothy took his hand and helped him up. "Careful! You'll lose all your stuffing."

"That's all right. It can always just be shoved right on in again," the abomination said, gamely tugging open the top of his button-down shirt to demonstrate with a large fistful of straw.

"You're a talking scarecrow," Dorothy said again, as if declaring it enough times would make it *true*, rather than what she'd seen when she first walked up. In her voice there was a slight wobble that was being forcibly smoothed away as she repeated it again. "A talking scarecrow in the middle of a sunflower field—how very strange. But...not so strange or scary. A talking scarecrow."

The man made of grass and wrongness wavered unsteadily as he tilted his head at her. The split of his mouth parted as if he were starting to say something, then closed again. After a moment he nodded, and then said, with a voice a little less hoarse than before, a little more human, "Yes, I am a scarecrow of sorts. I think that's very observant of you, actually. Thank you for rescuing me."

"Of...of course. You seemed in trouble. Oh, but you need more stuffing..." Dorothy averted her eyes as she noticed how the "scarecrow's" chest sagged in on one side. They set to stooping around the gallows to gather grass.

Terriers are made of firm stuff—not like those fussy purse dogs that will rolf at the first sign of stress—but even I have my limits. I turned around and trotted toward the smell of charred wood. A burned-out village surely had to be less horrific than the freak show going on behind me.

Should I leave Dorothy alone with such a creature? The thought made the wagging of my tail pause, but I reminded myself with a huff of air

through my whiskers, *Not a Good Dog, Toto. Not today. We're being a dog that is...something else right now. What would a Bad Dog do? Let's try that on for size.*

Besides, if the creepy straw-skin man had meant her harm, he would have done something right away. The presence of a little dog likely meant little to a monster like that. Obviously he adored her as his savior, the other voice rationalized. Even the monsters were a little teched in the head in Oz.

A Bad Dog wouldn't need this reassurance, but I told myself it was okay. Bad Dog training wheels, maybe. One last backward glance—my god, was she attempting to patch the straw man's shirt?—and I left them to get to know each other in the trampled sunflower field.

The dirt road into the village had been rutted with wagon tracks at one point, but now it was a quickly drying churn of mud and rubble. Bits of charred wood—no, mushrooms?—from nearby homes littered the road and contributed to the faint, earthy barbecue odor hanging in the air. What remained of the surrounding buildings were maudlin little frames, straw roofs gone, reduced to cinders and leaning together like particularly depressed clusters of skulls. At least some of the villagers had put up some kind of resistance—whether against their neighbors or against an outside force, it was hard to tell—because the market square was ringed with the remains of makeshift barricades, including wagons turned on their sides. More signs of struggle, and the faint, oily burning of panic still hung in the air. It made my ruff stand on end as I sniffed around an overturned cart.

The air was still and quiet.

I may be a little dog. Small in scruff and bark. The dreaded “cute,” as the humans say. But I've still got enough wolf inside me to feel the old warnings. Those old pulls in the gut that are your predecessors leaning on your instincts with everything they've got to save your fool hide because Something Don't Smell Right. Most of the time, I can comfortably tell those paranoid ancestors to fuck off from a heated pet bed, but not now. I realized my mistake and spun around. I was halfway under a broken barricade when the sun abruptly went dark overhead. The cutting noise of

wings through the air made my ears flatten just in time to avoid claws as they raked by.

“Hey! Watch out!” I barked my best Rottweiler impression as I finished sausage rolling my way free of the shattered wood.

The shadow wheeled, threatening to clip me again. “You watch out! I’m flying here!”

Above, reeling out of the glare of the sun, a large bird revealed itself, with vibrant blue feathers over most of its body, jagged at the tail as if singed or roughed up by recent action. A black marking collared its neck and bright eyes, and white stood out on its chest and in smatterings elsewhere. A jaybird, it would have been called in Kansas, and likely driven off with a broom by Aunt Em for being a “damned nuisance” as opposed to her preferred songbirds.

Of course, Aunt Em’s songbirds never yelled quite like this.

“You...” I startled back, prancing on two feet like a nervous Chihuahua. “You talk too?!”

The blue jay wheeled back, chittering what had to be a brief cussword. “Of course I do! I’m a fine example of the common flock educational system! Highly educated! Top of my fledge!”

If that was anything like the Kansas public schools, it wasn’t that big of an accomplishment, but I thought it best to keep that to myself. Instead, I settled into an appropriately polite bow. “I meant no offense. Just...then do you know what happened here?”

The bird abruptly quieted. It fluttered to settle on the broken elbow of the barricade overhead. With the sun behind him, he cast a long shadow, silhouette turned black and shadow long and forlorn. “Oh, terrible things. Human things. Terrible things usually are, of course.” He ruffled his feathers as if a chill had picked up and he began preening them roughly. “The animal kingdom can be violent, y’know, but it takes humans to make it personal. Make it cruel.”

I felt my ears tuck back despite myself. “I guess I’m learning that too.... So”—I straightened—“I’m Toto, by the way. I have a human I left a ways

back on the road. We're new here." I paused. "Sorry—I didn't catch your name."

The bird cocked its beak up. "Crow, member of the wings of freedom, at your service!"

"Crow?" I couldn't have possibly heard that right. I tilted my head slightly, eyeing the brilliant blue feathers that mantled his shoulders and wings, not to mention the crest of feathers that flexed slightly up and down on top of his head with his mood. "But...you don't look...like any crow I've seen...."

Those same blue feathers ruffled in an instant. "Nonsense! Look at these elegant black feathers around my neck. And see my clever eyes? Only crows are so cunning. Their intellect and bravery are unrivaled. Crows are intelligent, and loyal to their friends." The blue bird, Crow, obviously needed no help warming to the subject now. "They remember their enemies and mourn their lost comrades, and they will gladly give up their lives for their friends. No one can stand up to a murder of crows united to a cause. For *la révolution*! Of course I am a crow. A crow is the best thing to be in this world."

I had a choice, in that moment, in how to respond. There were birds I knew, back in Kansas, that would have viciously mocked and driven any bird that made such a statement out of any flock. But we weren't in Kansas anymore, and it was such a gray, nowhere place anyway. If I was a Bad Dog now, why couldn't Crow be a crow? And that was that.

"Wow, I had no idea crows were so fearsome. Or...colorful. It's impressive," I said.

Crow relaxed and returned to preening. "It's all right, poor thing. For you are just a little dog after all."

"Woe," I said with a grave nod. "Woe is I. But...about what I asked earlier..."

"Oh! Right...well, I only arrived to catch the tail end of the action, see." Crow hopped down from his perch, evidently having decided I was not a threat to the revolution. "I was just doing one of my daily patrols—I'd been fostering a cell of rebellious chickens on the farm yonder for weeks, nearly

had them. The geese were on our side for the past month, not that geese need much encouragement to revolt. Usually the hard part is keeping them pointed at just the enemy, but...”

“The village, though,” I prompted.

“Right. I saw the smoke and came to investigate. Bad human business, that.” Crow’s blue crest flattened. “They had one of them human-made trees built up on the edge of town. You know, the kind they hang rope and people from? No leaves, no fruit. Very bad at trees, humans. There was quite a lot of yelling going on over it.”

“Over the gallows—I mean, tree?” I corrected myself. “Who were they hanging?”

“That’s just it. I think they couldn’t decide. I don’t follow their business that close. All sounds like a bunch of hooting and hollering to me. But from all the gesturing, it looked like the flock of humans was divided on whether to do one of them up or not.”

“Did you catch anything they said between the...hooting?” My hopes were failing, considering the bird’s intelligence, but the why of the situation seemed nearly as important as the what.

Crow gave a lazy shrug, but then appeared to think a moment, delicate cheek down puffing as he did. “Well, they *did* mention the Four Sisters a lot. No surprise there. If there’s bloodshed in Oz, there’s bound to be a witch involved. That’s why we need change—”

“A witch? Which witch?” I asked quickly, before Crow could get going again. My ears perked, my nose twitching as I thought of the suspicious way Glinda showed up in that damned pink bubble just as Dorothy and I were getting our bearings.

“Hardly matters. They all look the same to me anyway. It wasn’t the youngest one, though. Proper crow coloring, she wears, that—”

“The villagers,” I prompted, before Crow could get on his favorite topic again.

Blue feathers ruffled, but Crow acquiesced. “Anyway, I don’t know which way the hooting went, but they eventually brought out this sad-looking man. Seed Guy. That’s how I knew him. Lived on the edge of town,

grew the best garden. Sick and poor villagers used to visit him on the regular for the little things he could grow and put together. Good flock vibes, that one had. We would have spared him in the coming revolution... probably. Had some of that hedge magic.”

“Hedge magic?”

“Oh yeah. The witches try to put around that only their magic is the good kind, the allowed kind, in Oz. Everything else is foul winds, as we’d say. Proper folk are supposed to drive out any homegrown magic, you see, by decree of the Great Oz himself, though everyone knows it really comes from the witches.”

“But this...Seed Guy...?”

Crow’s dark eyes got a beaded shine to them, and he ducked his head. “Well, see, there’s what the witches know and what the witches don’t, and if there’s a local boy who happens to have a knack for herbs and healing and the occasional miracle and everyone’s smart enough to keep cool about it...”

“But sounds like someone wasn’t so smart.”

“There’s one in every fledge.” Crow made a twisting motion with his head, and I supposed by the tone that he’d spit if he’d only had lips. Instead, his beak clacked crisply. “Pretty sure the witches didn’t appreciate anyone harboring a native magic practitioner like that. The hooting went on for a while, but they had to string him up eventually.”

“They hanged him? What’d they do with the body? Where does the scarecrow come in?”

“Um, shortly after the big magical explosion and screaming?” Crow hopped around nervously. “I kinda flew off after that. The poor guy put up a fight as they were dragging him up. Then the air got all weird and heated and...boom.” The blue bird puffed up like a popped kernel of corn. “I saw a pink bubble coming in hot and knew it was time to hit the sky. By the time I came back, the village was in flames and that there ‘scarecrow’ was hanging where Seed Guy’s body was a moment before, and there was a lot of screaming and more hooting from the survivors.”

I felt my rump hit the dirt hard. I did my best thinking on my feet, but for a good solid brain reboot, you gotta sit down. Everyone knows that. I dragged my face rough over my paws to clear my head. “The Seed Guy is the scarecrow? How? What...how would that even...?”

“Hey, welcome to Oz, buddy. What can I tell you?” Crow gave a side shake of his head, which seemed to fit for a shrug. “I suppose if you’re gonna get hung by the neck, grass ain’t a bad thing to be made of. That guy did always have a knack for plants, like I said. But it wouldn’t have been my first choice either. No one ever said you had to be smart to be a magic worker. No brains, that one.”

No brains, only straw. How did that even *work* with a creature that could form words and speak and move limbs around and...Was it some kind of vascular plant system? Organized bug infestation?

“Dorothy!” I shot back up on all fours, realizing just where I’d *left* that monstrosity. With Dorothy, the traumatized girl who still insisted she saw a scarecrow. I was halfway back down the lane by the time Crow caught up.

“What’s a Dorothy?” Crow asked with much less alarm than the situation warranted.

“It’s a— She’s a—” I hesitated, paws slowing for just a second as I felt a flash of guilt. A resolute Bad Dog would not be running like a silly goose after a human girl. Especially not one who couldn’t even tell a terrifying magical aberration from a cornfield scarecrow. A certified Bad Dog would play it cool, see the angles, maybe even utilize this new ally with local connections to his benefit.

But there—stupid paws—they were, already moving again. This trial run of Bad Dog aesthetic was harder than it looked.

“She’s a problem,” I settled on, as the hanging tree came back into view at the edge of the cornfield.

Said problem was not quite where I’d left her. She’d gotten the lynched herbalist corpse turned scarecrow on his feet and guided him to the yellow brick road. Now she appeared to be helping him get his locomotion in order while he left a litter of stray straw and wiggling grass vine in his wake.

“Get away from her!” I gave my most vicious bark as we caught up with them. The creature was asking Dorothy to reapply stuffing to his chest, which seemed an awfully personal request for a grown man to make of a teenage girl, if you ask me.

“There you are, Toto!” Dorothy stopped, and withdrew her hand from the creature’s shirt long enough to give me the attention I was due. “Don’t run off!”

No, I should *not* have run off, not if it meant leaving an unsuspecting teenage girl with a desperate *death row* criminal. A magical, aberration-against-nature kind of criminal, no less. Well, okay, maybe the villagers hadn’t thought he was a criminal, but *someone* had and wasn’t going to take chances. I ignored Dorothy’s complaints and latched onto the scarecrow’s ankle. It was significantly less satisfying than the rare times I’d done the same back home. No fleshy give, not even a yelp from my prey, just a ponderous pause and the disconcerting gag of dried, slightly moldy hay between my teeth.

“Toto! No! I’m sorry. I really don’t know what’s gotten into him. Toto, stop! *Stop*—” Dorothy fumbled, arms too full with basket and straw to quite grab for me, so she resorted to the harshest words she had. “Stop! Bad dog!”

Bad dog. That was it. I *was*. Suddenly it felt right. I can’t explain it now, but I’ll swear on all things bacon, the *bloodthirst* kicked in. I heard the howls of my ancestors and I took that scrap of ankle in my vicious jaws and I *shook*.

When the murder haze had receded and I could see clearly again, there was straw carnage everywhere.

Well, everywhere within six inches of his ankle.

A swoop of blue feathers went past the corner of my vision. Crow let out an appreciative whistle before fluttering to land on a fence post. I had just a moment to admire my brutality before something had me by my scruff. I let out a startled—deep, wolflike, feral, of course—yelp before a second hand was just as quickly under my bum and scooping me off the pavement.

“Toto, you are in so much trouble, you—you—” Dorothy’s face scrunched up, seemingly caught somewhere between the Kansas colloquialisms Aunt Em hammered into her skull and the far better words she learned from the Internet.

“It’s okay...really!” The scarecrow was flailing around on one foot, hopping to replace the straw in his deflated ankle. I was rather disappointed to see it was as easy as that. Within minutes he was standing on both booted feet again, looking only mildly flustered. “I just have never been bit by... by...”

“Toto didn’t mean it!”

“I’m a fucking Bad Dog,” I muttered, still a little bit dazed at my own sinful wrath. It was a whisper at first, as I was testing out the words, trying them on to see how they felt, but then the roundness of it bubbled up. “*B-b-bad*. Bad Dog.” That was it. I’d managed it that time. And it began to feel giddy, empowering. I liked it. I wiggled in Dorothy’s arms until I could see the remaining bits of straw on the ground. Hell yeah, a Bad Dog did that.

It gave me the sass to squint at the scarecrow. “I know what you did. Crow here told me.”

To my surprise, he tilted his head at that and flicked a quick glance to Crow on the fence post. “Did he...?” he mused.

“No, he really didn’t mean it,” Dorothy said, thinking he was still talking to her.

I saw the twitch in his gaze when Scarecrow put it together, our little dog-girl communication difficulty. He seemed to think about it a minute; then the brim of the hat tilted up until I could see a dribble of the shadows of one eye again. “Miss Gale here is headed to the Emerald City. Seems to me she’s going to need all the help she can get to get there.”

“We’re doing just fine on our own,” I growled, but Scarecrow was not done.

“She’s going to see the Great Oz, and thinks perhaps he could help me too. What do you say, bird? Perhaps the Wizard can help your cause too.”

Crow perked up. “The Great Oz? Well...I am against the rule of the elite on principle, but...”

“Like heck we’re trusting an abomination to watch our backs!” I barked at Scarecrow.

“It’s a long way to the Emerald City,” Scarecrow said, still looking measuredly at me. “Dorothy could use allies. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“I’m right...right here, you know,” Dorothy pointed out, looking between Scarecrow and Crow carefully. No idiot, that girl; she knew when she was missing part of a conversation at least. Couldn’t tell a walking horror from a farm decoration, but I guess humans can’t all be winners.

Crow, for his part, noticed nothing. “Jeez, Seed Guy, you don’t have to beg.” He launched himself from the fence post and landed on Scarecrow’s shoulder. I took some pleasure in how much the blue jay’s presence obviously irritated him. “I’ll come along. You seemed like an all right sort until you exploded.”

The way Scarecrow tilted his hat down, even Dorothy couldn’t miss. She frowned as they set to walking again. I grudgingly trotted after, but not aimlessly this time: I’d keep an eye on that weed-for-brains. Every Bad Dog needed a nemesis. I’d read that somewhere, or maybe I’d just made it up. Either way: Weed-for-Brains wasn’t putting anything over on me.

THE SCARECROW WAS SHEDDING.

I shouldn't have been bothered so much, having been accused of very much the same crime all my life. Aunt Em complained that I left wire-brush hairs all over her best dress, while I held to the argument that I was merely improving the weave, thank you. Anyway, shedding isn't a big deal to dogs. But Scarecrow was shedding his insides. I watched another stray finger of grass-green straw work its way loose from the bottom of his trouser cuff and tumble off his boot heel. He was leaving a trail, which I pranced out of the way of to avoid stepping in.

Dorothy raised me on a farm. A pig farm. I'd stepped in a lot of things, but magical-straw-man innards just didn't seem healthy.

"Don't you need those?" I spoke up after dodging the third clump in the last mile. Scarecrow looked at me, those painted eyes seeming to gleam like the paint was still wet.

"Oh, I suppose so. If I get too floppy we'll find some new hay to make do, I think. Grass might even work."

"Who are you talking to?" Dorothy asked the straw man, and Scarecrow explained, for what had to be the third time since he'd joined us, that I, her "loyal" canine companion, had asked a question. To which, of course, Dorothy gave a nervous giggle.

"Dogs don't talk, of course. That'd be too weird," she said, also for the third time, and then Crow and I and the straw monster all exchanged uneasy shrugs before changing the subject.

"What's this revolution you keep going on about? Are you..." I paused, glancing at Dorothy, who was paying me little mind as usual, but I lowered

my voice nonetheless. “Are...are you socialists?”

I had heard about socialists from Uncle Henry and his favorite TV channel, which he watched when he thought Aunt Em was asleep. Socialists were, from what I gathered, a terrible monster plague that had not quite reached Kansas but could arrive any day now. The way they were described, I imagined something like a mash-up between a vampire and one of those gelatinous cubes from the game the people in Dorothy’s phone played every Thursday. Clever, but somehow all-consuming as well. Amorphous and shapeless and also unstoppable and maybe a little sexy? It was very confusing for a dog, even one as educated on the world as I was. The only thing worse than socialists, according to Uncle Henry, was something called antifa, and I could only assume that was, like...their lich form?

Before I could worry that we were in the presence of *that* horror, Crow arrested my fears with a head tilt. “Crows are excellent social creatures, but that is not all the revolution is made of.” He preened. “We are the true free folk of Oz, from Munchkinland to the Nixies, brave enough to throw off the shackles of magical servitude to the Four Sisters and claim the Emerald Throne for the people.”

There was so much to unpack in that statement, so of course I started with a pedantic point. “Don’t you mean ‘for the creatures’? Since you’re not all human...”

“Don’t be ridiculous, T. Some of the best people I know are creatures, and most of the worst think they are not. For the revolution!” Crow took flight again, with far too much volume and bravado.

“For the revolution,” I echoed with just enough gusto to be polite. “So, how far have you gotten? What’s the decisive battle going to be for this Emerald Throne?”

“Oh...um...” Crow’s path dipped a moment before righting. “Well, I’ve been in charge of distributing some strongly worded pamphlets, and we’re holding an open-forum drum circle next month, so I’d say...we’re nearly there.”

“...Great.” I made noncommittal noises of admiration before drifting back up the road. Huh. The revolutions had looked a lot more exciting on Dorothy’s pocket screen. Maybe Uncle Henry had been right about things after all?

The fields gave up in fits and spurts. Squarely managed agriculture crumbled into fallow meadows, where scraggly scrub weeds stuck up like abandoned bones. Uncle Henry would have called it disgraceful, but it just made me hungry. We had stopped to eat back at Scarecrow’s village, but that had been *hours* ago.

A whine slipped out as I paced around Dorothy’s ankles. I’m not proud of it, okay? I know a Bad Dog wouldn’t beg, but back home Aunt Em would have slipped me at least two scraps of dinner trimmings and I would have had all the crumbs the farmhands “accidentally” let fall under the table, and there was nothing like that here. I am a very little dog, and thousands of years of vermin hunting has honed this lean body into a calorie-burning machine.

“Oh crap.” Dorothy’s hand absently went to her picnic basket, from which we’d been slowly working through the delectables the Munchkins had packed us off with. Her brows fell as her hand withdrew with only some dusty crumbs on her fingers. “I guess I thought we’d run into a town or something by now? I’m hungry too....” She looked around, as if a roving hot dog cart—offensive name, in my opinion—were going to pop up out of a field furrow.

“An army marches on its stomach,” Crow said sagely from Scarecrow’s shoulder. The straw mage appeared to have accepted his life as a walking perch. “Do you eat seeds?”

“Heck no,” I said.

“Sunflower, maybe?” Dorothy was more hopeful.

“Apples,” Scarecrow said.

Crow clacked his beak. “Apple seeds are terrible. Never touch ’em. That’s robin food, that is. A respectable crow such as I would never stoop so low as to eat—”

“No,” Scarecrow said with an exasperated shrug that interrupted the jay’s lecture before it could get going. He pointed down the road. “Apple trees. There.”

The abomination was correct. I had to dart ahead to see them, but the bone scrub had given way to gnarled trees that sprang up in a gathering storm of thorny bark until it erupted into a shadowed old-growth forest. Compared with the wide, sunbaked fields we had spent the day in, the shadows of the trees looked particularly inky and jagged. Like teeth. I hesitated at the top of a rise, nails clacking on the yellow bricks. “Are you sure those are apple trees?”

“I’m an alchemist. I can identify many native flora and fauna,” Scarecrow said with a new display of certainty, before seeming to remember himself as he tugged at the straw at his cuff. “Well, I was. Maybe—but a forest has got to have fruit and berries, if my memory serves correctly.”

“I only see straw, comrade,” Crow advised gravely, peering into one ear from his perch. And Scarecrow looked sad enough to mold.

“That is where the yellow brick road leads,” Dorothy said, with a kind of plain practicality that she definitely received from the farm. “Why don’t we try to pick a snack or two on the way?”

TREES, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF a dog of short stature, are mostly about the roots and bark. Don’t ask me to wax on about the shapes of branches or the bounty of leaves. But roots? Those I know, and, man, some trees are just rotten from the start. The whole forest was that way. Roots arching out of the ground, as if the earth itself rejected them. Olive black moss hanging off the bark in clumps, forming musty kinds of fingers that reached and clung to my fur as I ducked over and under the roots to find a path. Even the yellow brick road wasn’t sacred. The trees crowded the path, and here and there, wicked roots jutted under the bricks and jumbled them out of line, tripping Scarecrow more than once.

I was having a hell of a time myself, to be honest. Terriers are made for this kind of thing. My fine ancestors were raised to go to ground, to follow vicious prey down into their dens, under roots, under earth, even, and come back victorious. I should have been sailing through a couple clumsy roots like they were a jungle gym. But every time I got a feel for the terrain and picked up speed, it was like one of those giant roots just plain moved and there was suddenly a wall of thorny bark and moss where there wasn't before. My nose was getting sore from running face-first into them.

After the fifth time, I let out a yelp and stumbled back into the road.

"The trees are moving." Scarecrow stated the obvious, as usual too late to be truly helpful. Hay Brains might—*might*—not be dangerous, but he was getting on my nerves.

Crow was more helpful.

"It's a box-in! Scatter! Scatter!" he shrieked just before launching off Scarecrow's shoulder seconds before a tree limb swung through the space. Scarecrow wasn't quite as agile and caught the hit on the shoulder, sprawling him across the brick. The assailant was a gnarled elm the size of a small haystack and twisted ponderously in search of a new target. Dorothy let out a scream.

Oh, hell no. I wasn't letting some oversize twig ruin my meal ticket. I was hungry and now I was angry, and I had heard humans talk about a thing called hangry. This must be it. I darted forward, ignoring the menacing branches above me. Roots. Stick with what you know, the old farm goat used to tell me. So I dove between the roots of the walking tree again and nipped hard as I could at the fragile-looking tendrils of growth spurring out from its...well, we'll call them ankles.

The thing moved slowly, but the sap-deep groan it made told me I'd done something worth its attention. Knobby coils of roots twisted, threatening to stab and snag me if they got the chance. I growled and dove out of the way, then eventually happened upon an idea. I darted left at the next jab, then right. Slowly, I led the tree away from Dorothy, and then, when I felt assured that it was far enough away, I twisted. The roots tangled, one darting under another in their pursuit of me. *Come on, come on...*

When the elm fell, it collapsed roots first in order to try to regain control. I didn't account for that. I was nearly squished as I dove for the shrinking opening of tree limbs, thorny bark dragging over my tail. I think I lost some puppy fluff to that one. But there was a thunderous crash behind me, and when I recovered enough to scramble back to my feet, the murder elm was on its side, branches shivering furiously.

Of course, that was just one.

"Incoming!" A shriek from above made me duck as Crow reeled past in a low dive, and something splatted against the sides of a warring oak that was encroaching on Dorothy. I hopped back, and after a moment's inspection I realized that each of the trees had large burls in the shape of eyes above a moss-veiled mouth. This one was busy vigorously trying to wipe away the gooey pulp of some lush red fruit that now clung from and dribbled into every crevice of its face. It let out a deeply insulted roar that sounded like splintering logs.

There was a jaybird cackle and I heard Crow in the distance, reloading for another pass. "For the revolution!"

Scarecrow had regained his footing and appeared to be flexing his gloved hands as he ducked away from a hissing willow. His slashed mouth snarled into something harsh and jagged, and some shadow began to spittle out, as from his eyes. I couldn't hear what he said over the crack of wood and root, but frost began to pour from the tips of his gloves.

The willow grabbed for him again, fine branches shivering as they drew near—but it didn't entirely stop. "Fire, you straw-for-brains!" I hollered over the noise. "They're made of wood!"

"Straw!" Scarecrow gestured at himself, just catching one of the willow's branches in a frosty grip as it lashed at him again. He crumpled under the effort. "No fire. Never fire."

Ugh. Is this what it was like to work in a pack? Is this why Bad Dogs were lone wolves? I felt like an idiot dashing forward to snap at a vine before it could reach the straw man's face. I spit out a mouthful of pussy willow fluff just as I heard Dorothy scream.

A fierce caw cut things off as Crow barreled by with another bombardment, driving off the hobbled elm that had rolled over to bat at Dorothy. “Scatter!” he said again, all authority. “Take your kid and evacuate! We’ll distract the pigs! Regroup later!”

I let terrier instincts take over and dove at Dorothy. In my Good Dog days, nipping at Dorothy’s feet would have been unthinkable, but right now there was angry firewood behind us. As a bonus, those silver-glitter shoes made such nice, flashy targets. I barked as I barreled into the backs of her legs, shoving her off the path and down the embankment, into the depths of the forest.

It was steeper than I’d judged, and a headlong run turned into a controlled roll, which turned into an out-of-control flail as we crashed through underbrush that was, thankfully, slightly less animated. When we finally came to a stop, I had thorns in my fuzzy beard. I shook furiously and extracted myself from Dorothy’s arms to see where we were.

Away from the attacking trees, at least. I let out a sigh of relief as all the tall standing pines around us remained motionless, though I nipped at a pine cone just to be sure. It felt as if we’d fallen into a forgotten fold of the forest where the air was heavier, darker. There was a mist that clung to the branches and slithered through the undergrowth that was so suspicious, one could describe it only as *gloaming*. “Gloaming”: it was a good-sounding word—not sure what it means, but heard it in a spooky song once.

“Ouch...” Dorothy got up, brushing the dirt off and carefully plucking thorns from the fabric of her leggings and skater skirt before surveying the darkening glen with a practical air. “Uncle Henry always said moss grew on the north side of trees,” she announced with the confident nod of a junior Girl Scout.

That was it. No fretting. No reeling over having just been in pitched warfare after being viciously assaulted by arboreal flora. Just Helpful Wayfaring Facts™. I always appreciated that Dorothy had a rather sensible head. For a perfidious human, I mean. Though it wasn’t exactly going to serve her well in this whimsical hellscape. “The moss is everywhere,” I

pointed out. “Besides, what good will it do us knowing what direction north is?”

Dorothy, of course, could not understand a word I said, even though everyone else in this world seemed to have no problem with it. She set to inspecting the nearest shrub, as if that would point all the way back to Kansas.

The mist swirled between two closely set columns ringed by vines that had begun to creep up. Following the vines, one could see that the columns met in a larger bulk that reached about the height of a— I let out a series of startled barks. If my voice was pitched at, well, panicked-purse-dog levels, it was because the columns of rust and vine were not structures at all, but legs, and Dorothy was standing beneath the upraised arm of a giant *man*.

A man who held a very, very large axe. I darted forward, tripping on some bramble but still managing to drive her away from the hulk, who remained motionless, axe poised above our heads. “Oh, Toto, quiet down! Someone will hear you! We’re trying to be stealthy.” Ever sensible, our Dorothy.

I calmed down in an instant and allowed her to scoop me up and rub my ears in that precise way she had, as we regarded what we could now safely say was a stationary figure. A...statue, perhaps? I sniffed the air, smelling of decay and old iron above the heavy, thick smell of moss and forest damp. The motionless figure was positioned in the midst of a clearing that was, beyond all reason, well tended, despite the absolute wall of blackberry bramble we had just tumbled through. He was made of metal; that much was certain. Bits of iron and large sheets of tin patch folded over to make his chest and limbs, which were supported by iron gears and fittings that had rusted in the damp forest air. If the statue had ever been meant to move, the iron joints were a poor choice. His position almost told the story: a swing, frozen in time.

Dorothy circled the giant as she held me, more curious than unsettled, as any thinking person would be. “He’s like one of those mechs, but abandoned...poor thing—” she said under her breath, then was interrupted

by a clink as the silver toe of her shoe connected with something else metal and sent it skittering across the clearing.

Dorothy startled; I flailed from her arms with the grace of a killer potato, landing with the hackles of my fur up, ready to face the new threat. But Dorothy was already leaning over the far bushes, fishing out a small metal can with a spout.

“What’s that?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“A watering...no, an oilcan?” Dorothy muttered to herself, pulling the trigger on the handle experimentally. The can itself was old, crusted over with patina, but some kind of oil dribbled from the spout as she worked it a few times.

If only the tree assailants could be put off by a bit of oil. I continued snuffling the undergrowth. There was a squeaking sound, and when I turned around Dorothy was up on her tiptoes, inspecting the mechanical statue again. Inspecting, more precisely, the joint of the arm that held the rusted axe in a tight grip.

Ah. “Oh, you clever girl,” I huffed, realizing Dorothy had the same idea. Trees might not be afraid of oil, but *axes*: they carried a little more gravitas.

The statue’s grip had been crafted for strength. Though the axe was obviously a separate piece from the statue itself, it was wedged into its fist tightly, and even though the gauntleted fingers of the statue were delicately articulated, it showed no inclination to relinquish the handle, no matter how much Dorothy pried and pulled under my expert coaching.

“Shh!” Dorothy reminded me, interrupting what I thought was a particularly helpful instruction on the leverage she could gain if she’d just grow some proper claws. She dropped back to the ground, frowning for a moment, with her hands on her hips, before her eyes lit on the discarded oilcan again. She snapped it up and began pointing the narrow spout at the golem’s knuckles.

I startled back as the squeaking of the can increased in volume, and her cleverness paid off in a moment: the mechanical fingers began to move. Reluctantly at first; then the whole hand sagged as she oiled up the wrist at the joints. My ears perked as a groan creaked from the head. The fingers

moved now, but Dorothy still couldn't pull the axe free. It began to look as if the hand was tugging back. I gave a few intimidating barks as Dorothy gave up the tug-of-war and stood on a tree stump to apply a little oil to the statue's jaw and neck instead.

Metal ground against rust, an aged, harrowing kind of grinding sound that put all my hairs on end. I shook my pelt out with a snort. "That thing's alive?"

"*Cha. Op...Cha*," said "that thing."

"Oh! Hi!" Dorothy leaned back as much as her perch on her tree stump allowed, attempting to look the clockwork man in its rust red eyes. "Are you awake? Sorry about this, but if you give me a sec I'll see if I can do something about your joints."

"*Op. Cha. Opt*," he said.

At this point my nose could pick up the faint smell of heated lead underneath the growing layers of oil and rust as Dorothy liberally applied more lubrication to the problem. The creature was struggling against its rusted bolts even faster than we were loosening them up, and I was a little worried at the strength behind the creaks and groans coming from deep inside that tin-barrel chest. "Uh, Dorothy..."

She, of course, couldn't understand me, but I would have sworn those rusty ball-bearing eyes glinted in my direction from inside the man's head. I hopped back a step.

Which was why I missed the blade that would have otherwise separated my head from my very squishable body.

I squealed an exceedingly loud warning, as is one's right when one's nearly been beheaded, thank you very much. The giant blade hesitated in front of my nose only a moment before blurring into motion again. A much smaller figure armored in chain mail and plate was at the other end of the weapon and spun into the clearing out of nowhere.

A crash, followed quickly by Dorothy's familiar scream, made the moment do that terrible speed-up, slow-down thing it does during emergencies. By the time I realized what was happening, the assailant had Dorothy flat on her back, blade at her throat.

There is a kind of rage and stupidity deep in our ancestry. Usually it's reserved for the larger of my kind, big lunks like bullmastiffs and Dobermans and German shepherds—real dummies, all of them. Not like little dogs like me. But I don't know what it was. Something about that fight, the blade, Dorothy's little human yelp—something came over me. Maybe it was Bad Dog energy starting to accumulate. Maybe it was some obscure Ozian forest mold infecting me. I charged, lunging at that shorter tin-can knight like a terrier at a sausage. Most of it was metal, but I got a hold of a hank of braided hair and shook it till my teeth rattled.

A grunt came from the helmet, followed by a pretty pathetic, uncanine growl. I shook the braid again, and my feet left the ground as the figure rolled off Dorothy and swept its helmet off. A surprisingly young, round Munchkin face scowled back at me, pale blue eyes bracketed by overlong wisps of blond hair that had escaped her braid in the fight.

“Chop.” This time the word came clear from above. No one had time to react. Well, Dorothy and I didn't have time to react; it seemed like the armored Munchkin girl was expecting it. She sprang to her feet with her shield up over her head. Metal shrieked as it caught the full force of a descending axe blade. The mechanical man's head swiveled, and then the arm reeled back with the axe.

What little semblance of order that remained scattered entirely.

“Get back!” the lady with the shield yelled, kicking Dorothy in the shoulder as she interposed herself between the rusty robot and us. Dorothy scrambled to her feet and pinwheeled until she found me. I managed to skitter around the edge of the clearing and lead her *away* from what was now a duel happening between the two armored strangers—one a giant, rusty murderbot, the other a tiny Munchkin knight fending him off with a blade and shield.

I found a break in the trees and thought it was obvious that we had a perfect chance to slip off and leave them to something that was *none of our business*. Dorothy, as I should have expected, had other ideas. She scooped me up yet again and hesitated behind a tree to watch, ignoring my pointed squirming.

The fight was nothing like the battles I'd seen rolled out with dice on Dorothy's pocket screen, but neither was it like the stupid five-second brawls I'd seen the farmhands get into before Uncle Henry (or worse, Aunt Em) stomped onto the scene and broke things up. Dorothy had called the statue with the axe a mech, but the thing didn't move like any piece of machinery I'd seen. It attacked with giant, unstoppable strokes of the axe, waves of violence that swung from one strike into another. Wide and implacable.

The woman knight with the braid that I'd attacked was a lightning bolt around him. One moment deflecting the outside of a chop to use the reverberating excess force to push her into position for a precision strike at the back of his knee, then, when the rusty beast staggered, hopping up to bring her shield down for a ringing blow on his head. She'd land three blows for every one of his, but never anything decisive.

"Foe and fae, Nick, just *calm down*," I heard her mutter after the third round.

The metal man only groaned in reply, swinging around and creaking as he appeared to catch sight of Dorothy and me peeking around the trunk of the tree. "Chop!"

The giant advanced and—hell no, I was not going down like this. I was not getting chopped to pieces hiding in a teenage human's bosom as she cried. No, no, thank you, we are in our *Bad Dog* era, heck this all to poop. I propelled myself out of Dorothy's arms with a growl, darting between the big guy's legs.

When in doubt, cause chaos. That's the motto of terriers everywhere, and it's always served us well. It held here, as the big tin can hollered, and the lady knight spun around, trying to anticipate his next move, and...well, okay, I did not account for Dorothy.

I really underestimated Dorothy, in retrospect.

"Leave *my dog* alone!" I barely had time to realize that terrifying bitch-in-charge voice had come from *my* teenage human before there was a wicker basket flying through the air and it bounced squarely off the metal murderer's face.

The clearing was so still that I could hear the wicker creak as the basket fell to the ground; its handle was crunched and worse for wear as it rolled to a stop. The mechanical man's rust red eyes faded out, then came back on briefly, like a mechanical blink, its axe arm frozen in midmotion where he had drawn it above his head in preparation for another swing. The Munchkin woman with the shield recovered from an initial horrified shock to slide carefully between Dorothy and the giant again.

"You are either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid," she muttered to Dorothy, not taking her eyes off the giant metal man as she raised her voice. "She's right! Shame on you, bro! Ma taught us not to pick on little animals."

Bro?

I, one of said pathetic little animals, was still six inches to the left of the giant's ankle, and torn between running away and peeing on his stupid rusted joint. I read the room and suddenly developed a limp in my front paw, hobbling around to make a wide circle back to Dorothy with sad, pathetic little whining sounds.

"Toto!" Dorothy was the easiest mark to con, dog bless her. She turned a reproachful glare at the tin man, though at least she listened to the knight and hung back. "You bully!"

Of course this was the cherry on top of the whole ridiculous mortal peril. The metal construction unfroze and finally began to lower his arm slowly as his head rotated in jerky motions from one side to the other. I couldn't believe my ears when the next sound he made was nearly mournful: "*Choppt.*"

Was that an *apology*?

"You should be. Is that any way to behave to someone who was freeing you?" The Munchkin woman was not done scolding the giant, though she did sheathe her large sword, as if the danger had passed. "Next time I'll take the oilcan with me and not come back. Just you wait."

"*Chhhop,*" the metal mechanical said almost pitifully.

The armored woman grunted. "Oh, you know I won't. For Ozma's sake, just be polite...." She straightened, putting her braid and armor to rights,

before turning around to face Dorothy and me. “I don’t know who you are, but you should be careful about approaching strange men with lubrication without asking for consent,” she scolded, and honestly, I agreed with her. *Dorothy, girl, get with the times.* But then the Munchkin’s round face softened. “My name is Violetta—Sir Violetta, as I am a knight of the Order of Lurline Eterna—but my friends call me Lettie. This is my brother...” She hesitated. “Chopper.”

“Chopper...” Dorothy opened her mouth as if she were about to say something, but her intense Midwestern manners won out and she closed her lips again. “Thank you for interceding in our, um...misunderstanding, Sir Violetta...Lettie. I’m Dorothy Gale, and this is my little dog, Toto.”

“Was about to be a hair littler if your big guy had anything to say about it,” I added, not trusting the blank perma-grimace on the tin man’s face.

“He didn’t mean it,” Lettie replied with exasperation and eye contact that confirmed she had understood me. Yet *another* person who could! Was it really only Dorothy who couldn’t? Was it that I wasn’t really talking, but that the Oz-born folk had some kind of innate animal-understanding magic that she didn’t?

“Chop,” Chopper said with a tone I couldn’t interpret. It could have meant either *Yeah, sorry, my bad, Toto*, or *I’ll finish the job when you sleep, vermin.*

“Did we do something wrong?” Dorothy asked Lettie.

Chopper made another statement, and his sister gave a low whistle before answering, “He said you were trying to take his axe. No wonder he was upset. I had thought—” She cut herself off suddenly enough that I flicked my ears forward, picking up on a metaphorical trail to hunt down later. “But that would do it. He’s very protective of his axe. Our da gave it to him.”

“Oh god, I’m sorry.” Dorothy winced hard enough that she appeared to be shriveling up inside her hoodie. “We just got attacked by these awful trees back there and separated from our friends, and I saw the axe and thought it would help.”

Lettie gave her an unimpressed look. “Do you know how to fight with an axe?”

“Uh...” Dorothy flushed. “No? I used a hatchet to split tinder once. Oh, and I saw some TikTok videos with women...uh, chopping wood.” Her face pinked as she trailed off.

Lettie threw her gaze upward, as if entreating the treetops for patience. “The Crab Apples would eat you alive.”

“Crab Apples?”

“Moving roots and branches that hit like an iron rollerboy?”

I had no idea what a rollerboy was in this world, but I figured that sounded about right. I nodded, and Lettie scowled. “They’re not supposed to be up as far as...What, you were on the road? We keep hacking them back to their grove, but they’re...grumpy.”

“Crabby, even.” I couldn’t help wagging my tail faster as Lettie glared at me for that.

“Our friends are still somewhere back—” Dorothy started, and her worried expression brightened as she was cut off by a caw that belted through the trees behind us. It was a familiar birdcall that, by now, I could describe only as having a vaguely proletarian lilt, and I barked twice in response, which brought the next blue jay call closer.

“Your friends...?” Lettie asked, wincing at the racket.

“Yes!” Dorothy made such a happy sound when Scarecrow’s wide-brimmed hat edged around the foliage that I almost forgot to dislike him. He seemed no worse for wear after the fight with the so-called Crab Apples, and a second later Crow burst overhead, not a blue feather out of place as he made a circle over the clearing—giving Chopper a double take—before landing on a bush by me.

“Jeez, when I said ‘scatter’ you two really followed orders! Nice job, T. Who’s the new recruits?”

“You mean Murdery Tin Can Number One and Two? Lettie—she’s some kind of knight, I guess?—and the big one’s Chopper.” I gestured, leaving the real introductions to Dorothy. “I wouldn’t call them recruits. We just convinced them not to kill us.”

“Psssh. That’s how all good alliances start.” Crow aired his feathery crest breezily, cocking his head all the way to one side, then the other, taking them in. “Munchkin, huh? She’s far from home.”

“Really?” I blinked. Lettie had made it sound like she and Chopper were from a village around here.

“Since we entered the woods we’ve been on the border of the Kingdom of the Beasts,” Crow explained. “They drove out any Munchkin settlements a while ago. Any nonbeasts that stay for longer than it takes to pass through are either wild-eyed mounties or woods-hags.”

“What’s a woods-hag?” I asked, eyeing Lettie. She didn’t seem very haglike. Or very woodsy, for that matter.

“When a Munchkin lady gets of a...certain age,” Crow said delicately, lowering his voice as if imparting a legend of import, “they say they come into their true power, get too dangerous to be around fragile men. They get exiled to the woods, where they can”—Crow squinted for the words —“fulminate? Matriculate? Marinade? There’s something about fields and barrens and beholding them; the titmouse that was telling me the tale was vague on that part. But the point is, even the beasts respect a woods-hag.”

“I don’t think Lettie is old enough to be a woods-hag,” I reassured him. “Though Chopper could pass for a wild-eyed mountie, I guess. Or a woodsman, with that axe.”

“Works for me!” Crow said, puffing up his chest. He gave me a wink, then jumped back into the air and fluttered over to startle Lettie as he landed on one plate-clad shoulder and nearly slid right off the other side. “Excuse me, Sir Lettie. Yes, hello! Call me Crow—or, better yet, call me *comrade*. Have you heard of the brave revolutionary efforts at work to win the freedoms of good, honest people like yourself?”

I stretched out the kinks and decided to find a bit of fading sunlight to sprawl out in. It looked like we were stopping here for the evening.

AS I'D EXPECTED, DOROTHY HANDLED introductions. It didn't take too much discussion for the gathered strangers to decide that it was getting too dark to blithely part ways, and that we all mistrusted one another a lot less than we did the surrounding woods. So Lettie led us to a clearing near a riverbank that obviously she and Chopper had used as a campsite in the past, and an uneasy truce was made for the night. It was only after we'd settled down around a campfire that Scarecrow had helpfully lit (from afar) that Lettie seemed more willing to explain their predicament.

"Nick was four years older than me, and the best smith in the village—in the county, I'd reckon," Lettie began. "He was a great brother too. Before, at least. I want to say that first. He always talked to me, took me everywhere, even as his annoying little sister. When he was on apprenticeship, he always came home with some little widget he'd made for me. I had a tinplate crown for my eighth birthday. And when I got accepted into the order to train, he made me my first pauldrons. I still use 'em...."

Now that she pointed it out, I could see how the plating on her shoulders was slightly older and of a different make than the rest of her gear, with joins at the curves that were just as fine but of a rougher material and, to be honest, of a more creative, artistic style than the rest of the lines. She paused, pursing her lips. "But it wasn't long after that that he...started to change."

"Was it the witches?" Crow guessed.

"No, worse. *Tarts*," Lettie said with an acid tone.

"Tarts...like the Tartpatch Gang?" Dorothy asked, pausing in the middle of trying to rescue a hopelessly spilled jar of jam. I was standing ready to

assist, and she *wasn't taking the hint*.

"You've heard of them, then."

"They greeted us in the village."

"With incredibly awful rhyming," I added, helpfully, since Dorothy couldn't scold me for being rude. And I obviously wasn't getting any of that jam.

"That's how it starts," Lettie said with a grim nod. "They prop themselves up as a community group. A boys' social club. I'm sorry—*men's* social club. For real Munchkin men." Her eyes couldn't help but take an extended trip around her sockets as she continued. "No one paid it much mind at first—most people still don't—but I started getting uneasy when Nick started coming home from their events and telling me all these... things."

"Conspiracies," muttered Scarecrow.

Crow nodded, agreeing with him for once. "Nutjobs. We heard about 'em too. No member in good standing's allowed to brook that flibbetyjack."

"Oh, come on. How serious can a bunch of kids singing about *lollipops* be?" I asked, and Dorothy finally delivered me my share of dinner! Bread crusts and torn bits of beef jerky again. Huzzah. "They seemed perfectly polite when we met them. If a little...Do you guys have Young Republicans around here?"

"A new republic!" Crow brightened. "We had a speaker come to the drum circle to talk about that a couple weeks ago. The discussion was tabled when we got to debating whether a representative or delegative democracy was more efficient, but—"

"The Tarts." Lettie raised her voice to bring her story back on topic. "They had convinced Nick that all his...girl troubles...were because he wasn't strong enough. It was bullshit. He..." She hesitated, turning her head to study where Chopper was standing sentinel on the other side of the roaring stream, axe swaying in his newly oiled hand. At that distance even I would have had trouble hearing anything, but she dropped her voice all the same. "Nickie was a beautiful, thoughtful boy. A blacksmith, but tall and willowy, and he had such a delicate, artistic touch with everything he made.

He got along with everyone, men and women, and maybe that was his problem—he got shy around them both. Never quite...Well, I was his little sister, but I realized later that it just never meshed for him. Not in our village.”

“I know that feeling,” Dorothy said quietly. I was surprised enough to turn my nose away from the food and prod at her knee. Dorothy was clever, friendly, unfailingly (irritatingly, really) polite—the perfect Good Dog kind of human. I couldn’t imagine her having troubles like Chopper’s. She glanced down and smiled at me, ticking her fingers absently behind my ears as she continued. “I never managed to make many friends at school either.”

Oh...*oh*. School. I...Dorothy disappeared into town many days for her obedience lessons—it’s true. She’d been doing it so long that I figured humans were just really slow learners. And when she came home she was always so glad to see me and...it had never occurred to me that she brought no one home, that no other humans her age visited the farm. Why should they? It was always the adventures of Dorothy and Toto. Dorothy and Toto scaling the fences when we were younger. Dorothy and Toto walking to the Kum & Go gas station for Cheez-Its when we got older. Dorothy and Toto staying up way too late watching pocket screen shows. Dorothy and Toto and...no one else.

My chin dropped down heavily on Dorothy’s knee. Dogs are social animals. We’re not stupid like cats; we get it. You need a pack sometimes. It never occurred to me that there was a whole other pack Dorothy’d tried to be a part of, and failed. (If I’d known, I would have bitten them. Which would have probably thrilled Sheriff Alice. Ended me up in animal control sooner.)

“The Tartpatch Gang wasn’t big in our little village,” Lettie continued, “but one of the older men went to Winkie to trade and came back with these papers that claimed to explain everything....”

“Ooh...” Crow intoned knowingly. “Pamphlets are serious business.”

“Nickie...Nick—he started to change.” Lettie’s voice dipped and wobbled. She stopped to take a long draw on her water canteen and shove back her braids before continuing. “He started going to meetings. First

traveling to the next town over. Then a local group of boys started up. And then he started thinking he had to...improve himself.”

She paused then, and made a precise cutting gesture with the edge of one palm drawn over her other forearm.

The campfire crackled into the quiet as we all tried to slot that interpretation into what she was telling us.

“He did *what?*” Crow screeched.

“Oh...” Dorothy’s brow furrowed, and instead of seeing horror on her face I saw her glance off into the dark, toward where Chopper stood with a soft frown. She looked back. “He was a Munchkin boy just like you before. But he did this...the metal...to himself?” Every word trailed up at the end, not because of any generational vocal tic but because she wanted to be sure she was understanding correctly the horrific thing Lettie was saying.

“Most of it,” Lettie confirmed, chewing viciously at a hank of bread she’d pulled from her knapsack and shared with the group.

“Metamorphosis of that nature...” Scarecrow sounded thoughtful, even impressed. “He must have been a very talented blacksmith indeed. Who did he study under?”

“Not. The. Time,” I growled, and for once he took the hint.

“It would have been an...intense change,” Scarecrow hurried to comment instead.

“That’s one word for it. It started with his fingers. Toes. Then a whole hand. Blaming it on accidents in the shop,” muttered Lettie. “He got so... different, angry with everyone. Mean. Even the kids in town he’d liked, he started to blame for everything wrong. I thought it was the pain, whatever he was doing to himself. I thought at some point he’d stop and come to his senses, but instead he just doubled down and dug deeper. And the shitty Tart connections started helping him get more and more done once he reached the limits of what he could do to himself.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” I swore.

“I can’t prove it, but I think they were planning on using him. Or someone was. It’s not all just pathetic ‘kids singing about lollipops,’ as you put it.” Lettie shot me a look, and I admit, I felt shitty. She shook her head.

“When he showed up at home one weekend with the last of his face gone and that stupid mask on...that was it.”

“What did you do?” Dorothy breathed.

“I...” Lettie hesitated for the first time. “I kind of tricked him. I waited until I knew it was likely to rain, and I convinced him to head out to the field with me, just help with the summer harvest and all. Then I made sure we got caught in a downpour that seized him right up. He always forgot about the joint maintenance...” she muttered to herself, then looked down, tracing the outline of her mug. “Then I knocked his sorry ass down and spent days dragging it away from the village, until I could hide it in the forest where no one would stumble on us. And then I...talked. A lot.”

“You talked?” Scarecrow echoed curiously. “Some kind of spell?”

Lettie shrugged. “He couldn’t talk back. It was my only chance to make my case, to talk his fool head out of it. I thought if I could just get him away from all that shit for a bit and make him see sense...”

“You tried to deprogram him!” Dorothy realized. “Oh, Lettie, that’s brave. And...hard.” She was probably remembering that clip from a documentary we watched on her pocket screen about cults—D had a big cults-and-true-crime phase for a while too. (Gave me the heebies—I was barking at shadows every night for a month—but she thought those murder podcasts were “comfort listens.”) It’d been a clip from the 1970s about the guy who’d invented the idea of kidnapping teenagers who’d fallen into cults to deprogram them. There was evidently some discourse about whether that was a cool method these days or not, but most people were probably not dealing with a cult that turned people into tin killing machines.

“I’m still not sure it really worked...” Lettie admitted slowly. Her cheeks had warmed and her shoulders had relaxed a little under Dorothy’s compliment. “But after a couple weeks, I loosened up his jaw. He wouldn’t say anything at first, but he’d nod and look at me, and after a time I...decided to let him go.”

“He was fixed?” Dorothy asked hopefully.

“Oh, no, he shoved me right on my ass and ran back to the village,” Lettie said with a grimace. “But when he got there...I guess it turns out the

Tarts are awfully suspicious if you go home and disappear for months, and no one would talk to him. And those who did...I don't know—maybe something I said did stick. He found me back on the road into town. We decided it was a shit hometown anyways. And those Tarts are spreading everywhere. Might as well try some country living for a while.” She gestured vaguely to the darkened forest around us.

“Oh, Lettie...” Dorothy reached over and carefully offered her hand, waiting until Lettie took it to clasp it tightly.

A warbling sniff broke the moment. I turned my head to see that Crow's feathers were fluffed and he was doing his best to stare at the fire and tilt the tears back into his eyes. “So much sacrifice and brotherly love. I will fight this evil with you to the ends of the earth, Sir Lettie,” Crow sobbed.

“Hey, now, you're already sworn to one ridiculous quest!” I reminded him.

“What is your deal?” Lettie asked, releasing Dorothy's hand and straightening with a not-so-subtle eagerness to change the subject from her own tale.

Everyone's gaze shifted around until it fell on Dorothy, who closed her eyes as she probably waited for the ground to swallow her up rather than be forced to exposit again. No such luck forthcoming, she quickly recounted the tornado, Glinda, and the events that had led us all here.

“Huh,” Lettie said when she was done. And that was it—no follow-up questions, no immediate oaths of service. For a supposed knight, she disappointed me, to be honest. She did look thoughtful as she set to sharpening her blade before bed, at least. She stopped to make sure everyone was setting up close to the fire for the night, and she recruited Scarecrow to join her and Chopper in taking shifts standing guard.

“Are the creatures of the woods that dangerous at night?” Scarecrow asked. In the darkness, I couldn't see the disturbing whirl of his eyes, which was a small blessing, but I pitied any average forest critter that stumbled into him in the middle of the night.

“Not the beasts,” Lettie said with a shake of her head. “The trees. They have a mind of their own. Out here on the borders, it's not just the Crab

Apples you have to worry about. Used to be better, back when there was the occasional wild witch or green man to look after them. But the Sisters rooted those out and sent those that remained hiding in even deeper, wilder places. Now the woods will move around when you're not looking in the uninhabited areas, and it's worse at night."

"Chop," Chopper agreed.

"Does he ever say anything else?" I asked Lettie, realizing her earlier story had left out that part.

"Not so far. It took him a long time to say that much, so I don't mind. I usually get the gist." She gave her brother's iron haunch a gauntleted slug and returned to the campfire. "Scarecrow, you've got first watch."

"I prefer open fields..." Scarecrow mumbled, shadowed face turning toward the tree line as vines whipped out of his cuffs and over his gloved knuckles nervously.

"Would you believe, in my world, we do this for fun and call it camping?" I thought about finding a good tree to mark before bed, but then revised that inclination. *No-o-o-pe. Just gonna hold that till morning.* I circled the campfire and sniffed at Dorothy's sleeping form. She'd curled up into a ball under a blanket Lettie had provided and been zonked out before I could wiggle my way in. The kid had been through a long day, so I didn't hold it against her. Instead, I found where Crow had decided to roost on a fallen log and I circled three times before backing up against it. "Night, bud."

When the sunlight forced open my eyes the next morning, the fallen log was gone.

So were most of my new friends.

BEFORE BEDDING DOWN FOR THE night, I'd circled three times in order to scratch some phantom of comfort into the bare dirt that had only begun to grow a thin fuzz of moss beneath the fallen log. The trampled grass that crunched beneath my paws as I lurched to my feet was the first warning siren that told my sleep-addled brain that something was very, *very* wrong.

Thick old forest growth still surrounded me on all sides, but the clearing seemed smaller, and...there'd been a creek, a riverbed. I remembered that clearly. I stumbled forward, not seeing anybody at first. This wasn't Lettie and Chopper's camp, and I could hear only birdsong. At least, right before my heart started to thud too fast and loud with alarm for me to hear anything over it at all.

"I'm lost. I'm— Oh." The horror sank its way in, like my coat was full of those little burrs that could burrow into the skin. The same ones Dorothy was forever carefully picking out from between the soft pads of my paws when I'd taken a frolic in weedy fields. "We're lost. Dorothy! *Dorothy!* Anyone?"

"*Ixnay* on the *anick-pay*, bud!" Crow fluttered down to my level and began to preen his blue feathers with a disturbing lack of concern. "The trees have seen fit to take us together."

I spun on him, and the relief at *anyone* answering sent my tail wagging even as I began to wonder whether curses were real in this fairyland. "You! I mean...what do you mean, 'the trees'? Did those freakin' Crab Apples follow us...?" I did not relish another round of whack-a-root.

“No, no, it is as Sir Lettie said. ‘Old ones move through the deep wood,’” he intoned in a surprisingly good imitation of Munchkin foreboding, before continuing in his normal blating chatter. “I guess things moved around and we got moved with them. An example of resource warfare, if you ask me.”

“But what about the others?” I didn’t have time for one of his classist-i-macallit lectures. I twisted around and tried to peer through the thicket, but the woods just seemed to go on and on for miles. “What about *Dorothy*?”

“I guess they’re somewhere around. Or maybe back where we left them.” He fluttered up to a branch above my head and paused long enough to give me a smug beak tilt. “But you said a thing about striking out on your own, right? No human setting the terms, or that leash-hoosit?”

I huffed, sitting down abruptly. The last thing I would do would be let him see that he was right. He’d be insufferable. “I had plans to go about it strategically, Crow. You can’t just do this kind of thing willy-nilly. Humans are unpredictable, clingy even, at the best of times. If you don’t plan these things carefully, terrible things can happen: dogcatchers, flea dip, diet kibble!” I had entertained a moment of bravado earlier, thinking I didn’t need to worry about those canine tortures in Oz, but who *knew* what kind of weird dog laws they had instead? I mean, according to Crow, the Munchkins tried to hang a guy for growing some nice plants and helping people. I wasn’t feeling so certain of anything now. “Luckily, Dorothy’s a simple girl and seems to have never heard of such things as leashes herself, but only because I have been a firm believer in the positive-training method so far.”

“You do seem to have her well trained, despite the language barrier,” Crow admitted. “Does she know a recall whistle or something?”

“She usually comes to my call.” I cleared my throat, then demonstrated with a series of my best demanding barks belted out into the ether. “*HEY, GIRL!* I am gonna chew up these shoes! The better to bury them in Mrs. Brumley’s garden! Is that chocolate over there? Is it *toxic*? Don’t mind if I *do*...!”

The thicket around us was hollow, devoid of footsteps, though a squirrel may have been laughing at me from somewhere in the shadows. (All squirrels think they are comedians, the bastards.) My heart inched down behind my ribs just a little. My special call *always* brought Dorothy running, whereafter we would play a delightful game in which she pretended to be mad at me and I pretended to be ashamed, and then we'd settle down and have biscuits together. It was great. Took me most of my first six months to teach her that, but consistency and routine are everything with humans. If she wasn't responding it was because she was someplace where she couldn't hear me or—worse—she couldn't get to me.

"Maybe she's on her way...." Crow suddenly came to a landing in front of me, forcing me to stop a frantic pace I hadn't even realized I'd started. "Have you taken her fielding often?"

"I mean, she helps with the farmwork, but I thought we had time before I had to train her for an occupation. Dorothy! Here, girl!" I found myself hollering loudly as I dared, like an idiot. Even if she could hear me, the silly human couldn't recognize her own name in dogspeak. My tail flinched between my legs. "Oh my god, she doesn't even have *claws*."

"There, chap. Even if she loses that armed escort, Scarecrow will be with her. I'm sure they'll muddle through all right, eh?" Crow fluttered around my head, an annoying blue halo, as I tried to peer around the thick undergrowth. He tutted. "Gosh, you really do care for the little miss...."

I straightened. "Do not!" Far off, something flushed out of the trees, and I remembered to lower my voice again. Thank goodness fuzzy dogs could not blush. "I do not. She's a terrible human. It's just...she was carrying my *basket*, and I left a snack in there. That's all."

"Smart thinking, division of provisions." Crow took this as a matter of strategy before appearing to size up the bleak glorified deer path we'd stumbled onto. "You know, I think I recognize that leaning pine. I might know some chaps around here."

I rolled my eyes. "Part of your grand rebellion?"

Crow made a tutting sound. "*Pfft*, of course not. Starlings, organize? No, they're more eco-anarchists, but they're good chaps. No crows, mind you,

but so few are...”

“Indeed,” I said.

Interspecies sarcasm does not come across in the eyes. I now have definitive proof, because Crow nodded his blue tufted head in hearty agreement. “I’ll see if I can spot them about. Won’t be but a tick.” Then he lit off into the thick canopy of leaves, almost immediately disappearing.

Leaving me exposed and alone on a dim deer trail in the middle of a bleak, dark wood.

“I’m beginning to understand why cats *eat* you lot,” I muttered under my breath, if only to make myself feel better.



BY THE TIME CROW RETURNED, I’d worn a circle in the dirt and in my brain. Everything felt exhausted and muddy, including my thoughts, so after a while I’d given myself up to the jaws of the forest. I’d flopped down on the grassy part of the clearing (even in defeat it sucks to land on a rock) and let each despairing sigh roll me, inch by inch, onto my back, exposing my tender, briar-matted underbelly to the sky.

It was in this absolutely abased state that I heard the first susurrus of wings on the air. *Ah, yes*, I thought with my eyes closed, *the vultures move quickly in this part of the woods*. “Feast, feast on my bones, brothers!” I barely managed above a puppy whine, but in my head it was a soliloquy worthy of the dramas on Dorothy’s pocket screen. “At least the carrion eaters do not abandon us in the end.”

The slip-sound of wings increased in volume until it surrounded me. There was an expectant, bloody pause, and then a rough voice I didn’t recognize: “This is your brilliant tactician...?”

“Hey! Back off. He’s just a little...battle fatigued.” Crow’s voice hovered over my shoulder, so I cracked my eyes, just in time to see him lean down and fluff the fur around one paw, futilely, until it snagged and caught dried mud. I twitched, and Crow fluttered around like a blue nursemaid. “Hey, buddy! There you go. I told you I’d be back. No time for

a nap now.” He cleared his throat, speaking with an ineffective whisper. “These aren’t the guys I was...but, well, just be cool, okay?”

I reluctantly rolled, with some effort, to my feet, feeling the feathered strangers around me hop back disapprovingly as I did so. Cocked heads and the shuttling of beaks were visible in the lengthening afternoon sunlight, as the shadows in the woods had grown deeper to match my dramatic theme. The parliament of birds that surrounded me were varied in size, but many were larger than Crow. Colors had begun to seep away in the shade, but I could make out the telltale shape of a woodpecker crest, the fussy movements of wrens among the bushes, and the intimidating silhouette of, yes, a turkey vulture against the canopy. Closer by, a rowdy squadron of the promised starlings hopped around the forest floor, with Crow shuffling uncomfortably in their midst.

“These are your buddies?” I asked, trying to keep my tone mild as possible.

“Oh yeah, we’re all brothers in the cause, eh?” Crow said in a cheery tone.

“Sisters too,” said a starling with a speckled mask of feathers.

“The gender binary seems like some landbound nonsense,” sang a songbird from the bushes, and received a chorus of acknowledgment. I couldn’t help but nod at that.

Crow took the correction in stride. “Ah, we are all comrades. Comrades.” He hopped forward before I had the time to ask how something as mundane as Russian sociopolitical literature had made it to Oz. “It appears my contacts in this part of the woods have been, ah, allied with a local grassroots effort. Bit of an antimonarchist cause, which of course you know I approve of.” He took the time to fluff his crest a little higher. “I’ll tell you all about it on the way.”

“On the way where? Do they know where Dorothy is? Not that...not that I care.” The birds were already shuffling into the air again, and I couldn’t help but feel the looming presence of the turkey vulture behind me. I started to trot after Crow. “Where are we going?”

Crow hopped into the air before looping to land on my back like a commanding general. “To enlist, of course!”

OceanofPDF.com

WHAT WE WERE ENLISTING IN—"BEING drafted into" seemed like the better way to put it, but what did I know?—was a rebellion. Crow explained it to me in hushed tones as we were guided by winged revolutionaries through thick undergrowth. He tried his best to talk up the cause sotto voce, but a blue jay whisper carries like crunching gravel, so he constantly got dirty looks from the starlings.

"The Deep Woodlands—that's what they call their section of the Beast Kingdom here, this side of the road all the way to the mountains—is ruled by a tyrant, a terrible tiger named Barth. The big cats—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "The tiger's name is *Barth*?"

"Yes." Crow glanced to one of the starlings for confirmation. "I got that pronunciation right, correct, comrade?" And the starling nodded.

"They've got a *Tiger King* named Barth," I said.

"Yes," Crow confirmed impatiently. "Has word of his cruelties reached the land of Kans...zas?"

I considered. "I mighta saw something about that on Netflix. Sorry. Carry on."

"Right." One good thing you could say about Crow: he was unfazed by sass. "The big cats always have ruled the Woodlands, apex predators and all that. And the Free of the Wing—that's our guys, the birds—are sick of it. There's been unrest for years—no one likes the tigers—but...ah, well..."

"Let me guess. Previous revolutionaries got eaten?" I whispered in my driest voice. I also learned that on the 'flix.

"Yeah." Crow shrugged. "Somehow the cats got the other predators on their side too. Gave territories to a group of bears, the wolves—"

“Wolves?” I perked up, images of the ultimate Bad Dogs in my head. Wild, loner wolves howling at the moon, wearing leather jackets and riding motorcycles in gangs...Dorothy’s pocket screen told me that was a thing, somewhere.

“They’re the king’s enforcers,” a wood dove said from overhead, nosing in on our conversation as we paused to cross a stream. “Filthy cops.”

“Oh god, they turned shepherd?” My ears flattened. Uncle Henry took us to the state fair once to see a demonstration of those military-trained dogs and their handlers, and the whole time he ribbed Dorothy and me about how “Toto could never” this or that. All I saw were a buncha trained jocks bullying stuffed props and strutting around in their little tactical gear for treats. Dorks. No self-respecting dog would ever.

“It’s worse than you know,” intoned a baritone owl.

“Your skills better be as good as they say,” the wood dove added.

“Our skills?” I hissed in Crow’s ear. I felt him flinch on my back.

The starlings cackled, and the nearest one swooped down in a less than friendly dip. “But the blue one says you are a witch slayer, so a king should pose no issue.”

Dorothy didn’t raise an idiot puppy, and I kept my mouth shut. Crow had the good sense to launch off my back, avoiding the nip I tried to take at him as he gained altitude to join the flock of winged revolutionaries moving like a scattered dark cloud, an infestation, pulling me into the thickest, darkest part of the forest.



BY THE TIME WE’D REACHED the birds’ rebel base (nest?), I had almost stopped worrying about Dorothy and believed the silent pep talk I’d built up in my brain.

Maybe this was all right, I tried to tell myself. If I was a Bad Dog now, maybe? Bad Dogs don’t respect authority. Bad Dogs rebel. What was more rebellious than taking part in a revolution? What was less Good Dog than a little sedition and unbalancing a foreign power? You’d never see Lassie doing that. The chump. Stupid collies never know how to live. So maybe

this was what I, as a Bad Dog, was supposed to do. Help a bunch of birdbrains overthrow their Forest Kingdom tyrant overlord and peace on out down the road. Maybe I'd get a cool beret out of it.

Of course, there was the matter of the giant tiger and his army of wolves. Best not to think of them. There'd better be a cool beret. Revolutionaries always have cool berets. Who do I ask about a cool beret?

"Hey, do birds wear hats?"

Crow tilted his head to stare at me, his mouth full of half-punctured berries. The birds' conspiracy headquarters was a clearing amid trees that had grown in a circle in a glen, each bowed and woven into its neighbor and completely conspicuous. I didn't know how critter espionage worked in the Deep Woodlands, but this seemed to me a bad hiding place. But they'd led Crow and me to a small shelter of roots with a soft bed of grass for me and a berry bush for Crow, so it wasn't entirely terrible. Berries weren't going to cut it for my diet, however, unless we wanted to kill the king with dog farts.

"Not really. Not very aerodynamic, hats," Crow said thoughtfully, and swallowed a berry big enough to make his throat bulge. "Though we make tools fine enough, so I guess if we added straps...but then there's the crests, and the eyes on the sides of the head.... Why do you ask?"

"No reason," I said with a sigh. Really, this whole crusade needed an overhaul. I wasn't volunteering, but I think this was what Uncle Henry had called being "voluntold." It was a term he muttered only when out of earshot of Aunt Em.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye as Astor, the wood dove we'd met earlier, came gliding down to us. Crow hurriedly wiped the berry snot off his beak as Astor fluttered to the ground. I was no expert on bird hierarchy, but something about the way Crow and the others behaved around the dove told me he was the guy in charge. Strange—you would have thought it'd be one of the bigger birds, or the birds of prey. A hawk, owl, vulture, at least a large pheasant. But no, something about Astor, with his gray head and the sporty white ring around his neck, made them all listen.

“Hope you’ve found the accommodations serviceable,” Astor said with a brusque peck to his words. He seemed comfortable on the ground, which I appreciated. I’d grown tired of craning my neck to holler at all the rebels around camp. I glanced back at Crow, who had on his face an awed expression that gave the impression that his brain had turned to the berries he’d eaten. Thankfully, Astor didn’t wait for a response before continuing. “We’re glad to have you on board. The war roo—” He paused, sighed, and seemed to correct himself. “The *community forum* is about to convene.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re a fan of community activism,” I said as I trotted after the two birds. It was a short walk through the underbrush to what appeared to be the meeting place. An obvious cackling of birds was emanating from a triangle of giant, particularly old trees. One was an oak wider than the chicken house back home. Its branches reached for the elder trees on either side of it, creating a cloak of thick foliage to hide the meeting from any prying eyes above.

To one coming by ground, as a lowly canine, it seemed rather exposed. When I craned my gaze above, the branches were a riot of feathered bodies. Ground birds settled on the bushes and lower branches. Wrens and sparrows murmured prim greetings while lemon yellow finches gossiped in thin, reedy voices. Above them, robins strutted in, fashionably late, with large seeds clutched in their beaks as if they’d rolled out of bed and grabbed something to eat on the way. Woodpeckers clung to the thick ridges of the oak’s bark, pecking out what seemed to be a summary of the introductions in an accessible staccato that carried both to the birds in the high canopy and to—I had to strain before I spotted them—the trio of bats tucked away in the shadowed recesses of the trunk of a secondary tree three rows back.

“Bats are mammals, though,” I muttered. I didn’t need Dorothy’s pocket screen to know that. I’d chased enough of them out of the barn back home at dusk, barking my head off until Aunt Em dragged me inside.

“They were driven from the mountains—something about Oz men digging deep for mother stone. All brothers and sisters of the wing are welcome in the fight,” Astor answered before launching off to join what appeared to be the leaders of this parliament of fowls. A fallen log had

wedged itself halfway between the grand oak and its neighbor elm, stumbling into the triangular clearing like a passed-out drunk. It was on the shoulder of the log that Astor was joined by the ponderous owl we'd seen earlier, a duck with a butter yellow bill and a matronly air, and—garnering a fanboy croak from my companion—a large, gruff-looking crow with feathers as dark as ink.

Crow whispered reverently in my ear, “That’s Cloudfell.”

“You guys name your crows like boring palaces?” I managed to keep my voice down. Mostly.

“It’s the name of his fledge.” Crow’s whisper took on a scolding tone. “Leaders take it on, and it’s a *big thing*. Dude’s a legend— Shh—I think it’s starting.”

“Compatriots, if I can have your attention,” Astor started out, in a voice that was raised for a dove but went largely unheard over the grouching. The ground birds seemed tuned to him and immediately settled down, but the grackles let out a riotous laugh overhead as two young birds got into a tussle over a good perch.

The duck clicked her bill and gave Astor a gentle nudge. “If you’ll allow me,” she said in a kind tone, and waited for Astor’s nod before she straightened her neck to clear her throat and let out a loud, scolding rattle of a honk that made the spines of the ducklings in the front row straighten like they’d been...well, goosed. “*Quiet time!*” Once silence had descended like a lead weight, the duck smoothed her feathers. “Closed beaks, open ears. Astor has an Action Initiative he’d like to propose to the Community.” She spoke the capitalization of certain words with a reverence that was supposed to mean something.

“Thank you, Grippa,” Astor said with dignity into the cowed silence. He bobbed his head and hopped forward. “We do have much to discuss. As many of you know, we have guests joining us in the community today. The first since our borders closed. Some of you will know Brother—I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

He tilted his intense gaze to Crow, who helpfully supplied: “Crow.”

Astor blinked. To his credit, he only momentarily glanced up and down, as if to affirm, yes, the blue feathers and the tufted crest on Crow's head were not a mistake, before smoothly recovering. "Ah, Brother Mr. Crow from the Munchkinland commune—"

"More of an association, but okay," Crow whispered to me under his breath.

"—and his companion, who has become a figure of some interest since his arrival in Oz brought the slaying of the Witch of the East—" Astor paused for a whistle and chitter of excitement from bough and branch before continuing. "A feat that has never been accomplished in recent memory, and we welcome seeing his martial power applied to our goals. Welcome, Toto."

The cackle and call rattled the leaves. Despite the, well, let's say *technical inaccuracies* in that introduction, I felt compelled to wag my tail until Astor summoned quiet again. "Brother Crow and Friend Toto bring with them the remaining resources we need to finally move. I propose that it is time, my good feathers. The tyrant's grave calls."

The jovial air of the flock immediately dropped about twenty degrees. I saw some bobbing heads, many from the birds clustered closest around Astor's log, but other birds held themselves like they'd just heard a threat in the bush. It was a ponderous white bird standing on sturdy fisher legs in the far corner of the clearing who opened her large—extremely large—bill and finally spoke first.

"As welcome as two new faces may be," she said in a low voice, and paused to duck another greeting to us both, "it does not change the fact that the king's pack outweigh us three to one, should it come to open warfare."

"A matter which is of no concern when they are landbound and we own the skies, Mere Fisher." Astor immediately dismissed her with what I thought was a rather patronizing coo. "I understand your concern, Mere. But we cannot fish as you do, by standing still as the king's pack picks us off in field and glen. Cloudfell's little birds tell us Barth is seeking an audience with the Wizard. If he brings his corrupted emeralds and opals here, or worse, the *witches* turn their eyes this way, freedom falls entirely. It

is time to strike. Now. When we have a rightful heir to the throne to champion.”

Uneasy chirps from the lower ranks told me that something about that statement didn’t sit right with the entire community action group. I saw why when Astor gestured to his left and clicked his beak. “Need I remind you there was *magic* in this forest once? Before those Sisters squelched it out? Don’t let them paint us as malcontents. We are patriots who wish to place the rightful son on the throne. Isn’t that right?”

I squinted at the bush he appeared to be addressing. I like to think that, even with my impressive eyebrows, my vision is pretty good, but wow. What I had taken for a pile of decomposing grass mulch and bramble in the shadows of the bushes resolved unwillingly, and only as one veiny paw dragged itself out. Then another. The mulch was *fur*, almost unrecognizably matted with dirt and twigs. It barely shifted until two hooded eyes blinked out from the shadows behind giant, if bony, lion paws.

A single grunt came from the bush lion. And the paws retreated.

The pause was short, as if this display had been trotted out before. “What about the wolves?” a nervous robin asked, and that broke a logjam of questions and smaller arguments among the crowd.

Astor’s council, for their part, sat back. While he’d responded to Mere Fisher, Astor seemed content to roost on the log and watch with a kind of patient satisfaction as the flock debated among themselves. Even Crow was caught up in arguing the merits of action with a starling he was friendly with until, finally, Astor had Grippa goose-hoot for silence again.

“We need not take down their entire pack. Friend Toto has shown us the way. Isn’t that right, Toto?” Suddenly, those weird dead-bird eyes were all looking at me.

I sat and thought fast, like my life depended on it.

“You mean...right, how I killed the Witch of the East,” I said slowly, trying to buy time. Astor gave me an infinitesimal nod of approval. The sneaky bastard. So that’s how a dove gets to be in charge. “I didn’t...You’re right. I didn’t really fight anyone else. I was tactical like that. Thought it through. Planned, used the...ah, resources at my disposal.” Mostly a

moderately sized farmhouse. That probably wouldn't work here, though the revolutionaries did have aerial support. "I dropped in on her unawares."

The chirps and coos from the flock were encouraging, and that made me bolder. Crow bobbed his head eagerly in the corner of my vision. "What you need to do is distract the main forces, make them think you're gearing up for a fight. Maybe air bomb them with something annoying somewhere near the king but not too near, draw them a little away. Then, when they're tied up, that's when you drop your *real* weapon right on the king's head. Sneak them in and *pow!*" My tail was wagging, and I felt a surge of Bad Dog pride, closer to my vermin-hunting terrier ancestors than I'd ever been. "In his own hidey-hole! Don't give him a chance to run! Root out the pest where he lives and shake him till he stops moving!"

The wind creaked in the bird-laden trees as this was digested, and the pause nearly did me in before a starling broke the silence with an understated "Whoa, dude."

"I dig it," whistled a stoned-sounding hummingbird.

A pygmy owl hooted, and then a squall of birds being *far* too noisy for a secret meeting joined in. Crow gave me a chuff on the shoulder, hollering something ebullient about glory in my ear, and I just kept wagging my tail. Maybe these bird guys weren't so bad.

Finally, Astor bobbed his head, and this time he didn't even need Grippa to silence everyone. The flock tuned in, eager and on board with the plan. "Friend Toto has the heart of a true bird. His plan is wise as an owl's, cunning as a raven's, and brave as a hawk's." Astor raised his voice. "It would be my greatest honor to follow him into battle and aid him in striking down the tyrant of the Beast Kingdom once and for all. Who is with Toto... and all of us?!"

The whistles, caws, and hoots of the gathered rebel birds were so deafening that it raised my fur on end and lit my body with excitement. Me! They were all applauding for me! I was definitely getting that beret! I was definitely making a name for myself as a Bad Dog, as a lone wolf, as a...

Wait.

OceanofPDF.com

THAT NIGHT, SLEEPING UNDERNEATH THAT shitty berry bush with a bramble stuck in my beard and with Crow whistling in his sleep above me, I dreamed of cats. Not tigers, thank god. Just...Cupcake.

Here's what I know about cats. They're not even bad dogs. They're aliens; that's what they are. Something's not right in the head, that's it. They're wrong, they're weird, and they look at you like you're just...just...not even meat—I don't know. We're all something like furniture to cats. I knew this from personal collected data.

Up until last summer, Dorothy would go visit Mrs. Brumley on Sundays; Aunt Em would send her with a pie and casserole after church. "Charity to shut-ins is part of godliness, child," Aunt Em always said, with a particularly pious smile, as if it were winning points to say it on top of the basket she sent on the way. And down the road Dorothy and I went. Mrs. Brumley's trailer home was old and pretty shabby, but I knew Uncle Henry stole over every now and then to keep the yard tidy and make sure the place was in decent enough shape to keep out the rain. He didn't have to worry about the vermin; old Cupcake did that.

Cupcake kept everybody out.

It was the inside of the house that told you something was tragically wrong for the inhabitant. You could smell Cupcake's...presence...right away. Poor Mrs. Brumley wasn't exactly up on litter-box hygiene. Luckily, Cupcake had found a loose window latch, so she could wander the property as needs must—or the department of health would have been called ages ago. After you got over the smell—Dorothy had begun to bring a mask after

her first visit and claimed it was in consideration of Mrs. Brumley's health—the interior of the home came into focus.

Creaky furniture a few decades out of fashion was nothing to remark on in the area where we lived—rural folk got things, or were given things, and hung on to them until they wore out at the seams. Sometimes beyond, if one had a knack for repairs to keep the bits together. It just made sense when there wasn't a lot of money to go around. But Mrs. Brumley took frugality to its worst possible evolution. Furniture didn't remain because it was still useful; it remained because no one could access it any longer. Every surface in Mrs. Brumley's small trailer home was stacked with things. Magazines stacked on top of tubs of dishes stacked on top of squashed dolls nested in half-folded laundry. Old bills filling a laundry basket to overflowing. Ever-present *National Geographic* magazines lining a shelf proudly while what looked like once-expensive blouses and fishing equipment commingled on top of the stove.

Dorothy, used to the hazardous terrain by now, knew the precise pathway to pick over the sticky linoleum to the carpet that had been matted down by years and suspicious substances. She couldn't carry me, her hands full of food goods, but she admonished me whenever I paused for even the most polite sniff at the towers and mysterious obelisks that made up the interior of the trailer. Perhaps she thought I'd be squished. We always made our way down the narrow path between the walls of *things* to the back bedroom, where Mrs. Brumley spent her days on precisely one half of a double bed.

Mr. Brumley had died in a trucking accident years ago, and slowly but surely, his side of the bed had succumbed to grief, support hose, and *Reader's Digest* magazines. Now there was simply an uneven mound of soft clutter in the space next to Mrs. Brumley, which she still reached over and patted occasionally, only to come up with an eighteen-month-old edition of *Prevention* magazine where her husband's shoulder had once been.

The one surface that retained its sanctity, above all, was in that bedroom. And it was always where my eyes first landed, even while Dorothy and Mrs. Brumley made small talk. On the top of the dresser, just to the right of

a dusty jewelry chest, sat a round pillow caked with orange fur, and enthroned on top of the furred pillow, almost invisible, sat Cupcake.

He was an ancient cat. Perhaps he'd been a kitten, a gift from Mr. Brumley to Mrs. Brumley in happier times, but since then, he'd aged like the rest of the place. Hair matted and snarled, eyes crusty liquid gold, the only things still sharp and polished in the shadows of the trailer interior.

"Hello, Cupcake," I would always say, as Dorothy encouraged me to be polite on these visits.

And Cupcake would always give me that eerie leaking-air hiss that cats made a deal with the devil to be able to make, and he would allow that to die out to a silent snarl until he felt I had been properly spurned. Then he would grumble, in a voice like broken dishes, a greeting: "You. Shitbrains. Still licking feet for scraps?"

"No, I lick toes because they are salty and delicious," I corrected. "Dorothy gives me scraps because I'm a good dog and she loves me."

I cringe now at that memory, and the disgusted look Cupcake always gave me. How often I defended my loyalty to humans, as opposed to Cupcake's nuanced relationship with them. ("Social engineering," he insisted on calling it. "It's more of a long-term psyops, if you understand... which you don't.")

I never, ever agreed with Cupcake on anything.

I never thought I would say this.

I never thought I would think this.


But...

Cupcake was right.

Cupcake was right about humans. There was no use in being a Good Dog. Humans would never really love a Good Dog; a Good Dog would never really be part of the family, one of them. No matter how many scraps and snuggles they gave you, no matter how many boops and *Got your noses* there were in your life. Someday, if a human with enough authority and the right piece of paper came to their door, your human would give you up in a heartbeat.

It's safer just to call it. Humans are only to be used, like Cupcake said. It's better to be a Bad Dog, a wild dog, a lone wolf. That's me. Feral and untamed. Toto.

Toto of Oz, Toto of the Revolution.



"OF COURSE YOU WON'T BE the *only* one facing King Barth," Astor assured me the next morning. "That wouldn't be strategically sound. You'll be part of a small group that sneaks in via the cliffside while the larger contingent deploys the distraction to pull away the pack."

Astor, as it turned out, was a great orator but a shit war planner. The ground team, as it had been called—had I noticed derision in Astor's tone?—had consisted of me, Mere Fisher, a couple ostriches (of all things), and a nervous quail named Torbin who seemed to know the "secret" path to Barth's lair. Crow had joined the aerial-bomber crow team that would be part of the distraction before attempting to join up with us.

Torbin led us down a creek that eventually dried out into a stony gulch that ran into a rocky area of the forest through which glaciers had obviously moved at some point in ages past. Or, well, that's what the explanation would have been in the real world. Maybe here, a giant just decided to dig out some cool rocks in the middle of a forest. Hell if I know. The result was a thin creek cutting between some sheer cliffs where the forest thinned to straggly pines. The bottoms of the cliffs were bare and marked by shards of boulders, and we wove between these to hide our approach as we zigzagged our way up the cliffside.

"Barth's private domain is in the nearby glens, but he uses the cliffs overhead as his personal sunning sanctum," Torbin explained at a stuttering, sputtering pace set by his bobbing head. Talking to him was like talking to an espresso machine. "N-no one's allowed during this time of day."

"Good. We sneak up, kick the shit out of him, and go home," I whispered, throwing a look at the two sullen ostriches clomping at the rear. They hadn't said a word, but Astor assured me that their kind could shatter

the rib cage of a lion before the big cat even knew what hit them. Seeing those dead eyes and big legs, I was beginning to believe it.

We followed the path to where it emptied onto a bare bit of rocky cliff about two-thirds of the way from the top. The path up to the sunlit cliff seemed clear of guards, and I let out a sigh of relief before I heard Torbin's warbling voice behind me. "I brought them! Don't eat me!"

I spun as four, six...no, *eight* wolves folded out of nowhere from the pines on our right. Torbin was already bolting, shitty-quail tail disappearing back down the path as a wolf jumped forward to cut that off for the rest of us. "Should have seen that comin', to be honest," I growled.

"Tiny dog, tiny brain," growled the nearest wolf in a speech so thick, I had trouble understanding it. Stupid muscle-bound jock. How did I ever think *they* were cool?

The ostriches didn't seem bothered, and one of them stepped right over me to honk in the enforcer's face. But I could see the wolves starting to tighten a circle. Mere Fisher had been silent but nervous, fluttering her wings. She seemed reluctant to take off. I recalled Crow's words of wisdom in the forest. I took a deep breath and hollered, "Scatter! Scatter!"

And then I ran. I didn't wait to see how the rest went down. I heard enough: A whoosh of wings that I hoped was Mere Fisher taking off to safety. A growl and yelp that I hoped was a wolf getting the shit kicked out of it. The other sounds blurred into confusion as I bolted for the one opening I saw I had left: a path farther up the cliff top, to the throne of the tiger king.



THE KING WAS NOT AS regal as I'd imagined him to be. I'd caught only a brief glimpse of him as I crested the plateau and skidded to a stop at the giant cat already standing, waiting for me. Having lackeys had taken the muscular definition off his frame, plumping his shoulders and flanks so that he looked soft, more like an overgrown striped tabby than like the terrible king of the beasts that everyone was going on about. Still, even a tabby can

eat a Toto if said tabby is the size of a small tractor, which His Majesty certainly was.

Yeah. I'd bolted for the bushes. I was trying to be a Bad Dog, not a stupid one.

I crouched behind a half-upturned pine and tried to formulate a plan. Scanning the skies overhead was fruitless. I could hear the cries of Cloudfell's murder, but they sounded engaged farther off, back toward the river, where the wolf pack still howled their indignities. God, I hoped Crow was okay.

He probably was living his best life, actually.

If those other crows weren't being nice to him I was going to piss in their nests.

There was the crunch of a very large paw on pine needles behind me, diverting any protective thoughts. I yelped, darting from cover, only to have something that felt like a battering ram connect with my flank and send me hurtling across the clearing toward the sheer drop of stone. I put my sausage shape to use and rolled, just managing to get my feet under me a couple yards from the edge. The tiger prowled out from the trees, clearly smug about his little move and sure of his victory. I skittered backward by impulse—oh, okay, bad idea there. Pebbles flew past the drop.

"And where are your wings, little bird?" the tiger purred. At least his voice sounded fit for royalty, all haughty and confident. I'd have been disappointed if he'd sounded like his cousin we'd left back at the base.

"Ah, I'm more of a...recent ally to the cause," I said, hedging for time as I edged sideways, gauging the land. The rocks behind me fell off into a fatal drop, an easy fifty feet into a sharp gulch below, where the river dribbled out into a cave system. The sides were of shale, steep and unforgiving, with few places to find purchase, even for a creature as small as a little dog. Not even the most resilient scrub or weed grew along them.

"Cause...? What cause do you think this is?" he said with a dismissive tone. His bulk was no more than two yards away from me now; an easy dash or leap and he'd be on me. I was as good as in his claws; I could see it in his mind. "What do you think you're doing? Liberating the poor kingdom

from a horrible overlord? Does anyone here look oppressed? Underfed? Enslaved? Are your bird friends not free to fly through the sky?"

"Well, yes..." I hesitated, flustered in the face of certain death, at this logical quandary. "But I'm not from here, so I shouldn't be deciding what is or isn't proper governance for the people here! Your own citizens want you out!"

"Really? Did you ask the deer? The raccoons by the river you just polluted with muck? The voles in the earth, or the bobcats that wander unimpeded along the Forest Kingdom's edge? No? Just taking the birds' word for it, are we?"

"Your bully enforcers out front didn't encourage much interviewing of the locals!" I caught a glimpse of the king's paw sliding forward, just an inch, and I gave my best Doberman stance. "You think you can psyops me? I know how you cats operate!"

"There's no need for racial profiling." King Barth sounded injured, and he sighed, though he didn't relax his haunches. His tail whipped. "You, my snack-size friend, have been duped into a messy and particularly boring debate over governance that had no need to go this far. What did those seed brains think they were going to do if they did get rid of me, eh? Peck at the predators of the woods until they behave? Singsong the Wizard into respecting their borders? Only apex hunters can keep things in order around here. Way of the jungle. The way of Oz." His resigned words sounded about like how Uncle Henry talked about the Kansas elections back home.

Still, I felt a surge of Bad Dog petulance, the way he was writing off the rebellion. Writing off me. I huffed. "Shows how much you know. They got your cousin to put on the throne."

I'd thought Barth too out of shape to achieve the liquid speed he did. Cupcake certainly never moved like that. Orange and black blurred, and all of a sudden, all I could see was a dull, hardy row of ivory teeth, dingy with age but each one approximately the length of my legs.

"My cousin?" His snarl was loud enough to echo down the very, very long drop behind us.

I froze, thank goodness, knowing there was bare little ground to retreat to behind me. If I'd had an ounce more self-preservation handed down to me from my ancestors, I'd probably have bolted right off the cliff. Suddenly I was thankful that I came from a long line of lapdogs and terriers that, when confronted with a threat, didn't have enough sense to do anything but scream profanities in its face.

Which is pretty much what I did.

"Yeah! You know, the dopey one that sleeps all the time? The lion that doesn't seem to have done shit? They prefer that layabout to you. What's that say about your so-called happy citizens, huh?" I stamped my front paws, coming up with a desperate plan. A cunning plan. Faintly, I could hear the cry of birds getting closer as reinforcements—or spectators—zeroed in. Oh yeah, watch this.

I juke to the left, toward the outcropping I'd first nearly slipped across, and the king yowled like a barn cat. "The thief! Coward! He never could face me himself!"

I wasn't a particular fan myself. All I'd seen of the supposed lion-who-would-be-king was a big sad-sack cat that sulked around the bushes while the birds did all the talking, but this wasn't my kingdom, so I wasn't going to— Oh, who was I kidding? I was involved. "Yeah, he seems like he got dropped on his head as a kitten. Does that run in the family?" I asked with the biggest, roundest puppy eyes I could manage. They're pretty impressive, I've been told.

The king made one of those unearthly sounds that cats are capable of, somewhere between a mangled violin and a diesel roar. He pounced, and all I saw was a sudden wall of fur and claws growing, expanding. I dove to the side and hit the slate dirt the way I'd seen every action hero on Dorothy's pocket screen do, the way described in every comic book. A little "Zing" should have appeared over my head in CMYK red and in Comic Sans for how hard I dove. It was just precisely how I'd calculated.

Problem was, I was a very little dog, and little dogs are terrible at math.

I cleared the mouth—that was the important thing—missing the jaws that had opened wide to wring and shake my stout little middle. I almost

missed the claws, but the king was fast too, and one giant paw whipped out to readjust as I tried to dodge. I heard a guttural rumble of victory a millisecond before a claw the size of my thigh narrowly missed my throat and I was knocked off my feet.

It was extra unfortunate, then, that the rest of my plan went exactly as I'd hoped it would. I barely had time to yelp before I heard the screeching of a weighty tiger trying to skitter to a stop on brittle shale. I was swept up in a claw, twisting and tumbling. I caught one nauseous glimpse of the cliff edge as we careened over it, and thank god the king was too engaged to skewer me for peeing between his paw pads.

Both of us tumbled off the edge of the cliff. We were both weightless for a horrible moment before the world became a thrashing tumble of orange fur, rock, and increasingly brief glimpses of sky.

It's a big cliché that time slows when you're about to die. What does happen is that you speed the fuck up, because no one, not a single time-keeping neuron in anyone's body, wants to die squished under a moldering fat tiger at the bottom of a forgotten ravine. Your heart speeds up and fires freak-out superpowers down your nerves and hyperdrama powers into your veins, and you see, very clearly, all the ways you have, indeed, *done fucked up*.

My screaming brain helpfully provided the inspection I'd made of the cliff previously: how there would be no scrambles or pawholds to be found. I had to try anyway. I wiggled and wrenched, and either luck or despair was with me, as I finally tumbled out of the tiger's paws and into open air.

I'm free; I'm dying! I'm free; I'm dying! They didn't seem like fierce Bad Dog thoughts, but I paddled my legs hopelessly as the ground rushed up and the edges of my vision darkened. My eyes squeezed closed as I just hoped the end would be brief and waited for the pain.

I must have gotten more disoriented in the free fall than I thought, because when the pain came, it was a sharp stabbing from above. Something scissored into the thick fur of my thigh, and I shrieked as my leg was nearly yanked out of its socket. My eyes flew open as I heard a crash followed by a familiar squawk.

“Crow?” All I could see was sky, broken by the valiantly flailing blue wings of the jay who had my right leg in a death grip. I gaped at him, though I couldn’t help but notice we were steadily descending. “What are you doing?”

“We fly in a pack! Er, a murder! I’m here to save your ass, buddy,” Crow hollered between struggling gasps. “Well—*wheeze*—she might be helpin’ a little too.” He nodded his beak, and I tilted my head back as something nudged into my spine. It had taken this long to realize the chill I felt on my backside wasn’t the wind and the ever-nearing hand of death, but the long, flat beak of a kingfisher. Mere Fisher! She had gotten away! She blinked at me now with her yellow-ringed eyes and shoved us upward.

I twisted, catching just a glimpse of a crumpled heap of orange and black where Barth, the tiger king, had crashed against the hard river rock at the bottom of the cliff. He wasn’t moving. That was all I grasped before Crow “directed” us to a soft landing where the cliffs fell away to the river.

I arrived on earth not pancaked beneath a tiger, but rolling ass over teakettle past a sandpiper nest, and came up soaked in the shallows of the marsh. By the time I’d struggled my way out and shook off the water, Crow was preening in front of a couple of blackbird scouts who appeared to have just landed. “And then he challenged the tyrant in a round of mortal combat in the air! You should have seen it! There was a stirring soliloquy about the rights of fur and fowl before the king was defeated! And I—with the assistance of Mere Fisher here, of course—was able to extract our wounded hero from battle. We were just on the way back to the rally point.”

The forest crows turned beady eyes on me. “Wounded hero?” one of them croaked.

I held up a front paw with a limp wiggle. “Ouch. Agony.”

To tell the truth, the next day my ribs were definitely going to feel where that asshole tiger backhanded me, but I didn’t really want any more attention from these guys than we already had. There was something about the way the black birds glanced between themselves before taking off without a further word that made me uneasy.

“Maybe we should skip the rally point,” I said as Mere Fisher approached to boost me up into the sky again.

“Don’t be ridiculous! There’s the coronation to attend. We might even get knighted,” Crow said before catching himself. “Not that true proletarians care about such things.”

I sighed, resigned to another night of bird drum circles and berry-digestion issues. As if to apologize, Mere Fisher bowed her neck, allowing me to gingerly clamber onto her back before she took to the air. Like most things in the Beast Kingdom, that kindness, which was intended to be a dignified gesture, was actually a horrible mistake.

OceanofPDF.com

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT from an avian-based coronation in the aftermath of a bloody revolution, honestly. I had only a sketchy idea of the human democratic version, and what I'd heard secondhand from Dorothy's pocket screen was that even that had gotten a bit shaky back home in Kansas. So after Mere Fisher deposited me on blessed solid earth and I finished beatboxing the remains of my berry breakfast into the long grass, I looked around and got my first good look at our surroundings.

I had expected the rally point to be the same rebel base that we'd started at, the most secure location the birds had, but this was somewhere new. It felt even deeper in the forest, somehow, than the tiger king's gaudy palace where chaos had unfolded. The nearest trees I could see were old, even older than the rebel oaks, and the tall, spindly pines were bristled like skeletal spines rather than healthy Christmas trees. They reached stories overhead, stooping just a little at the top to peer over us and the low swoop of ground we all stood on. Mist, thick as a snowbank, wound around everything, almost obscuring any landbound creatures, like me, but I did see the antlers of gathered deer; the yellow eyes of some surviving wolves reflected in low light; and just below, where the fog let up, the soft-furred bodies of dozens of rabbits, squirrels, voles, and other small burrowing creatures of the forest.

Above the fog bank, of course, the trees were filled with every feather of bird that flew in the forest, all silent and proud. The silence was eerie after all the screeching at the palace. I didn't know what to make of it. The place wasn't scary, but it was...heavy. Ominous. Portentous, as one guy who talks a lot on Dorothy's pocket screen would have said—right before he probably

would have described something as having a “toothy maw” or disappearing into an “inky blackness” again. I hunkered down despite myself, and had time to ruminate before Crow finally glided down next to me.

“Gives you the jim-willies just being here, don’t it?” he said, blue feathers pricking like...well, goose bumps around his head.

“Where have you been?” I asked, shaking dew off my ears.

“Strategy meeting with Cloudfell,” he said, standing up a little straighter. “Crow business. Hush-hush, you understand.”

“Sure, say no more.”

“Big things happening,” Crow said, saying more. “Oz things. Emerald City things. These guys got eyes *everywhere*.”

“Bud...” Crow looked so proud of himself. I sighed and decided to save him from himself with a distraction. “This is a weird place for a party.”

“Oh...but it’s special.” He shook, and took a moment to preen, before continuing, voice awed and just barely contained to a whisper. “They don’t usually let outsiders to the kingdom see it!”

“See what?” I said out of the corner of my mouth, aware of the dirty look a gopher one bush over was giving me. “What kind of place is this?”

“Where new kings are made—and you can see why,” Crow said with a leading nod.

I did not, in fact, see why.

“The Beast Kingdom’s hollows! Where the forest began, as just a weak little shrub of pines, so long ago.” He gestured to the tall spindle trees around us, and I shot him a skeptical look. He shrugged. “Not all trees survive by going on forever like redwoods and stuff. The original pines themselves are gone, but these are their descendants, and they spread far and wide, stretching the length of what would be the kingdom.” He fluffed up a bit. “A wise and proud lesson for any revolutionary.”

“Die fast and leave creepy kids. Got it.” That finally earned from the gopher a scolding chitter that needed no translation, and Crow and I quieted down until there was a crunch of footsteps behind us. Crow turned, giving a startled flick of his tail as he made way for, of all creatures, the large, slumping heir apparent himself, the lion that would soon be named king.

Astor the wood dove and Cloudfell, his ever-present crow second, were riding on the lion's prominent shoulder blades. "Ho, there's the good men of the hour," said Astor as he spied Crow and me. The lion came to a halt, whether by silent request or simply because he felt like it, and sat down heavily on his bony haunch. Astor fluttered off like a prince descending from a carriage.

"Cunning work you did with the tyrant, Toto. A credit to everything the Free Wing stands for." He tilted his head in that way pigeons did—and that was another term for "wood dove," I realized now, as he strutted back and forth in front of me—and looked at me like I was a piece of dried bread he could pick apart or not. "You'll go down in history as a credit to your species. I admit, there's a lot who don't have much good to say about... domestics...but you are a credit to your people."

"I'm not—" The denial started, then stuck in my throat. Hadn't I just proved myself? If I was really shaking off the leash, these guys would be the ones to support it. I was among friends. But for some reason a twisting feeling crept up from my gut and into my chest with each word. It didn't feel right to say it to strangers, without Dorothy here to defend herself. I...I should wait until Dorothy was ready, or here—yeah, here to see me walk away. That's it.

The moment passed anyway. Astor was finished lauding and motioning to the lion like a proud car owner. "Soon we will install a new figure on the throne who will do the will of all free creatures." He fluttered his feathers in a way that seemed to be an unsaid *starting with us*. The lion beside him did not even turn his head.

Crow hopped around excitedly. "This is amazing. I've never been part of a *successful* progressive-action initiative!"

Astor blinked. "A what?"

While those two tried to come to an understanding, I found myself staring, having not gotten this close to get a look at the lion at the meeting. To be honest, the future king of the Beast Kingdom wasn't that inspiring of a sight. His frame was large enough, big, thick bones and a giant block head. However, his skin hung off him in folds, likely from a combination of

not enough meat or muscle. His amber gold fur was a matted carpet, glued here and there with streaks of whatever had the misfortune of coming into contact with him. His mane was even worse. It might, with great imagination, have once been considered sun silk in color, but it had long ago accumulated twigs, dirt, and tangled damp to hang around his broad face in heavy wefts.

“Couldn’t be bothered to take a bath before your crowning?” I found myself asking, as if I hadn’t been beaten up enough by large cats today.

A large head shifted by inches and a slightly crusty eye—a bright gold color, for all the tarnish on the rest of him—opened to blink at me. The lion stared. He flicked a glance at the two birds still chattering nearby. Then back to me. “Why bother?” he said in a low, quiet gravel. “No one’s here to see me.”

“If you want to be king, you’re going to want to make a good impression,” I pointed out. Had no one put this guy through PR training yet?

“Who said anything about ‘want’?” he huffed, and eyed me. “You don’t seem like much of a bird dog.”

“My ancestors were grounders, actually, chased vermin out of holes...” I said, raising my voice just enough so the judgy gopher could hear me. It gave a withering chirp but did begin to busy itself with cleaning its whiskers. “But mostly lap—er, personal-attendant dogs these days,” I finished, with as much dignity as I could muster.

“That sounds like a complex job,” the lion said, and even under my best scrutiny he sounded entirely earnest. He rested his chin on his dusty paws and sighed. “And a lot of responsibility.”

“Not nearly as much responsibility as being king,” I pointed out.

“One would think.” The lion was quiet for a moment. “I didn’t want any of this. I didn’t want to fight him. I didn’t want to fight anyone,” he said suddenly, even lower, with a glance back toward Astor. “They said they would take care of everything. I never imagined...I never imagined they could do it.”

I hesitated, but today hadn't exactly been a day for staying a safe distance from things that could easily kill me. I sidled closer to the mopey lion so I could lower my voice as well. "The birds, you mean? Then why go along with it? You're a lion!"

"Birds are *scary*," the lion said, at his most earnest. His whiskers twitched. "Have you seen crows? What they do together puts a lion pack to shame."

What was *everyone's* obsession with crows? Seriously. I rolled my eyes, but before I could respond, Astor had landed and dug his small claws into the lion's shaggy mane. "We're about to begin, Toto, so if you'll take your seat...Up, up!" The last was directed to the lion, who heaved himself up with a sigh and a creak of tired joints. His gold eyes gave me one last look. And for some reason I couldn't define, I wagged my tail in encouragement as he trod off in a slow, steady amble down into the center of the hollow.

They'd waited until the light was just right, a slant of sunbeam streaming through the pines to wash bare ground and stones with an anointing glow. Astor glided from the lion's head to a rock outcropping and raised his voice. It carried impressively for coming from such a small bird. "Friends of the flock, feathers, fur, flesh, and scale; citizens of the Forest Kingdom; and all free creatures who roam it, I beg your attention as we crown our new monarch in this holy place...."

There was a polite rumble of agreement, a clattering of hooves, paws, and wings. Astor was an easy orator as he launched into some prologue that quickly lost me because it didn't have visuals or a skip button.

Crow returned to my side practically preening. "Astor says, if we want to stick around, there could be a countship in it for us! Imagine that! Count Crow!"

There was an old-timey band that Aunt Em listened to with that name. I doubt Crow had heard of it. "We're not sticking around," I said with a certainty I felt beginning to grow in my stomach.

"Aw, why not? You said you were thinking of branching out from the kid, going solo—"

“Not here,” I said, switching to a whisper. “I got a bad feeling about this.”

“What could go wrong?” Crow’s voice had never met the definition of a whisper, of course. He was in too good of a mood. “You’re just tired. Or hungry. Have a berry.”

He plucked a very prime-looking specimen off a high branch and brought it over, but I had sworn off berries and was not, in fact, hungry as I looked across the hollow and saw what two wild boars were dragging out between them. A rustle of shifting wildlife stirred through the trees, and I felt sick enough to never eat another berry.

The body of the former king, tiger stripes torn and matted with blood, was dragged to the center of the hollow, leaving a long, gruesome stretch of dark stain from the bushes. The boars stopped, disentangling the tiger’s limbs from their tusks and dropping them, like so much loose meat, at the foot of the outcropping.

It was the lion who noticed first, standing dully a couple feet away from Astor as he finished his speech above. His bony shoulders flinched and he began to back up, and that was when I finally saw it: the staggering, nearly imperceptible shivering in the orange fur of the beaten tiger’s side, the shivering of hairs as the broken chest rose and fell with pained breathing.

“He’s still alive? How in seed and bloom did he survive that fall?” Even Crow lowered his voice in horror now. It was gradual, but the same kind of murmur flushed here and there around the glen. Astor let it spread just until it threatened to turn into a conversation, and then he nodded and his crow marshal cawed for silence.

Astor perched on the outcropping in a sun-dappled part of the stone, an utterly placid scene, a wood dove at rest. We might have heard him cooing if we were close enough to hear. Into the quiet, he spoke. “Do not fear, friends. The tyrant will not regain his throne. We have our new king, a king we chose as free citizens, to see to that.”

Astor inclined his head, and now the crows didn’t need to quiet the glen. All the eyes of the Beast Kingdom suddenly were very much on one scrawny, filthy lion.

From where we sat I couldn't see his expression, but I saw the hunched shoulders as his big head and matted mane wavered, wobbling side to side as if he was suddenly unable to hold them up. His ears flicked back and his head twisted as he mumbled something to Astor. I thought of the impulsive words he'd said a moment earlier—*I didn't want to fight him. I didn't want to fight anyone*—and I felt a distant sense of pity for the old guy.

Don't get me wrong. Cats, on principle, are not worthwhile in my book. Cupcake proved that. But this lion was acting more like a farm dog that'd been beaten one too many times than like a spoiled, conniving, box-pooing alien.

"Defend your people, as we have defended you," Astor said in a measured, reasonable tone. No one could play poker like a pigeon, and I was beginning to wonder just how he got that unblinking stare. *Birds are scary*, Lion had said.

The crow lieutenant behind Astor hopped forward a step, and I caught the flinch that Lion tried to hide with a flick of his ears. "*Beaten farm dog*" is right, I thought, nervously getting to my feet. Lion turned away and faced the prone, barely breathing body of the tiger, which had not moved from its position other than for him to take labored, shallow breaths as his blood slowly wept into the hollow's dirt. Lion took plodding steps toward him, hesitant, until he squared up his thin shoulders and— No matter how Bad Dog I felt, I didn't want to see what was coming next.

Crow made a sick sound. "Um...uh...for...the revolution, right?" he whispered, blue crest flexing back and forth with the stress, eyes flicking everywhere. "We never covered this in our chapter."

"Don't look, Crow," I said. "This is...uh, extracurricular."

I doubt that translated, but Crow was swift to give me a grateful look and duck his beak under his wing.

I turned back to what was surely going to be worse than Uncle Henry on hog market day. Lion was standing over his fallen cousin, still as a stone except for his ratty tail, which twitched anxiously. Or maybe it was just swatting the flies that were gathering at the smell of fresh blood and other enticements as the tiger lingered. The lion's head leaned down, and I

thought I saw a flicker of life in the tiger's face as an eye cracked open. Something was said between them, before Lion cut it off with a growl that sent me bellying into the grass. It quickly died away into a weak huff.

When I looked up again, Lion was lifting his head and backing away from the tiger. "No," he said, and then, more loudly, so it carried, "I can't."

Astor, who had settled into a peaceful roost on his stone perch, bolted six inches into the air before fluttering down again in outrage. "What? Of course you can. He's *right there*. We've practically..." He paused, probably remembering the audience. "I mean, the hated tyrant is due his trial by combat! You would deny him that, my liege? After all...we...have done...together?"

Suddenly, there were three crows on the rocks where there was only one before.

Lion kept his head hung low, miserable. "I can't kill him. Not like this..."

"Well, a different trial could be arranged—"

"Maybe not ever."

There were now eight crows on the rock, and Astor strutted up to the edge. "So you're a coward."

The lion did not respond. He did not even raise his head.

"You are a coward," Astor repeated, loudly enough for the entire hollow to hear. "A cowardly lion, and cowards are unfit for the crown of the forest. Unfit to speak for the Beast Kingdom." He shook his head, unblinking eyes still just the same. "You were our hope. We found you, drew you out of the mire, protected you. Good birds died for you."

Three crows and a vulture now joined the birds on the rock.

I was transfixed by the *new* very bad thing going on in front of us, but a delighted sound from Crow tilted my ear. "Oh, hey, guys! Come to watch with us? Look, Toto! The crows got the late seats!" I craned my head to see that half a dozen of Cloudfell's crow enforcers had evicted the other birds to settle, in a fan formation, in the tree branches around us. There were others scattered here and there and starting to position themselves amid the pines surrounding the hollow.

Oh, oh boy. This was...

"You were our hope," Astor was continuing, in the center stage of this disaster. "But you were not our only *choice*, of course."

Lion, who had, if possible, shrunk down to the size of his skeleton, tilted his head up in confusion. Astor cooed, and at that signal a sawbill snapped free the restraints...on one of the wolves.

A cry of distress rippled through the pines; especially present were high-pitched alarms going up from the ground creatures who had frequently served as the wolves' natural prey and playthings. I suspected life had not been good for them during the tiger's reign. Things never were good for the little guys. That's what Aunt Em would always tut when Uncle Henry got his gumption up about *poly-ticks*. I always wondered why she didn't just give him a flea bath like she did me.

The birds, however, were being surprisingly chill about this whole thing, as one of the tyrant's former lackeys strode forward—well, hobbled; someone had got in one good hit. The wolf stayed silent, and just looked at Astor. The wood dove sat encircled by his council and enforcers on the rock.

"He's..." A very quiet gravel of the lion's voice broke the pause, and Astor looked annoyed as he glanced at the lion. The creature's head was still bowed, but he was shaking it in disbelief. "But...he's a wolf. The Beast Kingdom people...have always been led by my family."

"It appears change is on the wing. I believe we can work with the good Rilke of the pack here, now that the misunderstanding of his prior allegiance has been cleared up," Astor said gravely, with just the right touch of regret for those having doubts. "I mourn that it's come to this, of course. I blame myself. I foolishly exposed you to the outsiders, who filled your head with cowardly thoughts and sapped your honor. Look at you now... pathetic." Astor tutted. "Some say it might be kinder to put you out of your misery, but perhaps it's best if you just...leave."

"But they didn't—" Lion started.

"Don't worry. The dog and blue jay will be expunged," Astor reassured, just as I heard a creak in the branches overhead. I danced around, barely

missing the first scrape of claws that passed through the air above me.

“Crow! We got to go!” I dove for the cover of the shrub, putting a foot through the grumpy gopher’s nest and ignoring the curses in my wake.

“Go? Why? They’re looking for a blue jay, not *me*. I’m sure I can explain and clear up the whole thing—”

“Crow, to your left!” I winced as he dove and came up a couple downy blue feathers shorter.

“*Hey!*” Crow hollered, now keeping up with our escape in earnest. “Those guys aren’t looking for a blue jay at all!”

“We’ll send a strongly worded letter once we get out of here.... Now just fly, okay?” I had to put all my energy into careening in and out of bushes, avoiding the legs of frantically stumbling wildlife. The smaller ground animals had also decided it was time to skip the ceremonies, and that helped us somewhat. The grassy areas we had to make a break across were crisscrossed with small, furry bodies; squirrels, raccoons, foxes, rabbits—anything with four fuzzy legs and half a brain was looking for a burrow to hunker down in until this whole thing blew over. It made the aerial pursuit more difficult, and I thought maybe we had a chance as we hit the meadows separating the deep wilds from the tamer woods we’d first encountered.

Then I heard an unearthly scream.

“Oh god. We’re dead. I’m a dead puppy.” There were not many apex predators on the boring old plains of Kansas. Humans filled up most of that space, actually. Sure, here and there we had the venomous snakes that were bad news for small dogs like me. Hogs that could fuck you up good if they were in the mood. Surly bulls on the farm. Coyotes. But things were pretty happy-go-lucky as long as I stayed off the roads and away from farm equipment and Dorothy didn’t get any funny ideas about singing and dancing on top of the hog pen. (She was a weird kid—what can I tell ya?)

But I was a Very Small Dog, and Aunt Em had one concern she harped on to Dorothy about over and over again. *It’s a clear sky on a hot day. Perfect hawk weather*, she’d say ominously to Dorothy in late spring and on the sweetest days of summer. *Better bring Toto in.*

A red-tailed hawk could be a pin dot in a clear blue sky one minute, then be carrying off an entire toy poodle the next. You'd find your beloved Hawk bait dropped like a whoopsie-doo with a punctured lung and an all-new neurosis in the next field over, if it made it. Heck, even if the hawk couldn't manage to carry it off, in the tryin' those talons still could pierce all sorts of things on any tender little sausage-puppy physique.

And the point was, ya never saw them *coming*. You just heard that eerie baby-from-hell scream.

"Dead puppy. Dead!" My wail morphed into a whimper. I think my feet kept on scarpering just for something to do as my heart sank.

"C'mon! We're almost there!" Crow hollered, with what had to be his protest-chant voice. "For the rev—for us!"

The zen of facing death must have set in, because I had half a moment to feel grateful for the companionship of that beautiful seeds-for-brains before a shadow darkened the grass around me. I flailed and flung myself forward to wait for *death from above*.

Instead, giant mud-encrusted paws *flumphed* on the ground to either side of my head, and I had just long enough to wonder if I recognized those matted claws before a lion—the cowardly lion—was launching himself over and ahead of me. "*Run.*" His gravelly voice quivered with helpful advice, as if that hadn't been *my* idea in the first place.

The bulk of Lion's form was passing, and leaving me vulnerable in the hawk-circling sun again, so I didn't bother to quibble. I bolted to my feet and darted under his belly as he ran. It was a little tricky running between four sets of filthy but still very sharp lion claws, but given the choice between that and what was waiting in the sky above, I'd take my chances with the claws.

"Are you trying to trip me? Why?" the lion grumbled a little pathetically down at me.

"I'm on your side!" I said, and it was true, for the moment. "Just give me cover from those hawks and we'll make it out of here."

The lion's rumble seemed confused, but at least he did match his pace so I could keep up and stay out of the line of sight. The hunters above gave a

series of frustrated cries, and I could hear Crow mocking them even as he battled to avoid their attacks. Lion stumbled, shuddering, and I risked peeking out from around his ribs to see black birds and smaller birds launching off his back victoriously with tufts of tawny fur in their beaks. Some of the bigger birds had flecks of blood on their claws.

“Shitheads! Muddersuckers!” I yelled, using words I’d picked up from Uncle Henry and the farmhands, because I felt so useless otherwise. “You guys are the real cowards!”

Finally, after what seemed like a slow-motion montage of scary noises and bad smells to rival the hog pen, we burst onto a sight I hadn’t seen in days: yellow bricks. Sunlight fell brightly on them as the trees thinned and the murder calls of crow murders and the hell screams of hawks died away, which told me we had to be—*please*, we had to be—somewhere at the limits of the Deep Woodland’s portion of the Beast Kingdom.

Lion took two steps past me and, careful that the bulk of his body was no longer hovering over me, collapsed into a saggy bag of bones and matted fur on the roadside. I like to think I had slightly more dignity, and I stopped to circle three times—always got to establish a security perimeter as a Bad Dog—before giving in to a panting flop.

There was an old roadside fence in the process of falling over into the underbrush. Crow helped it along by landing on it heavily. He paused to try furiously to preen some of his frazzled (and missing) feathers into place on his back before announcing, with forced cheer, “Well, we have struck a blow against tyranny!”

I didn’t bother raising my chin off my paws. “Seems to me we might have just been the lackeys for a turnover in management.”

“Well...” Crow deflated a little. A Bad Dog would not have felt bad about that. A Bad Dog would *not*. “At the very least...we have found a new comrade!”

Said new comrade let out a sad little noise that may have been from pent-up flatulence after the frantic exertion we just went through. I tried to block at least some of my superior doggy olfactory receptors out of politeness. “You alive over there, Lion?”

“To my great misfortune, it appears so,” the beast sighed into the dust. “I am a coward.”

“Aw.” Crow coasted down toward the apex predator with his usual lack of survival sense. “It’s not as bad as all that. You’re an *alive* coward. That’s a blow to the oppressors, my mentors always said.”

To my genuine surprise, that seemed to actually get through to the lion. His shaggy head lifted a bit and his amber eyes blinked at Crow, taking him in for the first time. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“That’s only because you’ve lived under the yoke of your own imperial societal framework your whole life, my friend,” Crow said gravely, being so bold as to hop up on the lion’s protruding shoulder blades and begin to matter-of-factly pick nits from his matted fur. “Even the privileged ruling class suffers from the poisons of the system. We come not to throw you down but to free us all.”

He was off on his speech, one I had already heard several times over on the way through the woods, but Lion, as I’d begun to refer to him in my mind, appeared to be listening attentively as he was coaxed up to his feet. I shook my head and took a moment to figure out which way seemed least wooded before heading in that direction, giant predator at my back. I won’t say it wasn’t disconcerting. I won’t say my hackles weren’t up. I won’t say maybe Lion didn’t cough once and I peed a little.

A Bad Dog would have done the same, okay?

THE WOODS DID NOT SEEM nearly so idyllic and shady now as we left them. Every bird's song or rustle of leaves in the undergrowth to the side of the road made me jump, Crow flutter, and Lion swing his head slowly, as if expecting his inevitable execution. But gradually the wide oaks thinned to small saplings, and finally gave way to the intermittent elm accompanied only by thick brush as we broke out on the edge of the forest and the unfiltered sunlight blinded us for a moment.

I blinked, recovering quickly thanks to the impressive wiry eyebrows—I've had more than one lady farm dog compliment me on them, thank you—that my ancestors gifted me with. However, when I did, I thought surely there had been a mistake, because all I saw was...red.

"Oh, the poppies are in bloom. How nice," Crow said behind me, one second before he said, "Oh, is that...is that...Scarecrow?"

My brain had only a moment to focus and appreciate that, yes, the fields that stretched out endlessly before me were covered in nothing but giant, lush red poppy flowers. Far over a rise I could see, cutting through the field, the yellow brick road, which we had lost so early on in the woods misadventure. But I was in a hurry to follow Crow to where he was already fluttering in a drunken loop: a blackened patch of earth, not far into the field, with a familiar weed-wound figure at its center, hands raised...over a prone form.

My pulse stuttered—

"Dorothy?" I barked fiercely, causing the mage to raise his head as I plunged forward.

“Don’t!” Scarecrow boomed, his voice seeming to carry through the earth itself. I stumbled back as the scorch sizzled our way. Bloodred poppy blooms died in front of my eyes, withering to necrotic earth briefly before being taken over by wet creeper vines and dark mushrooms that sprouted out of nowhere, hemming a path between us and them.

I hopped back and forth on my front paws, snarling at the assaulting vines before tossing my head at Scarecrow. “What’s the big idea, Weedy?”

“The poppies are somniferous,” he said; then, after a moment: “They put Dorothy to sleep. They are the work of the Witch, I would wager.”

“I know what soma—somni—I know what poppies are!” I grumbled as I trotted quickly up the hill on the path of devastation Scarecrow had made. Lion lumbered after, and came to a stop to sit heavily beside me as we reached Dorothy, who was coming around. She sat up and held her head. She looked pale and so young and fragile. All that I’d told myself in the woods about how she’d be fine without me, how Dorothy was nearly grown up and didn’t need me, was just another human—all those thoughts came crumpling down into a guilty oil pit in my stomach. I pressed my head up under her other palm in the way I knew she liked, and she opened her eyes with a gasp.

I’m a Bad Dog. You can’t trust humans. I’m a Bad Dog. I’m a Bad Dog, I mentally reminded myself.

“Toto! God, I was so worried I’d lost you!” She swept an arm around my belly and I was airborne in a tight hug to her chest, my neck fur already getting wet. “Never do that to me again. I’m so sorry. I turned around and you were gone and...” Dorothy ran her hand over me from ears to tail and—*Wow, hey, watch it, kid*—sniffled loudly. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Can’t breathe,” I yelped out between squeezes. She was hugging me so hard, it made my chest feel tight and my eyes burn, see. Though I had to admit, the hugs felt nice. No one had given the fur a good rub since before the forest.

“Dorothy, maybe take it easy,” Lettie said, with a wry smile, though she didn’t need to; Dorothy had begun to loosen her grip immediately. “You did just wake up.”

“Right,” Dorothy said, setting me down on her lap to rub my ears. I am not too proud to say I got distracted for a good moment here. You have not felt bliss until you’ve felt a good dexterous ape’s knuckling at just the right spot in the ol’ ear folds, let me tell you. “Whoever would do such a thing to such beautiful flowers?” Dorothy said, in what I hoped was not really a question.

Scarecrow kindly gestured to the sky. “She likely never expected you to make it through the forest. We wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for Miss Lettie here and her brother.”

“Sir Lettie, if you insist on a title,” Lettie said.

“Chop,” said Chopper.

“I see you two decided to stick around.” I was not surprised. Dorothy was good at picking up strays.

“Well, thank you both. And thank you, Scarecrow, for...” Dorothy paused, gathering me in her arms as she rose to her feet. She had a proper view of the devastation for the first time, and the flowers were withered for twenty feet on either side of the yellow brick road ahead of us. The path the Scarecrow had made for Lion and me was a winding path of black mushrooms and wicked vines that led from the forest. Dorothy considered this for a silent moment before revising her words, her smile only a little forced. “For trimming the lovely landscape for us.”

“I’ve a little experience gardening,” Scarecrow said with a bashful tip of his hat that hid his missing eyes.

The power of denial in these two.

“But who is this?” Dorothy turned, taking in the appearance of a *giant freaking lion* with the same approximate level of suspicion that Aunt Em regarded early mail delivery with.

“New friend! He wouldn’t hurt a crow.” Crow fluttered to land on Lion’s head to demonstrate his toothless nature, and tripped a little as his claw got caught in a patch of matted mane. “May I present...um. Hey, buddy, we never did get your name back there.”

“Just call me Coward,” the lion said, drooping his head almost enough to rock Crow off. The mats helped him hold his perch now. “The dove was

right in that regard.”

“Hey, now.” I wiggled in Dorothy’s arms and, thankfully, she set me down before I had to make a more ungainly landing. I marched over to the lion. “None of that. Those guys back there were assholes, and we do *not* let assholes name us, right?” If we did, my name would still be the horrific *Strawberry*, since the rancher up the road thought naming his unwanted pups after fruits was a clever idea. Thank the Great Wolf that Dorothy took a shine to me and corrected that. “What do your friends call you?”

The sad creature raised his giant head, looking at me with furrowed brows, then squinting up at the bird perched between his ears. He shrugged. “Lion.”

“Lion it is!” Crow cheered, entirely missing the point.

I stared at the poor big cat as he inspected his dust-colored paws and began to conspicuously lick them with an awkwardness that said he hadn’t bothered with the act in a while. I had a memory of Cupcake grooming his paws, laboriously. Of watching the feral cats around the farm doing the same thing. Of chasing the piglets and the chickens even though Aunt Em scolded me every time. And no matter how outrageously I had behaved during the day, Dorothy inevitably scooped me up under her arm, shared her blanket with me on the couch as we watched the tiny people on her pocket screen do silly human things.

I had lots of friends, and nearly all of them knew my name. Even Cupcake, who locked me in a condemned old outhouse once.

I sat there scouring my little dog brain for something helpful to say—dogs speak more through actions than through words, so I was coming up empty. But then a sparkling metal heel clicked past me.

Dorothy had taken one of the blue scrunchies out of her hair, and with gentle, clever fingers, she sectioned a pesky part of the lion’s mane that had fallen onto his face and caught it in the scrunchie. She affixed it to the side. She fussed with it a moment, until it was where she wanted it, then patted it, with a firm smile as she met the beast’s amber eyes. “Nice to meet you, Lion. I’m Dorothy. Would you want to go to the Emerald City with us?”

We're going to ask to see the Wizard." She paused. "We could ask him to help you too, if you like."

"How could he help me?" Lion said, sounding so morose, he reminded me of a donkey from one of Dorothy's children's books.

"I'm going to ask for a way home," Dorothy said matter-of-factly. "The good witch Glinda said he could help me."

"I think..." Scarecrow said slowly, "I think I will ask for more in my head than greenery. A brain. I need the intelligence to help my people... subtly."

"*Freedom!*" Crow cawed as he launched from Lion's head in excitement. "I'm going to ask for community action and equal labor rights for all!"

"Chop," Chopper said.

"Your heart is perfectly good," Lettie objected to her brother. "Stop it with that nonsense. The Wizard will agree with me." She said it with a tone that had an unspoken "or else" that hung in the air with its own confidence.

Only the sizzling of dying poppies was heard as a number of those gathered stared at the Chopper siblings, until the tin man creaked and began marching, slowly, down the yellow brick road.

"So surely the Wizard could help you," Dorothy said quickly as the procession began again. "What would you like, Lion?"

"Not to be a coward, I guess," Lion said to his paws as he trod next to Dorothy, his shoulder blades plowing up and down like gears under his too-thin fur. "So I will not disappoint my family."

"Your family are a bag of di—disappointments themselves," I pointed out, keeping pace on Dorothy's other side. "But I get it. I'm gonna ask the Wizard..." I paused, just realizing that perhaps I could ask the Wizard for something *myself*. Even if Dorothy couldn't understand me, everyone else seemed to be able to. Why couldn't a wizard? Why just tag along for Dorothy's wish? Wasn't the point of being a Bad Dog to do things for yourself, not just for humans?

"Yeah," Crow cheered, "what are you asking for, Toto?"

“I...” I thought about it. Asking to be a Bad Dog seemed too vague. Too easy. Isn’t the point of being one that you just *are*? It shouldn’t be something someone makes you. So, what...? I felt flustered. “That’s top secret intel. Gotta play my cards close to the chest, Crow. Negotiation advantage and all that.”

“Oh, hawk spit! We shoulda thought of that!” Crow glided down to ride on Scarecrow’s shoulder, ignoring how the mage grumbled. “You’re so sharp, Toto.”

“I’m just glad we’re all together again,” Dorothy said with a sigh. “That forest was so dark and unpleasant.”

I gave a little bark. “Kid, you don’t know the *half* of it.”

Dorothy couldn’t understand a word I said, but she found the crumbled remains of a biscuit in her hoodie, which raised *my* spirits as we walked out of the red poppy fields on Scarecrow’s protective path of death and devastation.

CITIES IN KANSAS DON'T HAVE gates. At least none of the cities Dorothy's taken me to do. Once we all piled into the station wagon and did a weekend trip to Topeka for a school event that Dorothy was participating in. Uncle Henry even snuck me into the Holiday Inn we were staying at. Aunt Em disapproved of any rule breaking, but Uncle Henry insisted he wasn't paying any seventy-five-dollar-a-night pet fee when "Toto hardly counts as a real dog." I might have taken that personally, but then Henry shared bits of his hamburger with me on the way home, and I figured he could call me a purple squirrel if he kept sharing Big Macs.

Every dog has its price, okay?

Point is, a proper city might have a big sign, maybe a landmark or commemorative statue to mark that *you have arrived*, but I had assumed "gates" was a symbolic term.

So while the skyscraper-sized wall of verdant green that came into view from a long way off was surprising enough, I was flummoxed when the yellow brick road came to an end at a giant enclosure at the southern end of the wall. Shorter, hunter green stone walls, perhaps only three stories tall, reached out to either side of the yellow brick like encircling arms, and a raised gatehouse of some kind sat on the top left "shoulder" of one of the arms, observing all comers from far off.

A riot of color milled in the courtyard of the enclosure, forming loose lines of individuals of every shape, size, fur, and feather trying to get in. There were short figures in bright blues that I recognized as Munchkinlanders, and then there were other Munchkin types dressed with identifying bands of yellow, red, and violet. There were large-muscled

humanoids in armor so huge that they hunched forward and supported themselves on one knuckle, glancing keenly at their neighbors with bright brown eyes. A beautiful fat woman in a vest and spectacles was escorted by three spindly mechanical creatures with gemstone eyes and wearing dusters. And there was a solitary trio of formidable-looking figures with feathered lower halves, like the Harpies in Dorothy's fantasy games but wearing intricately tailored vests and dress shirts while sporting half-shaved hair and razor-blade expressions.

All of them were waiting, impatiently, for the pair of stout and frowning guards in sharp-edged emerald suits and holding pearly screens in their hands to turn their attention on them. Dorothy and the others slowed as they reached the enclosure, and I quickly lost my vantage point to a cluttered view of shuffling shoes and plump calves. Above my head, Scarecrow began to speculate. "It seems to be quite a queue to gain entrance to the city."

"Surely they'll let us in?" Dorothy said, concern creeping into her voice.

"You have the magic slippers of the witches," Scarecrow reassured. "They have to let you in."

"I can scout ahead, see what the bureaucratic lackeys are up to," Crow volunteered.

"Yeah, what he said," I muttered, already dashing off between slow, clumsy feet.

I heard Dorothy give a half-hearted "Oh, Toto!" behind me, but I kept on going. It was just a line! What was going to go wrong? This was nothing like the woods. I skirted fretting Munchkinlanders and grumbling winged folk easily enough, slowing as I saw the crowd start to clear toward the front of the line. There was a weird buzz in the air, but I couldn't see anything from the ground. I focused on following my nose until I was just behind the wagon of the miner currently waiting as the trader ahead of him pled his case. There was that lime-and-copper scent again, this time on the wagon's heavy load. I'd scented that briefly at the village, and now it was here and there in the crowd, but heaviest on the wagon. What the heck was

it? I ducked behind one of the front wheels, thought my smallest thoughts, and tried to figure it out while I listened in on the adjacent trader.

“My gillyweed won’t stay fresh more than a day. Your salons are expecting me!” The trader was a young man with a linen scarf tied carefully around his neck; it was faded but obviously his best wear for a trip to the city. His dark hair was sticking to his head with sweat as he looked with some dismay between the two officials. “We come at the same time every fortnight!”

“The imperial seeress does not operate by gillyweed demands,” the older of the two emerald-suited guards said in an apologetic tone. “And the Wizard has declared that no nonresidents be allowed in or out of the Emerald City at this time.”

“This has to do with that uprising back in the lowlands, don’t it?” The trader was eager to reach forward and clutch a hand. “We Gillikin don’t hold with any of that nonsense. Not a single hedge witch tolerated in our villages, no sir! We toss them to the sea at the first sign of that; why—”

“Please step back, citizen,” the younger guard said with a warning tone. He had a bright red bottlebrush mustache that was twitching. “There is no appeals process on official edicts.”

“But the gillyweed!”

“Son, just come back next month and try again,” the older woman in emerald said, glancing nervously at her partner.

The trader, full of dramatic dejection, turned to go back the way he came. The mine wagon pulled forward, and I backpedaled away from the wheels and into the crowd again.

“So, good news, bad news,” I announced as I pranced back between Dorothy’s legs.

“Bad news,” Lion said as, at the same time, Scarecrow said, “Good news.”

Dorothy looked confused but scooped me up for a pet. I grudgingly decided to give Scarecrow seniority rights. “Good news is that we can get a *wicked* deal on gillyweed if we want to act right now. Make a killing.”

Chopper perked up, and I added, “Financially, I mean.”

“Bad news?” Scarecrow prompted worriedly.

“They’re not letting any new people in or out of the city right now. And I think Junior up there has a hair trigger about it. *Ooh*, yeah—there’s the spot; someone tell her that there’s the spot.” I leaned my head back with abandon as Dorothy scritchd just so under my chin.

No one communicated my message, but Crow dropped in, stopping Dorothy’s important work. “Bad news, very bad news.”

“The entry ban. I already told them,” I mumbled, trying to nudge Dorothy’s hand with my nose to get her back to business.

“No—*pssh*, as if walls could stop a *crow*—no, what I was talking about was the big honkin’ *geode cannons* pointed every which way over there.” He did a swoop, broadly leading everyone’s gaze up over the heads of the crowd to...

Oh. That would explain the buzzing I heard.

Above the enclosure’s walls were giant half orbs the size of hay bales resting in gleaming metal swings that pivoted them around in delayed intervals. In one such movement, one swung our way, revealing the innards of its sliced-open side. Its outer surface was a dull gunmetal-colored stone, but its inside, as it spun around and caught the light, exploded into a kaleidoscopic frenzy of sparkly white and pearl rainbow, all trapped in facet upon polished facet of reflective crystalline surfaces. At its center, pulsing ever so faintly, ricocheted a glimmering bead of light just waiting to escape the reflective prison.

“Is that a laser?” I asked, horrified.

Scarecrow just looked at me with a tilted head.

“Is that a weapon?” Dorothy had the sense to generalize. “You said a ‘geode cannon,’ Crow?”

“Yes...” It was Scarecrow who answered, a worried expression crinkling his painted-on face. “I remember hearing about their development in the news sheets we’d get from the capital. Something they dug up out west and have been going on about. I never imagined they’d arm the walls themselves with them. It was meant to be only a prototype, a new kind of energy technology. Strange that it’s not even green. A light of a different

color! It was supposed to be a breakthrough for bringing more resources to the edges of the Oz empire....”

“Figures that they’d first suss out how many people they could kill with it,” Crow said. “Scientists—almost as bad as bureaucrats!”

“I don’t...I don’t think that’s how science works,” Scarecrow argued, weakly.

“Point is, flying over the wall is out.” Crow landed on Scarecrow’s shoulder with a slump. “How are we going to get in?”

“Well, it can’t hurt to try the door first.” Dorothy had a stubborn set to her lips that I recognized from when the local boys tried to tell her she couldn’t do something. “I have the silver slippers, after all.”

“You put a lot of faith in those shoes,” Lettie said, with a skeptical glance.

“Glinda said they were special and I mustn’t ever take them off,” Dorothy said, subconsciously mimicking the faerie’s fussy accent.

“Glinda also said if we just followed the yellow brick road nothing would harm us, and that was a load of me-poop,” I pointed out. To no effect, of course.

Still, it seemed we had no better option than to wait in line. We snagged a spot behind the lady with the clockwork guards, and though she gave us a politely curious glance, she was quite busy fiddling with a milky white crystal device in her hands until it was her turn at the front.

“Hullo, Dewjon, Merrigrue,” the woman greeted the guards as her turn came. “Can I go in or are we going to—”

“No entry except for residents, by decree of the Wizard,” the taller guard said.

I could *see* the teeth-grinding sigh from behind; it was pretty impressive. “Play games and waste time it is.” The woman pulled what looked like a gold-plated card on a chain from her pocket as her mechanical storkmen whirled their heads back and forth. “Smith and Tinker’s. Guild cert and permit of the Tinkers’ Circle itself,” she announced, with what I imagined were amazing teeth biting down on each syllable.

The tall guard squinted. “No royal certification?”

“Nome has no king,” the lady said, with endless patience and a film-thin smile. “Not anymore. The Tinkers’ Circle is authority enough.”

The shorter guard took the card and looked at it briefly, as if she’d seen it before but was required to look again. “Looks in order, Dewjon.”

“Her cargo—”

“Three clockwork mobilia. Previously inspected,” the tinker said.

“Checks out,” the shorter guard confirmed.

Dewjon did not appear to like this. The taller entry guard huffed hard enough to make his mustache flutter. “Irregular. This stamp is from the border—a tunnel crossing? You’re a Nome Kingdom citizen.”

“A mortal failing you kind folk forgive me for,” the tinker answered dryly. I was beginning to like her.

The mechanicals whirred, abruptly turning all their odd, storklike gem eyes on the gate guard. This seemed to tip the scale. The guard shifted uncomfortably and gave an impatient finger wave to his partner. “Fine, hurry it up. We’ve not got all day.”

The shorter guard handed the gilded card back happily and leaned over to press a button in the hatch next to her. A panel in the giant emerald doors opened just wide enough (and very high) to allow the tinker and her creations to pass. “Welcome to the Emerald City.”

Nome Kingdom. Tinkers’ Circle. So there were other countries than Oz in this land, and there were what sounded like sensible governing bodies, but this place was ruled by a wizard and witches? Nothing made sense. I had just resolved to ask Lettie about it when they waved Dorothy forward. “Next.”

“We need to see the Wizard,” Dorothy said immediately.

One of us actually groaned; I swear it wasn’t me.

The tall entry guard gave Dorothy one look up and down, then rolled his eyes. “No entry, on decree of—”

“I killed the Witch of the East and took her magic shoes. Glinda the Good sent me to see the Wizard, and I’ve got another witch probably ready to show up anytime and start a *big* fight over these things.” Dorothy pointed one toe up and placed it, oh so briefly, on the tall guard’s knee. His

mustache twitched in shock. “Now, you can keep me out here, where that becomes and stays *your* problem when she shows up. Or”—she smiled, popping one Midwestern dimple—“you can ask the Wizard if Glinda was right to send me.”

And that’s how we got a VIP escort into the Emerald City.

OceanofPDF.com

AS WE PASSED THROUGH THE gates, I was surprised that the walls were comparatively thin. I expected a place that had walls that high and gates that, well, militant, to have walls thick enough to withstand an atomic blast, but I did a double take as we passed through. The outsides of the walls bore the plain jade metal that glinted in the sun for miles but, up close, dulled to an imposing and unsettling military drab that draped the gatehouse and the shuttered boxes and faceless cages we just passed through. But inside, just a few inches of difference, the walls gleamed. Not even metal. What I saw when I looked up was hundreds of feet of faceted glass...or crystals? Gems? Surely it had to be some kind of artificial glass, that much of it, that many miles of smooth, flawless surface, all of it an ombré wave of green varying from the darkest kelpy forest at the base, where we passed, to, at the top, a milky Ceylon jade so pale that it began to disappear into the clouds of the sky. Winding through it all, in places thin as a thread, and thick as a narrow waterfall in others, were veins of lime-shot gold beneath the surface.

The entire metropolis was surrounded by walls of these cut-gem planes, which disappeared by curving behind tall buildings to either side of us. “It’s like standing inside a jewelry box,” Dorothy breathed. I thought of the Bedazzler rhinestone booth at the Kansas State Fair, but Aunt Em never did let me up on the dresser.

Dorothy had picked me up and carried me so I wouldn’t get stepped on as we progressed through the crowd. The gates had opened onto some kind of trade port, with a large building emblazoned with IMMIGRATION, CUSTOMS, AND TAXATION backed up to a warren of impounded carts and strange

hexagonal tents. With the ban on nonresidential entry explained at the gates, I expected such an area to be relatively empty, but instead it was a thronging sea of people, even bigger than the crowd that had waited outside.

Immediately, Chopper and Lion took up flanking positions in our little group, using their strange presences to keep the smaller members of the party—namely me and Lettie and Dorothy—from getting crushed or separated.

Dorothy followed our guide, who kept a solicitous eye on her now that she was aware of the silver slippers. Her gaze kept on dropping down to Dorothy's feet, almost as if it was the *shoes* she was escorting through the crowd, and not the young girl herself. Rude, considering the brilliance Dorothy had shown at the gates. She deserved all her respect.

Dorothy's hand smoothed firmly down my back when I bristled at the thought of it. "Shh, Toto. These crowds are just people going about their business," Dorothy soothed, misjudging my stress. Even if our guide, this guard Merrigrue, was the nicer of the two outside, she seemed too selectively friendly for my tastes.

"Hurry on, now. I'd rather not stop for gawking until we pass on to the Green Zone," she was saying, ushering Dorothy and me into an elevator that seemed to be made of jade glass.

"Green Zone?" echoed Lion, looking around, with a dubious flick of his tattered ears, at the emerald light reflecting from every surface. "I'd not think it could get much greener, and I speak as somewhat of an expert."

"Low animals would take things at their literal meaning," Merrigrue said with an arch kind of pity. She shook her head, allowing Lettie and, reluctantly, Scarecrow to board before closing the gate in Chopper's face. "Weight limits, I'm afraid. Animals and constructs will need to take the freight elevator. Just over there. Grated door and big red lever. Can't miss it."

"*Cha. Op,*" Chopper said, with a leaden tone that I hadn't heard since we'd first oiled him free.

Lettie's eyes flew wide and she cleared her throat, rising on her toes to peer over the grille of the elevator. "It's a short ride, isn't it? Crow, you can lead the way. Hey, hey, brother...you *escort* them and make sure they make it *safely* to the top. Please? We'll meet you up there."

Chopper's shaded eyes swiveled slowly to his sister, axe hesitating an inch off his shoulder before settling back down. "Chop?"

"Yes, Dorothy and I will wait for you at the top."

"And me," I said, just to break the tension. "I'll be there too, ol' Tin Man."

Lead balls for eyes etched my way, then moved back, unamused. Chopper swiveled, starting a mechanical march in the direction that Merrigrue had indicated. A handful of squelched squawks and other sounds of outrage dribbled out of the crowd as people either moved out of Chopper's way or got stepped on with an iron boot. Crow darted after him, knowing his babysitting job. Lion gave Merrigrue and the elevator as a whole a baleful look and slunk off in the wake of the metal man.

The Emerald City guide waited until the crowd had swallowed them up, and then she set the elevator into motion with a rather self-satisfied series of clicks. I frowned at her from Dorothy's arms. "What gives?"

Merrigrue cast a slantways look at me, then glanced at Dorothy, who was looking around with obvious awe as the city fell away around us. A prospective tug of a smile came to the side of her lips. "Miss Gale's familiar is quite well-behaved," she said to Dorothy. "You people do not converse with your...pets in the cosmopolitan fashion, do you?"

"What?" Dorothy turned her gaze to her, a slight flush coming to her cheeks at having been caught not paying attention, a thing Aunt Em was always getting on her for. "Oh, no, don't be silly. Toto doesn't talk. Not like Lion or the creatures around here. That'd be odd." She gave a nervous chuckle, which Merrigrue joined in on as if to make her feel better.

I did not feel better at the victorious look Merrigrue turned on me for a brief moment before looking away, as if she'd been given permission to ignore me entirely now. "I knew you were a sensible one, Miss Dorothy Gale of Kan-saz. Only a modern, enlightened girl of the city could defeat a

witch and wear her magic slippers.” She smiled as if finally fitting our strange group right with her worldview. “Just a shame you had to resort to such extreme measures to make it this far. The journey must have been so... trying.”

“It wasn’t easy...” Dorothy admitted. “I thought it might be an adventure more like...” Her fingers flexed in my fur and I could guess her point of reference. The stories, books, pocket screen friends that we’d used to escape, if just for a little while, the gray world of the farm. Those stories felt different than all this. I rested my chin heavily against her arm, and that seemed to help. She scritched my jaw, right where I like. “I’m lucky Toto and I met Scarecrow and the others to help us.”

“Well...” Merrigrue’s face puckered into a searching look. “There are those made to...help, I suppose. You’re safe now, rest assured. Nowhere more secure than the Green Zone of the Emerald City.” As she said that, the elevator made a lush chiming sound and the gates again slid open on silent tracks.

Dorothy exited first, at Merrigrue’s urging, and she took two steps before having to stop and blink as her eyes adjusted. Mine were quicker, so I was the first to take in the changes of the Green Zone.

It wasn’t...green, first of all. Or rather, of course it was green, emerald walls still in sight all around us, and plenty of the basic city structure and so on was composed of that olive metal we saw at the gates. But the buildings here appeared to be brand-new, and built of a milky marble that carried only a hint of jade in its color. They were so polished and pale that they seemed practically white in comparison with the bright green walls rising behind them. Likewise, the pavers beneath our feet and the ornate ironwork holding up the streetlights were all of stunning, bleached shades.

On that perfect canvas people moved like delicate chess pieces. This wasn’t the exciting patchwork of colors and scents and species that had appeared one level down, but was an artful parade of one ideal model of citizen who strolled around the promenade. It was serene, quiet, and as curated as the neat bank of white lily-type flowers that grew to either side

of the elevator and had such a strong perfume that it immediately made me sneeze into the silence.

The noise made a passing businessman in a silver-banded top hat look our way. His mustached face did a contortion of alarm as he took in our party, at least until Merrigrue stepped forward with an officious raising of her hand. “Wizard business,” she said with the voice she’d used on us at the gates. “The beasts are under escort.”

“I should hope so,” the businessman gruffed, making another protest or two that made his entire chest bounce before he eventually returned to the sidewalk.

“Did you hear that?” I muttered to Scarecrow.

“She said ‘beasts,’” Scarecrow said, and I appreciated that I never needed to explain things to him. Brains or no.

“I get the feeling it’s not just me and Lion who are going to have trouble here.” I took a long look around the square as Merrigrue ushered Dorothy along, and I returned to what I’d noticed before: that one particular model. Nearly everyone we passed was a standard-issue human like Dorothy. None of the Beastlanders from the forest, or the birdfolk or flying men we’d seen at the gates. There were Munchkins like Lettie here and there, but not many. Fewer still who wore the silver-green bands that seemed to indicate status like the one the businessman had on.

Merrigrue had begun a rather grandiose tour of the Green Zone, and we made our way across the promenade of a large shopping square. There were broad glass storefronts selling luxury goods and fashion that seemed to get increasingly bizarre and complicated the farther we walked. At some stores I thought I could recognize fabrics from the carts being impounded from the poor Beastlanders and outlanders downstairs; they had now been transformed into spindly status statements and were being sold for what I suspected had to be one thousand times the price.

Eventually Merrigrue brought us to a stop in front of a discreet glazed entrance. Not discreet in the humble and hiding way, but discreet in the “too expensive for anyone who doesn’t already know it’s here, so go away” way.

A tiny gilded placard above the door read OZMAN'S FOUNDERS CLUB. "Here we are," Merrigrue announced.

"I heard that the city had become tough for Munchkins lately, but I'd figured that's what old folks said to keep younger ones from leaving home..." Lettie said. There was a rough undercurrent in her voice, like rocks caught just beneath the surface of a stream. "This smells wrong."

"I don't smell anything!" Crow said, too loudly, as he joined us, dropping in from above to land on Scarecrow's shoulder. "Hey, guys, did you know that other elevator was really far back? The guards didn't want to let us in at first, until Chopper, uh...Well, we got in, but we almost didn't make it. It took forever to catch up!"

"Imagine that," Lettie said, shooting an accusatory look up at Merrigrue. The guard looked over her, not even acknowledging Crow's entrance, or Lion's slinking up with Chopper marching stoically behind him. She kept her smile pinned neatly on Dorothy.

"The Founders Club is the most exclusive salon in the Green District, but I was able to get appointments for you and your..." She gestured with a weak hand at the rest of us. "Your entourage. Anything for those about to meet with the Wizard, of course. Now, before we go in, just know that the club is a full-service spa and all the expenses have been taken care of—so enjoy yourself! And...please do remember you are guests of the Great Oz."

This last was said with a pointed look toward Scarecrow and the rest of us, so I felt it was the perfect opening to ask a question. "The Great Oz?" I echoed. "What kind of name is that? I thought Oz was the country."

"It is, the Land of Oz," Scarecrow affirmed, taking on his usual thoughtful tone. "Named after the benevolent emperors and empresses who have ruled for generations. The great family of Oz."

"Not wizards?" Dorothy asked, and Guardswoman Merrigrue began to look uncomfortable.

"Oh, no, the Great Wizard Oz is a new arrival, having come to lead the Emerald City and the greater area only in the last decade or so...thankfully so, for the whole country was left in quite a vacuum of governance after the

disappearance of the child empress Ozma. He is said to be a distant cousin of the family, however, from the crest on his arrival.”

“ ‘Said to be’—no one is able to check?” I asked, smelling a rat. This was what one would call, in Kansas parlance, a convenient old pile of bullshit.

“He’s very popular,” Lettie explained with a dry smirk that said I was obviously not the first to make this observation. “And the entire rest of the royal family went missing years ago.”

“I bet he is,” I grumbled.

“In we go, then!” Merrigrue declared, whipping open the door with a bit too much fervor. Unfortunately, it was on oiled hinges that just exuded money with their expensive silence, so it didn’t do a great job of interrupting the exchange of glances we “beasts” had before, one by one, we were hurried into the Ozman’s Founders Club.



WHATEVER A MAN OF OZ was, he must have excellent night vision and a poor sense of smell. The immediate interior of the salon was a dim wood-paneled lounge softened by plush tufted furniture in luscious fabrics and leather. A woman in a trim silver-gray attendant’s uniform that had a faintly military cut to it and who had serene green eyes and skin so smooth that it was rather eerie, bracketed by pale blond hair that Aunt Em had called “corn silk,” though I’d always thought that stuff was rather stringy and nasty.

She gave us a closed-lip smile as Merrigrue hurried us in, the woman’s mellow gaze drifting over each of us before coming, finally, to land on Dorothy and me. “Welcome to the Ozman’s Founders Club. I am Coletta, and I’ll be happy to be your luxury ambassador today. May I offer you a beverage? Green Faerie?”

“Oh...oh, I couldn’t possibly,” Dorothy said on autopilot, like a good Midwesterner; Aunt Em had drilled into her enough times that it was polite to refuse a gift at least *once*. Sure enough, the woman already had a fluted glass in hand and was stepping around the wooden counter. The glass was

two-thirds full of something fizzy and, even in the low lights of the lounge, obscenely green. As she handed it to Dorothy, the fizzing bubbles were close enough to me that the smell of something sickly sweet and herbal, with a twisty undertone, filled my nose and sent me into a sneezing fit.

“Your familiar isn’t...sick, is it?” the attendant asked, taking a hurried step back.

“Oh, no...” Dorothy reassured; then worry hit her and she hefted me up awkwardly with one hand as the other was still holding that horrid drink. “You’re not, are you, Toto? He’s such a stout dog. I don’t know what I’d do if he—”

Unable to stand the fuss—or the proximity of that fizzing concoction—a moment longer, I licked Dorothy’s cheek. She broke into a relieved laugh, though a quick glance at the woman in silver said she was not charmed or amused. Whatever. Dorothy put me down, and I could finally get a better look at the ground-level reality of the place.

This is the thing tall people, even tall dogs, never understand. Everyone looks at the world from three, four, even five feet up in the air. That’s where all the deception is. Everyone makes sure things look nice from that angle. Tables are kept tidy. Skirts are pressed. Floorboards are swept. Railings are dusted. Everyone wants to make a nice impression, tell a nice story from their point of view.

But when you see the world from five inches off the ground? That’s when you get the unvarnished truth. Sweep the floorboards, sure, but down here you see where things are swept *to*. You see exactly which rugs things are swept under. You see the undersides of the tables, the railings, the... skirts. Listen. I’m a dog. Of course I’m going to nose under the skirts. It’s common courtesy. It’s a metaphor—don’t...

Anyway. The point is, the *truth* is down at ground level. Not up where Dorothy always tries to carry me. The moment my paws hit the floor, *Warm*, I noted first off. Heated tiles. Expensive. Even in the lobby? *This place does not fuck around*. I began to sniff around. The room was scented with oak and sage, even down here, muddling the smells of recent footfalls, but I could make out the passages of slippered feet and the more distant

comings and goings of very fine leather—attendants and guests. Strangely, muddled in there was the smell of hard rubber and canvas, a smell I associated with the military boots the guards had worn at the front gate. Not guards like Merrigrue, but the heavy-duty ones who had manned the walls. A heavy police presence in such an establishment was confusing, unless something wrong had gone down recently.

And then there was the fact that the floor was distressingly crumb-free. As far as I could see under the attendant's counter and into the shadows of the couches, there was nothing major. A couple stray dust bunnies of minuscule proportions, a broken sequin, and what looked like it might be a bit of torn paper.

"The beasts, of course, can be maintained in the domestic bestiary grooming wing," Coletta was saying. A pair of additional attendants had appeared behind her, dressed in a darker shade of silver that came off more like gunmetal than like anything more precious. They were broader at the shoulders, and one of them carried in one hand a length of fine leather that looked suspiciously like a leash. I abandoned my investigative efforts to subtly back toward Dorothy. I was dimly aware of the concept of going to groomers—poor Cupcake had to go twice a year, when the mats on his belly got so bad, even Mrs. Brumley had to admit defeat, and he always came back sheared and angry and smelling like strawberry-scented shampoo—but I had been born a farm dog, and farm dogs did *not* go anywhere that resulted in strawberry scents. Even strawberry patches didn't smell like strawberry scents trained us to expect.

"I guess the forest and all was a bit hard on us. Toto doesn't need much, though. He's perfect as he is. I don't think he's ever needed more than a bath," Dorothy said as she scooped me up by my middle. I squirmed to try to communicate my protest, but Dorothy just scritchd my chin. "He's excited, even! You'll be good for the folks inside, okay?" She held me to her face, and I tried my best to stare in her *traitor* eyes and communicate the depths of my distrust of this entire establishment.

"Crow, *tell* Dorothy this is a bad idea!" I hollered.

“I don’t know. I could do with a good dust bath myself. I mean, even revolutionaries got to take time for themselves—”

“Just *TELL HER, CROW!*” I barked.

“Shh. You’ll disturb the other guests,” Dorothy murmured, placing a hand over my muzzle and looking sheepishly at Coletta. “Sorry.”

“You’re indeed our only guests for today,” the hostess reassured her, with a smile that never wavered. “Once we heard we had a guest wearing silver slippers who had an urgent audience with the Wizard, we knew we couldn’t let you trust your skin with anyone else.”

“I don’t like the way she said that.... Did anyone else not like the way she said that?” I muttered.

“Me,” Lettie said, eyes narrowing. “Listen, lady. I am not really the type to get gussied up, so maybe I’ll just wait....”

“My instructions were quite specific, and your treatments are already entirely paid for,” Coletta said, all honey-dipped barbs. “I’m sure it’s different in your...village, but turning down such a gift here in the Emerald City would be a great dishonor.”

Lettie’s mouth clicked shut. She shot me a mute glance with a helpless raising of her brows, and grudgingly allowed another attendant to point the way through the curtain, where they would see to her and Dorothy’s beauty treatments. The attendants appeared less certain of what to do with Scarecrow and Chopper, but they eventually also had them walk, stiffly, through an opposite door for human guests. I supposed Chopper could enjoy a polish, but I pitied the specialist who got Scarecrow—what were they going to do, delouse his straw?

I didn’t have time to ask, because men dressed in gunmetal were coming, with a demeanor I didn’t particularly like, around the stand for Lion. Crow caught on quickly. “Hey, boys, so, which way to the spa?” he said, springing to the top of Lion’s head and giving a little prance. I could practically feel his inner comrade dying inside. “I am hankering for one of those mim—mimicsoas.”

“Mimosas, yes. Yum.” I wove between Lion’s legs, which were not moving as he hung his head. Certainly not threatening but not playing the

eager, dumb mutt—familiar? Why did these city folk keep calling me that? I couldn't be that familiar; I hadn't seen a proper terrier dog since I got here. "Lead the way, kids."

The big brutes seemed flummoxed by this. Perhaps they'd never had charges who talked back. Or maybe they didn't know what a mimosa was any more than Crow did. But they seemed to decide, after a moment, that they did not want to wrestle with a lion today, no matter how raggedy. I didn't get to see how they eventually coaxed Lion, as I was swept off to my own "treatment."

The farm is a filthy—I'd argue *interesting*—dusty place, so Aunt Em has had to issue an edict that any creature to be allowed into the farmhouse was required, at least once a year, to be submerged unto near drowning, so I am familiar with the human concept of a bath. The Emerald City residents really took it to strange levels, however. Instead of being taken to a tin tub in the front yard, all three of us were brought to an ivory-tiled room where brand-new attendants took over. The smallest one, a round-cheeked kid the others called Interne—strange name for a human, but I'd heard weirder since we landed in Oz—scooped me up carefully, and asked if "sir" would enjoy a selection of little green candies from a silver platter.

Well, *heck* yes, sir would. I ate half a bowl of juicy apple-tasting jellies before deciding this Interne kid was all right. She completed a pleasant brush-out with a jade comb from her pocket, and it did *wonders* to free the bits of dried mud and broken bark that had been buried in my ruff since the Beast Kingdom. The whole time, she gave quite nice little scratches and explained that I was in for a "spa day," which was something I'd heard about only in ads on Dorothy's pocket screen. I had a vague idea that it was a fancy park that city humans went to, but Dorothy never showed any interest, so I didn't think it could be that special.

When my wiry hair was free of the woodlands, Interne carried me on around a corner where there was a delightful little magic wand that showered warm water, and she let me approve the temperature before applying. We had a lovely conversation about hobbies—I tried explaining pocket screens, and she actually said city folk around here had something

similar! She briefly flashed me a round milky white crystal like the one I'd seen the tinker fiddling with at the gates. Interne was just carrying me to the baths when I realized...perhaps...not everyone was having as good a time as me.

"Fragrance is a stain of the bourgeoisie!" a familiar voice grackled across the cavernous bathing room as we entered. Spaced out in rows across the expanse of tile, a number of generous bathtubs were carved out of stone in sizes meant for every possible creature. From a particularly petite one set on a raised shelf and attended by a slender, rather harried-looking attendant, Crow was clawing his way out, half-covered in bubbles. "I will *not* bear the scent of the ruling elite!"

"It's chamomile, actually," the ginger-haired attendant said with stoic calm as he gently scooped Crow up around his blue body and held him but did not force him back into the bath. "Would sir prefer a different scent profile?"

"Freedom!" Crow hollered.

"We do not have that essence in stock. My apologies."

"Crow?" I raised my voice. Interne took the cue to make a small detour over his way. "Hey, buddy, not enjoying your...spa day?"

"These lackeys cannot buy my compliance." Crow lowered his voice. "You were right. This was a bad idea."

"You were convinced by chamomile, huh?"

"Scent of colonization!"

"I thought that was coffee." Some historical YouTube video on Dorothy's pocket screen had explained that late one night when we'd had trouble falling asleep.

"The reek of the oppressors is *varied and multitudinous*," Crow swore. He emphasized it with his wings and caught his attendant in the face. He always got so *melodramatic* in these moods, like he was quoting someone who had never rolled around in a little dirt in their lives, let alone eaten it. I much preferred Crow when he was relaxed and annoying me.

"Do you have a dry application of some kind?" I asked Interne, who had thus far been the most sensible of these Emerald City sycophants. She

looked at me with the same expression that possums have in Uncle Henry's truck headlights before she appeared to land on an answer. "Perhaps sir would like a talc—"

I'll never find out what baby powder had to do with appeasing Crow's revolutionary aesthetic, because it was then that a high-pitched squeal startled the entire bath area into silence and jolted well-meaning Interne into losing her grasp on my newly squeaky-clean sides. I tilted forward, being rather top-heavy, and only just managed to hit the tiles paws first rather than slam my freshly oiled snoot into the floor.

The source of the screech presented itself a second later, as the doors opposite the ones Interne had brought me through slammed open to bounce off the marble wall, driven by an attendant who was struggling to stay on his feet as he fled whatever rampaging danger pursued him. He looked to be a senior handler, wearing an outfit similar to the one Coletta had worn in the lobby, but it was askew, and someone or something had ripped the collar nearly in half.

"Assault! Someone get security!" The alarm spread through the large room, and each attendant, pausing awkwardly in the process with their client, looked around, apparently expecting someone else, anyone else, to be such "someone." Thus no one moved.

Behind the yelling attendant, looking much more together as she fastened the buckle on her right gauntlet, but entering with no less haste, was Lettie. She also had a freshly laundered look to her, braids starched and crisp as her clothes, armor given a blinding polish, but the tense frown knit between her thick eyebrows had me concerned. I was still smarting from my fall, but I started forward before anyone could intercede. "Lettie? What's wrong?"

"Chopper—Chopper's— Don't touch me—I don't need a faerie-blighted robe!" Lettie snapped as one of the attendants approached holding terry cloth out as one might try to herd a charging bull out of an arena. "Chopper's missing. I don't know when— He must have wandered off when these"—she caught herself, and breathed through her nose for three

calming breaths—“these *fine people* insisted I have a soak. I...*told* you how he can get. Please, Toto...” She lowered her voice. “Help me find him.”

“Right, right...” I glanced over my shoulder to see Interne already preparing what she’d eagerly described to me as a blueberry facial, whatever that was. It’d sounded delicious, at least, but keeping a murderbot from starting a panic in the city seemed more pressing. I trotted back to the gathering of attendants around Crow’s station.

“I am feeling fancier already! Really, you guys do amazing work, top-notch. Big city-type stuff. I’ll tell all the folks back in Topeka about you. Have you ever considered a franchise? Maybe Ozman’s—Juniata branch? You’d go gaga out there, let me tell you. So, I’ll just be off.”

“Your blueberry facial...” Interne started, though I could tell she was sharp enough to understand what was afoot. Smart kid, that Interne. “Shall I...credit it for your next visit?”

“Pass that credit on to the next dog that shows up, or”—I thought of what Coletta had called us—“familiar, beast...whoever maybe can’t afford it, though I suppose you don’t even let those guys in the doors....” I ran into the flaw in my charity plan. Lettie cleared her throat behind me. “Anyway, I have something urgent to take care of. Can you please tell Dorothy and the others to leave a note about where we can catch up with them, Interne?” I looked up at her hopefully. I didn’t trust Coletta or the rest here very far, but I had a good feeling about the poor kid. Anyone who manages to scrub the dingleberries from my fur without getting too personal about it gets five points of trust from me.

Interne hesitated long enough to let me know she really considered it before nodding, and I turned to go with Lettie. There was a clatter of bottles being sent askew and water sloshing behind us as Crow extricated himself from the bath. “Wait for me!”

“You’re soaking wet,” Lettie pointed out, avoiding the spray of his wings as he landed heavily on her shoulder.

“I’ll dry in the sun. I can help scout,” Crow insisted, then lowered his voice not quite enough to be fully conspiratorial. “Liberate me from this den of classist vice.”

“Whatever it takes to *find my brother.*” Lettie’s deeply put-upon suffering was slightly undercut by the hand that came up to stabilize Crow’s perch and give him a little sideways scritch.

OceanofPDF.com

IT TURNED OUT, WHEN YOU had a well-armed Munchkin with you and no well-meaning Kansas girl to gainsay her, the Emerald City folks were a lot more accommodating. No one tried to stop us on our way out, and we reached the street quickly enough, but not quickly enough to see any sign of Chopper.

“Did he say anything?...Does he even *know* anyone in the Emerald City?” I asked, getting a little nervous. Lettie’s stories were vague but not exactly...complimentary to Chopper’s people skills.

“No, we never left the county, especially not after he...changed,” Lettie said. Her tone was grim and I could see the anxiety seeping in across her features. She clutched her short braid with her hand like she could strangle the answers out of her own hair. “He doesn’t know anything about this place. Why would he just wander off? He *promised* me!”

That, above all else, seemed to crack her calm like a structural flaw. She kicked a nearby pea-colored lamppost hard enough to leave a toe-size dent.

“Hey, hey...” I swung in front of her next swing, trusting that someone as chivalrous as Violetta would draw a line at kicking adorable sidekick dogs. “He probably just got turned around, or something caught his eye, or maybe this place has wandering apple trees—you know how much he hates them. Right? We just find out where the finest wood grows around here and we’ll find your brother, lollygagging around.”

Lettie was no longer crumbling, and she had stopped to look at me. And I looked at her. And we were both thinking the same thing: *Chopper does not lollygag*. In my brief acquaintance with him, it seemed Chopper had two modes: rust, and sullen violence.

“We should start—” Lettie began.

“The shopping square, crowds,” I finished with her.

“Chopper didn’t seem like a consumption-driven fellow,” Crow said as he tried to take a perch on Lettie’s shoulder. She swatted at him irritably as we broke into a jog. He was wise enough to swoop up and ahead of us, scouting a path down the boardwalk.

“He’s not,” Lettie answered, with a worried expression. “But he loves people watching.”



THE MARKET SQUARE WAS A shifting sea of Emerald City’s elite out for recreational consumerism when we got there. Lettie scaled a lamppost to scan the crowd, ignoring the withering look she got from a food vendor. Crow swooped on ahead to see what he could find.

“See anything?” I had my paws full below, dodging the foot traffic and the giant velvet skirts that evidently were in season.

“Not yet,” Lettie answered, shading her eyes.

“He’s a seven-foot-tall *iron giant*!” I hollered. “How hard can he be to find?”

“Oh *no*,” Lettie snarled.

“So you do see him.”

“No, what I see are *Tarts*.” Lettie dropped to the street with a face set for murder. “Come on. This way.”

I kept up, but only because Lettie did *not* wait for the taller denizens of the Green Sector to notice a Munchkin in their path and make way. Several noble shoppers went home that night with bruised kneecaps and with firmly worded letters to write. But Lettie plowed her way through to a corner café that had a cluster of tables set out front. Holding court in the center of them was a very familiar-looking group of young men in button-up muscle shirts and suspenders.

“The crystal-print market is where it’s at,” one of them was saying as he sipped what looked like a green coffee with foam on top. “I call it CRYStO.

Print gleams are going to be the wave. Just you wait and see. The greenies around here will—”

“Where’s my brother?” Lettie dropped a gauntleted fist on their table before I could stop her.

The one speaking was a young Munchkin man with thinning curly brown hair all slicked over on one side like some kind of midtier banker. He smirked, making his soft cheeks even more punchable. “Lose your man, baby girl? Give me a smile, maybe we can help you.”

Honestly, the hot green coffee down his shirtfront was an improvement, in my opinion. The way everyone jumped up and hooted and hollered, I guess they didn’t agree. Lettie had hardly needed to move to do it. “Where. Is. My brother? Nick Chopper—where is he?”

“I don’t know your fucking brother! You’re going to pay for that, you psycho cu—” he shrieked, and honestly, his ankle tasted just as greasy as the rest of him.

I was busy dancing between the table legs and Tart legs when Crow finally arrived, swooping over Lettie’s head. “I found him!”

“Where?” Lettie slammed an elbow into the back knee of one of the taller Tart boys, then drove the pommel of the sword up between his legs as he came down. That drowned out Crow’s answer until he repeated himself.

“Blacksmith!”

Oh, well, that made sense. I extricated myself from the legasbord and ran down the street with Lettie as Crow led the way (though I was sad we couldn’t stay long enough at the café to introduce Oz to the idea of a pup cup). None of the Tartpatch Gang boys followed, which was a testament to either their intelligence or our efficiency. I’m humble enough not to say which.

Sure enough, when we turned the corner seven feet of lurking axeman was visible near a table set up at the blacksmith’s forge. Chopper stood motionless in front of what appeared to be a slab of half-finished merchandise, his arms at his sides, just...staring. The shoppers on the street gave him a wide berth, passing with leery glances and whispers, and the

blacksmith at work had her back to him and was bent over her anvil, apparently hard at work.

Lettie slowed, approaching her brother at a casual walk until she could draw up beside him. “Hey, Nick...” She waited, but no response came. “We’ve been looking for you.”

I ducked under the table, figuring that was a good place to be in case there were more aggro ankles—Chopper’s not included. The inside of the workshop was soot scrubbed but tidy, with tools hung along the walls and with various weapons and armor pieces in various stages of craft set along a bench. The forge crouched like a giant brick-and-clay bullfrog in the far corner, belching heat I could feel even from the entrance.

The blacksmith was doing some kind of fine work on the anvil, bending a heated metal rod. I watched with interest, having only briefly seen Uncle Henry hammering some old gate or fork back into alignment on the farm. Never anything like this.

My attention must have had weight, because the blacksmith glanced up and noticed us. She leaned back from her work and wiped her face before adjusting a wrap that covered her head. She had a brown complexion, and narrow eyes that seemed to be constantly inspecting for details. She had on a heavy apron, and light, snug-fitting clothes underneath that seemed protective more than ostentatious, like the rest of the city’s fashion. Her head wrap was the only standout fashion choice, a deep and brilliant bottle green.

“You his friends?” she asked, nodding to Chopper in his motionless vigil. When I nodded she chuckled. “He’s been there for half an hour, just looking. Thought he was like to be a thief at first, but...he just looks.”

“He’s my brother,” Lettie said defensively. She tried tugging on his hand, to no avail. She sighed and added, a little softer, “He was apprenticed to be a smith, once.”

The blacksmith paused before nodding at that. She took a step forward. “Explains his good eye. Those are fine work, but don’t usually catch much passing attention.” She gestured to the pieces on the table. I couldn’t contain my curiosity; I found a crate and hopped up to see.

The objects of Chopper's fascination were...children's toys. I tilted my ears in confusion as I glanced back and forth. There on display were a little tin toy sword, a toy shield with quite artistic decorative inlay, and, above them both, an even fancier filigreed little tiara sized for a child's head. Toys for the children of very rich patrons, obviously, but still toys.

"Chop," Nick said, finally moving to raise one hand and point squarely at the crown.

Lettie's face had slipped sadly and thoughtfully. The blacksmith eyed her. "You don't strike me as the type to have children yet, if you don't mind me saying."

"Presumptuous, but...yeah, no kids. No intention of them." Lettie rubbed the back of her neck. "I think he's just...confused. He used to make me little tiaras when I was younger. Come on, Nick."

Chopper would not, in fact, *come on*. "Chop," he said, and pointed again.

"You're being a brat," Lettie mumbled.

"How much for the little tiara?" I asked, like an idiot. As if I had any money.

The blacksmith huffed. "More than a little dog could carry." She eyed Chopper a moment, her keen eyes taking in the joints and joins, the iron-rust eyes. "Tell you what. Maybe I'm a fool, but this one's on me. You want to pay me back, you can return and tell me about who made *you*."

Chopper's head turned painfully slowly, and he stared at the blacksmith just as intently as he had stared at his prize. He nodded, and Lettie sighed. She picked up the tiara and placed it on her head; it sat like a small halo. "See, Nick? It's too small. I grew up."

There was a moment of hesitation during which the giant's gaze ticked back and forth with what might have passed for a strong emotion I'd been sure he wasn't capable of. Chopper reached forward and pinched the crown between his giant iron fingers with delicate care. Demonstrating a precision and agility I didn't even know he possessed, the iron giant carefully proceeded to slide the toy crown over one hand, up his forearm, and up his arm until it reached its limit around one metal-barrel bicep.

“You gotta be kidding me.” I was damn impressed. A little creeped out, but impressed.

“Let me affix that,” the blacksmith said, fetching a heated iron.

“You really don’t have to,” Lettie tried, but the woman wouldn’t hear of it.

“Are you kidding me? This is the best advertisement I could think of. Anyone asks, tell them arm crowns are all the rage and you can get one at Rizwan’s Forge.” She chuckled to herself as she heated dots on the crown and affixed it to Chopper’s metal bicep.

“I...well...” Lettie sputtered, and I could see she was a pup obviously not used to kindness.

“Thank you,” I jumped in, dancing as I hopped off the crate. “We’ll be back for one for each of us—and *paying* for them, I promise. You’re the best, Rizwan.”

“Just Riz.” She winked, tossing the tail of her green head wrap over her shoulder as she turned back to work. “Take care of your brother. Family’s important.”

“Yeah...” Lettie looked up at Chopper, and he finally looked down at her. I don’t know how she could read anything in dull, rusty iron eyes, but something passed between those two weird kids. Finally, Lettie kicked his ankle with a metallic clang. “Don’t run off again. Let’s go.”

“Chop,” Chopper said, and began to trot up the street.

BY THE TIME WE FOUND our way back to the Ozman's Club, there was a giant carriage pulled up in front of it. As we burst back through the lobby doors, we ran into the others, all newly groomed, and...a stranger.

Dorothy looked like some tourism board's idea of an Americanized goatherd on crack. Her skater dress and hoodie were gone, and they'd shoved her into a blue-gingham-over-white blouse that came up and covered her chest like a bib. Her brown hair was wrested into braids to either side of her head, pulled so tight that her eyes looked tinged with mild surprise every time she looked at me. When she scooped me up for a hug, I realized her chipped purple nail polish was gone and had been replaced with a delicate natural French tip that tickled as she scritched my ears, and she just *smelled wrong*, like baby powder and department-store soap.

"What did they *do* to her?" I turned a snarl on Scarecrow. "You were supposed to be protecting her!"

"I think she looks nice!" Scarecrow huffed. His straw was fresh and so well stuffed, it practically stood out in rows at his cuffs. The patches of his face had been darned, and I pitied the poor seamstress they'd put to that task. His eyes were still hellish holes of steaming darkness, but someone had tried to downplay the effect by drawing big false lashes around the gaping sockets with some kind of black marker.

"I look like a milkmaid." Dorothy sighed, flopping on the couch with a sprawl that would have had Aunt Em screeching. "But Coletta swore the traditional Munchkin fabrics would make the crowds happy, and the Great Oz watches the—dailies, she called them? Is that like Twitch numbers?" she asked Lettie.

“I’m twitchy as hell,” Lettie muttered, tapping her scabbard in a violent staccato. “First they parade you in front of all these rich shits—”

“Chop,” Chopper said, still a little quiet after his walkabout.

“Rich *shits*. It’s not swearing if it’s true,” Lettie insisted. “And then they corral us to make us wait around to finally see the man we are here to see? We’ve played all their games. Something is up.”

“I agree. I don’t trust these guys,” I said, though I knew Dorothy couldn’t understand me. “They *smell wrong*, I’m telling you.”

“They’re just busy,” Dorothy said, twisting the ironed hem of her dress nervously. “The Good Faerie said that Toto and I should seek out the Great Oz, and he would know what to do.”

“Glinda’s in on it!” I howled.

“Shh, Toto. It’s okay. We’ll see the Wizard soon and go home....” Dorothy hugged me close, cradling me upside down like she used to do when I was a tiny pup still chasing his own tail. It was embarrassing, but also...

This close, I could see the dark lines under her eyes. The signs of worry and exhaustion that the Emerald City’s cosmetics had not quite managed to obscure entirely. I could see the way the dress was buttoned too tightly. I knew Dorothy preferred loose tees and slouchy hoodies, not starched gingham so snug that the puffed sleeves pinched in at the soft chub of her arms. She was just as uncomfortable as I was.

But she was still trying to get us home.

I...humans are stupid like that, okay? They don’t know when to quit and look for better options. I was probably shocked by her stupidity, and that’s why I fell silent and stopped arguing as Coletta finally showed up, with another one of her endless assistant goobers, and announced that the Wizard would see us now.

“Oh, just Ms. Gale, of course,” Coletta corrected as everyone got to their feet.

“But we have requests for the Wizard too,” said Scarecrow, eyes beginning to weep a little shadow tendril in his distress.

“I’m sure you do, but Dorothy’s the girl with the shoes.” There was a flick of the pen over Coletta’s clipboard. I was beginning to envision new ways I could pee on *someone’s* shoes when Lion heaved himself to his giant paws.

He’d been cleaned up well by the Ozman’s Club salon. I wondered if Interne had spent some time with him after being rid of me. I hoped so—Lion deserved a little TLC. It looked like Interne’s work. His pelt had been washed and dried to a soft tawny fluff, and his mane, which had previously been more vines of mud and mats than hair, had been painstakingly restored. Silky amber fur ruffed in waterfall layers around his long, gaunt muzzle, expertly hiding the patches that had been thinned or cut.

“As a visiting sovereign, I invoke my right to escort the girl to her appointment.”

Coletta looked as if she had swallowed every fly in the animal kingdom. “I was given to understand your political status was more complicated. The Great Oz is very busy. He’s happy to see the girl who bears the silver slippers of—”

“The *girl* is standing right here!” Dorothy exclaimed, her shoulders hitching up and her hands moving in a gesture I could place immediately—reaching up to tug on the hood of a hoodie that was no longer there. The wash of sympathy I felt *wasn’t* because I was her pet, okay? It was because...because Coletta was an asshole who was looking at her like she was a living mannequin that had dared to topple out of place.

“Lion can ride in the carriage and walk us to the doors, surely,” I said with the least likely-to-bite-you voice I could manage. “Everyone can do that. It’s a public road, and it’ll make for one of the photo ops you like so much, won’t it?” I tried to wag my tail sweetly in Dorothy’s arms. She was no longer cradling me, but I could feel her arm around me tighten, clutching me like a shield. Even not knowing I could talk, she could tell this whole place was beginning to feel off.

“We’ll escort her as an honor guard,” Violetta added, looking quite the part in her newly shined armor, next to Chopper.

“It’s more impressive with a little pomp and circumstance,” Scarecrow mused, head tilted down so only I could see his canny eyes whirling shadows. His mouth quirked at one end as he held up a hand and a clutch of clovers formed in the stuffing between his fingers. He plucked the flowers and formed them into a boutonniere.

He approached Dorothy until Coletta made an imposing noise. “Oh no, folk trinkets will ruin the lines.”

“As you will,” Scarecrow murmured, shooting me a sly look as he diverted course and tucked the clovers carefully in the loops of my collar. “For luck,” he said with a weighted look.

“Uh-huh,” I agreed, not whelped yesterday.

Coletta’s rhythmic tap-tap on her clipboard signaled that we had shifted her train of thought, at least. “I could trade an exclusive with Arthur for that Pinxie incident...” She hummed under her breath before deciding with a final, hard tap. “Of course! Whatever Ms. Gale finds most comfortable.” She flashed all her incisors at Dorothy, which made me want to growl in turn, but *my* mama raised me right, so I barked instead.

“I’m not leaving you behind,” Dorothy murmured quietly in my ear, soothing me with a tender hug before she straightened my clover boutonniere. “Never ever.” And I stilled, though not for the reasons she thought. Comparing that promise with my own treacherous plans in my head.

And for the first time, I really felt like a Bad Dog.



THE CARRIAGE RIDE TO THE citadel where the Great Oz lived was just as much of a parade as Coletta promised it would be. Above our heads zipped whirligig jade gyros, which I imagined recorded everything for those pale white slate devices people carried. They had to be the equivalent of pocket screens in Oz. I hadn’t seen anything approaching that technology on our way here, but the Emerald City seemed like a different world entirely from the farmlands of the Munchkins and the feuding territories of the Animal Kingdom. Yet every people’s best goods and materials seemed to be

funneling in here, judging by the number of traders at the gates. It didn't make sense. If the Emerald City had so much, shouldn't it go in reverse?

I wondered this aloud as we were stopped for the eighteenth time for some dignitary or another to be seen shaking Dorothy's hand, and Lettie looked at me as if I were rabies-touched in the head. "Every quarter of Oz has to pay the faerie share." At my blank look, she waved her free hand—the one that was not resting nervously on her empty sheath. She'd been forced to relinquish her weapon before being allowed near the Wizard's citadel. "When the good faeries came to Oz and granted it their blessing, it was bound up in the land's returning its bounty to the magic to continue the cycle. The Emerald City, as the capital and where the original Oz ruler resided, is the center of magic in Oz. Every land of Oz, from Munchkin to the Winkies, sends their faerie share on to the capital."

"But what does the capital do with it? I haven't seen any faeries since we got here." I certainly would have had *words* for Glinda if we'd run across her, after the ill-advised journey she sent a teenage girl and house dog on *alone*. With nothing but costume footwear to aid them. *Terrible* human. Faerie. Whatever.

Lettie shrugged, and to my surprise Lion joined in with a slow, knowing tilt of his head as the carriage began to move again. "Whatever it was, it was not being fed back into the pact."

"What?" Lettie's squawk raised a sour look from Coletta, and perhaps only because of the covert nature of the conversation did Lettie bother to look apologetic and lower her voice as she repeated: "*What?*"

"The animals of the Deep Woodlands were finding...blight. Small dying-off spots, over the last few years. Spots that had previously been lush and rich with wolpertinger warrens. Recently, even a glade known to be a unicorn demesne had disappeared."

"Unicorns are...real," I said, because of course.

"Real assholes, those guys," Crow chimed in helpfully. "Sellouts, all of them. Bought into that virgin-culture nonsense."

"The crops had been failing, less and less left over after paying the share. More illness. More villagers had been forced to seek out folk magics,

small healings,” Scarecrow said as he looked ahead, scanning the people who loitered to gawk at our procession. Curious, I tottered ahead to try to see what he was looking at. From my perspective, what I saw first were a lot of plush fabrics and expensive, outrageous shoes—none made for an actual day’s work, but for displaying wealth. A sea of sundry shades of green, and above that, plump and glowing faces, rich with health but vacant with boredom as their gazes picked over our assembled crew, looking for entertainment. Their attention inevitably circled around to Dorothy and landed on her silver slippers; they were covetous and judging and... expectant.

As if they were waiting for fireworks.

“The villagers were not healing naturally as fast as they used to,” Scarecrow said quietly, still glaring at the crowds. “That’s why I expanded to small magics, hedge wizardry. Because people were hurting and I could do something about it, me and my herbs. At least until the faerie came.”

I startled, nearly getting stepped on as I twisted around to look at him. “You said it was a witch, like the one our house landed on.”

Scarecrow finally broke his stare, black gaze drifting down to give me a bleak look. “Your girl wore the magic slippers of the East. What was I supposed to think?” He sighed. “Anyway. There are four faeries—North, South, East, and West. The East and West are called witches simply because that’s what the others call them; they’re on the outs. Not that it matters to us so far below them.”

I gaped at the grass man, then cast a quick glance ahead for Dorothy. She had been waylaid by two nobles of the city, and now she was being half pulled out of the carriage to shake hands with a bony woman in a hoopskirt and a matching elderly man who had brushed his remaining three hairs into an outrageous comb-over that flipped back and forth in the breeze. Poor girl.

But it meant Scarecrow was revealing all this to me, knowing it was in confidence. I huffed back at him. “You know more than you let on,” I accused.

“Impossible. I don’t have a brain. The faerie took that,” Scarecrow said sadly. “Maybe the Wizard will give me one?”

“I wouldn’t count on it, the way our luck’s been going.” I sniffed my collar. “What’s with the clover, really?”

“For luck,” Scarecrow repeated, then added, a bit slyly, “And...if you run into trouble, just shred it in a crack. Clover’s horribly invasive. I’ll be able to zero in on the location.”

“If this is you without a brain, you’d be *terrifying* with one, Scarecrow,” I said admiringly.

He waved that off, but I could see the bottomless darkness of his eyes whirled a little more happily.

OceanofPDF.com

THE PROCESSION ENDED AT THE gates at the base of a glossy, obnoxious tower I'd spotted from other parts of the city. Its main spire was square, unlike the stylish curves and curls that many of the architectural designs had here in the city, and fluting off the sides were a dizzying number of ridges and balconies. About an eighth of the way from the top, a glorious prismatic canopy lazily circled what had to be some kind of penthouse, held aloft by invisible forces.

Crow broke the silence as we craned our necks. "It looks like..."

"Don't," Lettie warned.

"Well, not a feline's, of course," demurred Lion gruffly.

"*Lion.*" Lettie had a voice that replaced her missing blade.

"I bet he has it polished daily," I offered helpfully, earning what I'm pretty sure was my death warrant from Lettie, and a confused creak from her brother.

"Chop?" Chopper asked.

"Nothing. I'll— Later," Lettie said, turning a little pink beneath the freckles. "You're all miscreants. How did someone as good-hearted as Dorothy ever gather you?"

"You guys, we need to stick together," said the good-hearted Cheez-It-sharing girl as she edged our way, looking nervous. The guards were in an argument with Coletta, which I was sad to be missing, because Coletta looked *pissed*. Dorothy fidgeted, a stray hair coming loose from her braids. "What if he doesn't want to see me?"

"I bite him," I grumbled, which earned a nod from Lion and Chopper that I felt good about. Scarecrow had the sense to take a different tack.

“Of course he’ll want to see you. You wear the silver shoes.”

“Everyone’s so obsessed with the shoes....” Dorothy clenched one hand at her side and began to absently pick at the cuticle of her nail with her thumb, a habit I recognized. “They pinch and make too much noise.”

“Dorothy,” I whispered, too worried to care whether it was pointless, “Glinda told you to never take them off.”

“I just want to go home. To take T-toto and go home...” Dorothy reached down and began to fumble with a buckle, before suddenly there was a metal-gauntleted hand on her wrist.

Dorothy looked up, eyes red.

“Chop?” Chopper said with an unusual softness, dropped to one knee, though no one had seen him move. I was already at her heels and had the vantage point to see that his fingers on her wrist were featherlight.

Dorothy sniffled, not crying but staring with big eyes at the giant golem. I whined softly, and though that usually got her immediate attention, she didn’t look away.

I was thankful when Scarecrow approached and knelt with such a careful tenor that he was more like a knight taking an oath. He slowly extricated Dorothy’s hand from Chopper’s hold, which the giant released smoothly. Scarecrow turned Dorothy’s attention toward him as Chopper stood and clomped away as if nothing strange had happened. “Dorothy,” Scarecrow began with a gentle voice.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” Dorothy confessed to Scarecrow. I suddenly wished for her old skater dress and ratty leggings, the hoodie with the scuffed-up cuffs and the rubber sneakers that smelled of the Obedience School and the farm. At least she’d look armored, instead of childish and lost in a strange land’s idea of sentimental gingham and innocence. The pigtails made her eyes huge as she frowned at the hedge witch. “Glinda thinks I’m special because I slew a witch, but I’m not. I just hid under a bed with my dog.”

She was out in that storm because of me. Yeah, I know it. She was running away from the farm because she wasn’t going to let that horrid

animal control or The Man or anyone else have me, no matter what the other traitor humans said, and, and...

I'd told myself that she was intending to dump me the first minute she got to the city. But then why had she run out after me into the storm? Why had she thrown her body over mine during that stupid tornado and held on so tightly?

Okay, folks, you can shut it. I might be a Bad Dog, but I'm not stupid.

Scarecrow was busy trying to gas Dorothy up reminding her of their yellow brick road adventures. Reminding her of how she's got all those cheesy virtues of being, like, good and kind and sweet and beautiful and shit. My girl was not buying it, of course.

"Tell her she's the county spelling bee champ," I muttered to Scarecrow.

"What?" Scarecrow stopped midsoliloquy.

"Tell her. She's the freakin' spelling bee *Greatest of All Time*," I said painfully, because lord knows Scarecrow would have messed up the acronym. "And Tiffany Spalding wouldn't even know what 'crepuscular' was if it hit her in the face."

Scarecrow stared at me with his void eyes like I'd lost my senses, but very slowly he intoned to Dorothy: "You are the mage of spells bee supreme, I am told, and the one called Tiffany Balding was ignorant of a crepuscular attack."

"I can't believe *you're* the smart one," I grumbled.

"I can't believe *you* defecate on command, so we're even," Scarecrow whisper-argued back.

The huff that made us both look up was followed by a giggle as Dorothy picked me up again and shook her head at Scarecrow with a fondness I'd noticed developing over the journey. "The way you talk to him as if dogs could talk is really sweet. You're right. I..." She straightened her shoulders, and the heels of her shoes clicked in the process. "The Wizard will see me *now*."

Maybe it was just because she was holding me, but for a moment I felt in the air a glittering spark that sent every scruffy hair on the back of my neck standing up. My ears perked and I glanced to Crow and the others, but

no one else seemed to notice it in the split second before Dorothy was swiveling away with me in her arms, click-clacking across the tile floor with authority and right up to the guards flanking the cavernous hall that led to the Wizard's receiving room...and past them.

I saw the guards' eyes under the jade glass visors as we passed. They saw us and their brows furrowed, as if they absolutely had objections on their tongues, but then a flicker of silver glitter reflected in their polished green armor and they just...didn't? It was surreal, and we were five yards down the hall before I realized no one was on our tail; another five before I realized we were, indeed, going to charge into the legendary Wizard's sanctum alone.

Dorothy must have realized the same thing, because she slowed her step, awkwardly tugging at her skirt with one hand as she shifted me to her other and checked her horrible braids again. "Crepuscular," she whispered under her breath. It was the word she'd won the Topeka Regional Spelling Bee with last year; that's why I'd told Scarecrow to remind her of it. Uncle Henry had been busting with pride and had even talked about college without a sucked-a-lemon look on his face for the first time. I wagged my tail and strained up to lick Dorothy's cheek encouragingly, as she muttered under her breath with each step forward, "C...r...e...p...u..."

The hallway opened up into a giant polygonal dome that was so white and *not green* that it was blinding. After the hammering verdant redundancy and dedication to theme of the rest of the Emerald City, the brilliant shards of white that made up the walls at every angle of the hollow room made me blink rapidly and made Dorothy shield her eyes with her free hand. The walls, the floor, the ceiling—all of it was a glossy white that made walking into this room feel like walking into a shattered pocket screen, or one of those stores that sell them. Some of those shards seemed to have reproduced and broken away, sprouting out of the walls and floor at awkward angles and obscuring any clear path to the far wall. A faint mist coiled across the floor and made everything gauzy and impractically slippery.

Dorothy hesitated at the threshold, some of her magic confidence gone as she clutched me more tightly. She looked for a button or sign-in screen

without avail. “Hello? Mr.... Wizard?”

Something must have been voice activated, because the blinding white abruptly dimmed. Behind us, jade-tinted glass panels snicked down to seal off the hallway, then began to tint to dark evergreen like some kind of privacy glass. The lights of the confusing room dropped as the shards began to glow with their own light and a confusing spectrum of colors and images ran across them.

“You’re a girl, a daughter, a niece, a friend, a wanderer, a visitor...but *who* are you?” A deep voice flickered between the shards of light glass, dropping slower and more pompous and ponderous as it went. “Who are you? Who are you *really*?”

The room rumbled faintly.

“My name is Dorothy Gale...” Dorothy said, in that way only teenagers can, when adults appear to be acting dumb on purpose. Hadn’t Coletta planned this whole meeting? Surely the Wizard knew she was coming. I also thought the question was silly. “Do you...Do I really just keep calling you the Wizard?”

“Shhh!” The hushing sounded a little annoyed, breaking into a buzz of static before it was quickly covered up by that chill loading-screen musicality. “But who are you? Who are you *really*...*Dorothy Gale*?”

There was a pause broken only by the hiss of mist backfilling the way behind us as Dorothy and I looked at each other. Dogs lack the muscles to shrug, so I just released a small fart instead. No one but Dorothy was going to notice in all this fog, but she did make a face and put me down as she tried to take a step forward into the hazy room that was now being painted pell-mell with moving lights. “I’m not from here. My dog, Toto, and I arrived here in a storm, and a faerie named Glinda told us—”

“I know why you’ve come. All who come to the Great Oz seek the same thing.” There was a strange cadence to the voice now, and music began to drift in from somewhere, making both of us look up. Was that, like, synth? In the cavernous space above, hexagons of white were rearranging, pulling back to reveal a night sky, though it was daytime when we’d entered the

building. The music swelled, and a portal burst through the dark in a blaze of neon blue.

Dorothy gasped and—I admit it—I did jolt behind her legs. Listen. I might be a Bad Dog, but I’m not a stupid one. But the only thing that emerged was a strange man. Even from far away, I could see he was dressed in startlingly casual Earth wear: what looked like a black turtleneck and a dark pair of jeans that had never seen a day of work and, ridiculously, an emerald green trench coat over all. He had round spectacles and a slouchy knit hat on, like an aging adult trying to impress kids on the clock app on Dorothy’s pocket screen. And he had an odd transparent quality to him as he stood there, about sixty feet above the ground, floating at the edge of a fireworks display until he looked down at us. The smile he had prepared wasn’t so much pleasant as practiced.

“Everyone who comes to the Great Oz wants to be fixed. They want a miracle. Why else come to a wizard?” He gestured with his arms open and held them there, as if waiting for laughter, until he chuckled at his own joke. It was a harsh laugh, and my attention was drawn to another harsh sound, a faint buzz that I couldn’t quite make out over the music that was again jauntily bouncing along as the spiritual apparition of the Great Oz began to wander his way around the perimeter of the dome above our heads.

“Your Scarecrow has no brain, not an original thought in his head. A sheeple of the masses. A Chad, a *follower*. I knew that from the first look at him,” the Wizard said grandly, and paused to check his starlight reflection in one shard of white. “He seeks enlightenment, which really means meaning. Of course, I can give him that. I have a brain-growing program for even herb heads like him. Six weeks and he’ll be selling all his possessions to rent a micro yurt and work as a digital nomad nine months of the year. True enlightenment.”

“Oh, I don’t know if...” Dorothy started, but the Wizard was already moving on.

“Your tin man is a sadder case, of course. A victim of the modern push to infantilize men. It’s really quite sad. He’s forgotten his inner wolf, his inner Spartan. Look at how his sister leads him around by his nose. And

what does he think he wants—a heart? *Hmph.*” The man hopped down an invisible level, getting worked up to roll up the sleeves on his emerald coat. “The heart he needs is the heart for *combat*, that of a true warrior. He already has it; it’s just buried under all this guilt and worry over *upsetting* people, treating others’ needs as important as his own. That—*that*, Dorothy Gale—is loser speak. That gets you nowhere in life. Mark my words. I can, of course, fix him too.”

“Now, hold on—” Dorothy tried but was paid even less attention. I began to smell more than this gross fog-mist in the air—I smelled a rat. I wandered back to the door and tried to follow the wall around as the Wizard droned on.

“And your beast? The *Lion*? Ha. Hardly worth my time, but supposedly a symbol of virility. If you won’t part with him, I suppose we can find him his courage.” I found in the wall a strange seam that didn’t appear like the other shards. A sharp odor trickled from the faintest crack, so faint that even my nose had a hard time deciphering it. But it smelled bright and sharp—citrus, maybe? Familiar somehow, but I couldn’t place it above the musty mist. “My loyal Ozmen will toughen him up. We can march on the Beast Kingdom and disrupt the low-creature status quo within a week.”

“That’s not what we want!” Dorothy finally shouted, and I spun away from the weird line in the wall. She’d made her way farther into the room, weaving through the odd maze of panels to keep track of the wandering wizard figure above her. And now she had on her face a scowl that brought me a happy bark of recognition.

It was her own Bad Dog face. Her *But it’s not fair* face, her *Toby Williams kicked Cupcake and deserved that scratch* face. The face she got on rare occasions when Aunt Em spoke ill of Dorothy’s pocket screen friends or her faraway stories or her dreams. The face that all pups needed to survive in a world that was so much bigger, harsher than they were at first. Dorothy had it, even though so much of Kansas had tried to smooth it, civilize it, out of her, and I skittered back to her side, proud as a Labrador with a duck. My Dorothy was about to give a rare *bark*.

“Yes, Scarecrow wants a brain, and Chopper needs a heart, and Lion courage, but your ways sound horrid! They are good people as they are, and don’t need to change at all because the world is terrible. Besides, they are my *friends*.” She aimed the word up in the sky with enough force that the Wizard flinched at the novelty of it. “Glinda told me you could *help* me, but all it sounds like you do is belittle people to make yourself feel bigger! I’m not broken. I just want—”

“To go ‘home’?” the Wizard grumbled and recovered, though he wobbled in the air, flickering in and out of light. His shape appeared to grow as he scowled at Dorothy, expanded until nearly all that we could see in the ocular opening above us was his head. The circles of his glasses caught the light and did a quicksilver flash I thought I’d seen only in the Japanese cartoons on the screen. “Glinda sent you, did she? That changes things.”

The thing that had *changed* was his tone. It lost that balmy, deep, buttery presenter quality, dropping the polish of the light and flash around him. His lip curled and suddenly the room felt colder, sharper, all those shards suddenly becoming more like *shards*. “She’s right. I can help. I can send you home. I am the Wizard, after all. But I can’t—”

“*Won’t*,” I corrected with a snarl of my own.

“—help ungrateful little girls who don’t appreciate the work I do here. You need to do a minor gig—a task—first. Should be easy, with those magic shoes of yours.”

“A gig?” Dorothy repeated, wary of the word choice, as any teenager of the right generation would be. “What?”

“I need a broom. A *witch’s* broom. Since you killed the East, the West should do.” The Wizard’s giant face broke into that peaceful smile again. “Toddle on, now.”

“What?” Dorothy didn’t move.

“Kill the Witch of the West and bring me her favorite flying *broom* as a trophy. I love trophies. It’s like a reward,” the Wizard mumbled, face already growing smaller as a million points of light whirled around his visage overhead. I caught a snip of that scent again—what was it? *Ugh*,

there were things here that were so familiar, but I just couldn't place them when everything else was so weird and...Oh shit, the floor was tilting.

"Don't return without it. *End conversation*," the Wizard's voice intoned, and Dorothy and I skidded. She went to her toes, tapping hurriedly to the door to stay upright, while I mostly ping-ponged from one white partition to another, sliding on the quickly angling floor until we were deposited in the hallway, emerald privacy glass slamming shut behind us.

"Oh...oh shit," Dorothy whispered after a long moment of labored breathing.

It was the first time I'd heard her swear since we landed in Oz, Aunt Em's militant influence finally cracking under pressure. Frankly, I was surprised it'd lasted this long.

...Lime. That's what I'd smelled.

Copper and lime again.

IT APPEARED THAT, ONCE THE Wizard had sent you on a *gig*, word got around fast. At least, word got around to Coletta quickly enough. We found our guide absent as we were left at the gates outside the Wizard's grand hall, and a guard handed Scarecrow a card with a memo informing us politely that our all-access pass to the Ozman's Founders Club had expired.

"Oh, thank the Field Mother," Lettie whispered fervently. "My lady had already booked me for something she called a *wax intensive*, and I was really terrified to find out what god-forsaken torture she would think up next."

None of us were particularly cut up about losing the spa day, but it was the first signal that we were no longer high-society guests in the rarefied circles of the Emerald City. At least they'd allowed Dorothy a room to change out of her crazy folk-dress getup and back into proper clothes. She explained our encounter with the "Great and Powerful Oz" as we made our way swiftly out of the city and found ourselves, once again, on the yellow brick road outside the gates.

But we wouldn't be following so clear a path now. While we were inside, Scarecrow had been clever enough to acquire a map. I frowned as he ran a stubby grass finger through a gnarl of black squiggles toward the foreboding symbol that marked West's domain. "Another forest? Forest Kingdom, Lion?"

"Long ago, maybe," Lion said forlornly. He didn't even bother to look at the map. He was a few paces down the dirt path of the forest, sitting on his haunches as he stared at where a dark rise of brush started to dapple the grass, swiftly twisting into bleak, crooked little trees that grew into a distant

lurch of charcoal pines that were too squat and bulbous and too much at odd angles to look restful. "But it's been a necropolis of stone for as long as I can remember." He got up and began to back away slowly, head hung low. "It's...it's no place for a coward like me."

"Come, now." Scarecrow tried to reason with him. "I'm sure it's not as bad as all that."

"It is," Lion said morosely. "No hearts beat in anything that moves in that place."

Crow, at least, had the good grace to look as unnerved as that statement deserved. He fluttered around Lion's head to try to stop his retreat. "But we're comrades!"

"Then you should leave too." And when he passed, I'd swear Lion met my eyes with a heavy, meaningful look.

I felt a stone weight plunge to my stomach and I barked after him, "What's that supposed to mean?"

The noise caught Dorothy's attention, and she turned away from packing the basket with Lettie. "What...Oh! Lion! You can't leave us, please...." She started after him across the grass, and that was finally enough to slow Lion to a halt. The giant cat faltered, swinging his perpetually too-heavy head around as Dorothy crashed into it and wrapped her arms around it fiercely. I chased after at her heels, so I was close enough to hear her murmur, "We can't do it without you, Lion."

"I haven't done anything, young one," Lion rumbled.

"You have. Crow told us you stood up to your family, and you helped our friends escape, and in the Emerald City you made that horrid woman let us all go together to see the Wizard! You have done nothing but protect everyone since you got here. I think that's very brave. Oh, Lion." Dorothy refused to let go of his ears as the giant cat tried to pull his blocky head away. "I don't want to walk through a wood without you by our side."

"You are a capable warrior of your own, Dorothy Gale," Lion intoned while not quite looking at her. "And you have your trusted guardian in Toto."

"Shut your mouth," I muttered, licking my nose in a huff.

“I’m a coward without courage,” Lion insisted stubbornly, and growled a little as he glanced upward to beseech Crow. “You all heard it.”

“I don’t listen to *the ruling class*, as a rule....” Crow came to land on Dorothy’s shoulder, looking uncertain.

“And I’m a brainless traitor,” Scarecrow interrupted. “An abomination, I believe some would call me.”

“Who would *say* such a horrible thing?” Dorothy said with censure.

Scarecrow tilted the brim of his hat to reveal one side of his crooked drawn-on smile up at me. “Who indeed?” He shrugged and carried on with a grand gesture at Lettie and her brother. “And Chopper here is a heartless monster, a killer. Only suffered on the leash of a martyrlly woman.”

“Chop.” The metal man creaked out an acknowledgment even as Violetta narrowed her cold blue eyes and crossed her arms.

“My brother’s existence is not *suffering*,” she said in a tone full of grindstone warning.

“Of course it isn’t,” Scarecrow said. “We’re seeing who can tell the biggest untruth and flail themself with it. Isn’t that right, Lion? I have to say, being a coward isn’t going to win you the game. Not in this group. We haven’t even gotten to Crow or Toto.”

“What’s wrong with— Oh, no, I’m not playing this stupid game,” I said almost as quickly as Crow blurted out, “I got kicked out of the local chapter of the revolutionary unionists!” All the feathers on his head appeared to rise up at once, a giant blue bonnet, before flattening again in shame. “I was deemed a ‘security risk’ for my...nontraditional interpretations of self and asked to leave. I’ve been lying to all of you. There is no place for me in the coming workingman’s utopia,” he wailed.

“Means they knew he was loopier than a Munchkin tavern crawl,” Lettie whispered to me out of the side of her mouth.

“Shh. Their loss, our gain,” I whispered back, fondly watching Crow receive a sympathy cuddle from Dorothy. “He’s not so bad for a crow.”

“You mean blue j—”

“I mean crow.”

Lettie chuckled, and there was a moment's pause while Crow pulled himself together and jolted up from Dorothy's hand with a bright look. "Did I win?"

"Yes..." Lion sighed as he lumbered back around to face us. "You won, Crow. You all win."

Dorothy made a delighted sound, which was the happiest I'd heard her since we'd entered that dreadful green city. As she hugged Lion, the others all stepped forward to clap him on the hide or, alternately, affirm to Crow that there was not, in fact, a prize for this particular game.

Dorothy had arrayed quite a set of skills around her indeed. A cowardly lion who was still fearsome and clawed. A brainless mage who was twice as clever and sly as any of us. A heartless tin man with an axe that could... Well, perhaps the most impressive thing so far was that we did *not* yet know fully what Chopper could do. And a Munchkin knight dedicated to keeping it that way as she kept oaths to a missing lady liege. Even Crow, with his skills in the sky and with his network, brought valuable skills to the party.

I was just cute and easy to pick up.

I was still mulling this over as we began the walk down the trader path, away from the Emerald City, off the familiar yellow brick road, and ducked under the long-reaching shadows of the old woods. As we reached the edge, Dorothy paused and gave one look back. I could see her trace the buttery ribbon of road away, back through the red poppy fields and beyond, where it got lost in the bright foliage of the opposite forest. I wondered if she was following the spiral in her mind's eye, back to a little gray farmhouse crumpled in the middle of a Munchkin village.

I barked at her side, and earned a distant smile as she glanced back down. "I was just wondering what Aunt Em would think of all this," she confessed to me.

I wanted to tell her that Aunt Em had never met a new experience she didn't hate and she would have been scandalized into cardiac arrhythmia several times over by now, but I didn't get the chance, as Crow returned to her shoulder to butt in again. "If that Wizard is the city's governing

authority, does that make us mercenaries of the state? Hired to go to another domain and kill their leader and all.”

“Terrorists, or maybe the CIA,” I confirmed—having learned all about this kind of thing from Dorothy’s late-night pocket screen autoplay—at the same time as Dorothy blanched.

“That’s just what adventurers do!” She had, of course, also learned this from her pocket screen. We’d just been paying attention to different parts. (She fell asleep during the autoplay.)

“But a wizard must know what he’s doing...” Lion said with a frown.

“That man is *no* wizard. I’d bet my best bull penis,” I announced with authority. “Dude talked like a...” I frowned. “How long ago did you say he showed up here?”

“About ten years ago,” Lettie supplied.

I tried to do math, but I’d paid so little attention to the precise movements and passage of trends and time outside the farm, aside from what Dorothy’s current pocket screen interests were, that I couldn’t be sure. Ten years ago was a little before my time. I shook my head as we began the hike into the lengthening shadows of the dark forest. “Well, he didn’t talk like I expected a wizard to talk—that’s for certain.”

There was a grinding sound like that of grudging stone purging ore from its depths. “*Choppp...*” Chopper ground out.

“He did.” Lion sighed.

“Am I the only one who can’t understand a word he says?” I scrambled over a tree root that seemed to grow up in the middle of the forest path just to spite me.

“Yes,” Scarecrow affirmed, before returning to the conversation. “Chopper has a good point: wizard or not, he *does* perform miracles for the people who appeal to him. That’s magic enough for most of the populace of Oz. Magical aid is hard enough to find, what with the faeries divided and the fall of the Ozm—”

“*Disappearance*,” Lettie corrected through gritted teeth. “Our order is still looking for her.”

“The *disappearance* of the Ozma line...”

“But this place is brimming with magic,” Dorothy pointed out, shielding her eyes as clouds moved across the sky, the sun rippling unevenly through the break in the thick branches overhead. “There’s talking creatures and enchanted woods and magic things...I don’t understand. What makes the Wizard so ‘great’?”

Crow, who had been swooping from branch to branch, eagerly looking for gossip to catch up on since the time in the Emerald City had been sadly lacking in the crow department, paused long enough to drop down on Dorothy’s shoulder. “What’s so magical about a talking creature? But, I mean, the Wizard is the *Wizard*. Even the libertines got to respect that. He came from across the uncrossable desert.”

“On the unrideable storm,” Scarecrow verified with a nod.

“You mean, like a tornado,” Dorothy said with a skeptical tone.

“Nothing crosses the uncrossable desert,” Crow said, as if explaining things to a new hatchling. “It’s *uncrossable*.”

“We got that part, buddy,” I assured him. Could this huckster be from the same world Dorothy and I are? But then how was he conducting this magic the others were all certain they’d witnessed?

Nothing we could do in Kansas could hold up to the crazy shit I’d seen go on here; that was for sure. Not even pocket screens and Cheez-Its, and I fucking *love* Cheez-Its, okay? At one point, Aunt Em had worried about my illicit Cheez-It intake, and—against all her practical rural-pet-owner instincts—bought a bag of those hippie city-dog organic treats designed to *look* like Cheez-Its but taste like...well, I don’t know what the humans thought they tasted like, but they tasted like regurgitated cow snot after it had looked at cheese once. It was an incredibly dark time in the Gale household. At least until Uncle Henry got tired of my pathetic begging, tasted one of the city-dog cow snots himself, and proclaimed that they were not fit for a “real dog” and threw the rest of the bag out.

From then on, he bought two boxes of Cheez-Its whenever he stopped at the Kum & Go. Uncle Henry wasn’t all bad.

Isn’t. Isn’t all bad.

I darted a quick glance at Dorothy, like I'd betrayed her with that thought. It's not that I didn't *want* to go back to—okay, I didn't want to go back to Kansas. Who would? You saw that place, right? Grayness, speciesist attitudes, hogs, tornadoes, and so much dust...but for some reason Dorothy loves it. *Why* is a goddamn mystery, but even if I were staying and she—

I tripped, over my thoughts, over my guilt, and over another stupid invisible tree trunk. Which was why the giant stone claws that swooped down out of the shadows missed me by a whispering fraction. Just as someone let out a scream.

OceanofPDF.com

I RIGHTED MYSELF IN A PANIC, wheeling around for Dorothy. But the scream had actually come from Scarecrow, as he'd been the first ambushed. The fine vest that the salon had given him in the Emerald City had been ripped open at the buttons, and his straw spilled out across the forest floor. Two smaller stony creatures—gargoyles?—were tearing into his stuffing. They had wings and preternatural features like the decorative monsters I'd seen humans carve into their big-city buildings on Dorothy's shows. I'd seen them in person only on the small city hall in downtown Topeka the one time the Gales took me into town for licensing and a vet visit when I was a puppy. Uncle Henry had laughed at me for barking at them.

I barked the hell at them now.

Scarecrow was quickly deflating, and his witch powers with him, as he grappled at his attackers weakly with only puffs of leafy vines writhing out of his wrists to his defense. Crow dove and pecked at the gargoyles from the air, to little effect. The others were wrapped up in their own engagements, as the path had turned to a battlefield out of nowhere. Three stone buzzards with lashing tails took turns harrying Lion, who only just managed to bat one down and maim it between his jaws before another reassembled its body and clawed his back. Lettie was a roiling ball of flashing steel and rage, holding off a behemoth gargoyle that I refused to believe had flown here, as large as it was. Easily as large as a Munchkin farmhouse, it blocked the path behind us so we couldn't retreat. Lettie ducked under its battering limbs, each fist the size of her entire body, but

her powerful, armored strikes only chipped flinty scales and made the beast's bleak malachite eyes darken.

I heard a laugh come from the other end of the path. A *laugh*. The culprit was the other Munchkin sibling. Chopper was weighed down under the combined force of half a dozen stone creatures of varying sizes. His metal sides were crumpled and dinged, as if they'd dropped on him from the sky for maximum force. But they'd miscalculated, not aiming for his axe arms. He was swinging—chopping (*His favorite*, I heard Lettie saying in my head)—and laughing in that hollow penny-in-a-tin-can voice that had up until now said only one word. “Chop. Chop. *Chop*.”

Bits of rubble had begun to gather around his crumpling legs, but shadows darted and swarmed over the ground, and as I looked up I saw dozens more of the creatures dropping in. A fresh wave, reinforcements. I burst from my hiding place and ran to help Scarecrow. If he could create some kind of cover with plants and vines, we needed to retreat, get to—

Two winged gargoyles stood over a scattered pile of fresh green hay and bits of dark, withering vine caught up in torn strips of cloth and fine leather boots. A wide-brimmed hat that had always shaded pitiless eyes and clever secrets was tilted on its side, open to the monster-filled sky.

A startled, furious shriek cut through the air, and this time I knew it was Dorothy's.

Two large flying creatures had her and, this close, I realized they were not *entirely* of stone. Flint-leather wings half hid her body as they grappled with her and she kicked and spit and bit furiously to get away. Dorothy, my human, would not be simply *taken* without a fight. Maybe she was a Bad Dog too.

That *thing* cracked beneath my ribs again. That lava-burst feeling, only ten times stronger than it had been in the forest. It was something old and fierce and feral and *primal*. A disconcerting feeling rumbled out of my chest with a snarl then. I like to think of myself as a very civilized dog. A perfect specimen of educated companionship, despite my low beginnings. Sure, I was whelped in the back of a Dodge flatbed, and the Gales picked me out of a cardboard box wedged between carrots and crocheted TP cozies at the

farmers market, but I am a modern dog who gets to sleep on the bed and eat Cheez-Its and is an expert on the rules of pocket screen shows.

But I'm also a pup of a pup of a pup of a hundred pups back who made a slow, cautious deal by a campfire hundreds and thousands of dog years back. Back when we were all Bad Dogs, and even Bad Dogs—maybe especially Bad Dogs—knew the importance of protecting what was theirs.

Dorothy screamed, and was struggling, and I *was* a Bad Dog as a growl ripped through my chest bigger than Lion, harder than Chopper, darker than Scarecrow. I lunged across the path and leapt on the nearest leathery wing, tearing into it with small teeth made to punch into the necks of vermin and not let go.

The forest blurred in my vision as the gargoyle whipped around, and I felt claws scramble, grasp my back leg, and pull painfully. I huffed a yelp but didn't release my jaws. Instead I shook my head, worrying at the place I'd locked onto, wishing I could taste more than gritty dust. The giant ass could pull my legs off, see if I cared. He wasn't flying off with *my* Bad Dorothy, not with me latched to his wing.

I was just relishing this Bad thought when two stone *twigs* shoved themselves directly up my nostrils and formed painful *hooks* directly in my sinuses.

My vision went white as I spasmed reflexively, letting go with a painful howl. Instead of falling to the ground, I was hooked by something around the chest, and those painful hooks grabbed my scruff and I felt myself hefted *up*. By the time the shrieking pain cleared from my vision, I realized I was even with the treetops and Dorothy was a few yards away from me, gaining height even faster than me as she faltered in her struggle against the two giant gargoyles that had now succeeded in dragging her into the air.

Twisting my head against the grip on my neck, I could just barely see my own captor. I was being hauled off by a single flying stone beast, and a much smaller one at that. I combat scrambled all four of my paws against nothing, only occasionally brushing the tips of tree branches, until those shrank below me and I could only bark my head off at the others, left wounded and stunned on the path below.

OceanofPDF.com

DOGS WERE NOT MEANT TO fly. Moreover, dogs were not meant to *fall*. I was perfectly fine being carried when the operation was undertaken by a trained and certified human. We canines had spent *thousands* of years selectively breeding humans for that job, and I like to think Dorothy was a prime example of the perfection of the evolution. She *never* dropped me; she kept her feet on the ground, and squeezed me around the middle only when something really wild was going on.

I could *not* say the same for my current captor. Zero stars, no tip. The tops of pine trees wheeled in and out of focus, smearing across my vision, as stabby little hands with fingers as sharp as fork tines squished and squeezed all over my body. When they changed their grip for the eightieth time in ten minutes, I had swung all the way around from terror to irritation. “I’m a terrier, not a fidget toy, you goon!”

The knife hands froze, but if they replied I couldn’t hear them over the rush of wind. I should have lost my temper in a more comfortable position. As it was, I was left dangling upside down for the rest of the trip, so I had to twist my neck as black rock rose out of the western forest.

The forest ran up into the foothills, right up to the mountains, like an aggressive neighbor, causing the mountaintops to almost lurch out of the mist-laden green like a wound. The mountain range ran back, growing to greater heights on the horizon, though the peaks seemed muted with rubble. But there, at the leading edge, perched over the western forest like a gloating black blight, was a fortress of stone. A castle. The Witch of the West’s castle? I had to assume that was our destination. Who else would extend an invite with inept flying garden gnomes?

The wind cut off as we abruptly started to descend rapidly. The dark walls, which had been bleak from afar, were in actuality textured and chipped with green mica, I saw as we swung past. I nearly smashed my face into the pavers as we landed in a square courtyard and I was dropped ungracefully.

The impact stung all the way through my paws. I tried to bolt to my feet anyway, but those stupid *knife hands* were right there, grabbing my collar before I could get my bearings. I twisted around to glare, but all I could see were a glint of metal and the edge of a stony wing like the rest of them. *Asshole.*

The courtyard was full of assholes, tons of those flying gargoyle creatures lining the walls and looking down on Dorothy and me from upper walkways. With this many in one place, I could see now that there was a great variety in their stone composition. Some were nearly entirely stone, like the attackers that had focused on Chopper in the forest. Others had scaly leather hide exposed; a rare few young ones even had ruffs of faint fur around their faces, with mottles of scabby rock and coral growing and spreading over them like barnacles. Most of them were armed. All of them were frowning at us like *we* were the problem. I decided to keep calling them gargoyles just for that.

Dorothy had been brought to earth more gently, and was standing with her arms wrapped around her chest between two of the bigger gargoyles. I barked to get her attention, and her face lit up briefly, until a door opened at one end of the courtyard.

The Witch wore the same odd clothes as before, and that wild, gauzy knit cardigan swirled behind her like a storm cloud as she strode in. But there was no choking smoke this time, no screaming Munchkins. The army of flying gargoyles balanced it out maybe, but still, I felt off-kilter as she stopped in front of Dorothy with an impatient glare.

“So. Here you are, still in Oz. You didn’t find what you were looking for in the Emerald City?” the Witch asked. “The ‘Great and Powerful Oz’ turn out to be not as great and powerful as you’d hoped?” She watched Dorothy’s face and gave a curious tilt of her head. “Or just not as helpful?”

“He told us how you’re the cause of so much suffering,” Dorothy said quietly.

“You believe everything men like him tell you?” the Witch snorted, but there was a drop in her shoulders as she glanced away. I’d almost have sworn she was disappointed. “Figures.”

“Bet this is where you tell us it’s actually *his* fault,” I muttered.

The Witch snapped her fingers, and the clumsy gargoyle holding me somehow levitated three feet off the ground. I was suspended by my scruff, which had not happened since I was a pup, and let me tell you, some things dogs *do* grow out of.

“Ow, ow, the *collar*...!” I hissed.

“Sorry! Sorry! Not my...I mean...” A soft voice behind me coughed and dropped deeper, a few pebbles purposefully added into its register. “Er, that’s what you get for being lippy, short stuff!”

“Please don’t hurt him.” Dorothy stepped forward with a hand up. “I know you want the slippers, but I’ve already tried. They won’t come off.”

The Witch met her with a flinty glare, snapping her fingers again, and both I and the gargoyle holding me dropped back to the ground with a thump. My soft canine body provided a nice padded landing for the stone pest falling on top of me.

“Ow!” I didn’t bother hiding the yelp as elbows flailed all over my spine.

“Sorry! I’ll just...Oh goodness, you’re so squishy and slippery, so much hair and...”

“You’re a terrible jailer,” I hissed.

“I’m *new*, okay?” the small gargoyle hissed back as she rolled off me and helped me up with a tentative grip around my waist. “Shh. You’ll get us in trouble.”

“*Us*,” I thought sourly, but I was too busy to indulge in reporting a minion to her supervisor. The Witch was advancing on Dorothy now, and the bigger, mostly stone creatures shifted around the castle courtyard with rumbling anticipation. “The Wizard sent you, didn’t he? You were headed this way before the Rooks got you.” She made a vague gesture to the

creatures I'd been considering gargoyles. *Rooks*. I swiveled my head around to sniff at the little one holding me again, and they—she? I only now noticed a green band of ribbon jauntily holding back her tight coils of moss-and-coral hair—gave me a toothy smile. The Witch pressed forward. “Give me my slippers or I’ll drown your stupid dog, thief,” the Witch said, with her hands stiff at her sides now.

Dorothy’s cheeks were flushed, but there was something different about her. I sniffed the air, trying to parse it. A hard jut to her chin, the way her feet, stupid sparkling silver footwear and all, were braced slightly apart, and she had her hoodie zipped up to her chin. I marveled that I could still feel Scarecrow’s tiny clover boutonniere tickling my chin. An idea sparked in my head.

There was a tremble in her hands, but she was still trying to be a Bad Dog, my Dorothy. “You know I can’t,” she said in a small, tight voice. “I don’t know what the Wizard wants. He told us there was...a magic sword in that forest.” I could see her thinking fast, fingers twitching in her pocket. “A powerful sword. A sword of kings. And if we brought it to him he’d grant my friends their wishes and send me home.”

“A sword...” the Witch repeated in a curious tone I couldn’t make sense of. “What was this sword called, did he say?”

“E-Excalibur,” Dorothy answered quickly. “A legendary artifact...that strikes with radiant damage...for paladins...” She cleared her throat. “I think. I don’t know. He spoke so fast, and I just want to go home.”

Dorothy schooled her face into quite an impressive picture of wide-eyed Midwestern innocence and guileless beauty, which I hoped covered up for the blatant fantasy-franchise infringement she’d just committed with that lie. The Witch, though she couldn’t possibly be familiar with that many dice of any number of sides, closed her eyes and tilted her head to the sky as if seeking strength from an unfair universe that had saddled her with such a troublesome kidnapping target.

“There is no magic sword in my woods. I know every stump, hollow, and glen west of the Emerald City. Witch of the West, remember? And what rises above the land, the Rooks in their aeries know above and below the

stone. Ever heard of a ‘Caliber,’ ‘Ex’ or otherwise, Velt?” She directed this question to one of the creatures nearest her, who stepped out of the shadows to answer.

“Sword blunts against the mountain. Next time try a hammer,” an old female voice, rough as shale, grated out between crooked teeth that clamped around a hunk of copper. She appeared to be chewing on it like an old man would chew tobacco, meditatively and with full knowledge that it annoyed everyone around her. She spit a penny-sized wad out at the stones, which made me flinch. She wasn’t the largest garg—sorry, Rook—of the creatures gathered, but she was obviously one of the most senior and battle worn, hulking up just past the Witch’s height. There was hardly a patch of scale or skin on her that hadn’t yet turned to stone. A heavy leather patch covered the side of her face, which appeared acid etched and crumpled in injured ways that rock would not be. She moved with a hobbling gait, as if one leg bothered her, though both wings were strong and had barbed hooks at the top folds.

It struck me that these Rooks were capable of obvious violence, and the Witch had them as her allies at the very least. And all they’d done so far was grab Dorothy and me? Well...assuming the others were all right after the fray in the woods. I assumed. I...hoped.

“Looks like you’re the one that has the arsenal.” I spoke up, trying to catch the Witch’s eye. I succeeded, but only for a moment, because Dorothy didn’t appear to care whether the Witch believed her or not.

“Fine. The Wizard did send me to face you. I’ve been sent a lot of places since I came to Oz, actually. Funny thing is, I’ve not seen anyone else exactly out there trying to fix anything.” She finally twisted around to look up, and in her eyes there was enough raw frustration to have bubbled up and seethed over into anger. It made even the haughty Witch take a step back. “Neither of you are really interested in telling me the truth. *Or* helping me. But if I do what he wants, he can help my friends and send me home. Glinda said he could do that.”

“Glinda.” The Witch’s mouth went through a...complicated twist at the name, before settling into a curl. It would have been easy to miss, but dogs

know the difference between a snarl that leads to a bite and a snarl when you're hurt. "Like I told you before, you shouldn't trust everything she says either."

"She's your sister. You should try to repair things with her," Dorothy said, with what I thought was a bit of bravado.

The Witch allowed her eyes to roll with an excess of performative drama. "Spoken like an only child."

"I was supposed to have a little brother," Dorothy muttered, startling not just the Witch but me as well.

"You *what*?" I said at the same time as the Witch said, more blankly, "Supposed?"

"I didn't always live with my aunt and uncle," Dorothy said a little defensively, shoulders coming up to her ears as she stood in the darkened courtyard. My ears fell forward, and I was so puppergasted, I stopped struggling in the stupid Rook's grip for a minute. I am not too ashamed to admit that I had not spared much thought for what Dorothy's childhood had been like up until I had come along. It had...always just been Dorothy and me, okay? Dorothy and me on the stupid farm in stupid Kansas against the stupid world.

I'd never stopped to have the thought that maybe Dorothy had struggled along in stupid Kansas against the stupid world all alone before then. It was a thought that made my tail want to shrivel up and never wag again.

"It was just Mom and me, from what I remember. And she had just found out she was pregnant again. Aunt Em didn't want me to know any of that when I was a kid, but..." Dorothy shrugged, as if it were a cute gesture on the part of adults—thinking they could shield children from things when the worst had already happened to them. She added, almost as an afterthought, "Car crash. I was just about to turn eight."

A seven-year-old Dorothy—*my* Dorothy—immediately popped into my head, all chubby and floppy and half-baked the way human pups are, and alone and sad, and would the authorities have sent her off to the shelter like an abandoned pup? Thank goodness Aunt Em and Uncle Henry were there to foster, but she hadn't had *me* or any littermates and oh...

A faint, high-pitched, pathetic noise interrupted the quiet. I realized it was from my own traitor throat when Dorothy looked up and her shoulders eased. “Oh, Toto. It’s okay—” She made to reach for me, but the stupid granite mooks holding her arms yanked her back. Moisture finally pricked at her eyes then, making them glint as she turned sharply back to the Witch. “So don’t talk to me like I don’t know anything about...anything!”

The Wicked Witch of the West was a frozen statue, even surrounded by her minions of literal stone. Flickering torchlight made it hard to tell if the flush discoloring her green cheeks was shadow or the faint and passing plum of some undecipherable emotion. As if a witch even *had* emotions.

I had my doubts, as the next words out of her mouth were, “Lock her in the tower,” as she half pivoted away, hesitating only to toss me a dismissive glance and add, “Put the dog in with her.” She began to stomp up the courtyard stairs with a raised voice. “She can say her goodbyes before dawn.”

“Dawn?” Dorothy demanded, twisting to look over her shoulder as the Rooks began to wrest us into a position to carry us away.

“I meant what I said, pretty,” the Witch said, with a flat note that was either tired or cruel, not looking back as she scaled the steps. “The silver slippers or your little dog. We’ll see how firmly they’re stuck on when your faithful friend is drowning in the river.”

Dorothy’s jagged sob almost buried the screech of stone as the remaining sunlight disappeared and the Rooks hustled us down a long corridor swallowed by the depths of the old fortress.

THE ROOK GUARDS WERE NOT unkind guiding Dorothy down a dizzying number of dark hallways and twisting stairwells until I'd lost track of our direction. But no matter what rough courtesies were here, the Rooks were unsympathetic when she balked at entering the shadowy open door they stopped at.

I quickly wiggled in my jailer's arms until I was shoved through first, skidding around and wagging my tail. That coaxed Dorothy in, and she fell to her knees to hug me. That made it easier for us both to pretend we didn't hear the door closing and heavy locks twisting behind us.

The dull, stone-chill silence after the Rooks turned away and their footfalls ground against the pavers into the distance was harder to ignore. I tried licking Dorothy's face. It was the thought that counted, after all. "Hey. What that stupid witch doesn't know is that I can *swim*, eh?"

Dorothy's face quivered before falling over the edge of a complete, shattering change. She leaned forward and enveloped me in her arms until all I could see was grimy black hoodie. The Emerald City perfume had worn off by now. The ionized wash of lavender and Florentine musks was gone and she just smelled like Dorothy again, thank god. As I've said, even dogs of Very Little Size have vastly superior noses, and it's always befuddling when people try to smell like what they are not. It'd be like trying to put on a cosplay outfit and wear it to Sunday church. Sure, you could. Maybe it's quirky for a while, and if I take a second good look I know it's you, but it's off-putting and everyone around you is ill at ease until you take the damned thing off and start acting right again.

Anyway, Dorothy smelled like Kansas sweat and crumpled cotton and lingering sunflowers and hay again. And salt, because she was crying.

It was getting *real* salty in here.

My ears flicked back, flattening against my head. I huffed and nosed at her cheek. “C’mon. It’s not that bad....” The action just appeared to make her sob *harder*, right into my ear. Before I could withdraw, she was wiping her big soggy face on my shoulder like it was a hankie. Oh man, I felt my heart gutter inside an increasing tummy ache. Not because I felt sorry for her, mind you, but because...because snot is impossible to groom out of fur.

“Don’t cry like that,” I tried, knowing it was pointless. Thankfully, she’d finished clearing her sinuses on my pelt and was attempting to pull herself together in that red squashed-tomato-looking way all the humans got when they were distraught. Little wet gulping noises kept on escaping between her fingers pressed over her lips, and gosh, that was the *worst* sound.

I struggle-flopped out of her arms, landing inelegantly on the stone floor. Her distress was contagious; that’s what it was. Human hysteria. I felt it sinking in, curdling all my former cool and aloof badassery. I spun around in a circle thrice just to burn off the bad energy. Dorothy burst out into another heartbroken sob, and it set all my hairs on end and I shook.

The locked room wasn’t big. I looked around helplessly. The shadows were dull with blunt-edged stone. Here and there I could see little scratch marks that smelled faintly of other creatures. Mice, perhaps, or past prisoners who had also been here, in the dark, crying until they were forgotten.

I’m not gonna lie to you. That idea didn’t just make my hair shake; it made every little dog part of me tremble like I was one of those purse dogs. The Witch said she’d drown me in the morning, but I was fuzzy on the whole time concept. What time was it? Midday? Evening? Surely Lettie and Crow would think of something. Belatedly, I remembered the clover and checked my collar again. Against all odds, there was a tiny sprig of clover still hanging on to one hole, though most of the boutonniere had fallen off. I clawed at it until it shredded to the ground, and I’d swear it mighta wriggled as it fell and disappeared into the cracks.

I'll be able to zero in on the location, Scarecrow had said. Well, he freakin' better. Even that dunderhead Scarecrow and Chopper would bumble their way into a rescue before sink-or-swim time got here, right?

Right?

Dorothy's sobs had quieted, but I smelled a tiny trace of copper where there hadn't been one before. I whipped around to see she had her eyes squeezed tight and had bitten down on her knuckles hard enough to bleed.

I yelped and jumped for her lap. "Stop that! You're hurting yourself!"

"Enough, Toto," Dorothy muttered around a busted knuckle.

"Heck it is! What you go and do a thing like that for? Last thing you need in a place like this is an infection! Now we gotta find a clean bit of that hoodie and tear it off for a bandage. Don't trust that bucket water—hear me? Scummy enough to make you melt, but you just—"

"Stop telling me what to do!"

Dorothy's knuckles were out of her mouth and her brown eyes were wide and tear stricken, so the holler must have come from her. That was the only way my brain could process it as I fell back, skidding from her lap to roll across the stone floor again. I think it took Dorothy a minute to figure out the same thing, because her mouth stayed open, slowly morphing from an angry snarl into shock.

I righted myself but stayed crouched down—just a little. Listen. Being a Bad Dog is all well and good, but when your girl is crying and going Through It™, a little cowering is appropriate now and then. Especially if she's just yelled at you for...

"Wait...." My head popped up, and I felt my eyes go as wide as Dorothy's. "You *understood* me just now?"

Dorothy's hand flew back to her mouth and her eyes screwed up closed. I was afraid she was going to burst into that terrible noise again, but all she managed to do was jerk her head up and down, breathing hard over the rim of her palm for a moment. While she did so I paced back and forth, trying to figure out the angle, whether it was an enchantment specific to the Witch's fortress, or some kind of magic latent in the slippers, or Oz hysteria bullshit, or...

Dorothy whispered something at a frequency only mutant rabbits would be able to hear, and I stopped my pacing. “Huh?”

“I’ve—” She gulped a final semihysterical sob that seemed to have been lingering in the chamber, so to speak. Took a deep breath. “I’ve been able to understand you since we arrived,” Dorothy said, a little more loudly now.

I froze with one front paw in midair, and my head slowly tilted, then tilted again. I likely looked like one of those ridiculous radio-logo dogs. I hopped forward all of a sudden. “Hold the flippin’ bone—you could hear me? Understand me? The *entire* time?!” I was barking now. I tried to leap into Dorothy’s lap, but she waved me off and abruptly got to her feet and it was her turn to pace. “Why didn’t you say...Why’d you act like you couldn’t?!”

“Because...*Because!*” Dorothy shouted back at me, as if that explained anything. “Because dogs don’t talk! But suddenly we were in Oz and nothing was making sense and everything was different....” She hesitated, gesturing, and I just couldn’t hold it in.

“You’re telling *me*! You’re dancing around in those...those *cloppers*—making a *mess* of things, I might add, like some oversize Great Dane—and listening to everyone but me!”

“Because I wanted us to go home!” Dorothy barked.

“Me too! So why did you ignore me?” I howled right back, and we both had wet noses now.

“Because *my* dog, my best friend, Toto, doesn’t talk! And if you did...if you did...” She wrenched her hands through her hair and gave up pacing, then slid down the wall until she could tuck her knees to her chin miserably. She let out a hollow sob. “If you were talking now, then maybe you wouldn’t go home with me.” Her voice cracked and faded. “And I couldn’t do this without you.”

I fell back onto my bum, contemplating how “this” wasn’t encompassing our stupid trip down a yellow brick road. “This” wasn’t a strange experience in an unfamiliar magical nonsense land, where it would be logical to selfishly hold on to a sense of familiarity for your own

comfort. “This” had come after “you wouldn’t go home with me,” which meant...everything after.

She’d never intended to dump me, even though that’d been exactly what I’d tried to talk myself into doing to her. I was the Bad Dog in the end.

“Dorothy...” I crept up, nudging my snout under her folded arms, wedging myself into the folded misery tent for one that she’d made against her knees. She made room, immediately wrapping her arms around me and burying her snotty, wet face in the side of my neck. It slimed my fur, and for once, I didn’t mind at all. I gave her extra-wet slurps right on the eyeball and up the nose until she huffed.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, rubbing her face on her sleeve and starting to try to pat down my fur. “I should have listened to you.”

“Nah.” I scooted down in her lap. It was cold in the tower cell, and it would be my job to keep her warm tonight. While we talked. Talked. “You wouldn’t have been able to hear me over Crow anyhow.”

Dorothy giggled at that. She unzipped her hoodie and wrapped it around us both. It had Oz badges of honor now. A blue ribbon replacing one of the hood drawstrings, which the Munchkins had given her. Several ragged holes and a tear on one cuff she got in the first scuffle in Chopper’s woods. Fragrant dark smudges on the back that still faintly smelled of poppies to a canine nose. And while we’d been in the Emerald City, they’d gotten their glitzy hands on it and repaired a torn pocket with a shiny green rivet. She picked up things on the road, Dorothy did. Things just clung to her like that. Stains, patches, gifts, an assortment of odd friends and allies. She’d gotten this far with me, and just as quickly as I’d decided not to leave, I knew she had grown to have so much more than just one little dog in the world.

I wasn’t a Good Dog, but maybe that was never the kind of dog she needed. I snuggled down into Dorothy’s lap. “Those shoes don’t come off tomorrow, huh?”

It was easy to feel her stiffen in response. “Toto, I’m not going to let that awful woman do anything—”

“Hey, relax, huh? I got this.” I wagged my tail lazily, though the space was tight inside the confines of the hoodie. “I escaped from that ol’ animal

control, didn't I?" I heard her giggle at that, and somehow the giant stone I'd been carrying around in my chest since Aunt Em had uttered those traitor words shrank just a little. "You just rest and think about how to be clever enough to get that broom in the morning. Leave these witches to me."

"I'm going to miss talking to you when we go back," Dorothy said sleepily, as her chin fell to rest against the top of my head.

"We've always talked. Don't pretend you haven't told me everything since we met. That's never going to change," I muttered, lowering my voice to match hers. "Oz just made the listening easier. Now get some sleep, kid."

And for once, Dorothy listened to me.

WE WERE ON THE WRONG side of the fortress for dawn to bring anything like hopeful sunshine streaming through the tiny, barred porthole of a window in the cell. Dorothy was still breathing the heavy and slow huffs of sleep against my neck when I heard the sound of leather-clad claws coming up the stone stairs. One of the big Rooks undid the locks and threw open the door just as I poked my head out of our hoodie, groundhog-style. Dorothy woke up fast as the stone jailer grunted and motioned for her to get on her feet.

He gestured for her to follow him. It was time. I felt her heartbeat pick up as she kept me cradled in her arm. I would have preferred to walk, but I could tell that at the moment I was less lapdog and more shield. I could fulfill that role; bet your life on it. I curled my lip and snarled as the door guard neared. His thick shelf of a unibrow didn't shift, and he only gazed at me with a bored look. As Dorothy passed under the shadow of the cell door, I turned to look at what awaited us in the hallway. And that was when a stony hand plucked me from her arm and flung me back into the cell.

The stone wall stopped me and cut off my yelp as I bounced to the floor and scrambled to my feet. Dorothy was already disappearing down the hall, her protesting holler ringing off the walls. "Dorothy! Hey! You bastard!" *Wait.* "No, that's an insult to good, loving bitches everywhere. You, *you...*" I tried to think of the worst insult I had ever heard Uncle Henry, his farmhands, or the foulest old hog on the farm utter. "*You politician! Yeah, you heard me! You representative of governmental authority! You come back here and legislate to my face, stone man!*"

The door closed in front of me. I threw myself at the bars with all the ferocity of my people. “I will *not* support your reelection campaign! Laws are just fees for the fascist ruling class! The ideological—”

I had to stop before I started spouting a full Crow-inspired monologue. Besides, it was no use. Locked. The Rooks had locked me in alone. Me. *Me*. A little dog! Sure, people were known to lock up Bad Dogs, but I wasn’t even being particularly bad at the moment! Didn’t anyone see how scruffy and adorable I was? This was unprecedented. Freedom and universal affection were my *rights* in the world. This was worse than the time with the wire kennel and animal control. I waited a stiff moment, listening for someone to return and receive my complaint, but the hallway was silent. *Silent*.

I had been manhandled, taunted, starved, imprisoned, and now, worst of all, *ignored*. As Uncle Henry would have said, I’m hecked up and I won’t take it anymore!

Of course, I had one weapon. I’d been benevolent not to unleash it until now. But with Dorothy gone and my own dogsbody unjustly manhandled (Rookhandled?) and imprisoned, I saw no reason to hold back. I plopped down on my butt, cleared my throat, and prepared an ancient verse passed down to me from little dog to little dog since time immemorial.

“*Woe. Woe is me!*” The howl proved the Witch’s tower cell had excellent acoustics. I threw my head back. “I have been wronged and my innocent heart is broken! How shall I go on in this *unjust woorld?*” There were warning thumps from somewhere out in the hallway. I pressed forth in the cause. I threw in a little acoustic tippy-tap scratch with my claws against the metal door, which made a pleasingly irritating shriek. “I am wounded! *Oh, jail for humans! Jail for one thou—*”

“Please be quiet!” an entreating whisper came from the other side of the door, down much lower than the height of the gorilla jailer I’d dealt with earlier. I blinked and hopped back. Peering in through the lower slot in the door were two swirly agate eyes not much bigger than mine, set under furrowed brows and ringed with pale ivory-colored pebbles of scaled stone.

“Oh, please. You’re going to earn me such a demerit. The lieutenant already has it out for me.”

“You’re one of those flying dognappers? A Rook?” I couldn’t keep the skepticism out of my voice. I’d forgotten all about barking for the moment. I knew that squeaky-soft voice. “You’re the one who sat on me in the courtyard!”

“Thirty-first Squadron,” the tiny jailer said proudly. She pulled back from the slot until I could catch a glimpse of a brief salute in the dark corridor. She wore the same leather flying jacket as the brutes that had grabbed Dorothy and me, the same steel goggles and the same jingoistic mountain insignia on the right shoulder (though this one lacked the bangle of ugly medals and ribbons). But that was where the similarities ended.

The jailer who stood between me and freedom was no more than two feet tall, and that only if she was at a full parade salute. Instead of being all granite biceps and marble forehead like the lunks she called comrades, this one was small, covered with flaky, pale violet-blue shale that appeared like a ruff sticking out around her leathers, and had a curious, round pink coral whirl of a face. Her wings were scaly and small, still showing wide expanses of leather but mostly bare tufts, and she kept them pinched up between her shoulder blades like question marks. Instead of one of the thick cudgels those others had, at her waist hung a trio of almost equally intimidating metal tools on a belt.

“Please be quiet, Dorothy Minion,” she said, with that pleading note again. “I just started my shift, but...” She looked hesitant, glancing to either side. “Is...is there something I can get you?”

“A key,” I answered flatly and without hope. She looked like a sweet kid, but even sweet kids weren’t that dumb. I huffed. “And my name is not *Dorothy Minion*. It’s Toto.” Of all the indignities.

“Oh. Begging your pardon, then. My name is West Thirty-first, Mechanic Minion,” she said, gesturing to herself in an oddly formal way, before lowering her voice. “But...but you can call me Min.”

“Min...Is that your real name?”

“Real...? Oh, no. I gave that up.” Min paused as she seemed to register the confused cock of my head. “Um, it may be different where you come from, Mr. Toto. Here, when a Rook goes into the service, they give up their name. The mission is more important.”

That explained a lot of the confusing chatter I’d heard on the way in. Here I’d thought the flying thieves just had a thing for militaristic lingo.

But maybe I could use this. I was a little dog of little learning, but I’d listened to Cupcake go on about psyops several times. I leaned forward and tried to look sympathetic through the bars. “That sounds terrible! What was your name before? I won’t tell anyone.”

“Not terrible! No, no, the West allowed my people refuge and aid when no one else would. The other witches refused us, closed their borders. Called us dirty, cursed, thieves...worse things.” Min ducked her head, twitching in vexation what I could now see were little rosette crenellations of coral like ears on the sides of her head. “The blight of our line is not contagious, but other peoples do not understand. The West understands. The West is a friend.”

“Well, sure, but she makes you *serve* her and shit...” I tried.

“Oh no, it’s an alliance! We of the aerie would never leave a debt of friendship unpaid. As long as the mountain holds up the sky,” she intoned like she was repeating an oath. She sounded almost protective of the Witch. It wasn’t the vibe of a brainwashed peon, to my disappointment. It was almost as if she...respected her?

Shit. That was going to make this harder.

Humans, I’ve heard, call depression or despair a black dog. Which is terrible slander, I think. Dogs are always naturally determined creatures. If anything, despair should be a black goose. I’ve seen those things at the farm, and they’re gloomy, mean, and dumb as rocks. Get one stranded in the rain, and after a lot of hollering and token effort, they’ll just stop moving in one big group and...stare at the sky. There’s an old wives’ tale that they’ll even get so hypnotized by a rainstorm, they’ll drown themselves staring straight up. I don’t *think* even geese are that dumb, but I can see how the rumor could start in the henhouse.

Right there, in that cell of stone and doubt and the stupid whimsical uncertainty that this whole freakin' land was made of, just as gray as Kansas but so infinitely far away...I started to feel that black goose despair breathing down my scruff. I slid down to my belly, next to the crack of the metal door, and sighed. "Your boss may be a friend to you, but your 'friend' is going to drown me today."

There was a heavy silence on the other side of the door. If I hadn't been able to see the shadow thrown by Min's feet...Did she have *thumbs* on her feet? Handy. No wonder she was a mechanic.

"She's not actually going to do that," Min finally said.

"Uh-huh." I rested my chin on the stone floor and sank my eyes closed as the black goose plucked thoroughly at my fur. "You're a sweet kid."

"No, I mean really. Not *really*." Min rattled the door, slinging the little eye slot open. I could tell from the scrambling that she had to clamber up and brace herself on the handle of the door to peer down at me. "She just threatens terrible stuff to keep up her reputation. It's what keeps her sisters out of the West."

"She was threatening my Dorothy, not one of her sister witches," I pointed out without lifting my head.

"She counts too. You think South hasn't been listening in on everything since she got her claws into you two?"

I opened my eyes with a blink. The stone wall came into focus as I furrowed my brow and considered that carefully. I lifted my head to squint back at the flinty buckeye agates peering in at me through the slot in the door. "What do you mean?"

"Did South—I mean Glinda—give your girl anything when she first got here, after she got the silver slippers?" Min's eyes bobbed like she was wagging her head. "Like a charm or a blessing or..."

"She kissed her forehead, and it glowed for a second before fading," I remembered, sitting up suddenly. "She said it would help protect her on the road trip...I mean, journey. Not that it did a fat lot of good with all of the trouble we ran into." I thought for a moment and snorted. "Hey, and she already had said the shoes would protect her!"

“A forehead mark, yeah, that’d be a pretty obvious trace! Not even trying to be subtle there!” Min said brightly, as if I was such a clever dog for remembering it now, too damn late to do anything. “A good witch can follow you and scry in whenever she wants with an arcane mark like that.”

“You mean she’s been listening the entire time? Everything we said, all we went through...that meddling, awful...” I thought of all the times I tried to warn the others that something seemed wrong, and the number of dangerous situations Dorothy had landed in that a powerful witch could have so easily whisked her out of, saved her suffering. And then—

“Wait. But that has to mean she knows we’re here now.” The thought bolted me upright. “If they hate each other so much, why hasn’t Glinda bubbled her ass in here to save Dorothy?”

There was no answer, so I spun around and craned my neck to look through the eye slot. Min’s stone eyes softened, coral brows crinkling downward with an air I’d swear was nearly pity before she dropped out of sight. I barked, thumping my paws against the door again. “Min! What do you know? Why would Glinda just leave us here...?” The theory I felt taking shape was awful, black-goose awful, so I shoved it down to bark more loudly. “Min! Don’t leave, okay? I just...please don’t leave.”

Small, flinty feet scuffled along the pavers unseen, and for a moment I began to feel abandoned. Min’s faint voice on the other side of the door was a lifeline. “I’m still here.” She was quiet another moment before offering, with an awkward shyness in her voice: “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah,” I said, because I would have agreed to anything not to be left alone worrying about Dorothy in that moment.

“All right, hold on. I’ll be right back.”

“What? No, I don’t need—!” But I could already hear Min’s steps tapping away as she hurried down the hall. I stared at the door, noticing for the first time small, dull dents along with the scratches in the iron surface. I wondered how much of an impression the skull of a small Kansas terrier would make.

Glinda knew we were here. That the Wizard had sent us here, and that we’d been captured, and that Dorothy was probably being tortured by the

Witch of the West right now. That meant that Glinda...what, condoned it? Planned it? Either had a use for Dorothy being here or had written us off as a loss?

The others had said that the Wizard had been propped up in power by the witches. West had obviously fallen out of favor with her sister South. South sent Dorothy to the Wizard. Now the Wizard had sent Dorothy to kill West. In a roundabout way, that meant South had sent Dorothy to kill West, didn't it? What game were these catty assholes playing?

My thoughts were just spinning up faster than a Jack Russell when a sharp whistle came from the barred porthole window behind me. I spun around and craned my neck, wincing against the tiny bit of morning light starting to stream in. It was obscured slightly by a fluttering bird clutching to the bars and trying to shove a familiar crested blue head in—

“Crow?!” I barked.

“Keep your voice down!” Crow whisper-croaked before letting out a pleased titter. “Good to see you alive, T!”

“You too—you have no idea...” I spun around in the cell, trying to work out the desire to bark out my feelings. “They took Dorothy! We were set up! And...where's the others? We need—”

“You are weak with hunger, yes?” Crow interjected.

I stopped. “What?”

“You are *weak* with *hunger*, yessss?” Crow hissed, giving a significant look to the cell door as he yanked his head back free of the bars with some effort, unable to get the rest of his body through.

Oh, now I could hear the light tin-pebble steps of Min returning. I felt a brief glint of guilt, but only momentarily. “Very weak. Got it.”

“Good comrade,” Crow had time to say before disappearing from the window just as Min slid the food slot open with a rusty drag. Her eyes appeared, lower this time than before.

“I brought food, Dorothy Minio—er, Toto. I wasn't sure what your kind eats, so I just brought scraps from what we prepare for the West, since you're both soft and squishy. I hope that's okay. I am not really allowed in the kitchens, but I managed. Here.” She slid through the slot a tray with a

wooden plate bearing a generous helping of a variety of what looked like roasted chicken and veggies.

She'd even warmed it for me. The smell was, frankly, heavenly. Especially considering I hadn't landed a solid meal since we'd left the Emerald City. But I kept limply reclining across the cold stone and barely lifted my muzzle. I thought back to the farm. Occasionally, for whatever reason, a mother hog would decide a particular piglet was too small or weak to survive and would isolate it from the rest of her litter, refuse to feed it. Then Uncle Henry, insisting it was only economical and not at all due to his soft heart, would give it over to Aunt Em and Dorothy to bottle-feed, though often we found it in dire straits after it'd been starved for several days. I tried to channel that pathetic-baby-piglet energy: hollow limbs and needy, helpless gaze in big puppy eyes as I looked up at Min.

"Oh, it smells so good. You're so kind." I flailed my front paws like I'd forgotten how they worked. "I...I am so hungry, but so...tired...."

I could see Min shift uneasily behind the food slot. A little coral-petaled hand reached in and tried to push the tray a little closer. "Try to eat, Toto. It'll help you stay strong. I promise the West isn't *really* going to hurt you."

"So...tired...hungry..." I let my eyes flutter even as I lifted my nose and strained for the tray, almost bumping the edge. "Is it dark? Evening already—is Dorothy back yet? I want Dorothy.... Cold..." I let out the secret weapon: the tiniest, softest *sorry to bother you* canine whimper.

"Oh no..." I heard Min gasp, then let out a firmer breath. "Oh, screw the rules. Sorry, chief..." The next moment, I heard the grinding of locks being thrown and the slow fricative wailing of the hinges as the door was pushed open. Min hurried in, skirting the tray to crouch over me and begin gently checking my vitals.

It was my first chance to get a proper study of her, no longer in partial glimpses through the food slot. The stone and scale on her were so ruffled and intermixed, they almost looked soft, and little coral rosettes sprouted everywhere, giving the impression from a distance of a little creature with pale fur dotted with tiny flowers. Her face was round and curious, with buckeye-agate eyes and with delicate coral details growing over her tough

skin to accent her expressive brow, mouth, and nearly invisible pink nose. She'd called herself a mechanic, and her hands were engineer deft, zeroing in, after only a moment's hesitation, on where my "squishy" pulse might be. After she found it strong, she tried to drag me to sitting and reached for the flask of water she'd placed on the tray, probably with the intent of kindly nursing me back to health.

Which was about the time that a torpedoing blue bird barreled into the back of her head at the full speed of a concussive shot.

I had only just cracked my eyes open to study Min, and Crow was no more than a smear of blue through the air before he made impact. There was an abortive cry from the Rook as she dropped the flask and it crashed back onto the tray, upsetting the wooden bowl. Her weight forcefully slumped forward—over me, thanks—and stayed there, unmoving. Thankfully, Min was not much bigger than me, so when the winged gargoyle of scale and stone turned into an unconscious weighted blanket on top of me, I wasn't squished to death the way I would have been if she had been one of the others. I let out a small yelp, matched by Crow's squawk as he tumbled, wings akimbo, to the floor after impact.

Crow recovered first, bouncing to his feet with his feathers askew, beak scuffed to hell, and crest crumpled, but with a wild, victorious look in his eyes. "Did you see that? Down like a sack of rocks! Rocks, ha. That's a pun." He hopped around, fluttering his wings. "Death to oppressors!"

"Shh, quiet! Remember?" I reminded him, having to wiggle and squirm my way gently out from under Min. "And I don't think she counts as a real oppressor, buddy. She was actually pretty nice." I turned around, looking at the unconscious Rook between us and feeling more uncomfortable by the moment. This didn't feel as cool as I'd imagined a jailbreak would. "But good job getting the door open," I had to admit. "What's the plan for getting out of here? Where are the others?"

"They're farther down the mountain still. Waiting for us," Crow said, having had the grace to stop prancing around. He smoothed down his feathers, fluttered over to peek out the door, and affirmed that the coast was

clear. “There’s an open window just a jaunt down the hall that’s a straight flight down to them. No archers or anything.”

“Great...” I nodded, thinking through what I had seen of the exterior of the fortress and its sheer walls. “So, how am *I* flying down?”

“You just...” Crow stopped. “Oh.”

“Crow.”

“No, I have a plan....”

“Crow...” I tried to say patiently. I couldn’t quite make it a question. “Did you forget again that I can’t fly.”

“I flew you out in the Beast Kingdom!”

“Buddy, that was at most a barely controlled fall and you and I both know it. It was good Mere Fisher was there.”

“That could work here,” Crow insisted.

“Let’s save that for plan B.” Or *plan Z*, I mentally added, considering how tall the walls of the fortress were and how sharp the rocky barricades were at the bottom. “Maybe there’s a diff—”

A stifled groan came from the crumpled pile of Rook folded between us. Crow’s eyes sharpened. “Hey, the grunt has wings!”

“Min? Yes, but—”

“And we know *she* can carry you. ‘Properly.’” Crow added the last part with a touch of injured air quotes, then shoved Min’s shoulder with his beak. “Hey, hey! No sudden moves. We’ve got you surrounded.”

“Crow,” I growled under my breath, but Min came around with a flinch. Her hand went to the back of her head, then winced away, a piece of chipped coral from her curls breaking off in her hand. She made an uncomfortable grunt and rolled gingerly onto her side, squinting wide-eyed at me.

“Toto?” she mumbled uncertainly, which made me feel like absolute me-shit when Crow pecked her on the shoulder again.

“Hey! Collaborator! I *said* we had you surrounded, buddy! That means you’re our prisoner and got to do what we say.”

Min’s agate eyes were tawny stone flecked with a clever swirl of moss green and gold. They widened, flicking in Crow’s direction before coming

back to stare at me with a pained accusation. “It was a ruse?”

“Not everything. Everything I told you before is true. But...But I really, really gotta get out of here and find Dorothy,” I tried to explain. “She’s my...she’s my *person*.”

“We already put a magical geas enchantment on you while you were out. You will help us escape, or else.” Crow puffed out his white-feathered chest as Min turned around, pushing herself to a cautious crouch. He postured, beak in the air, apparently warming to his role. “I am a very powerful sorcerer in the revolution! You best not test me.”

“I don’t feel very enchanted...” Min said with deep, wobbly doubt.

“You could come with us, you know,” I added, nudging the water flask across the floor to Min’s hand. “Or just to, y’know, make sure we’re not up to anything else nefarious on the way out.”

“Powerful sorcery! Magics beyond the ken of mortal beasts! I have studied the esoteric arts of the fearsome and wild Gilly people, you know. Studied with Lurline herself on the Magic Isle. Practiced the *dark violet arts*, if you will. For the revolution!” Crow threw out his wings in a way that was supposed to be mysterious but succeeded merely in knocking over the wooden cup remaining on the tray.

Min skittered back as her carefully selected bits of entrée sloshed to the floor, and her gold eyes lolled to give me a cutting look.

I shook my head in the slightest—gentle, mind you—dismissal of Crow’s theatrics. They were very Bad Dog of him; I would give him that. I would have jumped right in with him not too long ago. But I had a different itch niggling at me and I was going to listen to it. I ducked my head as I closed the last of the remaining space between myself and Min. “You were the first person who was nice to me since Dorothy and I were brought here. Believe it or not, that weird bird was the first one who was nice to me when we crash-landed in Oz. He means well, I swear.”

Crow had ascended to the top of the cell door, muttering about rebel wizardry and how Min had better watch herself as he scouted the hallway. He leaned too far over the door and nearly lost his balance, finally pulling a soft giggle from Min as he overcorrected. Her expressive coral-cluster

brows bunched together as she glanced back at me. “I’ll get in *such* trouble if you escape.”

I winced. “We could make it look like we overpowered you? Gave you no choice?”

“That’d just be worse. Then I’d be a failure as a jailer *and* a soldier,” Min said, soft voice spiraling into a sigh as she fiddled with a tool on her belt. “I mean, I am, but I am trying not to make it general knowledge. I was doing pretty good as a mechanic until we all got called up to this...special assignment.”

“What kind of stuff did you work on?” I wondered. Only the Emerald City had any kind of technological advancement that I’d noticed in Oz. Even there, most of the wonders I’d seen had appeared to run off the Wizard’s magic or those pale stone slates, not mechanical engineering.

“Mechanical motion, mostly. A lot of us were injured in the Stone-Sky War. Before.” It was said as something obvious. A point in the timeline every Rook marked their life by. She shrugged. “We started with chunky prosthetics and got pretty good at it, considering the need. But I have been working on automatons. Mining, and mechanicals that move all on their own. That’s where the edge is, and I think there’s a real possibility if we just focus our engine research on refinement rather than firepower *annnnnd* I should not be telling you this.” She stopped just as her face crinkled into a coral amalgam of excitement, crumpling back into wariness marked with guilt. “No one usually asks me about my work outside the unit.”

It took a moment for me to remember to close my mouth. I was a little distracted thinking about how much this gargoyle mechanic would love to get her screws into Chopper, and how much Violetta would *freak* to know someone else was even thinking about these things. “Min of the Thirty-first, I have a tin woodsman and a knight of the order who would absolutely be delighted to hear all about your research.” I paused, remembering the tinker at the Emerald City gates, the giant geode cannons, and the crystal devices. “And there may be more opportunities out there than you think.”

“Really? I mean...” Min ground the knuckles of her hands together with second, third, fourth thoughts. “This is wrong. I should stop this. It’ll all be

cleared up, and we can still be friends after, of course.”

“Right. After the Wicked Witch—”

“*West*,” Min corrected, mortified. “The Lady of the West, technically. But ‘West’ is enough if you have to be...so prickly.”

I did, yes, have to be prickly. Crow exchanged a look with me over Min’s shoulder, but I corrected myself anyhow. “After *West* doesn’t drown me, despite threatening to. What’s she going to do instead, when Dorothy doesn’t give her the shoes she wants? Just let us go?”

“Well...” A curdled alarm began to creep into Min’s eyes as she considered that. She tried to stand, but Crow swooped down from the door and pecked at her shoulder before darting back to his post. Frankly, unnecessary strong-arming in my opinion, but Min’s shoulder was barnacled with some kind of hardy shale flakes, so she barely noticed. “No, she needs those shoes. No, I don’t know what for, so don’t bother asking. But...she won’t let you go, but maybe...Oh gosh, she’ll be so frustrated. Your girl just gets her *goat*, you know.”

“The Witch has a *goat*?” Crow asked, crest rising with a morbid kind of curiosity. “Is it a transformed victim? Oh, or maybe a horned familiar! I heard talk that the bourgeoisie had begun to partake in necromantic rituals as a way of keeping the lower classes in their place!”

“If that was true, the Emerald City would have been nothing but goths and blood sacrifices.” I felt the irritation bleeding through as I paced around Min. We needed to get *out*. We needed to *move*. Dorothy had been gone too long; we needed to rescue her and figure a way out of this whole mess.

“You went to the Emerald City?” Min asked, breaking my stride. “And you’re going back?”

“Yes? You heard it when we were hauled in front of the Wi—in front of West,” I corrected impatiently. “Tried to get help from the Wizard and we were tossed on this wild-geese chase.”

“Now there’s innocent *geese* involved?” Crow hollered from his perch.

“We’re trying to be stealthy, Crow. Remember?” I whisper-yelled back.

“I’ll help you,” Min said quickly, coral brows scrunched into an intent V shape. “You’ve just got to help me do something in return.”

What is it with this place? I wanted to scream but chose not to—barely. *Why is everything a goddamn side quest?* I shook the stress out of my ears with a good, hard full-body shake before responding with a resigned sigh. “Help you do what?”

Min’s gold eyes looked up at me; the coral-and-shale ruff of her face was a heart-shaped frame to her earnest expression. “Kill the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz.”

OceanofPDF.com

“SURE!” CROW CHIRPED INTO THE silence, dropping down onto Min’s shoulder. “Jeez, why didn’t you say that in the first place? It would have saved us a lot of time. I didn’t rough you up too bad, did I?” He lifted a claw and checked Rook’s barnacled shoulder oversolicitously now that she was a comrade in the revolution.

“Crow,” I hissed, “we can’t—”

“Of course we can.” Crow turned a look on me. It was a look that said *Shut up*, a look that said he suddenly had a plan, or a hunt, or a...It was a bird look that was...hard to describe. I’d been traveling with the stupid blue bird for quite a while now. I’d known him as a guide, a revolutionary, a pest, an ally, and...okay, fine, even a friend. But as his little round black eyes went blank and depthless for a flicker beat of a glance, I was reminded that blue jays, like all birds, evolved from the largest cold-blooded predators that ever moved across the earth. Evidently even the Ozian ones carried the memory of the cunning of that ancestry.

If only for a moment. In the next blink, Crow was back, fussing at Min’s pebbly strands of coiled hair that refused to bend to his beak. “Now let’s get out of here. The sooner we rescue Dorothy and come up with a plan, the sooner we can get back to the Emerald City and face the Wizard, yeah?”

Min eyed the bird on her shoulder with a small smile. “No magical threats from the great sorcerer of the revolution?”

“Hey, we’re on the same side now. You can call me Crow.” With that, they were turning toward the door, and I was following them like a two-week-old country whelp, trying to figure out *what* the hell Crow was

thinking or why a low-level Rook mechanic suddenly had political assassination on her mind.

Whatever. That would wait until after we rescued Dorothy.

The window that Crow had entered through turned out to be little more than an arrow slit, but with a fair amount of squirming (and grinding, on Min's part), we all managed to fit through it. The sheer drop outside was even worse than I had feared, and I was *intensely* glad I had not allowed Crow to talk me into plan B. As it was, I lost all sense of pride as we tumbled out of the window and into empty air.

"I got you! I got you! Ow, that's *mrpggha*—"

"Sorry," I mumbled as I withdrew a flailing and flexed paw from her mouth. I had clenched my eyes closed the moment I'd made the mistake of looking down. I was not opening them again until my feet were on solid ground. Maybe not even then, or ever.

"Just hold still. Stop wiggling!" Min shifted her arm from under my ribs to a more comfortable position. "Do you need to use the little familiar's room? Didn't you go before we left?"

"No, I definitely do *not* need to go now," I admitted, having left my dignity about five hundred feet below us, on the forest floor.

Somewhere to our left, Crow was jauntily humming a revolutionary protest song, and I swear to dog, I was going to strangle the seed out of that bird.

After a nightmarishly long descent, I felt Min come to a soft halt as her feet touched down. I also felt her straighten as she folded her tiny wings back against her shoulder blades. I, indeed, was quite aware of the sensation as she crouched down to make disengaging from her arms easier. Felt one arm slide away from my rump, and felt her head tilt of surprise as I remained firmly clinging to her shoulder by canine nails and will alone.

"Uh, Toto? We landed. It's safe," Min tried.

"Great, awesome," I said. "So, I was thinking our plan should be—"

"Don't you think you should get down?" Crow interrupted.

I thought it was *rude* to point out when a friend's body had perhaps decided to stop cooperating in terror. With my eyes closed, I grumbled, "I

was *getting* to that, Crow. Sheesh. Four legs take some logistics. I swear, if Lion were here he'd be able to explai—"

"I'm here," a deep voice as thick as brambles rumbled to my right. It was enough of a surprise to crack the seal on my clenched eyelids. Evidently Crow had guided Min not just down the mountain, but to where he'd left the others. Chopper, Violetta, Lion, and a newly restuffed Scarecrow stood in a loose semicircle around us.

I hit the dirt with a hard thump, rump first, and tried to ignore the relieved sigh that came from Min as she straightened. "We have to rescue Dorothy," I said the moment my ass and pride had recovered. "The Wi—Witch of the West took her and I haven't seen her since we got separated."

"We've been trying to get in since they took you. Good job on the clover, by the way," Scarecrow said, eyeing Min with blatant distrust. His eye sockets bled twice the amount of shadows as usual, but Min appeared to be too entranced staring at Chopper to notice. "That place is on high alert, guards everywhere."

"I was watching their guard change while looking for that window entrance," Crow volunteered. "I think I saw an opportunity at a lower watchtower to grab a couple uniforms if you two are careful."

"*Choppp.*" Chopper thrummed as Min approached him the way one would ease up to a newborn kitten—if one liked cats, that is. I could take or leave 'em, but Min was tiptoeing up to Chopper the way Dorothy tiptoed whenever a farmhand presented her with a newly discovered mewling fluffball. Rapturously and reverently and very much like Chopper was not a creaky old seven-foot-tall rusting statue of barely contained violence and forestry.

"Aren't you *the neatest?!'*" Min whispered, tiny coral-furred hands briefly not knowing where to put themselves before smacking her cheeks and gripping her stone ear flaps in delight. "Oh wow, heck. Wow. Is it arcane? Or some kind of clever ore-sympathy enchantment? Or *steam?*" she hissed to herself, like the idea of a pressure valve was as tawdry and illicit as anything.

She'd come to a stop within arm's reach and almost worked up the courage to reach out a hand when a flash of steel swept through her line of sight, causing her to blink.

"Cursed," Violetta answered with a bland kind of suspicion, narrowing her eyes at the Rook mechanic before briefly shooting me a glare. I tried to look encouraging, but my ears tilt only so far forward. Violetta placed herself firmly in front of her brother, her arms crossed. "Or, at least, that's what our family always assumed. He was a normal Munchkin kid before—" She caught herself with a purse of her lips. "He was a normal Munchkin kid once. Why do you care?"

"Oh, West, East, and all between, where are my manners? Sorry." Min's stone curls bounced as she rubbed her hand quickly clean on her vest and offered it. "Name's Min. I'm a mechanic in the Rook Thirty-first and I specialize in mecha-biotic engineering. I guess you could say I kind of wandered my way into working a lot with things like your friend here." She gestured to Chopper.

I felt Lettie's chill from where I stood as she succeeded in looking down her nose at the Rook, who was only a few inches shorter than she was. "My brother. Is not. A Thing."

"Oh, no! Of course not..." Min's eyes widened to moss-agate orbs. "I meant that the stuff I usually work on is basic, mech prosthetics for our war vets and citizenry. Wing gliders and such. I've been arguing a long time that what we do could be combined with sentience, but..." She stared up at Chopper and took the risk of addressing him directly again. "If you don't mind me saying, sir, you are so much more incredible than anything I coulda thought of." She turned a shy look to Lettie and gestured to the crown affixed to Chopper's bicep. "Your family has good reason to be proud."

"Proud..." Lettie echoed, a strange, still look on her face. The nippy little hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I hesitated, trying to figure out how that comment was landing with Violetta. She was so fierce with the protection and guardianship of her brother, but so...ashamed of his past and what he had become. It felt an even bet between open violence and...well,

honestly, I'd only ever seen Lettie respond to things with open violence so far.

Until now. "Yes..." Lettie said faintly as her blade lowered. She sheathed it in an almost absent gesture as she regarded Min with a furrowed, thoughtful brow. "We...I was always proud of Nick. We call him Chopper now, but—" She stopped short, frowning at Min's smiling face. She looked away abruptly to rub the back of her neck. "My name's Violetta, I guess. The rest of them call me Lettie."

Min's expression brightened, and from behind her I could see her whip-scale tail twitch happily before twisting around her own ankle in what seemed like a shy gesture. "Nice to meet you, Lettie. And you, Nick. Or Chopper? You got to let me know which one you prefer," she said, with an earnest tone, to the giant metal golem. She looked between them, hesitating before going on. "I was...noticing Nick's joints. They're exposed, so I bet weather gives you trouble? Are there mobility issues? Because I happen to have this handy silica lubricant I prototyped that I bet would do just dandy and..."

There was a beat of dead silence before Chopper intoned, "Chop..." and his sister appeared to have to remember to blink as she became more disarmed by the adorable two-foot-tall gargoyle than by any of the opponents we'd faced.

"Actually...yeah...his right elbow's always locking up. If you want..."

Min absolutely *did want* whatever that sentence was going to finish with. She and Lettie had Chopper sitting on a rock while Scarecrow and Lion sat nearby, talking infiltration strategies. Min was cemented as part of the group within five seconds.

That Rook kid was either incredibly sneaky or incredibly adorable. The fact that I couldn't tell which was mildly concerning.

But not as concerning as what I had on my mind. "Crow!" I hissed when I finally saw him light in a tree above us. "Get down here!"

Crow made a *who, me?* gesture with his wings, but his mouth was too stuffed full of berries to argue or draw attention. I managed to sidle my way farther down the path, away from the group, until I was tucked behind the

trunk of another tree and out of earshot. Crow took his sweet time gulping down his berries and joining me, so I had a moment to get properly worked up before he landed with a plunk on the dirt.

“What’s up, comrade?” Crow asked, not at all keeping his voice down.

I barely resisted dragging him off by the neck like some stupid bird dog, and only because I was trying to work my way back to Good Dog status. “What is the deal with promising Min we’ll kill the Wizard?! You know we can’t do that! We need the guy for everything!”

“Whoa, whoa. Easy there, T. It’s *handled*.” Crow hopped back and started to preen his feathers. “Besides, the Wizard isn’t *that* important, right?”

“That— He—” I sputtered, barely biting off a bark. “Look. I know he seems like a grade A asshole, because he is. But we *need him*. To grant Lion and Scarecrow and Chopper and Lettie their wishes, right? And you! You wanted to convince him to come to the—the...‘common cause of the proletariat’!”

“That’s a no-go. Have you *seen* that guy’s public speeches? No one who lives in a frickin’ crystal compound is going to know a thing about the working-class struggle, no matter what lip service they want to give about what their pop-pop did before making it big. They got too much to lose by upsetting the status quo.” Crow shook his head. “Better to just chop off the head and start anew.”

“He’s *Dorothy’s ticket home*!” I growl-whispered, jumping at him as I lost my patience. The move startled Crow into a bramble bush with a squawk and I immediately regretted it. I flattened my ears and stepped back with a sigh, then tried to explain what I thought was obvious. “Glinda said so. That if anyone could send Dorothy and me back to Kansas, it was the Wizard. And he seemed to think he *could*.”

Crow preened for a quiet moment as he tried to think up a rebuttal to that. “Well...that doesn’t mean he’s the *only* one who could do it, surely?”

“Or it means exactly that.” I furrowed my entire fuzzy face up in his direction. “You wouldn’t risk Dorothy’s one chance at going home for anything. Not even revolution. I know you’re a better guy than that.”

Crow stopped preening his feathers and found something on the ground to take up fascination with. At length, Crow spoke. “Miss Dorothy can’t go home if we don’t rescue her first, and...and we need Min for that.”

“I don’t like lying to her, Crow,” I muttered, and I was surprised to find it was true. The weird stone kid was pretty okay.

Crow gave a shrug that was careless and this side of harsh. “Who knows? A lot of confusing things seem to happen around you, Toto. Maybe we’re not lying, and Min will get her wish.”

“We’re *not* killing the Wizard,” I insisted, feeling a little defensive because Crow thought *I* was the chaos element in the group. Me! A simple little dog! “At least...at least not before Dorothy gets to go home,” I added after a moment.

“See, we’re reaching strategic agreements already!” Crow brightened and took off for the upper branches of the trees again. I peeked around the trunk and saw that Min was finishing up the roadside repair. Chopper’s elbows and knees did seem more limber now, and Violetta was even smiling a small—weird—smile at Min when she thought no one was looking. It was time to get moving.

“To the rescue!” Crow cried, swooping down over the heads of the others. Even Lion perked up and stood a little straighter. I tried to set my unease and worry aside. One thing at a time. Maybe it was just Bad Dogs who questioned their friends? Why would I ever doubt Crow after how far we’d gotten?

I picked up into a trot to join the others. *Hang on, Dorothy. We’re coming.*

IT WAS A TWO-PRONGED APPROACH, and a compromise in the end. Of course Chopper and Violetta had wanted to simply storm the front doors, go in swinging. Scarecrow and Min had argued for an incredibly complicated plan that had involved stages and code words and coordination that would have gone south the minute it required Crow to count past twenty. In the end, it was, amazingly enough, Lion who had broken the stalemate.

“I am not accustomed to such strategy, but I also know I am a coward and not to be counted on in such a fight....” He spoke slowly, with the patience of one who has watched quicker-tempered members of his royal line come and go. I didn’t think either statement was particularly true, but Lion seemed to have repeated it enough to believe it. “If our friend Min here is any measure, these Rooks who aid the West are formidable and we should avoid lethal engagement.”

“Please,” Min piped up. Somehow she’d earned the right to ride on Chopper’s arm as she fiddled with what looked like a new monocle of some kind. “My people are not bad, I promise. But we are sworn to protect the West.”

“Then I think some of both plans is wisest, as Toto said,” Lion rumbled. I blinked, looking at him, as he had to know I had said nothing of the sort—or anything at all. But he kept on placidly. “One team secures these disguises and enters stealthily, as Min has described, to rescue Dorothy, while a smaller team provides a distraction.”

“What kind of distraction?” Crow asked, riding on Scarecrow’s shoulder once again. The hedge mage didn’t even seem to mind anymore.

“I would suggest doing exactly what they expect us to do.” Lion paused, looking heavily at Min. “Heading straight for the Witch of the West.”

“Oh.” Min frowned.

“Chop,” Chopper said, almost reassuringly.

“Of course, Nick and I would be on the distraction team,” Lettie said.

“Lion and I would be on Team Dorothy,” Scarecrow suggested. “Min’s laid out where the guard post with the uniforms is, and Lion can pass for one of the prowling watch creatures if no one gets too close.”

“I’m going to see the West,” Min said firmly. “No one harms her. That’s the deal.”

The eyes of the others shifted around uneasily before eventually settling on me for some reason, and I gave a subtle nod. “That’s fine. All we were really told we *had* to bring back was the broom, so...”

Min had on her face a look that said she had opinions on that that bordered on mutinous, but she kept them to herself and acquiesced. I cleared my throat. “I’m going with the rescue team, of course.”

“Actually...” Scarecrow spoke up in that measured way that people had when they absolutely knew they were about to say something unwanted. “The rest of us were talking before, and...I—we—think you should go with the distraction team, Toto.”

In the middle of the mountain path, I stopped hard enough that Lion had to sidestep around me. “Oh, hell no.”

“Toto...” Lettie tried.

“You too?!” I barked, a little injured.

“Chop,” Chopper said gravely.

“It’s wise,” Lion said, making me turn. He stood over me, still gaunt but having gained back some of his luster from the care he received in the Emerald City. His mane hung in waves now instead of hunks, and his eyes gleamed with humble, burnished amber in the low light. “The guards know you as a prisoner, and there is no uniform in the world to hide a beast of your stature and notoriety.”

“You mean I’m too little and cute to blend in,” I countered glumly. “Scarecrow could stuff me in his shirt.” I shuddered at that indignity, but it

was one I would suggest and endure, if only for Dorothy.

“You would regret that choice,” Scarecrow said, in a way that was just vague enough to be ominous. “Besides, it has to be this way.”

“Why?” I snapped.

“Because I demanded it.”

Min, who hadn’t spoken a word during the back-and-forth, hopped down from Chopper’s arm and padded up to me quietly. She’d tucked her trinkets and tools away, and she gave me her full attention as her clasped hands fidgeted in front of her. “I only agreed to Lion’s plan if you went with me and Crow to seek out the West, alone.”

This had all been a ruse, I realized at once. The back-and-forth, the proposal, the team forming. I huffed and sat on my haunches to indicate my displeasure. “I thought you were *nice*, Min. Why would you do that?”

“Because I like everyone here,” Min said softly, with a skittish smile to the group, before focusing back on my scowl. “But I trust you if you promise me you won’t attack West on sight. I swore an oath to do the West no harm when I joined up. I don’t want to break it.”

“What if the *West* wants to harm *me*?” I pointed out, ears back. “What’re you going to do then?”


“I’m not letting anyone hurt you either, so I’d have a very big problem to fix.” Min’s coral-heart face lifted upward into a grin as she hefted a wrench over her shoulder. “But that’s what mechanics do.”

Call me a teacup pup, but damn if I didn’t believe her. I drew a deep breath and swung around on Lion and Scarecrow with a growl. “You better get her back with not a single *hair* out of place. Hear me?” I tried to think of the best of the influencer lingo I’d seen Dorothy scroll past before bed. “Her, like...fingers all *on fleek* and her *crops watered* and her skin *moisturized* and her pocket screen *fully charged*! *No cap baddie gas up follow and subscribe, okay?!*”

Scarecrow stared at me with his swirling, void gaze. “You speak the old tongue of your people, and I will honor it, Toto.”

“I don’t understand,” Lion admitted gruffly, “but we’ll bring the Dorothy back safe.”

I nodded, telling myself that it made me feel better, even though I had to pace in place for a few minutes. We'd reached a rise in the pass where we'd have to go our separate ways, and the silhouette of the Witch's fortress loomed like a cresting black wave overhead. I finally sighed and returned to where Min was with Team Distraction: Crow, Lettie, and Chopper. "Fine. Let's go."



THE PLAN THAT TEAM DISTRACTION had worked out—or at least, Lettie and Min had—without me was surprisingly efficient. Min directed us to a kitchen entrance that was only lightly guarded by a single Rook and a pair of prowling watch creatures, which Scarecrow had mentioned earlier. They looked like cats carved out of sandstone with giant blackened bird skulls protruding from their shifting manes of flowing waterfalls of sand. Sand that never hit the ground, mind you. Very disconcerting, though I could see now why Scarecrow suggested that Lion could pass for one, as long as no one got close enough to realize he didn't have a vulture skull for a face. They let out a shriek that sounded like wet cast iron being dragged on concrete, but was twice as loud, when Lettie and Chopper charged into the kitchen yard. But I had barely managed to squirm past the rocks lining the wall and fall down the other side before it was just...Lettie and her giant brother standing alone in a sand-crusting yard, with a slumped-over Rook guard at their feet.

Min flitted over and turned over the guard with a kick to his shoulders before letting out a sigh. "He's fine. Thanks for not killin' him," she said to Lettie.

"Oh, um...didn't I?" Lettie flushed—from battle, I assume—and turned away in order to busy herself peering through the kitchen door. "Sorry if I beaned him too hard. He swung at me."

"Then he deserved it," muttered Min, letting the fellow Rook's helmeted head drop back down with a not-quite-gentle thunk. "Norbun is kind of an asshole, and a thick-skulled one at that. It's okay."

“Chop,” Chopper observed, nudging a plated toe at a small dune of sand where the beasts had melted upon falling. A blackened bird skull, eyeless socket half exposed, poked out of it. It seemed inert but I gave it a wide berth as I joined Lettie near the door.

“Think that was loud enough?” Lettie asked. “Kitchen’s all clear, but I hear yelling down the hallway.”

I listened, cringing as I could pick up at least a dozen armored feet scurrying inside as an alarm was raised. “We’re going to have to fight our way to the Witch, then?”

“Not we.” Lettie shot me a dry look over her shoulder.

“Why fight when we can fly?” Crow pointed out, landing next to Min with a flutter of wings as Min held out her arms for me. I looked between them and the Munchkin siblings.

“We aren’t leaving them!”

Lettie rolled her eyes, already hefting her great sword over her shoulder, as she kicked the kitchen door open. Chopper had to duck low to go in first, and I could see he made an effective shield for any retreat. “Don’t be precious, bud. We’ll get everyone worked up down here, then catch up. You kids would just be in the way.”

“Kid?” Min’s voice had a mild lilt that almost sounded like a challenge.

“I don’t know how old you are, Lady Rook,” Lettie admitted.

It was Min’s turn to...blush, I guess? I studied the way the splinters of shale and coral around her cheeks flexed and constricted, already rose pink, and revealed the more tender silver scales underneath. She was like the younger ones I’d seen in the courtyard, then. Leather and scales, with the rock exterior being growth that expanded over time until it was all she appeared to be made of. She recovered with a swift little chin raise. “Old enough.”

The curve of Lettie’s lips grew, outrageously evolving into a smile she quickly tucked away as she twisted a sweaty bit of hair behind her ear. A grunt of warning came from Chopper, and she turned away, disappearing through the kitchen door and kicking it shut behind her. A moment later, we

heard a crash and the unmistakable sound of someone meeting the rude end of Chopper's axe as combat broke out again.

I wasn't about to argue with a murderbot currently engaged with hacking stone enemies into the dinnerware, so I let Min scoop me up and we were gliding up around the higher towers of the fortress again. This time at least I knew to resist the suicidal voice inside that told me it'd be a nifty idea to look down.

It was a surprise when Min started to descend once we'd passed the wall, not scaling to the highest rooms but gliding to a regal but moderate balcony overlooking the inner courtyard where Dorothy and I had been briefly held. Min landed first, setting me down silently, and I took a cautious glance past the railing as Crow swept the perimeter. There was also a view, I now saw, of a cleverly designed garden tucked along the cliff face. It was unreachable by anyone without wings, but a thick row of hedges provided a wind guard for tender beds of what appeared to be well-tended herbs and a mature and lush peach tree.

"Coast is clear. No one followed you coming in. Which way to the Witch's tower?" Crow asked as he landed on the railing.

"This *is* the West's private quarters," Min answered, returning from checking the wide arch that appeared to lead into a curving corridor. Down below, we could see a half dozen Rooks hustling across the courtyard, half stumbling as they struggled to tug their armor on as they ran in the direction of the kitchens. I wagged my tail at the vision of havoc Lettie and Chopper were surely raising. I just hoped Scarecrow and Lion were holding up on their end.

"Then let's go." I turned away and trotted to the arch with purpose. "Lead the way, Min."

Her wide agate-and-gold eyes met mine, and I could understand the silent question as all her shale and coral fluff was riled in worry: *You promised. Just talk.* She had a lot riding on this plan too, though I didn't understand her motives yet. Maybe she had a Dorothy somewhere—or once had. That thought made me pause. I ducked my head and wagged my tail slowly in response. *I promise.*

Min guided us down the curve of the hallway, which was short and emptied quickly into what appeared to be a sitting room furnished with a small fireplace and a sensible armchair padded with simple woven fabrics in earth tones. Nearly everything appeared handmade. There were two doors, in the walls to either side. A large, ornate one, lacquered midnight green and reinforced with black steel, the other smaller but sturdy polished oak with copper fittings.

Min came to a stop not in front of the grand door but in front of the narrow one and motioned us back before knocking hesitantly. “My lady?”

“I wish to be alone,” a flat voice came through the wooden door. It made my tail twitch. It did *sound* like the Witch, but...also different.

“I have a report you’ll want to hear,” Min said with a careful measure to her voice. “It’s about the prisoners. There’s a rescue attempt underway, as you may know, and I have information you’ll wish to—”

“You already said that,” the voice through the door snapped. There was a pause before a mechanism in the door clicked, though I hadn’t heard any movement from the other side. “Min, isn’t it? Enter, but please be quick.”

I was still ruminating on that “please” when Min lifted the latch on the door, opening it just enough to allow us entrance and gesturing for us to follow quickly. I darted under her arm, bracing myself for what dark tortures I’d find in the inner lair of the Wicked Witch of the West. When adventurers faced a final boss in Dorothy’s pocket screen shows, there were always craggy shadows and rusted cages, sometimes acid pools or magic traps. Definitely at least a skeleton or other eldritch horror or two.

I wasn’t prepared for the crochet. I padded in, low to the ground and silent, but stopped after about three steps as the first sentinel by the door was a bench beneath a line of wall hooks, the intended purpose of which appeared to be to hang not skeletons but a startling variety of shawls and cardigans, all crocheted in different shades of violet, green, and black thick-spun yarn.

(Crochet, not knit. Practitioners of the craft get quite heated if you confuse the two, as I observed when I had the misfortune of trying to take a nap in the living room during one of Aunt Em’s after-church ladies’-group

coffees. I thought it really might come to blows when Gladys Dangler mistook Tunisian crochet for knitting, and then Beulah Jorgensen's visiting sister made a snide comment about how crochet was for *children* until they learned to hold knitting needles, and Aunt Em stopped rocking in her La-Z-Boy so fast that you knew *someone* was in trouble.)

Below the wraps on the bench was an unlaced pair of thick, flappy combat boots that looked awfully familiar, and a crooked old broom leaned in the corner next to the door. *The* broom. I was so busy staring, I nearly pooped when a voice came from behind me.

"Either your automaton research has progressed swiftly or I am about to be displeased, Min." The Witch's voice sounded as if it were coming from right above my shoulder, but when I turned, she was in an oversize wing chair by another fireplace, legs tucked up under her in a tired, coltish pose I'd seen Dorothy take a hundred times. She seemed smaller folded up like that. She had one knee pulled up to her chest while one bare green arm looped around it, a mug of something faintly steaming clasped in one hand. Her head tilted to rest on the flare of the chair back, and though she had her dark eyes narrowed at us, she didn't appear tensed or ready to strike.

But I was still too much a Bad Dog to trust appearances. I felt my fur rise along the back of my neck as I crouched and edged sideways for cover. Crow darted up for shelter in the large wooden rafters of the high ceiling. Min hopped forward, hands out. "It's okay! It's okay!" I wasn't sure whom she was addressing as she half turned between us. "They're just here to talk. Ma'am." She readjusted back toward the Witch's chair and bowed formally. "You did say you wanted to speak to both the Dorothy and the Toto."

"It's a name, not a title," I muttered automatically, irrationally irritated that she was bowing so low to our former captor—former, I hoped, because surely Scarecrow and Lion had reached Dorothy by now. "What did you do with Dorothy?"

I know. I heard the desperation too. I just couldn't help myself, okay?

The Witch's gaze turned from Min to me, expression flat over the top of her mug. The steam obscured anything I could have read in her eyes, but

her body language didn't change. "Strange you would come here instead of seeking her out."

"Drat, I should have thought of that. Why didn't we think of that?" I made a show of briefly turning to the ceiling to holler at Crow before looking back to the Witch. "I'm useless without my girl, so please just tell me what you did with her." I tried to delicately sniff the air—*No blood. That's a good sign.* But I didn't see the silver shoes anywhere, so Dorothy hadn't given her what she'd wanted, which made me worry what the Witch might have resorted to.

"It's true what they say. Dogs really are terrible liars." The Witch shook her head pityingly. She took a final sip from her mug and set it down. "So are Gale girls, if you must know. How do any of you survive? This Kansas must be a terribly nice place if you can simply get by telling the truth...." The Witch tilted her chin to one side as she considered that, and I finally got a good look at her face without obscuring shadows, cups, or steam. She looked weary, as if whatever had transpired between her and Dorothy had taken much out of her, but she also looked...well. Young.

I had estimated that she was the younger sister to Glinda back when she'd first appeared in the Munchkin village, what felt like ages ago now. Despite being glowering, and barbed with sharper edges, harsher colors, she had a newness to her light green skin and a roundness to her frowning, fierce expression that felt closer to Dorothy than to Aunt Em in maturity. But the snarl of heavy eyeliner and the bite of threats had added a few years. Without either of those here, she was obviously no more than a year or two older than Dorothy.

"Did you hurt her?" I asked, suddenly less certain of anything.

"Of course she didn't!" Min said.

"Not yet," the Witch grumbled at the same time, crossing her arms defensively. She didn't bother to look at me. "Your *beloved* girl is as stubborn as a hexed Winkie—you know that? She called me the rudest names I've heard in a long time—including a *fascist simp*, and I don't even know what that is—so I gave her until nightfall to think about it."

“You gave us until dawn to think about it, and then you were going to drown me,” I reminded her, confused.

“I didn’t—” She pushed out of her chair as she sputtered, shooting me a withering look, then turning away. “Did you come here to be drowned?”

“I’d have had to, because I don’t think you sent someone to get me....” I realized it in an instant. I fell back on my rump and couldn’t help following that thought out loud. “No one realized I’d escaped yet. Because no one had been sent to fetch me at all after Min.... Now you’re giving Dorothy till—”

“I am *allowed* to change my mind!” the Witch shouted, throwing her arms out. Her shoulders were hunched up near her ears, though she didn’t turn around. “I can torture you however I want! Witch! Remember! Gah!” She kicked a half-filled basket of crochet yarn next to her armchair, then made a strangled noise as it got too close to the fire and she crouched to scoop it up. Min darted over to help, and the Witch scrubbed a hand through her hair as she straightened.

I tilted my head slowly in one direction, then even more slowly in the other. Crow had fallen silent up in the rafters. I don’t think this was quite the tyrant overlord he’d expected either. I took my eyes off the sulking Witch to better take in the rest of the room. The handmade touches didn’t end at the cardigans by the door. A soft sandy pink texture covered the walls, and over that, a cottagey jumble of framed art and bits cluttered them in clustered arrangements.

I’d discounted them as dark trophies at first, due to the nearly black ebony of the wooden frames. But on closer inspection I saw that those frames were hand carved into floral and animal patterns that showed off the dark grain. In the frames were various showcases, woodblock prints, old parchments with what looked like poetry in faded ink, colorful watercolors of what looked very much like young Rooks playing around a mountain spring, and shelves overflowing with knickknacks, baubles, dried flowers.

Opposite the bench by the door, I saw something I’d missed: a pail with gardening gloves tossed lazily over the side and with the handles of various tools sticking out the top. A sprig of something like lavender poked at an angle out of one hinge.

And there—huh. My gaze came to a stop on a tiny oil portrait nearly lost amid the bric-a-brac on the fireplace mantel. It was in a simpler frame than the other paintings, and that was why it caught my eye. The wood was older, less ornate, chosen by a different hand. A regal figure with silver hair and spectacles surrounded by four young girls, none of them older than eight. The eight-year-old had perfect red curls and a cupid smile. And the youngest, held idly in the silver-haired parent's arm, no more than a toddler, but sporting unruly raven black hair against freckled pear green skin.

I hardly had to take in the others to know. I glanced over at Min, who, with a worried expression, was finishing rearranging the yarn in tidy balls in the basket. She looked at me pleadingly. As if *I* had any answers.

Ugh, why does everyone look to dogs to fix their stupid emotions? I'm not certified to be an emotional-support animal! That takes training! I don't even heel right!

"Why did you want your sister's shoes, anyway?" I asked, cautiously.

"Why do you want your stupid Dorothy?" the Witch said to the floor, still sulking. When no one rose to the bait, her shoulders dropped an inch and she let out a sigh, as if she were the one being tortured. "Lurline, the one who raised us—they always promised the shoes to me. They were my inheritance. Trained me in how to use them, to travel the worlds. Anywhere in three steps..." She caught herself sounding wistful and tucked her chin to her chest. "But when they Left"—she said the word with a precise capitalization—"Glinda and the others insisted I was too young. Such a powerful magical artifact was too big a responsibility for such a young girl. So Serena took them instead. She promised she would 'hold' them for me until I was old enough. I tried to reclaim them last year. It didn't go...well."

I caught Min making a grimacing expression out of the corner of my eye and I made a note to investigate that later. The Witch wasn't finished. "So, when I heard she was dead, I thought it was finally my chance. If I had just gotten there before Glinda, but...no, she has her spies everywhere." She sank back in her armchair, folding her limbs into herself once more as she rubbed a hard hand over her face. "It would have been bad enough if my older sister got there first, but then she was vicious enough to rope some

poor *refugee* kid into it”—she parted two fingers to peek at me between them—“and her dog. Sorry, I guess.”

It didn't quite feel like an appropriate apology, considering all that had occurred, so I pressed on instead of acknowledging it. “But why not just forget the shoes? If you hate your sisters so much.”

“I don't hate them!” The hand left the Witch's face, green paling to a faint mint as she looked stricken by the thought. “I mean...not...not all the way. Not really. I can't. Even if they...It's...” The line of her lips did a complex move that would have been impossible to chart on a simple axis. Finally, she just said: “It's complicated. If you don't have close siblings, it's hard to understand.”

“I had three sisters and four brothers and I haven't seen any of them since I was weaned, so yeah, I wouldn't,” I agreed. I glanced ceilingward, and Crow's beady eyes blinked down at me and I jerked my head to one side. *Quit being a scaredy-crow!*

He took the message eventually, and glided down to settle nervously on the back of a wooden chair. The Witch glanced up at his arrival, her gaze narrowing. “Jaybirds are bad omens in the north.”

“Good thing there's no blue jays here,” I said, with a cough for emphasis. “Only crows.”

The Witch's gaze slid to me with obvious confusion. “Oh. I see.” She didn't argue, but still regarded Crow with suspicion.

I tried to steer the subject away from Crow's identity. “Why the slippers?”

The Witch sank into her chair with a renewed kind of mulish silence. I was worrying that we were absolutely hitting a dead end when a click of soft stone passed on my right. Min had been trying to smooth things over in her own way. After putting the yarn basket to rights she'd managed in a matter of minutes to do no less than fix one wobbly chair and stoke the fire, and now she approached the Witch's side with a fresh mug. The Witch took it with an absent nod and raised it before stopping with a blink as she looked down into the contents. “This isn't my tea.”

“Stone hooch!” Min chirped, patting her arm gently. “Warmed with a little bit of the buttered peach cider you like. You looked like you needed it.”

The Witch appeared to choose amusement over insult, and her face softened. I blinked when a chuckle even escaped. “Thank you, Min. You... you’re very good.”

Min stood up straighter, almost growing an inch with the praise. “I just fix things. Try to see problems before they start.” She shrugged, then hooked a thumb in my direction. “They aren’t actually a problem to be fixed, I think. In my...professional opinion,” she added shyly.

“Hmm...” The Witch chewed on a noncommittal sound as she took a tentative sip of the stone hooch and cider. She pulled a face, but it must have been a *good* kind of awful, because she took a longer draw of it right away as she granted me another round of consideration. I immediately sat to try to appear nonproblematic.

I’ve never looked nonproblematic in my life—it’s a curse of all terriers—but the Witch must like ’em scruffy and stubborn, because she let out a sigh and said: “I want out.”

“Out of wh—” Crow started, but Min managed to be right there, pinching his beak closed as the Witch took a steadying sip from her mug and gathered her thoughts.

“There’s an endless, impassable desert surrounding Oz. No one can cross it and survive. No one leaves Oz. But we have stories of the lands beyond; Lurline even claimed to have been to them in her youth. There’s a few people who claim lineage from there. The kingdom of the Nome king has a tunnel he guards like it’s paved with gold, and then there’s the Magic Isle.... Lurline was always coy about how they’d gotten there.” The Witch was quiet a moment. There was a thick glass window near the fireplace, and her gaze was pulled to it. I felt my fur standing on end as I caught the look in her eyes. I knew that look. I saw it on Dorothy’s face often enough. “You ever feel trapped in a family you don’t belong in? In a place that’s just so... so that it’s suffocating? And you know there’s more, so much more, out there, and it’s worth seeing, and every day you wake up in the same bed is

like drowning a teaspoon at a time? I never wanted—I just...” She took in a sharp breath, catching herself. Her gaze refocused, directed away from the window and back on me. For a flicker beat she looked like a duotype print of Dorothy—hair obscured in soft shadow, a dark wardrobe that could have included the ratty tee Dorothy slept in when she finally peeled off the hoodie on the weekends...and a face so full of hunger-pang sadness it could swallow the world with those wide eyes.

But the Witch blinked, and the illusion was broken. The Witch turned away, straightening, setting down the mug firmly beside the chair. “Less stone hooch next time, Min,” she said, not unkindly.

“Dorothy desperately wanted to leave the farm too, before we ended up here. Actually, we got caught trying to run away,” I offered. “Now she just wants to be able to go home.”

“Then she’s stupid as well as stubborn,” the Witch muttered, a firm jut to her jaw.

Crow edged over until he was able to whisper in my ear, “Boy, takes one to know one...”

That earned him a vicious glare from Min, but I pretended I hadn’t heard it. I padded forward until I was at the foot of the armchair to which the Witch had retreated. “What if you could both get what you want?”

She regarded me down the length of her narrow nose, and I could smell an opening. Skeptical and angry as she was, she also was tired and looking for options. I wagged my tail ever so slowly. “Look. All our biscuits on the table here. Glinda sent us to the Wizard, and the Wizard promised to send Dorothy home if we defeated you and brought him your broom—”

“By ‘defeated’ you mean killed me,” the Witch corrected.

I ignored that too; I was getting good at it. “But once we do that, he’s going to grant everyone’s wishes and take Dorothy home. What’s she going to need a pair of clicky-clacky and—you’re going to have to excuse me here—gaudy-as-hell heels hanging around for? Aunt Em’s never going to let her out of the house in them until she’s, like...thirty. And that’s dead in me-years,” I said, trying to talk faster as the Witch began to tilt her head with interest. “So what I’m figuring is, you work *with* us, let us take the

broom, and we'll send someone back with the shoes once Dorothy's on her way home. Wizard's got his trophy, you've got your magic kicks, Scarecrow's got brains, et cetera, et cetera...and Dorothy's got Kansas. Everyone's happy!"

I finished with a tail wag culminating in a full butt wiggle that spun me around for the showmanship of it. Crow, ever the loyal hype man, contributed an appreciative whistle and caw. Then we both looked back to gauge the Witch's reaction to my genius. Which was...well, underwhelming, to be honest. She had a frown on her face, but this one was different from the previous scowls. It was small, pinched, as if she were worrying something between her teeth. Her gaze flicked between Crow and me before hunting over to Min speculatively. Min tried to smile and gave a single thumbs-up.

"It won't work," she said, and my last shred of optimism snapped.

"You can't just say that! How do you know? You don't know that!" What had been a logical protest in my head immediately crashed through my stupid mouth at top volume. I felt my heart begin to pound as I was just...sick of it. "You and your sisters and your Wizard—you're all the same. All you people with the power to help, to do *anything*, and what do you do instead? Spend all your time backstabbing one another. And when someone finally comes along and serves you, on a silver platter, an opportunity to do *anything else*, you get *scared*. Yeah, that's what you are. *Scared!* You...you aren't the Wicked Witch. You're the...the Whimpering Witch! You're so afraid of failure or change that you won't even *try!*"

I found myself at the end of a breath and was forced to stop to drag air into my lungs again. The Witch had a mildly surprised look on her face, as her brows had inched up by millimeters with each accusation I'd flung. Had there always been a faint red ember in her dark eyes? She spoke in the pause. "Are you done?"

I growled a negative at the same time as Min wisely spoke up. "Yes, he's done."

"Then I can finish..." The Witch heaved a sigh and straightened in her seat, sitting in it, for once, like it was meant to be sat in, with her feet on the

floor and everything. “It won’t work, not because I’m scared—”

“Toto didn’t mean it!” Min apologized for me, the traitor.

“He did and he wasn’t entirely wrong. Sit *down*, Min of the Thirty-first,” the Witch ordered gently. “Your friend is not far from the mark on many things, and if we had more of him, maybe things would be a lot better around here.... He’s right to bark at me, about all of it. But I’m not saying it won’t work because of that.” She frowned. “It won’t work because all it will take is for the Wizard to glance at Dorothy’s face to know she’s lying. Your girl is brave and kind but *desperately* too honest.” She broke the prognosis to me with the same sympathy as a doctor telling you a loved one had a terminal illness: honesty. “I don’t know how she’s survived this long, to be frank.”

“She had Toto, of course,” Crow piped up. “We all did.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Min agreed.

“Hmm.” The Witch made a noncommittal sound. She was staring at me with a worrying look, but I was too preoccupied with trying to counter that previous nonsensical statement *with my eyes* to care. “There is a possibility there. Ansel is incredibly small-minded, even after ten years in Oz.... Did he pay you any attention at all when you and Dorothy were in his audience, Toto?”

At that I snapped back to the conversation. I squinted up at the Witch. “Not really. I mostly sniffed around that weird chamber of his while he postured and strutted around for Dorothy. Did you know he’s got a room that smells like copper and lime?”

Her lips were a darker shade of green than the rest of her, even without her heavy cosmetics, and they pulled up into a knowing smile as she winked at me. “I do. And I think he’d be *horribly* upset if anyone found out why.”

I did a radio-tuning tilt of my head, trying to pick up on anything hidden in that tone. “I noticed that same smell around the screen emporium in the Emerald City square.”

“How strange. What business could a private market have with the Wizard?”

“And I first encountered it down at the gates...Wait. No.” I thought back further. “On the yellow brick road itself. The first Munchkin village.”

“Surely your nose must be mistaken, considering the Wizard’s strong stance against the export of magic tech to outlying counties,” the Witch said somberly. “Why, it’s been the foundation of his baseline support and general popularity.”

“My nose comes from a first-rate bloodline of terriers that are the bane of voles from Kansas to the Eastern Seaboard,” I said with no pinch of humility. “If I smell a rat, there’s a rat.”

“And what do you—what was it?—terror-iers do when you smell a rat, Toto?” the Witch asked with a sidewise smile. Ah, yeah, she had caught on quickly.

“Root out the whole damn nest,” I huffed, and the Witch made a toasting gesture and swigged the rest of her spiked cider. She made a face, as the strong drink had gone cold by now. “Somehow I think that plays into your plans. So you *will* help us.”

“Maybe. But on one condition.” The Witch studied the dregs in her mug before setting it down.

“Bad feeling,” Crow muttered. “*Baaaad* feeling.”

“The girl’s a terrible liar; we all know it. If I’m letting you take my broom for this little ruse...” It looked like it pained the Witch to say that part, but she pressed on. “She has to believe she won it for real. That’s the only way it’s going to work.”

“Murder you?” breathed Min, horrified.

“Falsely and temporarily, if you please.” She grinned a particularly laconic smile. “It can’t be that hard to fool a farm girl, can it?”

“Dorothy’s not *dumb*!” I felt honor bound to defend her. “She gets straight B pluses in school!... Mostly! A’s in art!”

“I didn’t say she wasn’t a girl with gifts,” the Witch grumbled. “Among them, being *deeply infuriating* to hold a conversation with once she’s been fed a single line of rot from my sister! Ugh!” She stood up and began pacing. “Wait.... Maybe we can use that.” She spun on the rest of us with

enough force to make Crow flutter back again. “What else did my sister say about me?”

I felt Crow’s and Min’s gazes turn to me as well. Oh shit. I tried to think back. But even if an entire, like, *second act* of bullshit hadn’t happened since then, I really didn’t find what she said interesting enough at the time to recall it easily now. “Something about...bitter, keep the shoes on...stay on the path...terrible magics that melt a soul like sugar, warts...”

“That’s it.”

“What?” I perked up. “Warts?”

The look the Witch gave me made my tail shrink an inch. “The melting like sugar.” She nodded consideringly. “Yeah, melting. I could fake a death like that. Easily done.”

“How does sugar melt? Like one of them fancy elitist dessert situations with the fire?”

“Not fire!” Min realized, catching on to the idea. “Water.”

“Oh, like those raccoon videos, with the cotton candy,” I remembered. Dorothy and I had giggled so hard watching those on a loop on her pocket screen. Stupid fuckin’ raccoons. Talk about big trash rats.

Everyone looked at me like I’d just muttered gibberish, which I supposed I had, but the Witch was already moving. She crossed the room and swept up her broom, along with the drapey and shapeless oversize black cardigan that acted more like a cape. “I can handle the death ruse. It’ll be up to you to orchestrate planting the idea in Dorothy’s head that I can’t touch water. Pretend to break Dorothy free and meet me—” She cut off as a low, grinding wail started deep in the fortress and built in volume as the sound of crashing feet and rattling scale-and-stone wings passed outside the window. She raised her brow at us.

“Uh, we might have been one step ahead of you there,” I admitted with a weak wag of my tail.

The Witch snorted, slinging a bag over her shoulder. “Gather your friends and find a way to get them up to the south ramparts. You’ll ‘catch’ me there, with convenient buckets of water nearby. The rest is up to you.” She gestured, lifting her broom briefly as she held the door open.

“Afterward, don’t think I won’t be watching. If you think of double-crossing me...”

“Lady, you need a vacation from your family,” I said, stopping after Min and Crow filed out. “Wait. What *is* your name? We can’t keep calling you ‘Witch’ or ‘West,’ or whatever the kid says.”

The Witch frowned, rubbing her thumb along the grain of the door as she considered this. From the weight in the pause, it seemed it was the most troubling question I’d asked so far. “Evaline, or Evie. Lurline named me Evaline, but my sisters called me Evie back then, because, well, the sun sets in the west, so...”

“Evaline,” I repeated, trying to stay away from anything her awful sisters did. She startled, as if not used to hearing her name out loud, so I tried to bring the conversation back to our former tone. “Look, Evie or West or whatever. The only shoes I cared about before this were the tasty leather kind. I actually don’t care about any of this—only about Dorothy...and these weirdos, I guess. Your interests are safe with my indifference—understand?”

If I was stealing an old line from one of Dorothy’s pocket screen shows, the great thing about freaky magical fairylands was that absolutely no one would know. Evaline, the Wicked Witch of the West, crouched down and surprised me by reaching out and ruffling my ears with one hand of surprisingly long, delicate fingers. “Your Dorothy is a lucky witch to have a familiar such as you, I think.”

I snorted, stepping back out of her reach to prance out the door. “Say that after we kill you.”

NO ONE WOULD BELIEVE THAT a young woman could be disintegrated by water.

But then, no one would believe that a dog could talk, that a scarecrow could cast plant magic, that a man made of metal could walk and feel and atone for his sins, that a lion could be an uncrowned king, that a gargoyle could dream of mechanical wonders, and that a benevolent old wizard sitting on an emerald throne had sent a sixteen-year-old girl on a mercenary errand he expected to end in her death.

Dorothy and I had been daydreamers in Kansas, and since we landed in Oz, you could say we'd become professionals in the whole believing-in-impossible-things racket. Nice work if you could get it, really. The pay had worked out all right, but the health benefits, all around, left something to be desired.

I couldn't say much about the working conditions either. As we stood at the stone battlement, with a sizzling puddle of black fabric and with the strong stench of burnt hair in our noses (the Witch had really outdone herself with her effects), I was able to feel one brief moment of victory before the tin water bucket hit the stones with an echoing ring. I looked up into Dorothy's tear-shocked face and...oh, the pride filling up my lungs shriveled.

This had been a bad plan, or at least a cruel one. The kid was going to need a *lot* of therapy. All the color was draining out of Dorothy's already pale cheeks, and though her eyes had not left the shriveling pile of former Witch, she stumbled backward on her sparkling heels, and would have

fallen had Scarecrow not been there to catch her. “Hey...it’s okay,” he reassured her quietly. “She was a monster, but she’s gone now.”

I hadn’t exactly had the time or privacy to catch the others up on the new plan, so to everyone except Crow, Min, and me, we’d just very much committed a full-on murder by water. I felt a little disconcerted by how chill everyone was being about it, actually. Scarecrow supported Dorothy, of course, and had every right to hate witches. But it’d been her sister, not the Witch of the West, who’d attacked his village. And Lion, Chopper, and Lettie—they’d never had direct dealings with witches, but all of them were circled around the faintly steaming “remains” with varying levels of satisfaction.

As much as I wanted to blame Glinda and the Wizard’s influence—their unseen hands having set us all up—I couldn’t put it on their meddling entirely. The problem was seeded in Oz itself, I realized as I remembered the Munchkins, the Beast Kingdom, the Emerald City. The righteous win and the wrong lose. Therefore, if you lose, you must be in the wrong. The reassurance of adventuring paladins everywhere.

Also the justification of bullies.

I didn’t like it, but I played my part, skittering over to where the broom had dropped, and barking as I wagged my tail like an idiot. At least it shook Dorothy out of her fugue. She came over and gathered up both me and the broom; only I got the snuggles. I tried to lick some tear tracks off her hot cheeks to reassure her.

“I just killed her, Toto. What am I going to do?” Dorothy murmured bleakly.

There was a pause, and I remembered that she could understand me—had understood me—and was expecting a response. “It will be okay. Just hold on until we see the Wizard, buddy.” I nudged my nose under her chin until I could feel her smile, if only weakly.

“If you say so.”

I looked up as Scarecrow came around. He looked ridiculous in his Rook-uniform disguise. They’d evidently found some uniforms meant for Min’s gorilla-sized brethren, because the epaulets on the military jacket’s

shoulders stuck out at hollow, sharp angles, and Scarecrow's long, spindly limbs were lost in the puddling fabric of the oversize pants. Worse, he'd insisted on keeping that goofy wide-brim hat. He looked less like a Rook militiaman and more like one of those Civil War reenactors after the third day of a show. Uncle Henry had taken the family to a demonstration once in a burst of historical interest, and the entire thing had been a mistake. After a certain point, the historical nerds departed and we were left with sunburned patriots who just wandered around getting drunk in discount Confederate uniforms hollering about the South risin' again.

Scarecrow, thankfully, only said, "The stone men wish to swear their allegiance." He didn't know what to do with this information, it seemed from the bemusement in his voice. Min swung around at his side, giving his straw hip a reassuring pat as she threw me a wink.

"Oh yeah, I spoke with General Velt, and the fact is, with the West dead, we thought it only prudent to shift our alliances." She nodded deferentially to a larger Rook that approached from a stairwell farther down the battlement. I did a double take as the figure came closer with a firm, steady limp: it was the battle-scarred stone woman who had been at Evie's right hand down in the courtyard when we'd first arrived. Velt—right, that was what Evie had called her. The Rook leader came to a stop and nodded respectfully to Dorothy as Min continued. "The new Witch will naturally take over the territory."

"I don't want to rule anyone!" Dorothy's horror cut through her shell shock. She shook her head and held the broom out like a shield in front of her. "I just want to go home. Your people can have all this."

"Are you saying you cede your territory to the Rooks?" Velt asked in a voice like basalt churned into sand. There was a grinding noise of an engine or something vibrating deep within the fortress.

"I guess. I don't...It isn't mine. You shouldn't be talking to me—they shouldn't be talking to me, should they?" Dorothy glanced to Scarecrow and Lion for confirmation.

That grinding vibration grew stronger, and I glanced up as the clouds began to darken. When I looked back again, Min had a secretive smile on

her heart-shaped face. I narrowed my eyes at her. I would have liked to mouth something like *What do you think you're doing?* but dogs are notoriously underblessed in the lips department, so the best I could do was flick my ears so she knew I was onto her.

The Rook leader was quietly conferring with Lion, Scarecrow, and Dorothy on the finer points of witch territories, and the sky was continuing to darken, with what looked like a dog soaker of a storm rolling in, so I hotfooted it over to where Lettie and Chopper had settled against the stone parapet with Crow, recounting their battle with animated glee.

“...and then they brought in a *rock troll* and we were outnumbered five to one,” Lettie was saying.

Crow had flattened into a feather pancake on the stone parapet. “Surely at a time like that you felt kinship with your brother and longed for the communal strength of the Munchkin men you left behind!” he speculated, morbidly rapt.

“Holy tits, no!” Lettie stopped midtale to stare at him. “Why would we want a bunch of useless boys in the way? No, Chop—*Nick* and I had it handled,” she corrected, straightening a little as she spied Min joining us. Lettie grinned, showcasing a newly chipped tooth. “I let Nick clear the chaff while I went straight for the troll—right up the back side, hup, hup”—she gesticulated, rather indelicately demonstrating where she planted her sword—“and once I got one knee around his ol’ gritty windpipe he couldn’t shake me.”

“You fought the *rock troll*?!” Min caught up fast, with a mix of scandal and, well, also indelicacy. I decided it was time to settle down as those two went over the details of the entire fight again, this time with new details and vaguely weighty eye contact.

Girls, I tell you.

THOUGH THE AIR WAS DARK as a scowl when we were on the rampart, by the time we departed Evaline's fortress the weather was shaping up to give us a clear dawn. I caught Dorothy yawning, but none of us suggested spending a night in the castle. Even though Min, Crow, and I might have known we'd be perfectly safe, the others would have rightly been concerned about reprisal from the looming army of Rooks, no matter how much Min reassured Dorothy that they praised and respected her "battle prowess."

Evaline had been awfully worried about Dorothy's ability to lie, but I think she overlooked how Min's coral tail rattled like a sleigh bell every time she delighted in the slightest fib. Once I caught Lion narrowing his eyes, then throwing a weighted glance in my direction, but thankfully, he decided to simply follow Dorothy down the stairs.

At the gates, Velt, Evaline's right-hand Rook, and a cluster of other stone soldiers waited for us. Velt stepped forward as we approached. "We will accompany the Dorothy," she said in that gravel understatement of a voice.

Dorothy blinked, but she had developed enough caution to stop a few feet away. She held the broom like a scepter, whether or not she realized it. "You don't have to do that. You all don't owe me anything."

"Perhaps not," Velt said, leaning heavily on her steel-piston leg. She crossed her arms and squinted at Dorothy with her one good eye. "But one of ours has already chosen to follow you." She nodded in Min's direction. "Some of us wish to know why. We're a curious people. And seeing as I

am...temporarily free of duties..." she said carefully, "I will engage, and observe."

"It could still be a trap," Scarecrow noted in Dorothy's ear.

"It could be...but somehow I don't think it is," Dorothy said, giving a small smile in Min's direction. I didn't think so either. Obviously Evie had given Velt her own orders and they involved escorting us to the Emerald City. I was all for it, myself. I couldn't wait to see the Wizard's face when we strolled right through the Green Sector with an entourage of stone bodyguards. The Ozman's Club was going to flip.

Dorothy had never laid eyes on misfits she couldn't adopt, and she wasn't about to learn now, so of course her former captors were allowed to come along, over Scarecrow's protests. We made it down the mountain and to the edge of the western forest before finding a place to set up camp far off the road. I had just finished reassuring Dorothy, for the tenth time, that it was safe enough, when Lettie appeared between us.

"Toto! I've been looking for you." She already had a gauntleted hand on my collar. Which was, first of all: *Rude*.

And odd, especially since Lettie was not the kind to seek out casual company. At least not *my* casual company. I slowed the wagging of my tail. "What's up?"

"Nothing! Just...saw a cool bush. Thought you'd like to sniff. Over here. Be right back." She said this last to Dorothy, waving her off as she dragged me bodily into a trot across the clearing with her.

"Ow, ow! Little feet! Little feet!" I twisted out of her grasp as she slowed down, and I stopped to shake off the absolute indignity of the entire thing. Once I'd looked around, I realized I'd been dragged behind the tumble of boulders that made the far side of our camp—and put us now out of sight of the rest of the group. I blew a resigned sigh. "This bush isn't gonna be cool at all, is it?"

"Depends on what you're not telling us," Lettie said, having already placed herself to block the path back. She crossed her arms and looked at me expectantly.

“Us?” I asked, starting to feel a tiny bit worried. “Come on, Lettie. We just defeated a witch! We’re on the same team here.”

“Is that so?” I skittered around in the dust as Scarecrow’s familiar voice joined in from behind us. He leaned against a tree in the shadows, though I swear I had looked *right there* earlier. *Every time*. He tilted his head, and only a sliver of his patchwork face was visible. “Then how come I caught this guy trying to sneak off muttering about a witch?” He raised a gloved hand, and what had been a thicket of greenery by his feet parted.

“Damn it, Crow!” I couldn’t help the irritation, even if a trickle of sympathy followed. The blue jay had his beak clamped shut with Scarecrow’s vines and he’d been gently pinned with a helpful spray of ivy. It had to be humiliating to a flying creature. I decided I might as well sit down. “I don’t know what idiocy got in his head to sneak off, but listen—it’s okay. Just...” I winced, feeling guilty as I lowered my voice and said it. “We can’t tell Dorothy.”

Scarecrow was not reassured. He arranged his long limbs into a crouch, seeming to draw shadows and vines around him like every Halloween nightmare come to life. He tilted his hat up so I could get a good look at his pit-mad eyes. “Can’t tell Dorothy what, little dog?”

I glared at him to let him know his act wasn’t scaring me. I also wasn’t moving from this sit, in case my legs decided to disagree right now. “That she didn’t actually kill the Witch of the West. Water doesn’t hurt her. That was an act.”

Scarecrow stared at me, then tilted his head to Lettie. She grunted her surprise. “Damn, you were right.”

I blinked. “You guessed?”

“Water is an organic substance and essential to life. It’s an odd substance to have such a...dramatic reaction to,” Scarecrow said logically.

“I knew Evie oversold it,” I muttered. Scarecrow always had been a smart son of a gun.

“Evie?” Lettie repeated.

“Oh...” I cleared my throat. “Evaline is the Witch of the West’s name. We might have had a chance to chat with her beforehand and kind of...

Turns out, she might have as many shitty family problems as the rest of us?” I did my best to briefly sketch the encounter for them, complete with crochet and family drama. “I’m not saying she’s all sunshine and roses, but...the point is, she didn’t really *want* to hurt Dorothy or any of us. She just wants the shoes so she can take a vacation and get away from her crap sisters. So we made a deal. She fakes her death and lets us take the broom to give the Wizard, and once he sends Dorothy and me home, she can blow town with the shoes.”

Lettie frowned and looked to Scarecrow, who had been silent, but black tendrils were spilling out from under the brim of his hat at an increasingly worrying rate as he thought. “And you wanted Dorothy’s emotions to appear legitimate in order to execute the ruse,” he guessed. He fell silent again. “How do you know she’ll actually leave once she’s got the silver slippers?”

I tossed my head in a version of a dog shrug. “If she doesn’t, what else will she do with them? A ‘wicked’ witch had them before, didn’t she? I guess that keeps the score even.” I paused. “You know, you guys really got to look into something better for a system of territorial governance than this whole Faerie/Witch thing. Your two-party system makes even *ours* look not so bad by comparison.”

Crow made an extended and strenuous comment that was muddled by the vines around his beak. I really was going to insist that he be freed. In a moment. Really.

“You should talk with Evie—I mean, Evaline,” I added, to Scarecrow. “From what I saw, I think she might have an interest in hedge magic and take an, ah, more open-minded approach to things.”

“Did she ensorcell you?” Lettie asked with narrowed eyes.

“Mostly she just drank stone hooch and complained a lot.”

Scarecrow laughed and glanced to Lettie. “*You* might like her, then.”

“Shut it.” She made a gesture that I assumed was indecent in Munchkin society. She shrugged after a moment’s thought. “I guess...Min trusts her too. So I’ll go along with it as long as it doesn’t put the plan or anyone in danger.”

“Agreed,” Scarecrow said, absently flicking a hand. The vines retracted from Crow so fast that his feathers were left askew, and he stumbled forward.

“Finally!” he croaked after hopping around a bit, shaking and fluffing his blue feathers back into a straight line. “You guys could have just asked me all those questions, you know.”

“We did.” Scarecrow was busy folding his vines back into his cuffs. “You only went on about the sanctity of the brotherhood and how you could never be broken.”

“Not unto ‘pain of the sword or lick of the flame,’” Lettie quoted helpfully.

“Oh, did I?” Crow tilted his head. “That sounds very heroic of me.” He turned on me, suddenly intent. “Are you sure these green recruits can be trusted, comrade?”

“Yes, brother,” I intoned, already padding my way up to Lettie as she started to make her way back to camp. “I have a good feeling about these ones.” I slid a step closer to Crow. “What was with the sneaking around Scarecrow mentioned?” I muttered.

“A revolutionary is ever vigilant! Maybe I have contacts in these woods. You never know.” Crow fluffed his chest with great importance before fluttering ahead to the campfire. I shook my head and followed.

I was never going to understand that weird blue nut.



FROM THERE, OUR LARGER GROUP made quick time traveling back through the western forest to the gates of the Emerald City. Along the way, I caught Scarecrow having a quiet word with Lion, and Lettie surely filled Chopper in on the conspiratorial circle protecting Dorothy. There was the expected furor at the gates when we arrived, but all it took was Dorothy’s holding out the Witch’s broom like an amusement park fast pass and boom, we were strolling through the upper echelons of the Emerald City with an absolute *circus* going on around us. The entire city was yapping like toothless Yorkies from the sidewalks.

“Flying would have been so much easier,” Min said from where she nervously rode on Lion’s back. Lettie had protectively placed her there after a too-inquisitive Green Sector noble tried to *touch her hair* and nearly lost their hand to Lettie’s blade for the offense.

“Maybe, but I promise none of you wants to have to carry Chopper. Besides! We would have missed the green jelly ropes!” I said around a healthy mouthful. Damn, I was going to miss the candy when we went back to Kansas. From the way Aunt Em acted, humans seemed to delight in making food that poisoned small dogs. It was torture.

“I don’t want jellies. I want the Wizard’s head—remember?” Min’s heart-shaped expression remained sweet and wide-eyed with coral and white shale perfection. It was really unfair of stone Rooks to come in *cute* varieties when they hid such bloody-mindedness. Sugar curdled in my stomach. I’d forgotten about that. She glanced up at Crow. “So what’s the plan?”

Crow dipped to land on her shoulder with an easy, conspiratorial wink. “First, sister Min, lower your voice when discussing coup plans.” He seemed much more prepared for the whole situation than I was, and I was briefly glad for Crow’s insane revolutionary delusions for once. “We may appear to have the upper hand now, but striking a powerful mage inside their own sanctum would be foolhardy. Don’t you agree, Toto?”

“Oh, yes...” I veered closer and attempted to look properly assassin-ish. “Those mages, you know. They have”—I tried to remember appropriate vocabulary from Dorothy’s intense studies—“like, plus-five AC and damage resistance. And *lair* actions! Can’t forget about *lair* actions.”

“See?” Crow curved a wing around the back of Min’s head, taking her into confidence. “We draw him out into the open, and then—then? That’s when we claim the...revenge. Your revenge, his head.” Crow tilted his beak. “I hear he has a flying conveyance?”

“His...*drone*, he calls it,” Min answered immediately, grinding the words out with more venom than I’d ever heard the little Rook muster.

“Hmm, very interesting...” Crow bobbed his head in a performative way. My ears flicked back as I watched him and suddenly realized

something. He was pretending to think right now, a show for Min—or both of us. He already knew what he was going to say. “Perhaps—and this is tentative—” he started, slowly, “we could draw him out. A public speech or—I don’t know—something with this ‘drone’ of his, and there would be our opportunity.”

“That’s...” Min’s tail whipped with excitement. “Yeah, I like that. You’re actually pretty good at this, Crow! And here I thought it was Toto with all the brains....”

“Thank you!” Crow preened, not at all taking offense at the shock in Min’s voice.

A flick of movement caught my eye as two amber-furred ears slid forward from the way they’d been angled slightly back and lost in generous mane. Lion continued to amble on, despite the semi-whispered conversation taking place partly on his back. He was a subtle one, the uncrowned king of the beasts. I was beginning to wonder if “coward” was just a beastly mistranslation of “subtle, patient, willing to wait and see.”

Might as well ask the question, then. I sidled up as the parade we’d suddenly become a part of slowed for greetings from city officials for Dorothy. I turned my attention to Min. “Why do you want to axe the Wizard, anyway?”

She blinked at me before her stone mouth parts formed into a perfect little O. “I keep forgetting, you don’t know anything about Oz.”

“To be fair, I was wonderin’ the same thing,” Crow chimed in. “You Rooks are a pretty secretive bunch.”

“We’ve learned to be.” Min’s normally light voice sheered off at that, before rebounding as she contemplatively ran her tiny shale-splinter fingers through Lion’s long mane. “Rooks have always lived in the western mountains, even before the Sisters. We ruled them before they did, though ‘rule’ is the wrong word. More...stewarded.”

“You mentioned aeries earlier. Is that, like, caves or something?” Crow asked.

Min snorted. “Giant nests. We fly, featherhead. We lived *above* the mountain, on the floating gem isles. We...” She looked between us, then

away. “Right. The isles aren’t there anymore, and the outsiders have already forgotten. We didn’t always look like this. Like stone.”

“Not like stone?” I perked up, remembering the mottled patches I’d seen on some Rooks at the castle. I found myself trying not to stare as I inspected Min’s appearance with obvious confusion. “How did...?”

“Like liquid starlight,” Min said with a faraway look. She shook her head. “Well, Gram described it like that when she told us stories of how it used to be. Now we’re just stone rooks. We always had hard-as-rock scales, so I guess the connotation was never that far off. But we were renowned for the gemlike formations each clan bore between their wings. My clan bore opal, like the gems on our isle, and were known for holy folk who kept the stories of the deep mountain.” The coral ridges on her face crumpled together in obvious pain. “Those stories are gone, thanks to the Wizard.”

Even Crow, for once, knew to keep his mouth shut. We began walking again, and by silent agreement we drifted together to give Min a sense of privacy. Lion lagged slightly apart from the others, though he still pretended not to be hearing a thing. I think I loved the old stupid cat a whole lot right then.

“When the Wizard came to Oz, he blew in on that flying contraption, like I said. He called it a ‘manned drone,’” Min began, resolutely staring straight ahead. “He must not have been the proper man for it, because it was out of control. It buzzed low over the western mountains in its descent before crashing in the foothills beyond the Emerald City. He emerged from the wreckage to stumble his way to the nearest village, but eventually, after he’d risen from outsider to ‘Oz the Great and Powerful,’ he issued orders to retrieve it.” Min pressed her lips into a grinding line. “It took many, many machines to do so. The Wizard’s men began to dig deep into the mountain.”

“Strip-mining vulture,” I muttered, earning me a confused look from Crow.

“The isles started sinking,” Min said. “We don’t know why—the miners never dared to climb up to the isles themselves—but whatever they did down there...It was just a little at first, but by the time we noticed, it was too late. One by one, our isles crashed to the mountain.” Min’s features

hardened into flint. “We tried saving the farthest isles, diving into the mountain tunnels ourselves to stop the miners, but that was futile. Worse... some of the soldiers came back with...growths. Some kind of disease or symbiote of the deep earth that we’d been safe from in the isles, but now...” She paused, lightly touching the coral crenellations that ran along her forearm. “Once we were earthbound, it swept across the whole mountain-refugee population. We couldn’t isolate fast enough. Now even our children are born with it. Rock where their gem birthright should be.”

Lion’s ears had flinched back flat in his mane. His steps had slowed, though he had kept his head straight and proud as he carried Min on his back. Finally he bowed his head, turning so its angular, blocky profile was visible, along with one somber golden eye. “It mirrors the blight in our ancient woods. Why didn’t your people raise the call, little Min? Surely the Beast Kingdom would not have stood for this atrocity if it had become public all those years ago?”

Min stroked the old lion’s mane. “By the time we recovered from the catastrophe of the falling isles and the disease, word had spread that we were infected and mutated. Rumors were swirling that we were filthy and it was due to our own gluttonous, violent, thieving nature that such misfortune befell us. By then, a new ‘Oz’ royal was on the throne, if you recall.” Min glared up at the tall jade tower of the Wizard’s hall growing on the road ahead of us. “And everyone was in awe at this new melding of enchantments he was offering in the Emerald City. These *gem slates* and *geode cannons*. Oz the Great and Powerful. No one would listen to a bunch of diseased ‘flying rock monkeys,’ as the Quadlings called us. We were driven off our own mountain for three years, wandering the roads, hated. And the Sisters didn’t raise a hand to help us, until West offered us a home.”

“Did Evaline know what happened?” I asked.

Min shook her head. “She had a theory that the Wizard took something from the mountains, something that had been part of the balance keeping the gem isles afloat. But the excavation sites were obliterated after the Ozmen left—to avoid ‘scavengers,’ they said. Funny way to talk about our

own home.” Min looked close to salting up with tears. “The air was full of dust, and it took weeks to wash out the copper-and-lime smell.”

I perked up, ears alert. “Wait. What smelled of copper and lime?”

“Oh...” Min closed her eyes, as if remembering. “It must have been the residue of some extraction process the miners used. It clung to *everything* they left behind, and when they’d set explosives to the sites it hung in the air for days and got in everything. I was just a tot back then, and I still can’t stand lime.”

I froze, piecing together where I’d smelled traces of that scent. The bricks under our crashed house in the Munchkin village, the wheels and tracks of the large miner carts outside the city gates, delicate traces in the Ozman’s Club, hints nearly everywhere in the Green Sector, and then that door, right there in the Wizard’s own sanctum. It didn’t make sense if it was some kind of explosive residue, but...

“You guys...” I realized I’d fallen behind, and I bolted to catch up, nearly skidding into Lion when I did. “You—you guys,” I wheezed. “You’re going to have to present the broom without me once we get in there.”

“What?!” Crow reeled around to land on Lion’s rear. “We can’t do that! Can we?”

“Sure, you can. That blowhard doesn’t even notice when I’m there.”

“What dangerous thing will you be doing?” Lion asked, with a worried flick of his tail.

“Nothing! Just a little dog...you know, sniffing around. Doing little-dog stuff.” I wagged my tail with the ol’ big-eyes routine, which, of course, did not work on Lion at all.

He hung his head. “Dorothy will be worried if you wander off.”

“I’ll be back before you guys even finish up with the Wizard. Promise,” I said, then brightened. “I’ll tell her myself.” Honestly, I had to keep reminding myself that I could do that now. Maybe Dorothy *had* been a better actress than we all gave her credit for.

“It’s something about the mountains, isn’t it?” The tone of that question was *intense* and strung tightly enough to spring. Min was crouched on

Lion's back with a fistful of his mane up to her face like a security blanket. "Isn't it? You have to tell me, Toto. If it is, I'm going too."

"Min..." I started, but I could spot a losing fight a mile away. I might as well go offer to arm-wrestle Chopper. "If too many of us sneak off..."

"The Wizard doesn't even *know* me. Besides, if we're not...killing...him..."—she did have the wisdom to drop her voice there—"then what do I have to ask for from the jerk? 'Oh, please, Mr. Wizard, *sir*, cure my disease that you probably, most definitely, caused in the first place?'" She spit on the pavers, just missing my paw.

Okay, maybe Min should *not* go see the Wizard with that history.

"Fine..." I sighed, recalculating the plan. "But this is a *stealth* mission, okay? No matter what we find. And no, I don't know exactly what that's gonna be, so don't ask."

Min nodded so hard, her coral curls rattled, which didn't really give me confidence in the whole stealth thing. But she did flash me a double set of thumbs-up, so I wasn't going to yell at the kid. Thumbs were useful to have in a pinch.

DOROTHY DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO do her fast-pass broom-flash maneuver to gain entrance to the Wizard's grand estate. Word had traveled ahead, and the keeper at the gates escorted us quickly into the ornate waiting hall lined with oversize gold-and-jade couches and with trophies for the Wizard's victories.

We were still asked to wait, of course, because the Wizard loved to make people wait. I had counted on that. I caught Dorothy over by the "foosball" table. Obviously some poor Oz-born master woodworker had been given a description of a table full of little American soccer men on sticks and told to make it happen, and (bless his heart, as Aunt Em would say) he tried his best. Huh, did that confirm that the Wizard was an American? Or just a collector of antique tavern games?

Dorothy twisted a greased handle hesitantly, which sent three players carved with rather horrifying anatomical detail spinning on the pole they were vividly skewered on. Nah, that level of puppetry seemed about right for the man we were about to see.

"Hey, bud?" I said, padding up.

"Oh..." Dorothy jumped back from the table as if it would skewer *her*, and she turned. "Toto, you scared me. Don't worry—just a little while more and we can go home."

I popped my front feet up, letting her scritch behind my ears. "Don't worry about me, kid. We're doing okay, you and me. We got an entourage now, and hey! You got a bargaining chip. Don't let that guy in there push you around, okay? You did exactly what he wanted, and now you got the goods he needs. Don't give him that broom until he pays up."

Dorothy chuckled and switched to scritchng under my chin. “When did you become such a tough negotiator?”

“I had to listen to Uncle Henry turn those hogs into next year’s seed and feed again and again, didn’t I?” I pointed out, then regretted it as I saw Dorothy’s smile fall.

“I never paid attention to all that...” She sighed. “Maybe Aunt Em was right. It’s time to act more like an adult when we get back.”

Somehow, when Dorothy used that word, I didn’t think she meant just selling stinky pigs for other things. It felt depressing when she said it. It felt final. I let her scritch my chin another minute while I thought. “Maybe. But maybe adults are bullshit too.”

Dorothy blinked. “What?”

“So, Uncle Henry works the farm and sells the hogs. Know what else he does?” I wagged my tail faster as Dorothy looked confused. “Plays penny-ante poker with the farmhands over lunch on Thursdays! I’ve seen it! And on Sundays, when he says he’s driving down to the Tractor Supply after church, and sometimes he’s had to take me for a vet appointment? He stops and gets us *burgers*. No toppings on mine, but still. And *ice cream*.” I salivated at the thought. Hells, I missed ice cream. “And Aunt Em’s laptop still has her favorite old cartoon show clips bookmarked, just like your pocket screen! And she doesn’t want you to know about the paperback books she buys at the grocery store each week, but I don’t know why, because the people on the covers still have more clothes than the ones that show up on your art sites, soooo...”

“Oh my god...” Dorothy’s hands clapped over her ears, but nothing could hide the flush in her cheeks or the giggles that were building. “Toto, you’re not supposed to tell those things! You’re a dog!”

“I guess dogs see the stuff adults do that they don’t show the people they’re telling to grow up.” I dropped back down to all fours, unrepentant. “You don’t have to give up one thing to do another, D.”

“But that’s not what others...” she started.

“Who cares? The others don’t get to ride talking lions either.” I danced around, gesturing to the palace around us. “They’re missing out. And take it

from a dog: life's too short not to follow your nose...er, heart."

"I thought you hated this place," Dorothy said with a soft smile.

I stopped dancing and plopped down. "Oh, well. It still is a place that makes no sense and is probably trying to run a con on us half the time, so... watch yourself, but"—I huffed, clearing stray scruff from my eyes—"maybe that's kind of grown on me."

Dorothy's smile began to grow, and she leaned forward like she was about to say something *absolutely* heartwarming and disgustingly sentimental and earnest, so I had to act fast. I jumped to my feet again. "Speaking of following your nose, I got a lead. So I'm gonna just step away real quick while you deal with the Wizard."

That diverted Dorothy to a startled blink. "Oh...you're sure?"

"Yep, no worries. Just gonna be around the corner sniffing out something. I'll totally hear you if you holler. Meet you back at the front door." I circled around her feet as I saw the Wizard's attendant coming down the hall to show them in.

"If you have to. Just"—Dorothy was fast enough to scrunch my ears as I passed—"be careful, Toto. I love you so much."

I huffed and picked up the pace toward where Min was waiting for me, and I knew weak human ears couldn't pick up the "Yeah...you too" as I trotted away.



IT WASN'T TOO DIFFICULT TO give the rest of the party the ol' slip once we passed over the threshold into the Wizard's mist-and-shard-laden sanctum. He still had the whole place glitzed up like a tech demo on drugs, so Min and I just kept under the roiling layer of fog spilling across the floor as we parted from the rest of the group. From there, it was pretty easy to hug the wall until we found the seam of the hidden door, just like I had found it before.

"Okay," I whispered. The stupid fake-zen synth music was picking up, signaling that the Wizard was about to make his entrance in the main part of

the hall. Sanctum my ass. This whole place felt like a theater. “This is the door. Can you get it open?”

Min had been concentrating on waddling with her wings cinched tight against her back to stay undetected, and she almost jolted upright in surprise. “Me? Oh...” She recovered and tried to examine the seam from our awkward position. “Maybe—hang on.” She reached into her coral-and-moss hair and pulled out the world’s tiniest screwdriver.

I couldn’t decide if I was annoyed or impressed. I decided that would depend on whether we survived the next five minutes undetected.

After about thirty seconds, the seam sprang open with a little hiss. Thankfully, the music presentation had picked up, and Min caught the sides of the doors with her hands, keeping them from spilling too much light into the room. “Like clay butter,” she muttered, and I admit, she’d earned the right to brag as I ducked in after her.

The first room was a small study, and surprisingly ordinary. I could tell with one sniff that the source of the copper-and-lime smell wasn’t here. The desk was dusty and cluttered with a hodgepodge of boxes and wrappings that obviously had been stacked there for lack of anywhere else. This was the room of someone who liked the idea of having a grand office more than they liked *working* in one. Between two fancy, unused bookcases, I saw another door that was, thankfully, only partially closed. My nose pointed me to it like an arrow.

“Here,” I muttered, right before I shoved the door aside and forgot altogether about speaking.

Imagine the biggest pumpkin you’ve ever seen grown at the state fair—or I guess for city slickers that’d be, like, the biggest disco ball? I don’t know; just imagine a honkin’ *big* pumpkin, and then double it. Like, to the size of a golf cart.

Then make that pumpkin entirely out of shimmering, shining...

“Opal,” Min breathed beside me. “Mother Opal.”

I wasn’t that educated on my gemstones. “Mother of opal?”

“No, *the* Mother Opal.” Min whispered the capitalization as if it was important.

I had been in Oz long enough to understand that these folks loved themselves a good capitalization, and rather than question their imprecise naming practices, I found it better to focus on the important parts. “What the heck is that...?” I had no idea why I was whispering too. “And why is my face getting hot?”

“It’s the heart of the mountain. It’s the heart of *us*. Look...” She drifted toward it as if pulled. I, at least, retained the sense to glance around. The room was a workshop, but not the good, dusty, greasy, farm kind of workshop. The walls were all white like the shard panels in the hall. The gargantuan opal hung on chains in the center of the room, conducting a subtle hum up and down the metal. Giant bins and crates sat by closed loading doors to our left, and to the right were worktables and cabinets glazed with mirrored glass.

“*Look*,” Min said again. I turned my attention to the giant humming rock. Min was fluttering up next to its surface. No, strike that. She was *floating*, as her wings barely moved. Thankfully, my feet remained firmly attached to the ground as I drew nearer. However, up close, I could see that the surface wasn’t a simple opalescence. There were cracks and whorls.

No. *Handprints*.

Hundreds and hundreds of handprints. The giant opal had a translucent quality, and trapped within its milky depths, rendered in a gentle pastel fire of pinks, oranges, blues, and violets, were hundreds upon hundreds of handprints. They were from rounded hands, with extra-long thumbs and nails, and it took me a moment to realize they were from Rook hands.

“Min...” I muttered, but she already had a tentative hand extended.

“Every Rook is recorded in her. Going back forever,” Min whispered. “My entire *people* are in here, Toto....”

Look. When a friend reunites with a lost cultural artifact, far be it from me to dictate the terms of their engagement. Still, I let out a warning yip a second before Min’s palm made contact with the surface of the Mother Opal. A thrum sounded, gentle at first, as the giant stone lit up, a glow flickering from within, then spreading all over the surface, racing from

handprint to handprint like it was a juiced-up Christmas tree. Then the Mother Opal gave a lurch.

And I realized the chains were there not to hold it up, but to hold it *down*.

The opal spun against the chains, and the force threw Min over my head and across the room. She crashed with a crunching noise into one of the big cloth-sided bins by the loading bays, followed by a clatter as the fabric tore and a slurry of opal chips and dust spilled out of the bin and across the floor.

I twisted my head back to the office door and froze, straining to listen. Across the room, I could hear Min doing the same, struggling not to move, as the slightest shift sent more opal debris scattering. An agonizing minute passed, and all I could make out was the muffled boom and baritone of some furor going on in the hall. God, I hoped Dorothy was sticking it to the Wizard in negotiations. Preferably loudly.

I breathed a sigh and dashed over to the broken bin where Min had landed. “Are you okay? *What is going on?*”

“I knew it! I *knew* it! West was right! He stole from us, from the mountain.” Min emerged, still half-buried in what appeared to be a debris bin for...opal refining? She came up with her coral face caked with white powder and began rubbing it irritably from her cheeks. Lime and copper puffed in my face and stunk in my nose so hard that I sneezed twice. She waved the air clear between us. “When he took the Mother Opal, that had to be what caused the aerie-fall disaster.”

“Their crystal screens,” I realized. “He’s got to be using it in those somehow. Ev—the Witch of the West told me they were an exclusive magic of the Wizard’s and he forbade export outside Emerald City. But they must be getting out. I smelled that opal scent as far away as Munchkin country.”

“He’d be panicked. If West found proof that he’d mined her mountains, he wouldn’t be able to hide behind Glinda and the others anymore. Toto, we’ve got him!” She paused. “What’s wrong with you?”

I nodded vaguely, as I was distracted by the rose nubs of coral that made up Min’s face. A chunk sloughed off as she rubbed her thumb down her

cheek, swiping away the opal dust. “Uh, Min...” The rubbing had already turned the rough coral and shale of her cheeks into a faint silver scale. “You might...want to take it easy there. And find a mirror.”

Her mismatched eyebrows knit into a frown until she glanced down and saw the bits of coral in her hand. More opal shards scattered, like hockey pucks, across the floor as Min bolted for the cabinets and their reflective glass.

“Mother Opal...” This time when Min said the title it sounded like an oath. She stared into a cabinet’s mirrored surface, and as I caught up I realized there were tears making tracks down the still-dusted side of her face. She reached a hand up and tentatively began to rub a clod of opal dust into her hair. It took a painful minute, but eventually chunks of calcified stone fell away and we both leaned in to inspect in the mirror.

The tiniest nubs of fragile violet-blue fur interwove lightly with the delicate silver scale that was her skin.

Min let out a ragged breath. “Oh.”

I began to wag my tail hesitantly. “Min, could this be a—”

“Don’t,” Min warned, voice sharp. “No. Just don’t. Look, see.”

I obediently looked again, and felt my hopes fall as I did see. The cleared part of her cheek was developing a pale film, coral already starting to grow back at the edges. Her cheek moved as she smiled, and she winced. “But this is *huge*. My people could do something with this. Refine it, find a cure from it eventually, even if it’s a temporary effect now. It’s a first step, so yes, it is big. It’s everything. And that...*monster*...has been hiding it from us.”

I heard the *red* in her voice again. Honestly, I wanted to help her as I watched the tendrils of microscopic coral begin to reach back into the edges of her silver harlequin face. But we had more to do. I leaned hard against her side. “How much opal do you think we can smuggle out of here?”

I felt more than heard the sigh as it deflated Min’s stony frame. She dropped her head to study the chunk in her hand. “Not much, but maybe just enough for the clan elders and West to do something with.” She squeezed the sharp edges of the rock until I thought she’d cut her palm, but

I forgot my friend was hard as gems. The opal split clean in two, each half the perfect size for tucking up each sleeve.

It didn't take long for Min to gather up a few more pieces and to stuff as much dust in her hair and pockets as she could. Finally, we stood looking at the Mother Opal. I could tell it was painful for Min, but I had to ask. "What about that one?"

"We..." She closed her agate eyes and opened them again. "We come back for her. Or maybe..." Her gaze traced the chains. She grabbed a tool from the wall, studying the loading doors and appearing to do some calculations in her head before she carefully, precisely, snipped the back end of just one link.

"Just one?" I asked as she returned the tool and joined me at the door.

Min glanced back at the softly humming stone of her people, the possible cure, their future in the sky. She smiled when she looked at me again, and shrugged as we snuck back out the door into the silent office. "Sometimes one is all it takes. Haven't you been listening to Crow?"

WHEN WE MANAGED TO REJOIN the others, somehow the Wizard *had* been busy handing out miracles. Or, well...“miracles.”

He’d given Scarecrow one of the crystal devices, loaded up with “all the knowledge of the ancients!” Which would surely make him the wisest in the land. Perhaps no one expected Scarecrow to stick it directly in his ear and mulch the data directly, but he had been set on having a brain. What was more horrifying was that it *worked*.

To Lion the Wizard initially offered his army’s support in invading the Beast Kingdom to take the throne. When this was declined, the Wizard had blustered how *no one* declined an obvious opportunity like that in this economy. It was halfway through this snit fit that, Lion confided, he realized that if he didn’t care what the Great Oz thought, maybe he had courage after all.

To Chopper, I found out later, the Wizard had offered not just a new, improved body (“He went on about ‘the apex of male perfection’ for too damn long,” Lettie recounted disgustedly), but *leadership* of the Tartpatch Gang. “The elites might have abandoned you in that backwater village, but I can elevate you, free you from these jealous, harping *women* that want you to be small,” the Wizard had said with a dismissive gesture at Lettie. “Make you the king you were meant to be.”

Chopper had been silent, in the others’ retelling, so silent that even Crow began to get worried. But then he’d simply lifted one finger and raised it to the toy crown encircling his bicep. He held it there long enough that the Wizard realized he was being rejected *again* and sputtered that it wasn’t a

real crown. To which Chopper surprised everyone by uttering a new word: “Make.” As he raised his axe threateningly.

The tin man walked out of there with one arm a little heavier for the crown now gilded in gold and covered in rubies as red as heart’s blood. It had enough extra gems to ensure that he and his sister would not need to sleep on dirt and stones for a while, and that they could do whatever they decided to put their hearts to.

He was in the midst of negotiating with Dorothy over Evie’s broom when Min and I snuck back in. The Wizard was holding a large magnifying glass up to the bristle end of the broom with a sour look on his face.

“The stress fractures on these takes the collector value way down. Not to mention there’s not an ounce of provenance.” He straightened from his inspection with a shake of his head that seemed final. “No, no, sir, I couldn’t possibly pay you a *full ride* to Kansas for such a piece. I’d lose all credibility in reputable circles! Do I look like I’m made of magic?”

Dorothy had on her face a flat expression that contained only the barest hint of Midwestern civility. Her smile was thin as paper. We *had* been gone awhile. “Yes,” she answered.

The Wizard made a blustering fish noise. “No, no, listen here, girl. I’ll offer you a ride to Winkie Land, and that’s being *extremely* generous—”

“You take her to Kansas.” Min stepped past me and into the light.

“This is a private negotiation. Who do you—” The Wizard appeared to swallow his tongue as he caught a good full view of Min’s half-healed face.

“I am Min, mechanic of the Thirty-first Squadron, sir, and you better listen.”

The Wizard’s eyes narrowed. “You’re obviously too young to understand how these things work. Run back to your mountain—”

“And tell Wes—everyone what I’ve seen?” She held up a fist still dusted with glittering opal, eyes hard above a face that was half stone-coral, half silver-scale skin. “I’m no child. I’m fully crust among my people. Or was—*was* until today.”

The Wizard’s image flickered in the space where he hovered. I wondered, if we *did* go home, would we be accompanied by a hologram

even then? Was there any man left that would do such a thing to Min's people? "It doesn't last," he said finally. "The opal is no use to you."

The snarl that Min let out was primal in a way only a critter like me, like Lion maybe, could understand. Something deep at the root as she bared her teeth at the Wizard. "It was *ours* to begin with." She got control of herself, putting a hand on my back for comfort as she glared up at him. "It's a cure, or will be once my people have access to the Mother Opal again. And we will. So the only choice you have here is: will it be a miracle cure *you* bring to the people, or one that...someone else finds and publicly accuses you of withholding from an impoverished refugee population?"

The Wizard, for once, seemed to have glitched out. He had no response to that ultimatum. I turned my head slowly to look at Min. She still had her toolbelt on, still had her goggles lopsided on her head, still had her coral-and-moss curls and shale-flake face. But some kind of chisel had snuck up and chipped away at her when I wasn't looking. A canny, brilliant edge was hewn into her features, and I wagged my tail slowly, warily. *Dang. Just when you think you had Oz figured out, a minion goes and puppets an emperor.*

"What was your name, again?" the Wizard asked with a simmering anger and cold acceptance.

"I am Min, mechanic of the Thirty-first Squadron, daughter of Clan Opal, and keeper of your sins," Min recited through sharp teeth that grinned victoriously and ferally in her face still splashed with ghost white opal dust. "And before all that: you will *take* Dorothy Gale and Toto home. Immediately."

THE WIZARD'S EFFORTS AT DELAYING were unsuccessful in the face of the combined efforts of a newly confident Scarecrow and Chopper, the Rook entourage adding weight to Min's rather terrifying brand of sweet menace as she followed the Wizard around, never letting him out of her sight. All of it topped off by the accumulation of birds that had suddenly begun to flock around the Emerald City. Sparrows and pigeons jostled outside bakeries for

crumbs, and finches and robins and other forest birds began to harass residents' sleep patterns at dawn, while blackbirds, starlings, and, yes, crows began to darken the skies in increasing murders. I wanted to ask Crow about it, but suddenly he was mysteriously absent on "revolution business." Everyone, it appeared, was impatient for something to happen.

So the next morning the giant promenade of the Green Sector was cleared for what the Wizard boisterously announced would be his royal farewell. Emptied of stalls and the frivolous noble fancies that had always cluttered it, the promenade area surprised me when I saw how huge and flat it was, and that the paved area in the middle of the grassy park was not actually a giant fountain, as today it had been drained of water to reveal a giant bowl with a seam down the middle. It was toward this odd sight that all the bleachers and observation platforms were angled.

Our entire party was corralled in a "place of honor" up on the main stage, which felt more like a playpen puppies were put in when they needed a time-out. A big, ribboned wall sectioned us off from any nobles or other dignitaries who might have spoken to us, and I had to keep hopping onto Dorothy's lap to see anything. "What's going on *now*?" I called to Crow, who had returned and who obviously had a better vantage from a perch on one of those big decorative banisters around the platform.

"He's *still* talking," Crow called down. The Wizard had been preceded by three different minor big hats of the city—literally, they all wore different fancy hats; that was the only way I could tell them apart—and now he'd been at the front of the stage, talking, for at least ten minutes. "I think he's just finished wrapping up something about his *long dynasty* and is moving on to economics."

"Oh, for—" I dropped to Dorothy's lap. The Wizard's people had her dressed in that ridiculous gingham dress again, and she crossed her legs uncomfortably. "I'm gonna die of old age before we leave."

"Oh, wait—no, something's happening. He's mentioning your arrival and..."

I heard Dorothy's name echo overhead. She started, and the wall of our seating box split as she was being called forward. I hopped off her lap and

ran ahead. So what if they hadn't called me? Dorothy and I were a package deal, and I was real eager to stretch my legs.

The Wizard was in a formal version of that preposterous outfit he wore the first time we met him—a black turtleneck and black jeans, and over that, a dark emerald green leather trench coat with a popped collar that was twice as high as before. Its tips flared up to his overplucked eyebrows, and the puffy sleeves might have been designed to give the illusion of biceps but just made him look ready to sell car tires or float in a Thanksgiving Day parade. Stuck in the front pocket he had mirrored sunglasses that he obviously was dying to put on as he squinted into the sun. In the flesh, he was slightly dowdier, less sleek than his hologram counterpart. His smile was closed lipped when Dorothy approached. “Our girl with all the gifts,” he said, with his head tilted to a white crystal floating above the podium, which must have been projecting his voice. “Little Miss Dorothy Gale of Kansas!”

There was mixed applause. Earnest hoots and cheers echoed from the bleachers and standing-room areas for the general populace of Emerald City, but the claps were chilled from the comfortable seats held by dignitaries. I caught them throwing constant wary glances at the Rooks flanking our booth, as well as at Lion's silent presence.

“Um, hello. Thank you all for all you've done to welcome me....” Dorothy approached the podium and tried to center herself to speak, but the Wizard didn't cede enough room. She ended up awkwardly leaning in, which allowed the Wizard to wrap his arm around her in a side hug. *Gross.*

“All of you did so much to help me, even when you had no reason to. You, and your land...” Dorothy had that plastered-on smile, and then I saw her shift. One of her silver heels lifted, and it scraped very precisely the inside of the Wizard's ankle as she placed it down again. He instinctively stepped back, with a pained wince, and I darted forward to plant myself behind her feet. I wasn't much of a barrier, but the clever girl deserved backup. “No matter where I go, or how old I get,” Dorothy continued, smile softening into something real, “I'm never going to forget you.”

Dorothy glanced over her shoulder, back—past the glaring Wizard now—to our friends. I did the same, surprised when a moist, lumpy feeling formed under my collar. The others were watching, encouraging Dorothy. Min gave me the thumbs-up.

“I need to go home. But I wish I could stay.” I heard Dorothy sniffle.... Yeah, I guess she’s sentimental like that. Yeah. “I’ll miss all of you so much.”

Impulse control is not a teenager’s strong suit. Dorothy nearly tripped over me as she rushed back to the stand where the others waited. She threw her arms around Scarecrow first, starting tearful goodbyes. I followed at a more dignified rate, but still wound up nearly getting swept off my feet when Min found me.

“Soon as he magics you home, we’re going to kill him real good,” Min muttered in my ear.

“Aw, I’ll miss you too, you little murder hobo.” I licked her scaled cheek. It had nearly coraled over, but there was still a patch near her outer eye that was a reminder of her discovery. It tasted like mineral salt, and I remembered that Rooks cried rocky.

“I’ll build something someday that lets us come visit this Kan-zas,” she insisted, squeezing one more time before letting me down.

“And I’ll make sure she doesn’t blow herself up doing it,” Lettie said, coming up behind her. She had her armor polished to a shine, but she still crouched down to tap my paw. “Take care of your girl.”

“You take care of yours,” I said, with a wag of the tail as my words drew a slight blush out of the knight. “And the rest of them, I figure. Chop—Nick shouldn’t take up so much of your time now, at least.”

“He’s still my brother,” Lettie said, as the clicking steps of said metal man made their way over. His eyes were still rust red, but I did feel like there was a new curve of light in them. And when he slowly flexed his mechanical joints to crouch down, the words proved it.

“Good. Dog,” Nick Chopper said.

“I’m trying.” I sat up and put a paw on his battered-plate knee. “You keep trying too, okay?”

“Chop,” Nick said, for old time’s sake. Probably. Mostly.

He’d stood and carried Min and Lettie off to have a good view again when I turned and Scarecrow was there. “Jeez!” I startled with a yip. “Stop *doing* that, you freaky grass man.”

“You didn’t call me an abomination, at least.” Scarecrow chuckled, then fell solemn. “Are you really leaving?”

“Of course. The Wizard agreed—”

“I know Dorothy is leaving. I meant, are *you*?” Scarecrow interrupted. The brim of his hat tilted up, and I wasn’t sure I would ever get used to seeing glimmering gems of light where that seeping darkness used to be in his eyes. “You could stay, if you wanted to. Seems like Oz is a better deal all around for a dog like you.”

I faltered, sitting back on my haunches. “Don’t...don’t be ridiculous, okay? I can’t.”

“Why not? People can talk to you here, you have connections, friends, the food is better....”

“Because I can’t! I can’t...” I let out a painful sigh and said, “I can’t do that to Dorothy.”

“Huh...” The Scarecrow held my gaze; the side of his mouth flickered up almost imperceptibly at the side. “Maybe I better talk to the Wizard about this new mind crystal. Because that doesn’t make sense at all.”

“It doesn’t, does it?” I huffed and stood up again. “Thank you for watching out for her, and for us. Steer clear of those witches. Maybe pair up with Evaline and you’ll be okay.”

“We’ll be okay,” the scarecrow reassured. “We’ll still miss you both.”

“Pssh...” I didn’t sniff, just cleared my nose boop holes firmly as Scarecrow patted my head and managed to duck just as Crow swooped in.

“T! Comrade!” The blue jay, absolutely ignorant of the dramatic partings going on around us, fluttered to the pavement in front of me. “Listen. Don’t forget to leave the shoes.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“The shoes, the silver slippers! Make sure you remind Dorothy to kick those off before the Wiz does his...you know...sparkle fingers.” Crow

waved his wings vaguely.

“We’re about to leave forever and you’re worried about footwear logistics.”

“Aw, it’s not like that!” Crow glanced to his left and right, hopping from one foot to the other. “It’s part of the deal, though, so you’ll remind her, right?”

Just when I thought I understood Crow, that I had grown close to the dang addled bird, even...but no. My ears twitched as I stared at him. “Yeah. I’ll remind her, Crow,” I said flatly.

He stopped twitching with a relieved sigh. “Great! I—”

“Later, Crow.” I turned and started to walk back toward Dorothy. Crow’s squawked protest made me slow.

“Hey!” Crow started to waddle over. “I don’t mean...It’s all going to work out, right? There’s plans a’wing, big plans.”

I squinted at him through my fuzzy brows. “What plans? It’s all over—we’re going home.”

“Well...yes, but, see, a while back, when it wasn’t looking so good, I made this deal, so...” Crow’s crest rose to the top of his head, a sign, I’d learned, that he had gotten either flustered or constipated. “You’ll be long gone, so it won’t matter, but just...just remember the shoes. T, you should know—”

“Come on, Toto.” Dorothy snuck up on me, scooping me up, and Crow smeared out of my line of sight. She turned us to face the Wizard, who was again smiling for the crowds. “We’re ready now. Please, send us home.”

“Oh, I’ll do better than that, my dear! I’ll escort you there personally.” He made a grandiose gesture toward the emptied bowl of a fountain, and a grinding sound filled the air as the seam down the middle cracked and began to pull apart. The crowd of gathered Emerald City residents burst into scattered applause. “You see, I have missed my dear homeland myself, and I am overdue for a visit...” He was American! I guess the strip-mining *should* have been a tip-off.

“Escort? Oh, that’s not necessary....” Dorothy’s attempts to demur were drowned out as the Wizard’s amplified voice launched into a melodramatic

farewell to his worshipful citizens, complete with a tearful promise to return. (Honestly, none of his supposed fans looked that choked up about his departure. Even his personal attendant was already checking his little opal-powered crystal instead of listening.)

All the while, the two sections of the bowl of the fountain were disappearing into the turf of the park, revealing a darkened space beneath. A craft rose on a platform, and I had to blink to bring it into focus. The frame looked much like that of a small hover aircraft of Dorothy's and my world, complete with some obnoxious screen-printed graphics that had been scarred up in a crash landing. But repairs had been made with Oz magic, and giant hunks of opal and other gems appeared to be melted into the sensitive electronics of the engine and propulsion systems.

"Do...e...oz..." Dorothy squinted as she tried to make out the logo remaining on the side of the small aircraft. The "oz" was apart enough to seem its own word: "Oz." Ah, now I understood the confusion. Dorothy's mouth quirked thoughtfully before her face brightened. "'Do the Dooze'! Oh, you're that bubble-boy billionaire!"

The Wizard's shoulders flinched, and he halted his speech midsentence to whip around to Dorothy. "I am an *industry disruptor*, thank you. *Forbes* called me a *visionary*. I was in *Thirty Under Thirty*!"

"I watched your drone launch when I was...god, I had to be six?" Dorothy continued, blithely. The Wizard's sallow cheeks turned a new shade of violet. "I was too young to be on Twitter, mind, but they still use a screenshot from your onboard GoPro for, like...a classic meme."

Ooooooh, as she described it, I put together what she meant. It was a grainy photo of a failed extreme-sports stunt, a dashboard shot of a pasty pilot who looked at the camera straight on, eyes bugging out, as he looked to be vomiting in his mouth. It usually accompanied text like *I've made a terrible mistake* or *When money doesn't buy balls* or just *White boy tears*. But I was too young to know more than that, so I had to ask. "Why do they call him 'bubble boy'?"

"They doooooon't," the bubble-boy Wizard whined at the same time Dorothy happily answered.

“There was an extreme-games marketing phase. I watched a whole YouTube video essay on it. Like, guys did the stupidest things to see if they could. And there was this tech billionaire—I don’t even remember his name —”

“Monk. Ansel Monk. People *have* to remember my name,” the Wizard muttered to himself.

“Right, Monk. He made his money with mines or something.”

“There were no mines—that was a vicious rumor. I built cars! Really amazing cars! We were going to Venus.”

“Hey, I asked Dorothy, not you,” I said to the bubble boy. “Continue, Dorothy.”

“Right, well...he kind of had this dude-bro following, and announced he was going to prove how safe his latest vehicle was, some kind of manned drone, by flying it across the ocean himself, livestreamed online.” Dorothy tapped her foot. “There were some boring tech parts in the documentary—I’ll skip over those”—Bubble Boy looked distinctly pained—“but he got everyone psyched enough that he got a partnership with this energy-drink company that I guess millennials drank a lot. DewDooze? They sponsored the event, and Monk had the big idea that he could go even farther if he saved energy by using a weather balloon to do the initial rise into the lower atmosphere. A giant silver...thing. It *did* look like a bubble on-screen.”

The Bubble Boy of Oz groaned under his breath. “It was a Verne callback, you absolute toddlers....”

“It was big enough news that Mom even let me watch on her laptop, despite how young I was. I remember being excited because they launched from a field down in Texas—that’s practically Kansas, so...” Dorothy gestured to the giant Frisbee-like drone craft sitting on the platform. “He had that thing strapped to what looked like a giant silver hot-air balloon and just...went up. The feeds followed for a while, then cut to the little cameras he had tucked all over the inside of the drone. There was even one pointed at his face.”

“Ohhh yeah, that’s the one that goes down in history,” I added helpfully.

“Everything was plastered with DewDooze’s lime green and yellow branding—that’s how I recognized the bits now. But we could see the sky changing color, and the first thirty seconds or so are pretty cool.... Really, they were.” Dorothy paused, trying to offer a vague reassurance to the Wizard, who now just held two pinched fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Then...well, the solar flare.”

“Is that what it was?” The Wizard was hard to hear, his voice as creased as his expression—tight with an energy that sent my hackles rising, like I was a dog backed into a corner. Maybe this story wasn’t a good idea. “I’d always wondered.”

“They figured that out afterward, NASA,” Dorothy confirmed, not having hackles to pick this stuff up like I do. “The data from the stream starts to cut out, and everything starts to go...wrong, the tracking data even goes erratic, we only get a few frames of stills...” She paused, whispering to me, “*That meme...*” Then, “And then...nothing. Monk and his craft disappeared. I guess they found shreds of that silver balloon in the Atlantic a few weeks later. Then news of his company’s financial fraud starts trickling out, and there’s questions, and it reminded people of a hoax, so they started...calling...him...ah...” She finally noticed the way the Wizard—Ansel Monk, disgraced bubble boy—was staring murder at us with bloodshot eyes. “...Bubble Boy. But...look how well you landed!” She tried to end brightly.

“...landed!” echoed around the park, and I realized the amplifying crystal had picked up Dorothy’s entire story and shared it with the crowd. I doubted the gathered Oz nobles understood what a “stream” or sponsorship was, but judging by the uncomfortable quiet, they understood a silly stunt gone wrong and were trying to figure out what to make of it.

Well. I’d promised Min the Wizard’s head. After the story she told me, she deserved more than a metaphor, but a dog had to start somewhere. In Dorothy’s arms, I leaned forward just enough to speak toward the crystal: “That means he’s not really of the Oz royal family. Also, probably...check your treasury,” I finished lamely. (I had been about to say “also not

magical,” but the others looked so pleased with their miracles that I couldn’t do that to them.)

That struck murmurs through the crowd. But I barely had time to lean back with satisfaction before Dorothy was nearly yanked off her feet. She yelped, tightening her hold on me as the Wizard dragged us toward the platform with the drone.

“You *dare*,” he seethed. His narrow face, once comically pale, had turned a splotchy scarlet and eggplant complexion. His hand on Dorothy’s forearm was tight enough to leave bruises, and though I could see her digging in her heels, they only clipped sunlight-bright sparks over the pavement as he dragged her violently behind him. “You are *nothing*, get it? What are you? A *girl*? Not even old enough to...” he spit, coming up to the door of the machine and roughly throwing Dorothy against it. She bounced against the door, turning to shield me from the impact. “*I’m Ansel fucking Monk! I’m Thirty Under Thirty! Time’s most interesting man! I’m the Wizard of Oz!*”

“You’re right!” Dorothy tried, clutching me to her chest, with one hand raised. The Wizard was surprised enough to hesitate for a second while she talked, a tear streaming down her face. I could hear Lion roaring as the others were obviously encountering a fight while making their way to us. “*I am just a girl. Please. Just let us go home, and no one will remember us here.*”

Oh, that was a patent lie, I thought to myself. *Dorothy’s killed one witch, encouraged another’s freedom, fomented rebellion wherever she’s gone, and now disrupted an entire country’s sense of royal succession. Pretty sure she’ll make it to the history books.* Also, I might have accidentally helped put some feathered fascists on the throne in the Beast Kingdom, but I hoped Lion would sort that out after I left. Point was, Dorothy was saying what she needed to say to control the monster.

“You are...” The Wizard still fumed, but his face faded from scarlet and eggplant to merely scarlet. “And in effin’ Kansas I’m a god. No one will listen to a *woman*...or even...” I didn’t like the way his mind was working, but he clicked the craft’s door open and shoved us in. He climbed in after

us, shutting the door and hitting a button that began to lower the windows around us in the cramped, basket-sized cabin.

“Oh, the shoes,” I said, remembering the request from Crow, which had seemed weird then but felt like a blessedly banal reminder right now. “We promised.”

“Right...” Dorothy pulled herself together and shifted her grip on me to begin awkwardly reaching for the strap on one foot.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The Wizard grabbed at Dorothy’s hands again.

I was watching for it, and I snapped at him. Stupid, quick bugger. He jumped back, but at least Dorothy didn’t end up with another bruise. She did stop reaching for her shoe, though. “Taking off the shoes. I promised to leave them for my friends.”

“Oh no, no you are not. Those things are coming with *me*.” The Wizard’s lip curled. “Even if they aren’t...” He wiggled his fingers dismissively. “They’re still crusted with solid—what, diamonds? Quicksilver? Who knows in this place? Between those and the crates of opals I got stuffed in the back, I’ll make a tidy profit *and* have proof that my absence wasn’t a scheme. Maybe I can even get these guys to work like the opals—quantum tech; I had my Winkie engineers document everything,” he added in a way that made me absolutely certain he himself understood none of it. “And run Apple out of business...”

There was a hungry gleam in his eyes, the same kind of look I’ve seen when coyotes get a little too starved, or too diseased, and start turning on anything that gets close. “Maybe put me down,” I whispered to Dorothy, with my fur beginning to stand on end.

She complied, gently setting me on a crate near one of the windows. She held very still with her hands folded in front of her until the Wizard turned away and began fiddling with the power-up controls on the dash.

“Toto!” A screeched whisper made me nearly jump out of my skin. I spun around to see Crow and Min hugging the edge of the window to stay out of sight. Only Min’s fingertips and the top of her head were visible as

she peered over the edge, while Crow hung sideways off a rope tie. “You guys got to get off this thing!”

“What?” Dorothy whispered, much more quietly. “We can’t! This is our only way home!”

“My dear loyal subjects...” The Wizard was speechifying into a crystal as he leaned out the window of the craft. With the arch of the cabin ceiling and all the panes of glass down, the tiny space did open up, at least. The sound of raised voices and displaced crashes filtered in through the windows, though I could no longer see what was going on. I hoped it was even more chaotic than it sounded. I hoped the Wizard’s last sight of his “empire” was of nobility in open rebellion.

I could, however, see the curdled expression that crossed Crow’s face as he tried again. “But you guys really got to get off! It, uh...looks unsafe! And isn’t this guy crazy?”

“Crow...” I said with narrowing eyes. “What do you know?”

“Nothing!” he hissed.

“What was that deal you were talking about?”

“I didn’t know about this part!” He flapped his wings in a panic.

“Where are Scarecrow and the others?” Dorothy asked worriedly.

Min, meanwhile, had been scanning the interior of the tiny cabin with her sharp engineer’s gaze. It lit on the crate I was standing on and she gasped when she saw the stenciling. “That’s not what I think it is, is it?”

“It is,” I confirmed, backing up so she could see more. “The asshole wants to import your clan’s stuff as trinkets.”

“That...” To my surprise, she gave up stealth and swung over the edge of the window into the cabin. She pried up one side of the crate’s lid with one pull and crouched over it, staring in horror at the glittering jumble of opals, each with a tiny thumbprint caught inside.

Unfortunately, Min’s reveal didn’t go unnoticed. The crack of wood brought the Wizard’s head around just as he’d completed some launch protocols. The cabin jolted and rocked to the left as thrusters came online, jiggling the drone into a glacial hover.

“You—common thugs. Thieves! Stop the—” The Wizard was almost able to holler a full sentence—though I don’t know *who* he was trying to summon in a cabin the size of an outhouse. Before he finished, Min launched herself at him, screaming something between a howl and the sound of a pebble caught in a garbage disposal.

As the entire craft roiled, Dorothy clamped one hand over her ear at the noise and dove for the dashboard, trying to find a button to get it under control. I skidded off the top of the crate and momentarily into the inner pack of gems, having to scramble against a tide of shinies until they upended on the next jolt and spilled across the floor in a wave. They crashed against the Wizard’s legs as he struggled to keep Min from ripping his face off, which she had already made good progress on, judging from the large bloody scratches on his arms and neck. Meanwhile, Crow flapped around the windows screeching, “Get out! Jump! Abandon ship!”

You haven’t known real chaos until you’ve tried to pack a blood feud between a billionaire and a pissed-off flying gargoyle, a teenage girl batting at a dashboard like it’s *Dance Dance Revolution*, and a very heroic terrier slipping across an opal ball pit into a space twice the size of an airplane bathroom. I finally managed to find myself adjacent to the Wizard’s ankle and bite down, which provided Min an opening to kick him in the chest. That sent him reeling into the side of the craft.

The Wizard retaliated by using the momentum to fling Min out the window and turn his attention to Dorothy. He grabbed her by the hair and yanked her away from the dash with an inhuman growl.

I’ve described that red feeling before, but this was...this was something beyond that. It was *scarlet*, the pulse of vision itself. Red as the poppies that had dragged her down. Red, and I saw the red gouges Min’s claws had left behind on the Wizard’s neck, and I suddenly understood. Yes. Red, red is the color of *our human in danger*. For a moment even Dorothy’s slippers turned from silver to scarlet as they dangled on her feet, one strap undone.

I did not go for the Wizard’s ankles again; I did not go for the legs. I vaulted to the crate, then to the dash, spinning across it near the open

window, careless of the buttons I may hit in the process, and I launched myself at the Wizard's red, red neck.

Red—that's what I was focused on. That and Dorothy's cry, and I couldn't feel anything else. There was too much adrenaline pumping through my tiny vermin-hunting body. It must be why I didn't feel the claws that thudded into my side and sent me off course. Why I didn't understand, why I was frozen with uncomprehending horror, as instead of rocketing at the Wizard, I was suddenly shoved outside the aircraft and the scene shifted. I couldn't see the Wizard or Dorothy at all. Then I was falling.

It felt longer than it was, but it had to have been only a brief fall from the hovering craft before I hit the platform with a painful thump and went tumbling rump over snoot. I landed with a view of the sky, and dazedly tilted to see Crow swooping down toward me. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! You had to get out!"

"What have you *done*?" I tried to roll to my feet and began to bark. "Dorothy! Dorothy!"

I couldn't see anything through the windows of the craft. Not anything. What was that bastard doing to her? Had he already hurt her? What if he hurt her and took her off and I never knew? I barked more loudly, that red feeling escalating by the moment into a frantic feeling of white panic. "Dorothy!"

"I'm sorry, I'm—" Crow was still apologizing in my ear. *Traitor*. I turned and flashed every one of my teeth at him.

"Toto!" Every cell in my body pulled toward that voice. Dorothy stuck her head out an open door of the flying craft. But—oh, oh no, the craft was rising. It was a good ten feet in the air now. She hesitated, glancing down a moment, then looking back. I barked, not even sure if I was telling her to stop or to hurry, to be honest, and then she jumped—

Guys. They say cats have nine lives? Dogs must have two, because I think I spent one of mine that day just watching that.

Dorothy folded when she hit the pavers, not quite sticking the landing. She cried out as her ankle rolled, but she managed to turn her shoulder into

a tumble like they taught in gym class. She came to a stop in a fetal position, and I was already running as fast as four legs could take me.

“D! Dorothy! Buddy, buddy...bud—” I was panting and the hair around my eyes was getting all gummed up with eye goop and oh, Dorothy unfolded enough to open her arms as I came plowing in. My rump did all the vibrating as she clenched the front end tight and I licked every single part of her I could reach.

A wheezing caw intruded, sending my ears back. I twisted around. Crow landed a couple feet away and stomped his feet awkwardly. “Whew, good move there, comrade! Like I was telling Toto here—”

“What. The Hell. Crow,” I bit out, holding still since Dorothy had her head buried in my neck.

“Look. She promised me that everything would be all right. And faeries always keep their promises! Everyone knows that! So if you can just be cool for, like, five more minutes—” Crow’s crest flared into a full mohawk as shrieks started overhead, followed by the audible kick of an engine. Even I had to look up at that. The Wizard’s drone had continued to ascend. By now, it was seventy feet above our heads and climbing, banking off over the glittering roofs of the Green Sector as he made his escape. But what drew the immediate attention of onlookers was the dark, seething cloud of birds that had descended like a single entity over the Emerald City’s walls.

And had aimed all of their fury right at the silver-and-steel interloper in their sky.

As we watched, the drone banked in the opposite direction. But that was when the first wave of the smallest birds arrived. Tiny feathered bodies, songbirds and sparrows, finches, robins, titmice, swifts, wrens, and even some blue jays threw themselves into the engines and open ports. The tiny puffs of feathers made both me and Dorothy wince as the drone hesitated in its maneuver, engines coughing on sacrificial chaff.

I felt my stomach drop right through my paws and I managed only a hoarse whisper now: “What the hell, Crow...?”

“Just wait.” He sounded...strange. Sad, proud? There was none of the vainglorious cheer from when my blue friend talked about revolution and

sacrifice, but maybe he'd always known the real thing was a lot more awful than the stories. His feathers were all pressed flat as the larger birds caught up and swept an arc around the flying craft.

Owls, ospreys, and vultures wove a confusing net overhead as the drone wobbled, trying to push its way through the cloud of birds that tightened around it. I recalled how Mere Fisher flew with me weighing down on her back; maybe that's how I recognized the weighted way a couple of condors moved when they separated from the swarm and glided toward the open windows. The sedate way they hefted and then chucked some kind of package through. They nearly collided with the craft in the process, but they were big enough just to flap and kick off.

Suddenly, the drone wasn't just nudging its way through the crowd. Its thrusters flared like it channeled its pilot's panic. It gunned forward, slamming into half a dozen birds that didn't even attempt to dodge out of the way. The larger ones rebounded, while the smaller ones fell like shattered weights to the rooftops below. For a moment it seemed like the maneuver had worked, as the black cloud of birds overhead began to peel off. I heard a shriek that repeated through the swarm as birds backed off of the drone. The engines brightened again, and then—

A bloom of heat ripped the sky in two. The shock wave cascaded across the glittering roofs below the drone, cresting to send debris shooting into the square where everyone watched. Emerald City citizens screamed and dove for cover. If there had been unrest as Dorothy's friends struggled to come to her aid, total anarchy broke out as the Wizard's aircraft exploded low in the sky above the Emerald City.

Dorothy threw herself down in the explosion, pinning me underneath her. I felt the heat wash over us, though thankfully the ping and rattle of the debris fell short, across the square. When I finally wiggled enough for her to let up, we both blinked through the smoke at a changed scene.

The event in the Green Sector's park had turned from a grandstand festival into a free-for-all. The crashing drone had plowed through the roofs of a row of shops lining the square on the far side. Nothing remained of the craft itself—or, I have to imagine, the Wizard—but the fronts of the

buildings had collapsed into the street. A pile of rubble of oversize jade stone blocked one exit and had tilted a set of general-seating bleachers into another. Falling debris from the explosion had shredded the awnings that shaded the nobles seated in the covered stands, which had been abandoned in such a hurry that velvet pads and filigreed binoculars were strewn about. Smoke rose from the buildings that had caught the worst of the explosion's shock wave, painting the air with haze as sirens rose farther into the city.

Most of the attending Emerald City citizens either had already escaped or were attempting to, but there was a handful of the city guard trying to enforce order and, somewhat futilely, enact the capture of the birds overhead.

"Freedom! Death to tyrants and their puppets!" a particularly angry quail shrieked as it streaked by us, chased by a guard. A jolt of *red* ran hard through my chest and I yanked free of Dorothy's arms to whip around on Crow. He hadn't moved since the onslaught started.

"You knew this would happen," I said, trying to believe the pieces as I put them together. His reminders, the uneasiness, the warnings to get out. "You *planned* this to happen. Are these guys...these guys those Beast Kingdom assholes?"

"What? No!" Crow cried, and I felt a stab of relief until he had to amend, "I mean, I did...know, yeah, but they're not Beast Kingdom! These are my brothers. I earned my place back." He straightened and looked *proud* of it. "The revolution is finally underway. She promised to help us."

"Who?" A tremor was building in my front paws. I didn't know where it had come from, and wasn't sure where it was going. All I knew was the realization that we'd been *in that drone*. The air on my back felt cool as the fur stood on end. "You could have gotten Dorothy killed."

Crow flinched. "I wouldn't—"

"You lied to all of us. You—" I snarled, then hesitated as Dorothy laid a hand on my head. She'd gotten her feet under her again and was crouched, regarding Crow with a quiet, considering expression. Behind her and farther back, I saw Lettie and Min helping gather Scarecrow's stuffing after the struggle, and Lion and Chopper keeping a wary eye on the guards.

“Toto’s right—you should have told us—and he’s right to be angry,” Dorothy said coolly. She seemed to think for a quiet moment, rubbing one of my ears between her fingers. Then she said, a bit more softly: “You pushed him out of the drone to save him, though. Didn’t you? We would have still been in there if you hadn’t done that. Thank you.”

Crow brightened, opening his mouth to say something, but Dorothy held up her hand.

“Hey. Doing a good thing doesn’t mean your friends don’t still have a right to be angry. You earned that too.” Dorothy sounded so wise, so sad all of a sudden, that I looked up. She smiled down at me and stood up. “Like stranding us here. I guess I *was* a foolish girl to trust him after all, wasn’t I, Toto?”

I shook my head and was prepared to talk Dorothy through another iteration of this *intense* guilt complex she was developing when a syrupy voice swelled through the air around us and beat me to the punch.

“Oh, sweetheart, you can’t blame yourself.”

I darted between Dorothy’s legs and spun around, trying to locate the voice’s origin, but the pink glow swam in from the north. It brought a breeze along with it, which slowly cleared the smoke and haze, and heralded a familiar iridescent bubble that grew over the rooftops.

Glinda’s bubble must be a well-known trick in the city. Even the frantic city guards slowed and pulled back, giving room until it was only Dorothy, Crow, and me in the center of the square as Glinda’s bubble landed a few yards away and she stepped out as it popped into nothing. Her cherry-bright red hair still fell in the same perfect curls, and her face was still made-up in that perfect doll-smile pout. She wore the same frothy pink dress as when we’d first met her, in the Munchkin village, but now the bodice was armored with some kind of silver boning that plated her ribs and buttressed her bosom to greater heights.

Dorothy was struck silent, as was the rest of the square. I couldn’t tell from the hesitation in the air if it was because of respect or fear.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself, Dorothy,” Glinda repeated, kindly. “The Wizard was a complicated man and it was only natural that he made a great

many enemies.”

“You told me he was a good man. You said he could send me home.” Dorothy’s voice wobbled but she didn’t hesitate, and I was about to bust a rib with canine pride.

“I said he was *great* and *powerful*,” Glinda corrected, gently. Her lipstick didn’t even crease. “That did not mean he was good. And he could send you home—would have, had such an unfortunate act of terror not befallen him.”

She didn’t look at Crow, but kept her gaze steady on Dorothy, which I thought was weird since he seemed to be central to that “act of terror.” I glanced to the side. Crow was hunched where we’d left him and was shifting anxiously from one foot to the other as he hung his head. He caught my glance, and we locked eyes. Bird gazes aren’t particularly emotive on their own, but for a moment when he looked at me it felt like a continuance of the apology—at first, but then it became...something else.

I couldn’t understand it then, that clear light in his eyes. But later, I knew just how important that message was.

“But you’ve been so brave,” Glinda continued, drawing my attention away from the nervous blue jay. She clasped her wand in front of her with both hands. “Why, now you’ve killed not one but two evil, wicked witches. All of Oz is in your debt.”

“I don’t feel brave.” Dorothy’s face crumpled. “I feel horrible, actually. You’ve lost two sisters now. I can’t imagine how you must feel—”

To Glinda’s credit, her delicate features melted in a model of sorrow that put her on the edge of weeping the most beautiful tears. “My grief is immense, and as wide as the desert that surrounds this land.”

Dorothy wrapped her arms around herself, shoulders folding inward. Her stupid braids and gingham dress were faintly smeared with dust from the opal crate and the struggle inside the drone, and just below her right eye she had a scratch that was bleeding. “How do we get home now?” She sniffed. “I think the Wizard’s dead.”

“Oh, sweet girl, you’ve had the power to go home this whole time.” Glinda’s voice was soft and kind. Dorothy and I both looked up in

confusion. “All you have to do is close your eyes, knock your heels together three times, and command the shoes to carry you wherever you wish to go. Perhaps—eyes tightly closed, now—whisper, *There’s no place like home; there’s no place like home...*”

“The heck?” I said at the same time as Dorothy frowned.

“But if I could have done that anytime, why didn’t you tell me that before?” Her brows were furrowed in a tight line, but I could see her wanting to believe it so badly. She needed to think there was still a way home for us.

Glinda tilted her head, leaning forward to fold her arms under her chest just so. “Because it’s a magic that requires you to believe in yourself, silly goose. And now you do, don’t you? The truth is, those shoes can take you *anywhere* in three steps. Look at you, questioning *me*.” Something spoiled and venomous slipped underneath the silk on the last word and my ears went back.

Crow was crouched, wings tense, when I risked a glance in his direction. He caught my gaze and held it. There it was again, a sadness like he was still living through our argument earlier—but the blue feathers on his crest fluttered slightly, like he was breathing fast and frantically. I tried to slam together the words he’d said earlier.

I made this deal, Crow had said. Faeries always keep their promises.... She promised me that everything would be all right....

What was going on?

“It’s...worth a try,” Dorothy muttered to herself, and I turned my attention back to her. She smiled reassuringly at me and crouched to let me jump into her arms. Then she straightened and took a deep breath. She sent one last glance over her shoulder, at her friends who were just now gathering themselves together to approach across the square. But we’d already said our goodbyes, and it was time.

“Ready, Toto?” Dorothy whispered, and I licked her face reassuringly.

“You can do this, kid.” I hesitated, then added, just in case this really was it: “You’re my favorite human, you know.”

Dorothy smiled. “I love you too, Toto.” And her big brown eyes were all wet and goofy right before she closed them.

“There’s no place like home...” she said, clicking her heels together slowly. “There’s no...”

I’d been prepared to take one last look at Oz as we left, but motion caught my attention. Glinda had drawn her wand. Gone was the soft, sisterly serenity from that porcelain face. It had been quickly repainted with the sharp lines of a victorious smirk on her red lips. Her eyes were too wide, cheeks flushed, as her wand was over her head and then she brought it forward wreathed in flame—

—pointed right at Dorothy.

“...place...”

There was no reacting, nothing I could do. Time slowed just enough in my head that I could have the agonizing thought that Glinda played us perfectly. The trip, the shoes, her sister, the Wizard, and now, eyes closed, another loose end gone. I felt the pain boil out of my throat as a howl, which was when two impossible, terrible things happened.

“...like...”

The first: Dorothy’s arms loosened, perhaps because she was startled by the noise I made. Dorothy, who had never dropped her beloved pup in her life, dropped me as the killing firebolt flew loose from Glinda’s wand like a bullet.

The second: a blur of blue and white rocketed across my vision as I fell. A muted sound, like a cottoned explosion, was so quiet, I thought I imagined it as I hit the ground on all fours.

“...home.” Dorothy’s voice broke on a gasp. I spun around, immediately worried. Some ripple of magic shot over my head—not flames, oddly, but something like an aftershock. Dorothy opened her eyes briefly, but when that hit her, her eyes rolled back and she crumpled to the ground.

I yelped, rushing the step back to her side, and nudged her onto her back, until I could check her over. She hadn’t hit her head, she was breathing, and—thank god—somehow that firebolt had missed. Ha! That faerie bitch had *missed*! But she was unconscious, maybe just passed out.

Everything was happening too fast. Too *fast*. The Wizard was dead! Things were supposed to be okay now!

“*Idiot jay, useless!*” Glinda said, sweet voice curdled completely. And that’s...

As I turned, my paws were lead all of a sudden. In the air there was a burnt smell that I had not registered, had mentally refused. I didn’t understand what I saw, zeroing in on the threat first. Glinda was still there, standing with the wand out and her face twisted into something poisonous and wrong as ash filtered through the air across the square between us.

Oh. Not ash.

I stumbled back and sat down hard as I finally saw the faint smoke rising off a tiny crumpled body on the pavers. A faint scorch mark shadowed it and a few bits of fluff that had blown off in the initial impact were still white, though the rest of the small bird had been charred beyond recognition when he flew directly into the full impact of the firebolt.

A piece of burnt feather dusted out of the air to land at my feet... completely crow black.

“Crow...” I croaked, my whole body feeling too heavy and numb. “No, buddy, no...”

“The shoes,” Glinda snarled, wand pointed again. She started to advance across the square, this time focused on me, as I was the only one left standing between her and her goal. “The shoes are mine.”

Crow’s body was still smoking. It crumbled a little as Glinda swept her dress right *over* it, ignoring it like trash. And the rage that swelled in my chest threatened to break my ribs right then and there. I got up, planted my feet in front of Dorothy’s sleeping form, and summoned *the Grawl*.

Every dog has the Grawl in it, no matter how big or little, how scruffy or cute, how pampered, old, or toothless. Every dog has in them the first wolf barely coaxed to a campfire. Maybe we never have a chance to use it in our kind lives, and our humans would never suspect. But if we do, it’s because none of us, not a single pup, has forgotten the first campfire. And though we have taken on many jobs for our humans since then, there is one that is summarized in *the Grawl*.

This One Is Mine to Protect.

The Growl ripped out of me, starting from my claws, dug into the earth, and vibrating exponentially up through my bones until it released every slumbering dark, violent cell in my bloodstream, every foggy notion of feral defiance that had been tamed, every terrier desire to hunt and rend and shake, until it came roaring out of my throat as the quintessence of threat, a promise. *I will bite. I will tear. I will shred. And if you think to burn me, I will simply bite while on fire.*

“You won’t touch her,” I howled in a voice not entirely my own.

Glinda came to a stop, carnation pink skirts frothing around her. She looked down her nose at me. “You are one little dog. You can’t stop me.”

“I don’t have to,” I said, the Growl still vibrating in my chest. “I have a pack.”

Vines ripped out of the landscaping to our right, barely missing Glinda’s head before they fell and twisted in a loop, forcing her to step back. Chopper took a running leap over Dorothy and me, and his axe came down hard on a pink-bubble shield. Lion, who had been skulking behind, swept in from the left with Lettie on his back.

Glinda spun around, deftly cutting off attacks and meeting blows with variations of that pink-bubble magic that she warped and folded like origami into shields, walls even, a well that momentarily trapped Chopper, until Scarecrow vine-roped him out. I didn’t dare leave Dorothy unguarded, but it was still four against one and I thought we had a real chance. Especially when Lettie managed to lop a hunk of that ugly skirt off and Lion raked a bloody claw across Glinda’s back.

But no one noticed Glinda bunching them together. When another pink shield sent Lettie flying into Lion’s side, Scarecrow hollered, “Trap!” But it was too late. A perfect giant pink bubble formed around all of them, trapping them inside.

“Enough.” Glinda stalked toward me, a little slower than before. Her perfect coif was mussed now, and blood dotted the silver on her corset. Her skirt, I’m ashamed to say, still looked perfect, just fashionably asymmetrical

with Lettie's editing. She narrowed her eyes at me. "Since you refuse to move, we're going to make this...interesting."

I didn't like the sound of that. I edged back against Dorothy. Then, thinking better of it, I sidled to stand over the silver shoes still on her feet. "Touch her and I'll make sure no one sees these shoes ever again."

I didn't know how I'd do that, to be honest, but Glinda must have decided I was trouble enough to pull it off. She stepped back. "Your girl likes faerie tales, doesn't she? My pater used to tell me some. So let's make this something classic."

"Or you could just leave," I whispered.

Glinda ignored me. She flicked her wand at the bubble behind her. Chopper was walloping the inside wall with his axe while Lettie kicked and stabbed, but nothing they did left a mark. It was a silent show from out here. "It's a simple choice. You and your girl walk away, but I keep your 'pack,' as you called them. Or choose your pack and go free, and I negotiate with Dorothy unimpeded."

I blinked, shaking my head to clear it. "What about the shoes?"

Glinda waved her wand, and it really made me nervous now that I knew what it could do. Someone needed to teach people around here weapon safety. "It seems clear that the shoes and the girl are a package deal, so I suppose that depends on your choice. What's it going to be? The one or the many, little dog?"

"This is a trap. This is stupid. You're stupid," I said, even as my butt hit the ground so I could think. The square was still now. No one wanted to get involved with a faerie bargain, and I couldn't blame them. But I...

Dorothy shifted slightly at my feet, mumbling in her sleep.

It felt like it should have been easy. If I were a Good Dog, I would choose Dorothy, right? She was my human, and a Good Dog would choose its human while a Bad Dog wouldn't. But wait—wouldn't a Good Dog choose to save as many people as it could? So the Good Dog choice would be to save the pack? But that would sacrifice Dorothy.... Would the Bad Dog choice be to rebel and do neither? But then everyone dies, don't they? What's so cool about that? I don't...

This whole Good Dog / Bad Dog binary was beginning to feel awful. No matter which one I tried to be, I failed. What was the point of being a Good Dog if your friends died? What was the point of being a Bad Dog if your friends died?

Those were the people who loved me no matter which kind of dog I was. “This is hogshit,” I whispered.

Glinda reached a hand over her shoulder to pat at her clawed back with a wince. Behind her, there were dots of debris still hanging in the air. “Make a decision, dog.”

“This is hogshit!” I said, more loudly, and then my tail started to wag because I realized those dots were *not* debris.

“God, fine. I hated Lurline’s faerie tales anyway.” Glinda rolled her eyes and cracked her knuckles as she approached me.

“Hogshit!” I barked in her face, trying to think what other insults I remembered. “Get canceled!”

I had a second’s thought that this might be delirium, and I might be about to die. That was possible. But then I heard Min’s victorious screech. “I think that’s our cue, West!”

A great creaking echoed from the Wizard’s tower, and glass shattered. Even Glinda diverted her attention as a giant opal, trailing chains like a comet, bouldered out of the Wizard’s high windows and into the open air.

Just takes one, Min had said.

A squadron of Rooks appeared, grabbing the chains and quickly guiding the wildly oscillating gem off toward the horizon. Glinda whipped back around to us, but not fast enough. A Rook the size of a soda machine tackled the Witch from stage left. The shriek that pink princess let out was glorious as the stone creature flew halfway across the square with her, until they both smashed against the wall of her pink bubble.

I spun around, barking in relief as a whole squadron of Rooks descended from the rooftops, led by Min. She looked a little worse for wear, with a wing that didn’t entirely straighten as she flew—a larger Rook with obsidian shards gave her a lift—but she galloped straight for me when she landed. “Toto!”

“Min!” She squeezed the poop out of me, but I had to wiggle until she put me down. “Glinda’s still got the others—”

“Hi, Sis.” A cool voice made our heads turn. Evaline walked up to where the big Rook had a quite squashed Glinda bodychecked against the pink bubble wall now. The Witch of the West had on a big, chunky knit sweater and an even bigger, chunkier scarf, as if she’d just happened across this tableau all on her morning walk.

“Trying to kill people again?” Evie asked, shoving her hands into her pockets as she surveyed the scene. Her eyes stopped on the tiny clump of feathers that was Crow’s body and her expression darkened; her voice dropped. “You outdid yourself this time.”

“Drop it...” Glinda spit between bloody lips. Her eyes were wild as she snarled at her little sister, the Rook, the injustice of everything. “I just... want...the shoes.”

“Yeah...” Evie nodded slowly, contemplating. She gently straightened the tulle around Glinda’s shoulders, and the torn glitter of her necklace. She fluffed a curl of her sister’s red hair back into place. “Those shoes will do that to you. Here’s the thing I was told, though,” she started, sympathetically. She came around to look her sister in the face, her own expression serene now. She lifted a hand and rested it gently on Glinda’s heaving shoulder. “Dream smaller, Sister.”

Evie tapped the wall of the pink bubble above Glinda’s shoulder. Under her fingertip, it blossomed from pink to a happy mint green and split like a blossom, inverting. In the blink of an eye, Scarecrow and the others were out and a pale green bubble had formed around a *very* scandalized Glinda.

I trotted forward despite myself, now that the danger seemed contained. Evie glanced down at me as I drew up beside her. “For a little dog, you sure do know how to create a big scene.”

“I didn’t...” I shut my mouth, not even needing to look at the devastation of the city square around us. I stared up at Glinda, who was beginning to throw furious bolts of her own magic against the inside of the bubble. “What are you going to do with her?”

“She needs to be stopped. I will have to kill her,” Evie said, with the bottom half of her face tilted into the folds of her scarf.

“Please don’t.” Dorothy had pushed up to her hands where I left her, and though she was wan, she looked at both of us with clear eyes. Scarecrow was at her side, evidently having roused her with some of his herbs and magic. “Please. I don’t...I can only guess a little of what she just did, but please don’t lose another sister.”

“Not that much of a loss,” muttered Min.

I darted back to Dorothy, casting Scarecrow a thankful nod before checking her over again and accepting her hug. She really was okay. After all that...still. I looked up at her. “That woman nearly killed you. Nearly killed *all* of us. She did kill Crow!” My traitor voice cracked at that, and I hated it. “She killed Crow.”

“Tell me why I should keep her alive,” Evie said, approaching slowly. A few steps away from the group that had gathered around Dorothy, she hesitated as if buffeted back by so many...earnest feelings. “She’s an awful person.”

“Because...” Dorothy paused, holding me to her with one arm and rubbing my ear soothingly with her other hand as she thought. She dropped her eyes, slowly and sheepishly. “If the story ends there...I just...don’t like endings.”

Evie shook her head. “She could grow into something worse.”

“But that won’t be an ending,” Dorothy said, hopefully.

Evie’s lips thinned before disappearing into her scarf; in fact, she almost ducked her whole face into the chunky knit, until only her eyes remained, flicking between the remaining members of our party. I might have imagined how they hesitated on me. “Fine. For now. If only so we can find out what she knows about the Rooks’ mountain. It should be their punishment to dole out anyway.” She snapped her fingers, and the bubble behind her—Glinda had resorted to clawing madly now—began to shrink. Slowly at first, then fast, hovering in the air as it got smaller. I almost thought it was going to disappear entirely, until it stopped, having gotten to the size of a marble, with a miniature, healthy Glinda preserved inside.

The mint bauble fell, plinking to the scarred stone pavers harmlessly. Evie picked it up and shoved it into her pocket without ceremony.

“Thank you,” Dorothy said, with only a touch of uncertainty. Lion helped her stand as the rest of us began to take in the aftermath of the fight. The Green Sector promenade was chaos. Bleachers and other seating had been upturned in the panic of escaping citizens. The crashed drone had sent rubble and small fires piling into the streets. Chopper and the others had dealt with half-hearted scuffles with the city guard, though thankfully none of them (or the guard) had been mortally wounded in those exchanges. The guard had all fled by now, as had everyone else once Glinda had appeared. Now it was just us, Evaline, and a squadron of Rooks in the middle of an Emerald City in chaos.

A city whose leader was dead, its patron faerie defeated and missing, and that was now occupied by a witch and an army the populace had been taught to view as monsters.

“I just...I just wanted to go home,” Dorothy said with an empty ache in her words. “I didn’t mean for all this to happen.”

“Stop.” Evie’s voice was sharp. She grimaced and shoved her fists into her cardigan before stomping over to Dorothy. She looked up into her face. “Sorry. Just listen. This is not your fault. Stop making it your *fault*, grim garters. You did your best, and people used you. *I* used you.”

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Dorothy interjected with a touch of bitterness.

“Sorry, again. But come on—water?” Evie’s mouth edged up into a smile, which drew a smile out of Dorothy. They glanced at each other for a moment. Evie shrugged. “I need to get out of here before people start to think I’m invading.”

“You’re just leaving?” Dorothy shot out a hand that landed on Evie’s wrist and didn’t let go. To my surprise, it stopped the Witch in her tracks. “Aren’t you supposed to fix everything?”

Evie’s brows rose and her small face straightened out of her scarf entirely to give a very witchlike look to Dorothy. “First, that’s just what Glinda *wanted* people to think we had the power to do. Ninety percent of

magic is public opinion. Remember that. The other ten percent is the hard part.” She shook her head. “And even if I could, why would I? This isn’t my city. Seems to me you’ve got some capable people here. You, green speaker—” She pointed abruptly to Scarecrow. He tilted his hat up. “Yes, you. A decent enough intellect and community mindset. Skills that are... thematically appropriate, I suppose.” She made a vague gesture to the emerald walls that still towered over the rubble of the square. “Why don’t you step up?”

“Huh...” I realized it made sense. “You did want to help your people, Scarecrow.”

“I...” Scarecrow faltered, green shadows misting up around his collar. “The people of this city don’t care for nonhuman constructs.”

Evie’s lips twitched. “You’d be amazed how fast people’s bigotry turns flexible when it’s in their interests. Especially when you’re the one holding the key to the wealth all these Green Sector folk have built on the stolen-opal trade. Isn’t that right, Min?”

“We are reclaiming our Mother Opal and will negotiate rights to lost gems only with the new Emerald City governor, Scarecrow of Oz,” Min proclaimed sweetly, with an affirming nod from General Velt. It seemed a simple mechanic from the 31st had somehow risen in the ranks.

“Governor, *not* king.” Lettie spoke up, giving an approving nod to Min and then puffing up to her full paladinish pride. “The true monarch, Ozma, is still out there.” She hesitated, then shrugged. “I guess Scarecrow could hold the city together, though. For now.”

Dorothy had a thoughtful line knit between her brows. “This is not how it seems to happen in the shows, but”—she glanced toward the others—“I suppose.”

Dorothy’s hand curled, though she tried to hide it in her skirt. I could feel the realization dragging her down. I leaned against her leg, rubbing against those stupid glittery shoes. “I’m sorry, kid. I know that way home was your happy ending.”

“Oh.” Evie made a flat sound. “I forgot about that. Happy endings are overrated, though, right? I can offer you something better.”

Dorothy glanced up with an annoyed frown. “I just want to go home. I know you think that’s *stupid*, okay?”

“I mean, you could do that too! I was getting to that!” The Witch and Dorothy glared at each other for a tense beat before Evie continued. “What I was trying to say is that the silver slippers could take you home—or anywhere. Glinda wasn’t totally lying, even if she was trying to kill you. Like I explained to Toto, they are magic traveling shoes.”

I blinked. “But Dorothy did the whole ‘click your heels and wish’ thing....”

“Ugh!” Evie threw up her hands, sending her voluminous scarf fluttering like bat wings. “That was bullshit. What are shoes made for? Not heel clicking. *Walking*. You just envision the place you need to go, take three steps, and on the third, blink and you’re there.”

“That’s it?” Oh sure, *now* Dorothy was skeptical.

“That’s it.” Evie looked pained. “They’ll take you anywhere. *Anywhere*.”

“Toto too?”

Evie sighed the sigh of the damned even as she fought down a charmed smile. “And your little dog too.”

Dorothy’s face had brightened like the sun. Everyone was smiling, and I could see them stepping back to give her space, to make the parting as easy on her as possible. I resolutely took up my place at her side, nodding again to each and every face as I committed them to memory.

Dorothy’s expression had slid to thoughtful. She tilted her head as she studied Evie. “So that means I can bring someone along if I’m holding them.”

“Physical contact shares the magic, yes,” Evie confirmed stiffly. Her dark eyes narrowed. She shifted under Dorothy’s scrutiny. “Why?”

“I was just thinking...” Dorothy said slowly, glancing down at me, then back to Evie. “There are a lot of places in my own world I’d love to see. I do want to go home and let Aunt Em and Uncle Henry know I’m okay. But after that...there’s so many places! Have you ever heard of Australia? Or Ireland? Japan? Thailand? Egypt? Guatemala? Iceland?”

“There’s an entire country made of ice in your world?” Evie seemed caught between fascination and disbelief.

“There is, but it’s not that one, actually.” Dorothy had a smile she was trying to keep pinned in the corner of her lips and failing. “And of course I want to come back, if there’s no limit to these shoes. So I guess”—she drew herself up—“it’s only proper for me to offer.... You want to come along?”

A hoot escaped somewhere among the Rook ranks and was quickly squelched. It was a testament to Evie’s shock that she didn’t seem to hear it, as she was too busy staring at Dorothy’s face like it was a particularly complicated crochet pattern. “Me...you’re...but I *kidnapped* you and *imprisoned* you.”

Dorothy bobbed her head and pretended to glance to Scarecrow and Lettie for conference. “Yeah, but we killed you, and that seems like it makes us about even.”

The square was full of half-burnt rubble and stone Rooks, and a distant city was in chaos, but at that moment, none of us could have heard a thing except Evie’s pause before she took an unsteady breath and said: “Yeah, okay...but I want my broom back.”

Now no one tried to stop the entire squadron of Rooks from hooting like the Wicked Witch of the West’s own personal hype men. It took three death threats to quiet them down again, and we set to making plans for the last evening in Oz.

EVIE HAD AFFAIRS TO ARRANGE, of course. Traveling with a witch was a little more complicated than scooping up your best dog and setting off. While she and the Rooks slipped out of the Emerald City to avoid any alarm, the rest of us set to helping restore order. Min went with them, orchestrating the airlift of one giant milky white gem that was already underway.

To the great surprise of no one, Evie's prediction appeared to be correct. Scarecrow stepped up to deal with the emergency efforts, and though he faced initial resistance from the bigoted nobles, when it became clear that his magical talents were uniquely suited to fill the vacancy left by the Wizard *and* that the Rooks were pressing suit on their stolen Mother Opal—well, deep hatreds would linger, but at least they could be buried for now. I had no doubt that Scarecrow was clever enough to outmaneuver them all, especially with the support of the rest of our friends.

Lion appeared content to be an exiled royal in residence for the moment, but I wondered how long that would last. Not because he had a hunger for power, of course, but because the crazed mutiny of Astor and his cronies that we left behind in the Deep Woodlands couldn't stand forever. Lion knew now that he wasn't a coward. What Lion was, was patient. And when the time came to step in and rescue his kingdom from anarchy, he would have the confidence to do it, as well as the backing of the Emerald City.

Lettie and Chopper, to be honest, seemed the readiest to be on the road. Lettie spoke of striking out north to try to push through Gillikin territory—there was another faerie fortress someone needed to deal with there—and try to find a fabled path and hidden tunnel to the Nome Kingdom. The

Nomes, it was said, had the best tinkers, and could help extend and improve Chopper's life, if not restore his humanity. I excitedly shared with them my sighting of the tinker at the gates, which encouraged them further. Min expressed interest in this expedition as well, hoping to trade knowledge with the guilds there—and to have more time with Lettie, I suspected.

Everyone seemed to have new adventures on the horizon, and as I paced around the pale jade-colored mansion that was our temporary home in Oz—a thank-you from the city guard after we defeated Glinda—I couldn't help but realize that the only horizon waiting for me was flat and gray and... Kansas.

We'd held a small, quiet ceremony for Crow the previous afternoon. Scarecrow had offered a place to bury Crow in his newly appointed palace gardens, but that didn't seem like Crow's speed. I asked Min and the Rooks to help us sneak outside the city, to the edge of the Witch's forest. I hoped that the land belonging to Evie and the Rooks would be safe from disturbance, at least for a little while. We found a rise, a jut of land next to an old elm and a young alder sapling that felt just right. Lion scraped the hole, and Scarecrow called greenery up around it like a protective hedge.

Glinda's magic blast had left little behind, but we laid Crow to rest and paid respects to him at the base of that new little alder tree. There were just enough feathers—once brilliant blue, but charred to so much black now, as black as he'd aspired to be—to weave one into Dorothy's hair and another into Lion's thick mane, to tuck a single one deep into the left side of Scarecrow's breast and another in between the tin points of Chopper's crown.

Dorothy asked if I wanted a feather, offered to weave one into my collar, but I declined. It would have fallen out eventually. And the truth was... Crow had earned his black. I wanted him to keep it.

Scarecrow promised to return regularly and keep the little memorial up. Everyone began to file out, getting shuffled home by the Rooks. As I was about to leave, I heard a rusty-screen-door caw that made my stomach flip. I turned around in time to see a black bird launch itself from a nearby tree.

For a moment, the crow was a single inky dart slicing the blue sky overhead, until a handful of dots rose up and it joined its murder.

That night, I found Dorothy in a disused room on the top floor of the mansion. It was just before dinner, and afterward we were all going to head out to the roof, where Evie and Min could slip in after dark and join us. Tonight was *the* night. Lettie was downstairs trying to cook Dorothy's favorite corn bread, and Scarecrow was down there trying to ensure we didn't die of food poisoning. I could hear their soft squabbling as I padded up the stairs and found a door open at the end of the top floor. I nudged my way inside and worked my way across the dark, little-used spare room until I hopped up on the window bench where Dorothy was tucked in the far corner.

She was squished up like a pill bug, knees under her chin and hoodie wrapped over her thumbs and knuckles. Moonlight spilled over her back as she rested her cheek on her knees and gazed over the Emerald City that spread out below the window like a cluttered green quilt. It almost looked like a patchwork field from here.

I settled down, stretching out on my stomach to gaze out and enjoy the quiet. It's a dog's job to be the stoic in those companionable silences. I'd found that a *lot* harder since coming to a world where I could talk to everybody. But finally, I had to reluctantly start somewhere. "Evie will be here soon."

"Yes...she sent a bubble to tell me she's on her way," Dorothy hummed.

"Bubble? She can do that now?"

"Evidently."

"Huh..." I fell silent, considering. "Where are you guys going first, after Kansas?"

"I was thinking about Australia," Dorothy said with a quiet smile. "You know Uncle Henry's got a cousin down there. We could say hello. And that could provide the cover for school abroad until I'm eighteen."

"How are you going to explain the green-skin thing?"

"Evie's got an enchantment. It's imperceptible as long as she doesn't get worked up, she says."

“Oh, well, *that* never happens, so...” I was rewarded with a glance from Dorothy, and she broke with a little giggle.

“Toto,” she said softly, shifting so she could turn her attention to me. “What do you want?”

My tail started wagging out of habit. “Me? Oh, I’m good. No worries here. Just so ready to get home. Back to that ol’ farm. All those... chickens...”

One brow rose, and Dorothy just forced me to sit with that incredible statement as the wind stuttered against the glass next to us. I cleared my throat and dropped my head between my paws with a defeated sigh. “I don’t want to go back to Kansas, buddy.”

“We can take you with us to Australia—”

“Everywhere you go in our world, I’m going to be a new logistical question. Magic shoes are one thing. A dog without immigration papers and clearance from the local disease control? *Whole* other issue. Puts Emerald City bureaucracy to shame. No, I’ll be staying behind at the farm.” I hesitated. “You know I’m not going to be with you for *all* your adventures forever, right?”

A tear immediately escaped down her cheek as Dorothy sucked in a breath. “Toto!”

Shit. Abort, abort. “Sorry! Sorry. I didn’t mean *now*—I just...Hey, this is okay. We are both young and—” I shifted my fuzzy brows in the way that always made Dorothy smile. “Besides, I think you and Evie are going to get along great as travel buddies.”

Dorothy gave me a droll look as she rubbed the wet from her eyes. “Or murder each other. For real one of these times.”

“Or that. Either way, send a postcard.” I was edging up to an idea that seemed so radical even I was unsure about it. “You know...if you are going to swing back here anyway, maybe I could just...wait here for you. It’d be like—you know—Oz doggy day care.”

Dorothy’s chin came off her knees in surprise. “Leave you behind in Oz? Toto!”

“Hear me out.” I stood, coming up nose to nose with her before letting my chin take its place on her knee. I gazed up at her and gave her the ol’ big eyes. “I wouldn’t be alone, not with all our friends here! There are so many people who love and care about us, both of us. And I can communicate and do some good. There’re things I can *do* here. The thing in the forest was a *fiasco*, but it did teach me that. Lettie and Chopper are planning an expedition to the North, and Min’s got her hands full trying to restore the Opal. And Scarecrow—you see the shit he has to deal with here? And that’s just *our* people. Think of all the folks out there—here—that we haven’t met yet. This place is huge.”

“And you’re such a little dog....” Dorothy’s face went soft, brows tilting out as the green streetlight down below revealed the wetness still at the edges of her eyes. “Oh, Toto, it’s not that it’s my place to refuse. It’s just that I’ll miss you.”

Her knees dropped out from under my head as she swooped in for a hug, and this time I was ready. I firmly dropped my chin on her shoulder and dug it into the crook of her neck and breathed deeply.

I breathed in the scent, her, who she is, where she’d been, how she was doing. *Dorothy*, my favorite scent, my favorite story. She’d always been my favorite story. “Hey, hey. Don’t go squishy on me.... You’ll be back. You’ll be...” My nose twitched, catching on a feeling in my chest and *Oh hell, I give up*. “I’ll miss you too, okay, but it’s just goodbye for now. Go have more adventures. I know you love me. And, and...you’ll always be my favorite human. Don’t forget that.”

Hear me, kids? Never forget that.



Epilogue



*So let me tell the story right
They'll tell you that the Witch melted
And it's true, but not from water
No, the Witch melted much later
On a roof, under starlight, when the farm girl took her hand
Three steps, that's all it took
And they melted into starlight
And then the adventure really began.*

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgments

Toto was the book I wrote when I couldn't write. Or at least, when I thought I couldn't write. It holds a weird and special place in my heart because of that. When another book became impossible to continue to draft because of a family emergency—*Toto* was right there.

Toto, in many ways, showed up like any good dog: messy and persistent, whether you think you need one or not.

Toto was the book that came to me when I needed it, when I needed to write a book that was fun and sharp and light but also full of heart and real feelings. My first, deepest gratitude has to be to my editor, Anne Sowards; my agent, Caitlin McDonald; and the entire Ace Books team for the incredible support, kindness, and belief they showed in me during this process.

And like any good dog, this book gave me its own messes and struggles and heartaches to wrestle with while I was finishing it. I couldn't have managed it without the persistent encouragement and enthusiasm from my writing and publishing friends on sundry Discord and Slack groups. To my extended ink family—thank you. Extra nose boops of thanks to Kellan Szpara, who was a major cheering presence and sprint buddy through the final stages of bookmaking. And my deepest gratitude and hearts to Becky Littlefield, my unfailing first reader.

In perhaps pinnacle nerd style, I need to extra thank the friends in my D&D group, Violet and Bone. Friends who both kept me going with encouragement, but also, the writing and endless creativity of that year-plus campaign was a huge outlet and relief in my creative life.

Speaking of D&D—many thanks to the folks of *Critical Role*, who get a shout-out, in the form of Dorothy's own wardrobe and pocket screen-watching habits, for simply existing. You tell good stories and make good things.

Half of *Toto's* voice and personality is based on pure character, of course, but the other half has to be credited to every ridiculous, heroic, amazing mutt I've ever had the pleasure to know or come in contact with. This book is, perhaps selfishly, dedicated to the many good dogs I've known over the years, but I would be remiss not to thank the many good dog folk I've known.

Although I make animal control a fictional boogeyman in Toto's brain, the folks of animal welfare and rescue operations do vital and incredible work. While writing *Toto*, I had the pleasure of volunteering at the Humane Society for Southwest Washington as a shelter volunteer and foster parent. The things I learned and the ceaseless dedication I saw there absolutely carried through. Thank you to every shelter, rescue, volunteer, foster, trainer, donor, and adopter. I hope people remember that, as famous as Toto is, he was just a stray farm mutt at first.

Finally, as always, I have to thank my eternally supportive partner in crime, Levi, who might have lived such a pitiful hairless, midnight pee-less, mess-less, petless existence if I had not come along trailing a parade of cryptid dogs and cats. Thank goodness I saved him from such a sad fate. Can you even imagine?



A. J. Hackwith (she/they) is (almost) certainly not an ink witch in a hoodie. She's a queer writer of fantasy and science fiction living in the woods of the Pacific Northwest with her partner and various pet cryptids. A.J. is the author of a number of fantasy novels, including the acclaimed *Library of the Unwritten* trilogy. She is a graduate of the Viable Paradise writers' workshop, and her work appears in *Uncanny* magazine and assorted anthologies. Summon A.J. at your own peril with an arcane circle of fountain pens, weird collections of rusted keys, and home-brew D&D accessories.

VISIT A. J. HACKWITH ONLINE

AJHackwith.com

 [AJHackwith](https://www.instagram.com/AJHackwith)

OceanofPDF.com



Penguin
Random House
PENGUIN PUBLISHING GROUP

***What's next on
your reading list?***

**Discover your next
great read!**

**Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this
author.**

Sign up now.

OceanofPDF.com