

Undergrowth

Chapter I What Remains

Bedding of countless layers of trash sunk deep and stretched far into the horizon. This was the existence of all- a filthy home, where everything was made of trash, even the people. Those who lived here struggled to understand how this world came to be. Everything around them was from a previous time, this trash wasn't meant for them, but they used it anyway. Garbage, filth, rubbish, the leftovers that no one wanted, yet remained long after those who used them. Much of the trash was worn and weathered, but all of it still remained as plastics always do.

Filth was all they ever knew, and what they did with it was quite miraculous. A Kingdom was built from this wasteland. Atop this Kingdom was the Queen, often called Mother. The people loved their Queen and she.. But eventually the Queen became reclusive and didn't venture off of her throne of reclaimed refuse. Mother let others do her bidding.

All of her royal advisers exclaimed how faultless she was at ruling over the squalor. Those accompanying Mother the closest were called the Garb of Detritus, a thoughtless pile of sinew containing nine pathetic aristocratic children. Each head wanted the throat of the other. Their desire and fear to remain in good-standing with the Queen made them all the more pathetic.

Within the cavity of the Grand Archives, dark wine robes of transparent plastic gracefully flowed back and forth as ancillary aristocrats shuffled, pretending to be deep in labor. Their feet work harder than their heads, yet they moan over the difficulty of their decisions. They were known as Aggregates, a collection of foolish nobles that provided the least in value to the Kingdom, but were treated as royalty nonetheless. Their occasional contributions often came to a detriment of the lower class.

Trash Knights. This echelon addressed the needs of the people directly, and functioned as educators and protectors, rather than officers. Once trained by The Dregs Academy and

became a proper Knight, they would join groups of Scavengers and escort them to areas exceeding the protection of the Outerwall. What lies in the Outerlands, beneath the mounds of distant trash was unknown to even the Queen- She did not know how far the sea of filth stretched and what was buried underneath.

This Kingdom held no farmers, as such an occupation wasn't possible. Instead, these workers traveled about scavenging. Scavengers were the largest group of laborers, as the odds of finding something of value in the Outerlands was actually quite high. The endless sea of forgotten tokens and treasures provided enough. Scavengers searched for massive cans which contained preserved food. Still there were journeymen to work under artisans, smiths and their apprentices, and craftspeople of various passions. Those who could not work lived in the filthiest conditions, which was impressive, as they all lived on top of garbage. Most accommodations of their Kingdom were provided not by Mother nor the Garb of Detritus, but from each other.

Children rose from bed to be trained by The Dregs Academy. Owned by Mother, Controlled by The Garb of Detritus, administered by the Aggregates, overseen by the Instructor, and taught by the Trash Knights. Stumbling forth from their barracks, the sleepy, the hungry, and the excited stepped onto the soaked grounds of Dregs Academy. Their tiny feet kicked up loose filth as they got into straight lines of ten. They shifted listening to further instruction from their respective Trash Knight. Above them all, standing atop a parapet, was the Instructor of the Dregs Academy. Her powerful stance and sharp eyes caused each child to stand taller in fear of persecution- icy chains squeezed out their breath. At the head of each snake of children stood a fully trained Knight and each of those Knights watched their respective lines just as closely as the Instructor. Except one line was missing a Knight..

Chapter II Green

Tumbling down a steep mountain of trash at tremendous speed was what looked like a Knight. His feet reached the sky

and his head tasted the trash incrementally the whole length down. After a bit too long, the Knight grinded to a halt- his head being the wedge that stopped him. As Sol laid face down, talons of black goo grasped the back of his helmet and lifted it up, checking to see if any breath pushed and pulled. There was none. Dropping his face back into the rubbish, wings of tar tossed back and forth sending off Southwest, silhouetted by the Sun.

The row of nervous children peered around, hoping the absence of their teacher wouldn't lead to punishment for themselves. An inky blur passed overhead and landed gently on the shoulder of one of the other Knights- she tilted her head and three distinct pecks rang out. A thunk rang out as Arum palmed her forehead, and ran off from her line of students. From the parapet the eyes of the Instructor snapped to the out of place Knight. Arum continued running and didn't look back at the Instructor. The Instructor seethed with dissatisfaction.

Panting greatly, Arum's knees dug down into the trash to the left of Sol- face still in the rubbish. Her hands slid around his left leg and pulled it close to his chest and used it to flip his limp body over. His helm was slowly removed to check his face. Still the same stupid face as ever. Pitch used the tossed helm as a standing post and pecked at Sol's face- leaving little droplets of oil. The pain caused Sol to stir and his eyes softly locked with Arum's. He felt her hand leave his chest and with a smack- he was knocked unconscious again.

As Sol awoke for the second time, he noticed he was floating above the ground. Arum's arms were locked together holding his right arm and leg as his weight rested upon her shoulders. He looked outward to see passing faces... watching. Each villager held normal expressions, some waved, but he felt ashamed this time. With a key twist- a knock of his head against the door frame- and a subsequent toss onto his bedding, he was home. The bed was off to the right corner, while a vast majority of the room held trinkets, oddities, and hand made projects. Pitch perched on top of the slanted table in the center of the dwelling, watching carefully.

Unfinished projects were kicked by Arum. She bounced about in disheveled patterns, scooping up items and throwing them into various containers. Sol began to whine about how the locations she was throwing his masterpieces into were incorrect. He continued to groan and rubbed his face, the hand mark stinging more than the tumble, not from the physical pain but from what it meant.

Arum- eventually cooling down- realized Sol still wore his chestplate. She unhooked his back and placed the sheet of metal on the floor against the bed frame. Again realizing she still wore her armor, undid a buckle and pulled her helm off, and placed it on the table for Pitch to stand on. The rest of her armor slid off and thudded onto the floor. The bed depressed further as she laid next to Sol. Her face and body pointed away from Sol, but he knew it was ok to hold her. He buried his face into her shoulders, whispering apologies.

'It's ok, as long as you're alive...' but she was lying. This couldn't keep happening- the Instructor was becoming fed up with Sol's inadequacy. Sol's warming embrace melted away the troubles of the moment. They laid together, but eventually Arum rose to sit. Her hand floated down his left leg, it was fully mechanical up till the mid thigh.

Arum sighed and asked, 'Is it still functional?' Sol exhaled and tried to remember what actually happened- His memories dissolved away through his thick skull- He guessed why he fell. The damned leg locked up constantly, his craftsmanship wasn't the greatest, but he couldn't afford someone else's handywork. Nevermind that, no one else knew how to build a working leg like Sol did. He laid flat and tried to bend his leg.. stiff. Sol swore, punched his own head, and looked to see Arum putting her armor back on.

Arum informed Sol, 'I will be back later tonight- that leg has to be functional by tomorrow morning.' Sol understood the consequences of upsetting the Instructor. Just as he began to speak, Arum's soft palm touched his cheek where she struck him earlier. She moved in and kissed the side of his face- holding there for a moment of tenderness- then stood up. Sol gazed as she exited the door, she didn't look back.

The Sun was just hitting its lowest point before diving into the sea of garbage, the courtyard was now empty except for Arum stomping across. Her anger and annoyance grew as she passed through the large ajar door of the Academy. The dark interior didn't faze her one bit, but as she traveled deeper through the corridor, her fiery temperament morphed into obedience. She stood silently- not wanting to enter- her head hung and barely tapped against the door to the Instructor's office. The slight clink of the helm roused what was inside the room. With a call to enter, Arum creaked open the door and shut it quietly behind her.

A barren room with little decor, but the trash that comprised the walls, floor, and ceiling were the cleanest and most compact trash Arum would see on any regular basis. In fact, she visited this room only second to Sol, who held the record for most visitations. Arum's visits were almost always because of Sol. His ability to get hurt, hurt others, and cause unprecedented chaos wasn't lost to even the newest recruits. His reputation was quite accurate.

The Instructor was facing the large window that overlooked most of the courtyard, its shattered components scattered light throughout the room. Arum sat in her usual spot, next to where Sol usually would sit.

The Instructor inquired, 'Where is the location of Sol currently?'

Arum informed her that 'He is resting in bed after another fall, it was down a mound to the Northeast of here- and his leg is currently not functional.' The Instructor hung her head, turned, sat, and watched Arum. Arum was looking down at her hands, which curled tight. Arum began to speak, but the Instructor stopped her. The Instructor was no longer the Instructor, but Arum's Mother. Arum looked up to see Cicada. A proud woman with the strength of an army and the bloodshed to go with it.

Cicada began to lecture her daughter, indicating how, 'This happens far too often' and how 'Sol has a responsibility to his class. His students had to dissolve into other groups, reducing the amount of instruction each student got. Same goes for you. Your students are the highest

achieving, yet get hindered by your absence to attend to Sol's foolish actions.'

Cicada was now standing as she finished this almost scripted critique, Arum was looking down and began to mumble. Cicada bent over to become closer to Arum's face. Each was stonewalled. Arum's eyes avoided contact. Cicada peered deeply- until the moment was over and she straightened herself. Turning back towards the window, she informed Arum that 'Despite Sol being the Academy's most experienced guide to the Outerlands, he isn't impervious to punishment or removal from the Academy. I expect to speak to him in the morning.' Arum shifted uncomfortably, but settled, and noted her understanding. The Instructor now stood in silence, watching the movement of distant villagers' into their homes as the Sun's last moments faded. Arum meekly stood, said '...goodbye.' and exited the office.

Arum knocked on the door to Sol's home and waited for a reply. A loud 'Caw' came from the interior and she entered swiftly as the night's air was bitter. Once again, piles of tools, scrap metal, and oddities blanketed every surface. If anything, it was messier than before. Sol tinkered away at his own left leg, which had been disconnected from the socket and layed on the slanted table. Pitch was hopping from surface to surface in anticipation for Arum's greeting. She removed her helm and gloves and promptly scuffled Pitch's head feathers. Sol remained fixated on the leg as if Arum never even entered. As Arum leaned against the table, Sol's head shot up in excitement. With a devilish grin he grabbed and jammed his leg back into the socket and pulled the straps tight! He stood straight up just on his mechanical left leg. He balanced himself and spread his remaining limbs in a childish flare. Arum could only giggle at this marvel. Sol scooped her up and spun her around while Pitch began to fluff his wings in excitement. After a few twirls Sol tried to place her down gently, but her leg caught his and both fell onto the floor.

Arum was now on top of Sol, and he seemed more than pleased with himself. She tucked her chin down and stared directly into his eyes. Foreheads touching, she poked his

chest and said, 'I got scolded again, all because of you!' Sol knew what happened wasn't *entirely* his fault, but understood what Arum had to go through, as he'd gone through that conversation plenty of times.

Sol smirked and asked, 'How was Cicada doing?' Arum scoffed and rolled over to face the ceiling with Sol.

Arum explained that 'Cicada was the same as ever: cold and stern.' Sol's hand slowly intertwined with her hand, both squeezed. Silence followed.

Sol waited for Arum to speak but it seemed like she didn't want to. Sol swiftly tossed himself up and onto Arum and she gasped and giggled in surprise- her eyes softening as her hands touched Sol's face. She began to apologize.. for earlier.. but Sol stopped her by kissing her lips. Both embraced this moment.. but was subsequently ruined by the annoying caw of Pitch, who stood on Arum's helm. Sol and Arum turned their heads to see Pitch- his big bird eye was glaring at the two. Both sighed and looked back at each other as his caw echoed out. Arum pulled Sol's head back down and whispered something in his ear. They both laughed and launched up towards Pitch! The two began to chase about the house, kicking objects and jumping over tables and onto the bed in an attempt to capture Pitch as he scrambled wildly to escape them. The three played until a late hour of the night- Unaware the following days would change everything.

Chapter III Last Chance

After the next morning's routine class of sword training, scavenger accompaniment procedure, and independent survival training, Sol excused his class back to their barracks and joined Arum in the courtyard. His sleep last night was awful and his dreams disturbed him a bit. He had to talk to Arum about them, but as they began to speak, Sol noticed the Instructor peering through her glass window. Sol understood and sighed. He trotted away, but turned back to give Arum a quick wave from across the open courtyard; he marched into the corridor that led to the Instructor's office. While he made his way through the hallway, Sol kept thinking of his dreams... or were they even dreams? The

memories atop the hill were confusing yet enticed him to investigate the mystery further.

Without knocking, Sol strolled into the office and sat in his usual spot. The Instructor continued to watch Arum helping recruits in the courtyard. Sol sat patiently. His fingers tapped his legs in anticipation, which made a slight clinking sound. Without movement, the Instructor spoke, eyes still fixated on Arum.

'Sol, where were you when you fell?' The Instructor asked. Sol knew what she was getting at and answered promptly and precisely-

'The Great Mound to the Northeast.'

'And you know that mound is the largest in the area?' said the Instructor.

'Yes.'

She asked, 'You of course know that making an expedition to that mound requires multiple knights and permission directly from me?'

'Yes.'

She made her way to her desk and sat facing Sol. He could tell he was in trouble.

'I don't care how skillful you think you are, with that leg and going alone... foolish. Idiotic and down right dangerous!' The Instructor spat out with more emotions than either expected. She leaned away and put her curled finger to her lips and examined Sol for a brief moment.

Leaning back Cicada whispered, 'You know how annoying the Aggregates can be. The Garb of Detritus is furious with this incident. I'm not willing to take the blame for your actions- *unlike* my daughter.' This mention of Arum made Sol wince.

'If you step out of line...' the Instructor paused. This terrified Sol.

She sighed and relaxed. 'You have one more chance to prove you are of worth to the Queen, the Academy, to your students, to me- and to my daughter.' The instructor showed no emotions on her face- she just glared into Sol's eyes. Sol was petrified and his mind stood completely still- his thoughts didn't dare to move-

'I will not hesitate to remove you from this Academy any longer, do you understand Sol?' He gave a microscopic nod. The Instructor stood, waved out Sol, and turned to look out above the Academy's grounds. After a long silent pause, Cicada turned around to tell Sol to leave now- but he was already gone.

Sol exited the Academy's main doors and saw Pitch gliding above. Sol whistled and Pitch dove and attached to his shoulder, he asked to be brought to Arum. Pitch pecked at his helm and Sol knew she was waiting in his house. He made his way through the town. Passing by familiar faces, he said a cheerful hello to each as he went by. They all were warmed by his presence. Sol even stopped to help carry something heavy for an older lady, who he often traded trinkets with. Eventually he made it home, knocked, and entered.

He saw Arum sitting, her sword resting on her legs as she polished it with deep care and precision. It was a fine sword and an heirloom from her father. It was given to her after he passed. It was the only gift she ever received from her mother, and even then it was truly a gift from her father.

Arum looked up, concerned with how the conversation with Cicada went, and saw Sol slide onto the floor towards her. His face gleaming. On his knees he grasped her hands, the sword rested between them. This shocked Arum, as she was expecting Sol to be in a defeated mood.

Sol looked up into her eyes and said, 'I remember what was at the top!'

'What?' Arum scoffed in confusion.

'At the top of the mound to the Northeast of here. Before I fell down I saw something, something- different.' Arum was taken aback, she was still catching up to what Sol meant by all of this.

'Slow down-' but she was cut off by Sol's excitement. He stood and began pacing.

'I've never seen anything like it-it was green-but a different kind of green-and it was long..' Sol paused for a second, his face looked scared. She leaned over and held his hand. Sol's shoulders decompressed and his breath returned.

'Are you ok?' Arum asked softly.

'Yea... sorry. I think I remember what I saw- at the top of the mound. Me and Pitch left early the night before to have enough time to make it *near* the summit to watch the sun rise and be back in time for class. But then I found a new path up the West side, which led around to the Northern side of the mound that looped East! I made it to the top! It was the highest I've ever been! The view of the sunrise was amazing- then I saw something near the peak. I-I don't know what *it* was...' Sol's eyes fogged and he began to drop. Arum pulled his hand and wrapped her arms around Sol's torso, holding him up as he became dead weight.

'Sol? Sol! What's happening?' Arum looked into his eyes- he was unconscious.

Sol tossed over in bed, his leg and arms were achy and he felt like his whole body was metal. He leaned up and felt pain in his neck. Arum put her hand on his back in support.

'Sol, are you alright?' Arum asked.

'I don't think so...' Sol laid back down with Arum's help. She was next to him. She was always next to him.

Arum's voice was shaking as she tried to get the words out. 'Sol-I don't think you should be near that thing again, whatever it was, it's bad.'

'Yea, whatever that was is bad news. I guess I fell because of it... I just need to rest a bit longer.' With that he laid his head back and promptly passed out. Even though Sol slept his mind continued to work. It searched again and again in the memories of that summit. The feeling that rushed into Sol and the subsequent fall down a hill passed back and forth in his closed eyes. It felt like seeing a new color- something so different than before- but something primordial. Like a deity of a different world, a god on top of the mountain. Do profits know of their destiny- Or are they forged by action?

Chapter IV Return

Quite a while passed from that sickly night. Both Arum and Sol became very occupied by new orders from the Dregs Academy. Sol stayed in the Academy on a short probation from

the Outerlands. He was tasked with training the lowest scoring students in a remedial program. His skill in the Outerlands didn't transfer very well to his teaching skills. His expertise was innate and based on natural instinct, rather than textbook knowledge. With every new lesson the student's would ask questions, but Sol could only answer with weird metaphors and examples of him in the Outerlands. These answers often confused the student's, causing most to seek the help of other teachers. A few student's did improve, and ironically, they improved drastically.

Arum wasn't there to assist, she was sent on a long expedition. Assigned by Cicada in efforts to put a bit more space between the two. This decision was in preservation of her appearance to the Garb of Detritus, rather than any emotional reason for her daughter.

During this period of time, Sol tried his best to avoid his thoughts. But one can't *not* think of something. Just the act of trying to not think of something was thinking of it, and this cycle tormented Sol. His vision of the summit felt closer with each recollection, yet more fuzzy with each passing day. He even began to sketch rough images of what he perceived. Just trying to understand the unknown.

Pitch was great company while Arum was away, his constant shenanigans and general rudeness made Sol think of other things... maybe Arum... maybe the summit... maybe what was up there. He knew trying to make it back up could lead to his full removal from the Academy. He could even be exiled from the Kingdom... or even imprisoned.

Sol never really aimed or expected to become a Trash Knight, yet it was higher in status than anything he imagined when he was younger. It was never his goal to become a Trash Knight, but his experience in the Outerlands as a child gave him a natural advantage. Cicada's power and influence allowed Sol to live in the Academy, where he proved his worth. Rumors spread quickly of this person, a child found in the Outerlands, which was extremely uncommon. Experience was his greatest teacher- and the lessons were permanent. When they were much younger, Arum once asked how he lost his left leg. She asked casually- but Sol's expression was serious and

distant- He never answered. It's weird to see Sol without a smile.

Arum made it back from the Outerlands with a great anticipation to see Sol. Large carts filled with scrap metals, trinkets, and massive cans of food were dragged by tired Scavengers. Arum was guiding the caravan through the portcullis and into the city, where it would be brought into the Academy to be sorted and processed. She passed by Sol's house and looked in through a window- it seemed to be covered by parchment. This was a bit unusual. She couldn't stop by, not until she was done with her work back at the Academy.

After finishing her final task of speaking to the Instructor about the mission's success, Arum swiftly made her way to Sol. She knocked on the door and waited... He wasn't at the Academy, she would have seen him... She knocked again. Thinking he may be asleep and creaked open the door.

The walls and floor were covered in parchment. Dark brown ink covered every page- every page looked the same. Long spines reaching the bottom, but not reaching the top. And along the spines were smaller tendrils that were shaped like blades. Over and over were these images. Sol's usual trinkets and tools were placed away, and these pages replaced the space in his mind. There was a dark obsession with whatever he saw...

Arum entered and accidentally slammed the door, which startled a sleeping Sol. He wasn't on his bed, but on the floor next to his bed. He jammed his elbow and knee into the ground and pried himself off the floor. Standing in this darkened room, he gazed softly about, till his eyes met Arum's. They stood facing one another. She ran to him and grasped him in her arms. Her head on his shoulder, Sol reached his hand to the nape of her neck, stroking it gently.

'Hi...' Sol whispered.

'Oh my... S-s-Sol...' She was barely able to speak. Her anxiety started to fade as Sol kept petting her neck. His touch gave her some peace. But she didn't understand any of this.

'Let's sit.' He said as he softly placed her onto the bed. They slid from each other's arms and Arum was looking

about the room, some images were disproportionate to other sketches. It seemed the most recent renditions had more consistency and clearer details.

Sol grasped Arum's hands, 'I have something to show you.' Sol stood and walked over to his largest chest, the chest he would put his most valuable trinkets. Arum noticed those items were placed elsewhere in the room. She wondered what Sol was grabbing. She became worried. Sol bent over and gently slid out a satchel. He turned with a grin, kneeled down next to Arum, and lifted off the flap. The bag contained a collection of something dark brown, which filled most of it. On top- was something green. The thing that was sketched on the many parchments in Sol's house. Arum leaned back, the immediate fear was lessened, but she was still wary and cautious.

'What is this... thing?' Arum whispered as she looked into Sol's eyes, hoping to understand his state of mind.

'I actually don't know much about it. I guess it's called a Plant. That's what Helio called it...' Sol said as he sat next to Arum, the bag still in his arms. 'I did some research in the Academy's Archives while you were away. This stuff in the bottom seems to be a collection of dirt and debris. It's called Soil.' Sol's eyes remained in a loving connection to the contents of the satchel.

'Soil?' Arum asked in a soft tone.

'That's what the Archives said-' Sol was cut off quickly by Arum.

'Wait. Where in the Archives did you find this information?' Arum questioned.

Sol laughed slyly, 'Actually, in the Aggregates Reserved section...'

'SOL!' Shouted Arum in absolute disbelief. 'You didn't sneak in and read from the Reserved Archives, did you?'

'Nooo... I went in and stole the book. No point in reading inside the archives where I might get caught-' Arum stood ferociously, her anger building drastically.

'So you fall down a mound on a solo expedition you weren't permitted to go on, get knocked unconscious, get me

to leave class to drag your ass back here, I get scolded by my own mother-'

Sol took a sharp breath to speak but was ran over by Arum's words, 'You get scolded yourself and told *not* to return to that same mound, you go back and fucking take this-Thing! And to wrap it all in a bow- you steal a book from the Aggregate's Reserved Archives!'

Arum's breath was hot. 'ARE YOU FUCKING WITH ME?' Arum screamed in anger. She tilted her face back but the tears couldn't help but pour down her face. She collapsed into a chair and shoved her hands over her face- Anger and regret seeping out. Sol sat in silence... His face was unresponsive. His mind rushed like a flood enveloping his senses. He tried to think clearly, but every thought was trampled over by the next. He stepped closer to touch her- Arum's hand slapped his hand away. She stood quickly and rushed to the door. Sol was filled with sudden fear and reached again for Arum, this time she turned and shoved him hard. Sol was knocked back and landed onto his bed. He looked up in confusion- the door slammed and the silence reverberated until Sol passed out.

Chapter V Restricted

Sol woke up early the next morning and began to trace the form of his new obsession on some parchment. Again and again his fingers moved the muddy ink in the same pattern. Long spines sprouting from the soil- then little tendrils spreading out from each spine. He loved its delicate and beautiful shape, the rich green color, and the warmth Sol felt in his body. It was like this thing knew Sol, like they were friends from childhood and meeting again felt no different than before. His fascination was still split with the book. The book Sol found while sneaking into the Aggregates Restricted Archive was a wealth of knowledge. Sol never enjoyed books, they always held what he already knew- sometimes they were even wrong. Sol never had a use for them, until this book.

The Studies and Travels of Helio Cassini was printed in gold lettering across the spine of the book. It had a dark indentation on the cover, which looked similar to what Sol

had in his satchel. The book was an aged dark brown that closely resembled the color of the Soil in Sol's satchel. He thoroughly discovered the intricate details in this book. Each page was filled with text but also later additions by others. Sol couldn't easily tell if these handwritings were Helio's, but it looks like one or two others took notes inside this book as well. By the apparent age and usage of this book, Sol guessed it was owned by many people before him, or at least by a few that used this book consistently for years.

After a lengthy introduction of the Author's personal life that Sol skimmed through, it delved deeply into what Helio understood of Soil. Next to the word Soil was another addition- said 'dirt&clay.' Sol liked the word Soil better, but enjoyed the variety of knowledge. The book wasn't terribly large, in fact it was thinner than Sol hoped for. After the Soil section he was halfway finished. Sol only got as far, until Arum visited after her long expedition away. After last night Sol just wanted to focus on his book and plant. Once Sol was done sketching the mesmerizing form, he opened the book to finish the second half. Helio was researching the same thing Sol had- a Plant. He talked of the action of planting and what it could produce. It was very difficult for Sol to understand, it was new material he knew nothing of, but also Sol wasn't good at reading. That's why it took so long to get through just the first half. Sol's reading comprehension was terrible.

As he sat and read- Pitch still sleeping in the corner- Sol kept seeing Helio, or someone in the margins, reference a second volume of Helio's writings. Sol found this frustrating as he already broke into the Archives to retrieve *this* book, and it's not even guaranteed *that* book was ever even finished, let alone still within the Archive. Sol sat in a stubborn pool, wanting more and wanting to reach for more, but he was constantly blocked by others. He looked to the Plant for comfort. He stared at it for a while, and found Plant to be an unsatisfactory name for it, so he checked more on the Plant chapter and saw other names: flower, crop, weeds, and fern. The sketch next to fern looked the closest

to what Sol had. He marveled at the other sketches- beautiful pedals bloomed from a flower and along the stem were even thorns. He continued reading about how to care for a Plant. Plants needed three things: Soil, Water, and Sunlight. He couldn't leave it outside for fear of someone finding it and taking it away. Sol tore off some paper from his window and angled a large sheet of reflective metal near the frame. Doing so bounced light from the Sun into his house and onto Fern. He took some water from his canteen and poured it into the satchel- The water wasn't very clean- as all water collected was polluted by the dump, so he thought all water was like this. Sol was afraid to leave it here alone, but was even more afraid to bring that thing into the Archives. He decided it should stay put.

Last time Sol snuck into the Aggregate's Archives he did it under the cover of night. Any Aggregates that are stationed within the Archives at that time are the laziest and least perceptive. With ease he was able to sneak past any watchful eyes and found the Restricted section where *The Studies and Travels of Helio Cassini* was found. This time around, Sol thought of a better plan. A way to hide in plain sight. He made his way to the Academy.

Once again Arum was in the dark. Each step forward brought her closer. Once to that door, Arum knocked, waited, and entered once called in. In place, Arum watched as her mother stood peering at pages of weathered paper- Arum's breath dare not gently rustle the sheets. Cicada rolled them and placed them neatly within a cabinet.

'You may speak now.'

'Sol has broken into the Restricted Archives and stolen a book.' Arum felt ashamed to give up Sol so easily, but she couldn't keep this away from Cicada.

'That doesn't sound like Sol... The stealing part, yes, but books? What could he need those for?' Cicada asked.

'Well, Sol has something else... I don't know what *it* is.' Arum's eyes were drifting down. 'It's green. He had it in a satchel. The book must have info on whatever that *thing* is.'

He said something about it needing to exist in this special mixture. Soil he called it.'

'Where did he procure this item?' Cicada questioned.

'I believe... I believe he got it from the Outerlands.'

Arum waited for her Mother to reply with anger, but instead a gust of cold enveloped the room.

'Did he get this item recently?'

'Yes.'

Cicada stated the truth. 'What Sol has is contraband, direct orders from the Queen states we must retrieve this *Plant*. Sol will face a trial before the Garb of Detritus and his fate will be ordered. There is nothing else we can do.'

'How did you know it was called a *Plant*...' The words drifted out of Arum's mouth. Now they hung there, floating, yet heavy as Iron.

'How dare you question me? I am the Instructor of this Academy and I hold privy knowledge. If you dare go against me, the law, or the Queen's righteous orders, then you will face punishment far greater than anything you've ever experienced!'

Arum's guts churned and felt ripped apart. She can do nothing but yield to her mother. Arum looked back up at her.

'Go. Arrest Sol. Retrieve both this... *Plant*... and the book he has stolen. Be gone.' Cicada's voice whipped Arum. She stood meekly, bowed her head, and left to arrest Sol.

At the Academy, Sol brought class into session; he informed his students that they would take a field trip to the Archives to study for their upcoming exams. Sol's class moaned in disapproval and a few thought of this as strange, as usually Sol was the one to fight against the trips to the Archives, but this time he looked excited. Sol guided his students into the main cavity of the Archives and brought them onto the second level that held information on rubbish collecting and processing. Sol mentioned to his class that despite their training for the role of Trash Knight, they all needed comprehensive knowledge of the Scavengers' processes to better aid them in the Outerlands.

The class spread out and found various corners to sit and read in. While that happened, Sol slipped away and began to quietly climb one of the book shelves. Sol reached the third level in no time. He stepped over the third floor ledge that looked over the second and first floor of the Archives ribcage to see if anyone was watching... then began to search the restricted section. He located the area where he found the first part of Helio Cassini's book. He scanned the shelves until he found- Arum's face staring unblinking at him. Sol recoiled and held back a yelp from the shock. He looked back up to see Arum walking around the shelf blocking the section that Sol wanted to search. Arum sighed and grabbed Sol by the collar of his cloak- pulling him up.

'What are you up to?' Arum said in a voice that reminded Sol of Cicada.

'How did you find me here? How did you know I'd come back?' Sol quite yelled at Arum.

'Sol. I watched you scale a bookcase...' said Arum. Sol pondered for a bit.

'Oh yea- Then how did you beat me here?' Sol squeaked.

Arum dropped his collar and Sol fell to his knees. Arum knelt down to be on his level. 'Ok... Once I saw you scaling up the bookcase... I used Cicada's key to unlock the gate and went up the stairs.' said Arum looking disappointed in herself. Sol gazed at her with big eyes.

'Did you steal Cicada's key?' Sol asked. Arum looked down and began to shift.

'Well, I've actually had this key for a few years now.' Arum said in a quiet voice.

'What!' Sol said a bit too loud. Arum shushed him. She paused for a moment to hear if anyone was coming- then began to speak again.

'You know how my mother is- and when I was younger I just felt so trapped by her and her rules... so I stole her key one day and used it to get up here to escape- and read. Cicada thought she lost her own key and didn't tell anyone thinking she was to blame. Ever since then I would come up here to read alone. I also never *take* the books!' Arum locked back onto Sol, who was smiling.

'I would never have guessed you'd lie to your own mother like that-' Sol did a little dance on the floor. 'So you've read *The Studies and Travels of Helio Cassini* before?'

'Is that the book you stole? No. I've only read a handful of books, mainly because I can only read while I'm up here.' said Arum

Sol leaned close to her ear and whispered, 'I think there's a part two of that book with even more information!' Arum glared at him.

'Sol, I came up here to arrest you- I'm taking you to Cicada.' Arum began to grab his hand.

'I'm sorry- I can't. I need that book!' Sol said as he pulled away from Arum. He pushed off the ground and slid backwards and rolled up onto his feet. They met eye to eye. The look on her face really reminded Sol of Cicada. He back stepped and silently dove around a shelf. Arum grunted in annoyance and began to silently chase after Sol. As she turned the corner, Sol was already a few shelves high. She looked up in amazement and thought to herself how impressive that was, especially with his mechanical leg. She followed underneath Sol as he climbed from shelf to shelf. As Sol maneuvered he accidentally kicked a single book and it began to slide off the shelf and dropped like a bomb. Both paused in fear and right before the book hit the ground, Arum plucked it from the air. She sighed and looked back up to see Sol was already on another bookshelf. She placed the book down and followed.

Sol was scanning the books as he went. He eventually made it back to the upper shelf of where he found the first book. He searched and searched as Arum watched from below. Sol found a light gray book called *Helio Cassini and the City called Fleur*, written in black lettering.

'Found it!' Sol began to scale back down but saw Arum in waiting. He paused- and began to think of a way out of this. If he dropped to her she could take the book and subdue him. He had one choice, so he slipped the book into his pouch and prepared. Sol leaped from the bookshelf and off the ledge. He flew through the main cavity of the Archives. Arum audibly gasped and ran to the railing and watched as Sol plummeted to

the lower level. He reached out and grabbed onto the ledge of the second level. Using the momentum of flying, he was swung forward- flipping upside down- and rolled onto the ground, causing deep thumps. Arum palmed her face and ran back down the stairs.

Sol looked up to see a few of his students with their heads down reading a book. They looked up confused, seemingly unaware of what happened. Sol was still in shock that his plan worked. He looked back and saw Arum coming down the 2nd floor stairs. He yelled and told his class 'It was time to go home for the day. Goodbye.' The few students that actually heard this were confused, but thought a short day was just fine. Sol made his way towards the staircase to the first level but ran into Arum who blocked his way.

'Stop.' Arum said as her hand reached for Sol's neck.

He ducked and slid down the stairs railing reaching the main cavity of the Archive and dashed towards the door. Arum was in hot pursuit. A group of Aggregates shuffled ahead and Sol knew of to get the slip on Arum- He's done it before. Arum watched as Sol began to crawl under their flowing wine cloaks. Arum's impatience always made her attempt to follow directly after Sol. As she made her way through the cluster of Aggregates, Sol tripped one and they all began to cascade over Arum and they moaned over this being bothersome. She screamed and began to push her way out. Once her face was clear of plastic robes, she saw Sol's heels leaving the main entrance. She continued her pursuit, passing a student whose mouth was agape, for they just watched their teacher sore through the air.

Sol sprinted back home. His leg began to creak, and needed new oil for the joints. He slid and opened his door, slammed and locked it. He tore into the book reading as much as he could. He didn't know how much time he had. He read a summary of a city that was fully composed of the same material as the Plant- and directions to this city. Moments later Arum tried opening the door, which shook the frame.

'Occupied' said Sol and he stuffed the book in a hidden compartment within one of his many chests. Arum kicked the

door open and stomped inside. Pitch was on his perch very confused. Arum approached Sol.

'Give me the book.' said Arum.

'No.' Sol spat back.

'I can't believe you jumped from the third level! Like an idiot! What if you messed up and hit the ground? What then? Why are you risking your life for some book?' Arum screamed at his face.

Sol didn't reply at first. He looked into her eyes. 'I would have done the same for you.'

Arum's breath was sucked out, she clenched her fists and shook her head. 'Don't say those things right now. I can't allow you to break all of these rules! You can't keep this up forever! There's nothing I can do to stop this Sol. I must bring you in.'

Sol kept his eyes on hers. 'You don't understand what I found up there. That's fine. It's new- It's different. But from what I've read.. This-this Fern is something from ancient times. And this new book, it has information leading to something-somewhere. I read the first few pages of Helio Cassini's book. He referenced this place, the City called Fleur. That's what this book is about. It's a map- or guide book from this place, into the Outerlands- North around the Great Mound and even further into a different world..' Sol's words stumbled out as Arum just watched.

'This all sounds amazing- but.. I have to listen to the Instructor..' Arum said, looking down. She grasped the hilt of her sword and began to advance on Sol.

'What are you doing?' said Sol as he walked backwards.

'I told my Mother about the book- and Fern- and she's assigned me with your retrieval.. I can't let her down again- you have to understand this..' Arum said as she drew her blade. The unsheathing poured fear into Sol's stomach. He could see Arum's face reflected in the blade as it was lifted-

Just then Pitch flew into Arum's helm and knocked it to the side- covering her face and Arum's sword fell to the ground. Sol vaulted over the table and grabbed the satchel containing Fern. He looked up to see Arum fixing her helm and

picking up her sword again. Sol ran to the compartment where he kept both books. He grabbed them right as her hand grabbed the back of his chestplate. He kicked off the wall and sent both back onto the bed. Twisting free, Sol took his blanket and wrapped Arum. She screamed and began thrashing about. Sol grabbed her sword and ran for the door.

She yelled to give back her sword! This paused Sol for a second as this sword was the only memory left from her father. He threw the sword and it stuck deep in the wall. Arum tossed the blanket off her and ran directly to the sword. She placed her foot on the wall and heaved. It slid out and she turned to Sol- but he was gone-

Chapter VI Uproot

Pitch was gliding above Sol as he ran through the Northern portcullis and into the Outerlands. The only things he was able to grab were: His satchel containing Fern, both volumes of Helio Cassini's books- *The Studies and Travels of Helio Cassini* and *Helio Cassini and the City called Fleur*, his rusty sword, some oil for his leg, and his travel pack that contains climbing gear, food, water, and a plastic tent with a plastic bag to sleep in. Sol wished he had more time to grab more supplies he needed to make this journey, but reality did not allow such luxury. As he made his way further from the walls and out of view from anyone around, he stopped, sat down, oiled his leg, gave Pitch a treat, and pulled out a book. He looked through *Helio Cassini and the City called Fleur* once more, this time with more attention to where he needed to go.

The introductory section informed Sol of the path that he would need to take through the Outerlands. Sol knew the beginning of this path, as it passed by the large mound where he found Fern, to the Northeast. Sol never traveled much further past that mound, it was one of the areas that had the least amount of recorded scavenger trips. The Scavengers and Trash Knights traveled the Southern pathways much more often, creating packed trash pathways for safer travels. The Northern area was quite dangerous, with loose trash that

shifts when stepped on. Cicada rarely sent Knights near these mounds. Sol felt he now knew why.

Sol committed this path to memory and put away the book. As Sol continued onward, he let Pitch rest on top of his helm. Pitch sat quietly, not moving much at all. Sol could tell Pitch was upset from their last interaction with Arum. Sol was sad too. He always knew Arum's allegiance was to Cidada- the Instructor- her Mother, but Sol didn't think Arum would follow the Instructor's orders to subdue or retrieve him. This sensation of betrayal pulled his mind deep into his body. Sol felt a friction, somehow he always knew they were both ready to attack. Cicada was one of the only parental figures Sol had. Sol never remembered his parents, he felt like he never had any to begin with, he was born outside, and so he would die outside. The walls felt suffocating and he was glad to leave them permanently. He only wished Arum chose to follow him away from the prison, and was here with him traveling this long path to a new future together. He reminisced about expeditions they went on together in the Outerlands, which were the happiest days he'd ever lived. They would spend days and days together, helping Scavengers forage and guiding them back home safely. Now Sol made his way through the Outerlands and towards a new city. One that was completely different than where he came from. Sol hoped they would accept him. Sol hoped that this was all worth it- he couldn't go back-

Sol finally reached the mound where he found Fern. But instead of making his way up, he traveled down the left passage and continued past it. Sol trekked on, following the pathway recommended by Helio. But, the sun was getting low and Sol felt tired and wanted to rest. Sol decided to find a nice spot to set up camp. Pitch flew around and spotted a high point that looked stable. Sol followed Pitch and they began to set up tonight's camp. Sol did his routine checks on the landscape to make sure the ground was packed enough to not slide underneath him. He would find a long rod and poke holes in the ground to check for air pockets. The decomposition of the garbage would create air pockets that could collapse with added weight on top. Sol once got stuck

for a few hours and he struggled to get out. Sol nearly died more times than he could remember, but each time he gained a hard fought lesson to share with his students. He thought of his students that he left behind as he unpacked his tent and rested for the night. Sol placed all his possessions inside the tent, but kept the satchel close to him; he planned to never remove it from his side so he could protect it from danger.

As Sol slowly went to sleep, two things were occurring that he did not know of. The Instructor had just assigned Arum a mission to enter the Outerlands and retrieve Sol and the Plant. The other thing was something much more tragic. Just as Sol's journey began, it was doomed to fail. The Plant that rested in his satchel began to root and made its way through the satchel and into Sol's body- and began to spread.

The late afternoon sun traveled through the shattered glass and cast beautiful colors all over Cicada's office. Arum looked over to where Sol would sit, his absence felt like a gravity well, the urge to fall over and collapse felt impossible to resist. Cicada began to speak.

'The guards stationed on the Northeast side of the walls saw Sol travel deep into the Outerlands. I need you to follow his trail and retrieve him, the Plant, and the books he has stolen from us!'

Arum's face instinctually flinched.

'What's the matter?' Cicada barked.

'The Plant Sol has is something he found in the Outerlands- Ma'am. But you just said he took it from-' Arum was cut off.

'Yes, the Queen owns all of the land and it is her right to all items, objects, or things recovered from the Outerlands. Not to mention those books from the Archive! The Garb of Detritus will enforce her will no matter what- By extension you are her will.' Cicada paused. 'You must retrieve Sol and anything he has stolen from us: Contraband and those books! He's a criminal.'

'He's kind-' Arum said quietly and accidentally.

Cicada looked to Arum, 'What?'

'You say he's a criminal, but he's a good person, a well respected Trash Knight and the most reputable guide the Academy employs...' Arum said looking down, her hands knotted up.

'He's a criminal! He lies and steals and he has betrayed everyone in this Kingdom!' Shouted Cicada, fuming with anger.

Arum looks up to meet her mother's eyes. 'He likes you.' Her voice clear but quiet.

'What does that matter?'

'He doesn't have a family, he looks up to you. And I think he cares a lot about me too-' Cicada reached out and grabbed Arum's face. Cicada stood over Arum and stared directly into her eyes. 'HE IS GARBAGE, WORTHLESS TRASH, AND YOU WILL RETRIEVE HIM AND BRING HIM TO ME!' Arum was petrified and couldn't breathe- She needs to breathe.

Air poured into her lungs and she just nodded her head in fear. Cicada dropped Arum back into her chair. Cicada stood upright and brushed her uniform.

'Leave.' said Cicada. Arum made her way to the door. She couldn't make it out before she began to sob.

Chapter VII Rift

From that dark night into an early morning, Sol rose. He first checked Fern. 'All good there.' he said, patting the satchel on his side. Then he checked on Pitch, who laid motionless under Sol's pillow. A place where he often slept, unless it's hot, where instead he migrates to Sol's feet. Sol decided to wrap pitch in a blanket and stuff him in his pack.

Sol stepped from his tarp cottage and breathed a great breath of rotting garbage air. He loved this smell, and for some reason, early morning air just tasted better.

Sol trotted down the mountain's backside, in fact, Sol saw this area from the top of this very mountain when he first discovered Fern. Sol looked down, joyous of what he possessed. Pitch cooed as he continued to nap from Sol's cozy pack. Each step Sol took felt empowering. He knew his mission and wanted to reach the end no matter what. To see where Fern came from, a whole world of beauty, he just had to make it there.

The great mountain faded out of view and Sol felt uneasy as he peered out over a vast garbage ravine. These rifts in the landscape were formed by large amounts of gutter water from the mountains nearby. Filthy muck scoured the landfill and left a deep scar. Sol viewed this new landscape, wondering what the best course of action would be to traverse this gap. He shook Pitch awake and asked for him to scout the area. Pitch pecked at Sol's skull and he shooed him away. Pitch flapped off and made his way Northeast, then turned around and flew Northwest to try and find a path around or down the ravine. Pitch landed back on Sol's shoulder and pointed his beak more East. Sol crept along the sharp fall off. He spotted a path leading down into the crevasse, and it seemed he could climb his way out on the other wall- shouldn't be too hard to climb down. Sol pulled out some rubber and tossed it into the air for Pitch. Together they began to scale down the sheer walls of the deep ravine.

Further back on the trail was Arum. Extremely tired from an all night journey into the Outerlands, she was walking and heard a cawing. She knew it was Pitch! She clambered up a heap of garbage and peered down into the ravine. There she saw Pitch and Sol scaling down into the ravine. Her heart started beating. Beating really hard. She didn't even think she'd catch up to them. This forced Arum to ponder what she was to do. She was sent here on a mission to retrieve Sol, yet she was so unsure this was the right thing to do. Her dream was to live with Sol in the Outerlands- and here she was. She could live with him forever... If he forgave her. That was all just stupid dreams, she had to listen to Cicada. She had to retrieve Sol, even if she didn't want to. It was for her people. It was for the Mother.

Sol was just reaching the bottom of the ravine, where he dropped down and landed in a knee high pool of murky sludge, which was squishy and Sol's feet were gripped with every step, his mechanical leg was dragged by the soft trash. Sol made sure the satchel stayed on his side, and waddled across the bottom, he left the shadows and entered the center of the ravine. Sol noticed movement of the shadows along the edge and realized it was a person. Sol flipped around and saw Arum

standing at the top. For a moment neither moved. It was just a second or two, but time truly stopped and it felt like a day went by. Sol turned back and scrambled forward, hurring to the wall of the ravine. Arum began shouting to stop! Sol realized why she was here, and he knew if she caught up to him he would never see Fleur.

Arum began carefully crawling down the wall, she kept an eye on Sol and saw him begin climbing up the other side. She hurried and began sliding down. As she placed her foot on a ledge- it gave way- and she fell into the ravine. Sol didn't see this, but he heard the splash. He stopped his ascension and looked down to see Arum weakly sitting in the muck. He could tell she was hurt badly.

Sol carefully clung onto the wall with a hand holding onto a crack.

'Are you alright?' Sol shouted. Arum was now resting half out of the water. She didn't reply at first, then after a while, she said no. Sol's heart sank. He just looked at her.

Arum stood shaking and trudged into the light of the ravine and looked up at Sol. 'please come back..' Arum begged. 'You can come back- we can go home together, give back Plant and maybe Cicada might go easy on you.' When Arum said that, both realized that wouldn't be the case. If Sol was brought back, he would be imprisoned. Getting kicked out of the Academy is one thing, stealing restricted books and contraband is punishable by imprisonment. All he could do now is let go.

'I'm leaving.' Sol told her- 'Goodbye Arum.' He turned his back to her and began scaling out of the ravine. Arum hobbled to the wall and tried to climb after him, but her brutal fall made it impossible. She scratched and ripped out soft trash, but couldn't climb. She collapsed into the water and laid against the wall. She wept.

Looking up, Arum saw Sol at the top of the ravine. Sol held something over the edge and dropped it. Sol's bag landed in Arum's arms. She opened it and it was full of supplies and some climbing gear. She looked back up and saw nothing but the sun.

Sol was walking away, he was in no hurry, and didn't want to waste energy. Now all he had was his sword, a smaller pouch of food, two water bladders, and his satchel containing Fern. His leg got oil yesterday, but he already felt the stiffness begin to return. Pitch kept biting Sol either for getting rid of their food or for leaving Arum in the ravine. Sol ignored the pest and continued on.

His footsteps felt loud and annoying. Every crunch of the trash was like sandpaper in his brain. He stopped. He just stood still. His breathing slowed down and he dropped his head. Looking down at his feet he saw his shadow. It didn't look like his shadow, but an empty reflection of himself, staring back. Sol then became disgusted with this imagery and looked directly up, the Sun was above him. It felt like a searing eyeball- judging him. Sol scoffed and crankily stomped his boots down the hill side. He began to murmur, like he was having an argument with 3 different people at once. Pitch decided to soar above for a while, until Sol might cool off.

The Sun slowly began its deep dive into the horizon, darkness danced and kissed away the light, until the last rays disappeared, leaving behind the royal purples of twilight. Sol decided to keep walking anyways, he wasn't exhausted, or at least that's what he told himself. Pitch cooed as he fell asleep in Sol's hood. The darkness surrounded Sol, but soft star light hugged the world. Sol kept checking to make sure he was heading in the right direction. He was looking at a constellation when his foot stepped onto nothing and he dropped like a stone. Pitch awoke and quickly caught wind, but Sol began tumbling fast-

Sol thought it was fitting, it ended how it started-falling.

Chapter VIII Helio

Sol was cold on one side and hot on the other. His eyes opened to hundreds of stars. He looked to the strange warmth and saw-

Red! He tried standing but felt his leg lock up- he rolled about 4 feet away-*slamming* into the legs of a person.

'Are you alright?' said a voice like weathered stone. Sol looked up to meet the gaze of a rugged Trash man. He's an older fellow with layers of cloth wrapped around his head which flowed gently down his torso. 'It's alright my friend. It's just fire.'

'Fire?' Sol shouted.

'Yes. Fire. You're all right; get off of my foot.'

The man helped Sol stand. Sol felt his leg pop- a gear slipped into place and his leg functioned again. Sol turned to watch the Fire. It's just sitting there. He realized the thing wasn't even moving around, just dancing in place.

'Is this your Crow? He won't stop pecking me.' Sol looked over and saw Pitch pecking and pulling the cloth around the man's feet.

'Yes, sorry. Pitch!' Pitch looked up and flew to Sol's shoulder where he gently rubbed against Sol's head.

'Interesting.' said the old man as he slowly squatted down to look at the woven gears inside Sol's leg. 'This is impressive. Did you make it yourself?' The man stood.

'I did!' Sol was still worried about the creature near them. 'What is that?'

'Fire, My boy. It is an embodiment of magic. A sign the universe is alive. It eats the air and trees, gives you the heat and light of day then leaves behind the sand of night. Be careful not to touch it, it will burn you.'

Sol continued to watch the fire, it stayed in the same spot swirling playfully.

'Who are you?' The man pondered.

'Sol. I'm a Trash Knight from the Kingdom, and this is Pitch, he's my friend- he likes to peck. Um, who are you?' Sol asked in return.

'My mother named me Helio Cassini'

Sol was starstruck! 'Sir, I am currently set off on a quest by your very calling! I'm traveling to Fluer-'

Sol was cut off. 'Calm down boy. You have the energy of a Dandelion.' Helio chuckled softly.

'What's that?'

'Never mind that, more importantly, You *fell* down this cliff and landed near my camp. I saw you tumble. *Graceful*.

Then I dragged you over by my fire, but after leaving your side for a moment, you awake and flip out!’

‘Sorry Sir. Cassini’

‘Helio is fine. Please sit and we can talk.’

Helio walked closer to the fire, paying it no attention. Sol followed slowly, full of tension. Helio routinely picked up a bladder and filled a pot with clear water. He then took a stick and lifted the pot into the Fire. He looked over and beckoned Sol to sit. As Sol sat down, Pitch flew over and began scratching the ground, investigating this strange floor. Sol looked closely and realized what he sat on- Soil!

‘Hey, this is Soil, isn’t it?’ Sol exclaimed.

‘I would call this dirt or earth- this doesn’t compare to real Soil!’ Helio smiled as he watched Sol rub his hands through the dirt, feeling each small grain.

‘It’s like trash, but even smaller, and its coarser.’ Sol said as he dusted his hands off.

Helio rubbed a little dirt between his fingers and spoke as he watched the flame breath.

‘In ancient times life functioned very differently. Someone- some kind of advanced civilization- left behind an element called Plastic. Even when shattered and eroded, the fragments continued to exist- they created an ever lasting material- providing infinite usages. The ancients took this blessing and decided to discard this material in mass, and it disrupted the flow of Life. Plastic was unable to return to death like all organics do, this caused a great congestion of our world, this imbalance plunged everything into a world of death. Our ancestors faced an unforgiving challenge- and used what they had to survive...’ Helio stopped talking and was staring at the dancing Fire.

Sol looked up and asked ‘I saw you pour something there. Looked like water- but different. Water is brown and has debris in it. That stuff was smooth like glass. How’d you purify that?’

‘Great question! I didn’t purify the Water. I captured it when it was clean. You see, around the Dump heap is contaminated air, and the ground is rubbish, causing the rain to lose its natural purity.’

'Wait, does that mean you caught that in Fleur?' Sol said as he was filled with excitement and joy.

'Hohohoh' Helio seemed pleased. Joyful even.

'The reality we live in is a beautiful mixture of energies and elements. Chaotic as it may be, it has fundamental laws of progression. These laws are inherently equal. Creation and destruction are equal forces. By using the world around us, we can utilize these laws to our advantage.'

Sol's mind was splitting in two.

Helio looked at Sol deeply, 'I know, but it's simpler than you think.'

Sol's eyes were filled with the deep field of space above them. 'It reminds me of a few moments in my life- where something happened that was unique and I never understood. Like once, during a cloudy night, day time would appear for a moment. Then a few seconds later a boom would crash over me. Do you know what that was?'

'Ahh. I've seen one of those up close before. They are quite shocking to behold. They are called bolts of lightning. Energies within the clouds become too much to hold, and in a brief moment, pure energy is discharged and it crashes into the earth.' Helio spoke with electricity.

'Wow'

'If you like that, you'd love this story. The Sun and moon appear to be the same size. On the rare occasion, both line up, where the moon covers the sun perfectly! It will be bright as day- without warning a shadow swallows the world- like everything is within the mouth of a beast.. I looked up and saw a great eye staring at me. A dark center with a fiery aura. Moments later it was gone like it never even happened.. I think they call those an eclipse. Not much is known about those events. It does teach us that the moon is closer to us than the sun- which I find quite interesting..' Helio and Sol were looking at the night sky. Each traced the constellations in silence. The fire crackled and Pitch laid asleep, the dusted wind kissed the lands and they felt peace.

Sol turned and looked at Helio, baffled such a man could exist so far out here, all alone.

'I have something for you-'

'Me? A gift?' asked Helio.

Sol pulled out both books and held them out for Helio.

'I have both of your books, you deserve them back.'

Helio laughed, 'Why? I wrote those for you! I started them for me, they were journeys of wisdom and knowledge found. Once I truly understood- I let them leave me. Keep them! In fact...' Helio turned and lifted a scarred and torn book. The Spine was ripped and woven back together, with a thicker layer binding once more. 'Take this...'

Sol saw the tanned leather cover with red font, it read "How to survive the Wilds with Helio Cassini."

'This is my second book. You seem to have found my 1st and 3rd.' Helio paused and looked at the memories. 'Mind if I take a look at those?'

Sol eagerly lended them over to Helio- he inspected the books- gently rubbing the spines and covers. He laughed and said, '*The Studies and Travels of Helio Cassini!*' then sighed, '*Helio Cassini and the city called Fleur...*' Helio sat holding the books- then handed both books to Sol. Sol now had three books! Sol was reminded of Arum forcing him to read when they were younger- a repetitious event. Arum would spend hours reading those books on the first floor. Sol would hide on the second floor, and listen to what people said. Whispers in the library echoed so softly. The thoughts of Arum danced before him again- and he felt the torturous ripping of his heart. Sol became solemn.

'What's the matter?' Helio said, pulling the boiling water from the fire and pouring some into clay cups.

'A- friend- of mine followed me into the Outerlands and along the way she confronted me, trying to get me to go back to the Kingdom. She fell and injured her leg and I left her- trapped in that crevasse. Down in that shitty muck water...' Sol stopped talking. 'She should be alright, I gave her my bag of supplies.'

'Thank you for sharing...' Helio sipped gently, the steam swirled around just like the smoke from the fire.

'Well, I'm headed back to the Kingdom and I may be able to see if she's alright.'

'Thank you.' Sol said, breathing deep. 'Do you mind me asking why you're heading back? I don't really see why you'd want to be there.'

'Oh to meet an old friend maybe, have a drink, and check on a research project. I placed a few Ferns around the Dump to see if any could survive the hostile environment.'

Sol's stomach was tight. He realized what rested on his hip. Sol began to apologize.

'I'm so sorry, I ruined your experiment! I have one of them here.' Sol tried taking the stachel off his side. It was stuck on him, Sol felt a sharp pain course through his spine. Helio gasped- 'Don't pull boy!' Helio began inspecting the space between Sol's garbage body and the satchel.

After a moment Helio looked up to Sol- his eyes were wide and full of regret.

Helio said, '...I'm so sorry, my boy.. The Silent Fern, it has rooted into you. Removing it here would kill the plant... and you.'

Sol instantly felt cold and sickly. 'Why?' He meekly said.

'We are a creature called a Fungus. In the ancient past, our ancestors formed homes from the trash. Bodies- Shells. A clever usage of our environment. This armor is not who we truly are- we are a deeper creature. This Fern feeds as a parasite. It roots as a way to gain the meek resources in this world. Your internal Fungal body has been attacked by the roots- sapping energy. Removing this will break your spine.'

'Can I live with this attached to me?'

'Briefly... well... you need to be treated soon by proper scholars. I cannot do this, but Fluer has plenty of people who can help. You're infected and this is sapping nutrients, you don't have much time to reach your saviors. If we leave now, we might be able to make it before you-'

Helio stopped talking... he gazed at the edge of the hill. Large paws stomped the dirt and a face appeared that was surrounded by yellow flower petals. This beast entered their camp. Helio didn't break his eye line.

Sol looked over his shoulder to witness a monster. His mouth became dry- Sol and Helio watched the Dandelion pause. An obtuse triangle standoff insured. 'Sol... this is a Dandelion. We need to run down this hill.' Helio whispered.

'What about Arum stuck in the ravine?'

'Are you willing to continue alone then?' Helio asked clearly.

'Yes.'

'Then go, NOW!' Helio stepped and threw the tea kettle at the Dandelion. It roared and reeled back from the steaming water. Sol grabbed the three books and his bag and ran. After sprinting for a few seconds, Sol looked back and saw Helio had pointed the twisted staff- and created space between him and the Lion. The wilted Lion stepped towards him and growled- but began to shift its weight towards Sol-

'GO!' Helio yelled and with this last statement, Sol sprinted down the hill with Pitch soaring above him. Into the darkness he ran fearing the beast was tailing him, deeper and deeper into the dark he went... Fear crept up his leg and arms. He felt Fern on his side, and he now knew that his body was a host to this parasite. Leaving Helio behind felt like Sol was a baby without its mother, but the deeper he entered the darkness, the more he remembered he was always alone.

Chapter IX Nature Wilds

The night undulated around Sol, a nauseating burning sensation filled his body as he sprinted down the hill. It felt as if Sol was running upsidedown and his feet barely rooted him to the Earth, and one misstep would send him flying off into the depth of the starry night below him. Despite his vision being filled with complete darkness, Sol saw red. He fell to his knees and began puking, first nothing came out, then acidic mucus poured- all clung together and slowly dripped off his helmet.

After wiping his chin, Sol reached down and felt the dirt- it was covered in soft hair. Fibrous strands grew up and covered the earth. He leaned over and laid flat against the pelt. His body was so warm, and everything felt so cold. Pitch landed next to him, his inky color made him completely

invisible to Sol, but he knew his best friend was there next to him.

Sol stood, but dropped down to his knees, unable to bare the weight inside him. He held his stomach, trying to feel if the parasitic plant was squirming, or if that was just his own body, unable to handle the stress and exertion. Sol stood once more, but again could not. He struggled on his knees forward, until his helmet clunked into something dense. Sol pulled back and swatted at this beast to shoo it off. He slapped something that didn't move. It couldn't move, it was solid, like stone. He reached his hand out into the darkness, afraid his hand might be bitten off by a beast, but instead he felt a rough uneven texture. It wasn't cold, like metal, but not the warmth of a living creature.

Pitch began to peck at the thing, and tiny thuds rang out into the night. Sol felt the surface, from the ground he felt his way up, until Sol stood on his tippy toes and still felt the trunk reach into the sky.

He curled up at the base of this thing and looked up. He couldn't see any stars or the moon. He waved his hand up into the air trying to wipe away what was covering his view, but he only swirled the chilling air. His hand dropped into his curled up body. Pitch pushed his way into Sol's arms and together they slept. Exhausted and hungry.

Too quickly the Sun crawled over the horizon, its blood showering the lands in gold, and this gold hit Sol's eyes. Sol looked around and saw what he slept under. A large and still creature- A peaceful creature. A canopy stretched over Sol and Pitch, they rested against its large base, roots weaved in and out of the earth searching for something. Sol shifted his body and Pitch rolled over and continued to sleep. Sol rummaged through his bag and ate what little he had left, and pulled out the newest book given to him by Helio. *How to survive the Wilds by Helio Cassini* and flipped through the book. Sol wasn't really reading much of the pages, his eyes went milky as he daydreamed about Helio and Arum. Did Helio escape the Dandelion? Is Arum still in the ravine? Did Helio make it back to Arum? Are they together right now? Are they both dead?

Sol eventually clicked into reality and flipped back to the start of the book, looking more carefully for any information on what he laid under. Sol flipped past pages reading: Shadow flys, Thorn-Rino, Leafirds. Sol found a chapter on Plants that Helio discovered. Grass- Shrubs- Seeds- Trees: tall, hard, and a source of fuel for fire. They have a great root system- steaming from the trunk- which further spreads out into a canopy, which breathes the air.

Sol looked up to see the branches hanging above him, and realized Helio's staff was made of the same material- Wood it was. Each branch had green leaves on them- he noticed the visual connection between Fern and these Trees.

Sol continued to skim the book, checking for information that might be critical for their survival- all of it seemed important, but he didn't have much time to lay around and read. His clock was ticking.

Sol wished he still had his supply bag. Those rations felt really useful right now. Sol didn't regret doing it. But now he was overwhelmed by how exhausted he felt, even after sleeping.

Sol could truly feel the pulsation of the Ferns roots- the slow painful sippis of his energy. Large leaves were poking out of the top of the satchel and reached for the sunlight. Sol lifted the satchel's flap. His eyes locked with the now larger plant- He loved this Fern- but he was dying because of it...

Sol continued to read and found the section on Silent Ferns and read the following chapter: Silent Ferns use their leaves to absorb sunlight. At the base of the Plant, the roots would slowly crawl, pulling itself through the dirt. They lurk and wait for healthy prey, and once close enough would lightly attach on. Most creatures don't notice this, some clever animals bite it off. Once the Silent Fern attaches onto its prey, they spread a center Taproot which connects to the animal's spine. They sap nutrients, energy, blood, and become vastly more engorged. Its roots spread throughout the body, aiming to weaken the creature by locking up joints and disrupting organs. This would cause the prey to die. From here the fern would feast from the inside- growing

from the spine towards the light. The Silent Fern builds a city of engorged vines. The body would decompose rapidly and all that's left is the skeleton, in the case of Trash people, trash exoskeletons. Once finished with its meal, it leaves and crawls through the dirt to a nearby location to sit down-ready to wait for prey. If they got big enough, their leaves would plump and become too tasty looking for any beast to ignore. The successful became too loud and powerful for their own good-

Sol closed the book and checked his backpack for any more food... empty. He then checked his water bladders. He had two. One was empty and the other was half dry. He sighed as he threw Pitch a chunk of tire and they began their journey into the Wilds. They walked past the restful tree and continued towards another tree... then another... than many. They felt unnerved, such large creatures stood tall and still. Nothing in the Dump stood naturally like this, only the stone and garbage walls of the Kingdom had such structure. Unlike walls meant to keep people in, these trees were scattered randomly. Sol found these behemoths interesting, and wondered where they got all their mass from? If they pulled it from the Soil, then they should all slowly sink into pits of their own making, right?

Sol stopped walking and looked up, his eyes fixated on the giants in front of him. To think that the trees get so big... just from thin air. Sol closed his eyes for but a moment- and he felt a gust of wind and the infinite energy swirling around him. He opened his eyes to a world he belonged. The trees cast a wonderful shade on him, which he never got in the Outerlands. There, the Sun would beam down and blind anyone who dared to look directly at it. But here, under the leaves, Sol could look upwards and see the Sun barely shine, but even then, he could feel the immense power of its light trickling through. He noticed something strange, some leaves began to leap from branch to branch- tree to tree. Some leaves seemed to be some kind of flying creature, which perfectly mimicked the shape and color of the leaves. He chuckled as he continued on. The terrain began to creep down once again and the trees even began to clear. Sol took a

swig of his remaining water, gave a sip to Pitch, and they both scanned the horizon for some source of the precious liquid.

'Okay Pitch, we need Water. Please search for some.'

Pitched pecked at his head, and flew off. Sol watched as an inky blur flapped its wings off to the North-East, traveled across his view, then came back and landed on his shoulder. Pitch flapped its wings excitedly and pecked his helmet. Sol joyfully cheered and began jogging into the clearing, towards a Water hole that Pitch had found. They made their way across the open field- which had much taller grass- Then they reached the Water.

Sol got down to his knees and bowed his head down sliding off his helmet. He tossed it in the shallow water, where Pitch jumped to stand on. The clear blue water danced in front of him. This dance was still and beautiful. His eyes locked with his own and noticed the face. His whole body was composed of garbage. The garbage he used to live in. He was made of the earth around him- as a shell to a deeper soul. His hand reached into the water and disturbed the reflection. Sol fell back in shock! The delirium of the moment broke and he plugged his hands into the water, scooping, and drinking. It was cold and deep. He drank. He couldn't stop. Then he stopped. He felt so full it was like he was drowning. Sol leaned back and breathed deeply- the air was smooth and clean. He didn't think even the air would be different away from the Dump.

Footsteps approached- Sol whipped his head over to the left. A large and finely pointed horn lumbered through some tall grass. Its wide eyes turned towards Sol. His mind went to the book and somewhere inside Sol remembered what this thing was! A Thorn-Rino... It had tough hibiscus skin with rose colored plumage around its neck. The rose thorn on its head aimed towards Sol. Its feet began to move- it was charging straight at him!

Sol dove away from the stampede- but was forcibly pushed directly into the water. Sol had rarely ever swam. The few times were in pools of dirty trash water that formed, often in mountainous areas. Each time Sol did it on purpose, slowly

and carefully. He would remove his prosthetic leg, as the water would rust the gears. This water was smooth and didn't have the normal brown color and bits of garbage floating around- Large pieces, small pieces, microscopic plastics. This water was beautiful- This water was dangerous. Sol felt the burning desire for air again. He pushed his body out of the water and felt the air escape then dive deep into his lungs- Coughing and inhaling at the same time. Pitch was flying overhead, cawing a worrisome caw. Sol tried going to the shore, but saw the thorn edge closer to the water, keeping the shore off limits. Sol knew he had to swim across the water, to be fair it wasn't very much water, but he was exhausted and his leg began to weigh him down.

Sol struggled to stay above the water and moving towards the other shore. Pitch flew down and locked his talons into Sol's cloak, trying to help lift Sol. His muscles burned with exhaustion. His mouth filled with water, coughed it up, just to refill again with water. As they got closer to the shore, Sol noticed a nearby bolder that was covered in moss which stuck above the water. Sol changed course and in a few seconds made it to a solid piece of land. Pitch was soaking and flopped onto the rock, while Sol couldn't even lift himself out. His legs laid half in the water, his torso and arms holding onto the top.

After a few moments, Sol entered a dream-like state. The few moments of rest felt eternal, like he didn't deserve each second after, but each moment that came was filled with bliss and pain. He looked over to see Pitch, who was catching their breath. As Sol breathed deep and clear, he felt a rumble. The rock lifted from the water, waking Pitch up, and shooting terror deep into Sol's body. Two claws covered in algae lifted above the rock, one large and bronzy, the other thinner and sharper. Sol made an effort to stand, but the movement of the creature caused him to lose balance. Taking advantage of the moment, Sol used the full force of his right leg to push off the shell and dive closer to the shore. Sol began to frantically swim, and soon his feet found the soft detritus of the pond's shore. His feet clung with clay and he stumbled out of the water.

Sol could barely even turn his head. The exhaustion was becoming unbearable. His hands dug into the earth and he swiveled his body to see the large monster rise from the water and give chase towards Sol.

'God Dammit!'

Sol was filled with pure determination and clambered up the shore onto higher ground. Pitch pathetically ran- flapping past Sol and they made way towards another grouping of trees. Sol kept running, despite the pain, despite the hunger, no matter what he was gonna-

Sol thudded to the ground. He wanted to keep going, but his body didn't agree. He lost consciousness. Dreams flooded his brain- dreams of Arum and Cicada- of his students and his friends- of the old lady he would trade with-

Sol felt the Earth move beneath his face. Like someone was pushing the ground away from him. His mouth filled with grass and dirt as the earth turned underneath him. His eyes opened as his leg's sank under water. He twisted and looked towards the wet feeling and saw the monster dragging Sol back into the water. Sol had one choice to make. He reached over to his prosthetic leg, unbuckled the straps that helped keep his thigh in the socket and slid free from his own leg. The Terrapod did not see this and continued its dissension into the Water. Pitch flew down next to Sol and began flapping his wings. Sol looked at Pitch and swore that this bird was crying.

Sol looked into the satchel, the water caused the Soil to turn muddy. The Fern was huge now, the leaves spilling out and he saw the thick tap root plunged into his own flesh. It felt like the water made the roots ravenous- and his consumption inevitable. Sol looked to his missing leg and saw roots peeking out of his thigh- he looked to his hands and saw his body was pierced by the tiny roots. Sol meekly pulled himself up, stumbling on one foot trying to hold his balance, before hopping towards the cozy shade of Trees. As he hopped, and fell, and got back up, and fell again, and dragged himself- Sol felt the roots gripping the earth. Every step, every time his hand or body touched the ground, he was rooted and had to pull himself free. Every claw forward was resisted

by Fern. Pitch was flapping and trying to motivate Sol forward. Sol finally made it to the Trees, where he lifted himself back onto one leg. His head swam with greens and chirps and Arum and deep exhaustive pain. He fell into the Undergrowth- Finding peace and sleep for the rest of the day..

Chapter X Fluer

Arum sat in that dirty trash water all night- Her right leg was twisted and warped. Then the Sun rose and Arum was getting ready to scale that wall. She took out Sol's gear and analyzed the equipment. It was worn yet kept in quality condition- it smelt distinctly of his sweat. Arum attached the belt and pulled out small anchors all connected by a rope. She started slow. She pressed into the wall and pushed off her strong leg- quickly stepping on the right leg- then back to her left. The pain was nauseating. She pushed off with her left leg- kept off her right- then back onto her left- but she slid back to splash in the muck. She punched the muck and it splashed into her face. Arum rose up and breathed deep then slow. Slower. Again she tried to only use her left leg. Arum pushed up, then using her entire upper body strength to hold tight, her left leg jumped back up to her body. She pushed up and repeated this process. Pin after pin she stepped up- all she could do was look down. Arum's leg began to tremble. She held still. It stopped shaking. Another step. Tremble, it didn't stop. Arum grunted and fought to get every step higher. Pin after pin she climbed as her whole body quaked in fear and exhaustion. Every foot higher took longer- each step grew in pain!

Arum had to stop. She shook just staying on her left leg. The gravity of the ravine pulled Arum harder- the world itself holding tight- unwilling to let her ascend freely. With each step she was tested- Arum was unwilling to give in- Arum felt the wall move as it crumbled! Trash slid down Arum's right side. She jammed her body into a crack and froze. Seconds, just a few seconds. She couldn't stop shaking- She clawed her way up and at the edge her hand reached for the sky and her body was pulled up-

Together they dropped onto the sweet sweet trash. Arum laid breathing so deep- she coughed and yelled.

'Are you alright?'

'Yes! Yes! I made it up...!' Again Arum huffed.

'Good. Let's rest.'

Arum's eyes were closed for a long time, she felt the gentle breeze and the Sun on her face- The light went deep and she felt transparent to the world. Her eyes opened to gaze at the soft sunny sky- clearer than usual. She got off the garbage and stood before an old man. He was sitting... sleeping. Balled up with his legs crossed. His head lifted and he coughed and mumbled.

Arum looked at this strange Trash man- She'd never been this far from home- now she was greeted by this kind stranger.

'Hello, my name is Helio. Are you Arum?'

'Yes...!' Arum spoke cautiously.

'I've met a fiery boy named Sol...!' Helio said calmly.

Arum interjected- 'Really? Where is he? I NEED to see him. I need to talk to *him*- I must apologize for what I did! For being such a fool!'

'He's gone. We were attacked by a Dandelion... He asked me to come help you.'

'Sol told you to help *me*? But he has no supplies! I stopped him from getting fully prepared- then he gave me his gear and food! He has *Nothing* to help him!' Arum cried out.

'He has Pitch. So he's not alone.' Helio paused for a moment and felt the wind sweep around them. '...he also has the Fern with him. I'm sorry, but the Fern has rooted into Sol and his spine is being fed on. If he rips it out he will bleed dry... and leaving it in withers his body away. He's rushing to Fluer, a city that can help him. Yet, the journey remaining will not be kind.'

'Oh Sol. My Sol. I'm so sorry... I will help you.'

'We can travel by my path. I know these Wilds well. Can you walk with haste?'

'Yes.' Arum stated, but her first step crumpled to the trash like a calf.

'I can do my best to carry you-' Helio spoke but was cut off, Arum looked up at him with eyes of Fire. She stood up and walked on. Helio watched- shocked- then jogged to catch up.

Together they hurried from the trashed landscape, going downhill, the ground gave way to smaller trash. The Earth underneath grew up to meet their soles. Arum didn't look back to the world of filth and garbage she lived in- she continued forward into a soft grassland and towards a Tree.

'What is this stuff?'

'This is called Grass and that is a Tree, my dear. They are living too.' Helio's hand brushed the bark, 'They stand tall and strong and are unwilling to yield. Also good fuel for *Fire*.' Helio looked at Arum and saw the same strength of a Tree- yet the delicateness of a Flower.

'I've heard of Fire before! I once read about it in the Restricted Archives. It's hot and burns stuff.' Arum stated.

'Well educated I see, knowledge is useful where wisdom is not. We must be wise on our path to Sol. Violent creatures live in this forest. Are you willing to go into these deadly Wilds? You might not survive'

Does it matter? I'm going to Sol. I'm not changing my mind! Either you're helping me- or I'm going in alone.

Helio nodded and walked into the forest with Arum by his side. The day stretched long as they made good ground. Helio glided through the forest- knowing each path and where they were. Arum hated that Sol was out here all alone. She thought about how Sol never thought things through. He put himself in mortal danger- all because of a plant... She looked up from her rage and saw the world around her. The world Sol wanted to be in.

The cold chains of Cicada's subjugation wrapped tighter and tighter once more- the pull back home tugged her. She stopped and reminded herself of all those years she abandoned her independence to think and act of her own will. That long story of pain was over. Arum breathed the warm air and felt those icy chains melt away- chains that were never truly there. Arum felt nascent to a world where her mind and body could finally act together.

She wanted to see Sol and she pushed through the pain to keep up with the nimble speed of Helio. They were swept by the wind, making their way into this lush world. Arum looked up to see the gust of wind blow and dozens of little leaves jump from branch to branch. She realized there were hundreds in every tree, all swimming around the canopy. Arum thought of Pitch flopping about and began to giggle. She couldn't help but stop and laugh. Helio halted and turned to see her, standing in the shadows of the leaves and the light of the Sun- both dancing over her joyful face. Silvery tears fell. Arum squatted down and wiped her face. She looked back up and saw Helio standing patiently.

'Lets go.' She said.

Together they went out into a clearing of Trees. On they walked, until she viewed a beautiful blue hole in the Earth.

'Best to avoid the Water, many creatures fight here for this precious resource.' said Helio. They walked over to the right side of the water. Arum looked out at the clean water and the reflection of the setting sun, its rays beamed twice as bright- The shimmer was so brilliant. Helio put his hand out to stop Arum from continuing forward.

'Be careful, that over there is a Terrapod. Large and brutal crustaceans that can travel in both Water and on land.' Helio advised Arum. She searched the shore until her gaze fell onto a large mossy boulder that clung to the edge of the Water. She saw the water ripple with a deep groan. As it turned, Arum saw the mechanical leg of Sol sticking out of its horrid mouth. Arum screamed and rushed towards the beast. Helio shouted to stop! Arum's leg lit on fire as she sprinted to pull Sol from the jaws of the crab! She unsheathed her father's sword just as Helio's arm wrapped around Arum and held her back.

'You will die if you get any closer!' Helio warned, but Arum ripped herself free and charged the boulder. The weird eyes flickered in the mirrored blade as it crunched deep into its carapace. Arum held her blade and was lifted up as the crustacean stood. She stuck her boot into its face and wrenched the sword down- ripping its horrid maw in half- blue blood exploded onto Arum. The crab crashed in the dirt and

Water. Arum ripped Sol's leg from its mandible. She tossed it blindly away as she wildly began thrashing her blade into the Terrapods shell and face. Crunch after crunch echoed across the serene pond.

'Arum *Enough!*' Helio shouted. She turned and yelled, 'This thing *killed SOL!*' she turned back and continued her rampage- the rich blue blood splattering across her garbage face and body.

'No! *Look!* His leg buckles are completely undone. That means Sol detached his leg to escape. He may be close by!' Helio said as he held out Sol's mechanical leg. Arum's blade crunched one last time. She huffed and looked at Sol's leg- She stared at it for a long time... until she wiped her sword of the blood and sheathed it- her face dripped with blue. She took back Sol's leg and placed it on her shoulder. Helio approached the obliterated mess of the Terrapod. He placed a hand on its shell for a moment- then analyzed the dirt and noticed a trail leading away... into the Trees.

There in the Undergrowth the Fern softly sways. His face down in the Soil- gently kissing the Earth. Pitch rested by his cheek, hoping to once again feel the air push and pull. Helio stood still and watched Arum join him. Helio watched as Arum fell to her knees. Helio watched as she buried her face into his shoulders, whispering apologies.

Helio turned away and absorbed the myriad of warm colors from the setting Sun. The grand horizon of grass and trees adorned with a fading light- a flood of sadness washed Helio- cleaning his trashen body. He stood before the Sun and watched as it passed away. Again and again this happened, to rise and live in the sky, yet to fall once more under the world. Longer than the world itself the Sun lived, yet passed every day, leaving behind a cold and dark shadow. The nature of the Sun ensured it would be here again tomorrow- always and forever- above the Earth it watched life flourish and die. All it could do is shine its weightless light and give warmth to those who depended on it. Never asking for anything in return.

Helio turned and walked back to Arum. He rested his hand on her shoulder. She sat head down and legs crossed- one hand

petting Pitch who laid in her lap- and her other hand still on his neck. She stood and breathed a heavy sigh. Helio waited for Arum to speak, but she did not.

'What would you like to do?' Helio asked.

'I want to take Fern with me.' Arum stated.

'To where?'

'Onwards. I'm going to continue forward on this journey Sol started.' Arum said clear and soft.

'You will do that for him?'

'I will do it for me...' Arum said.

'I have a bag that is thick enough to hold Fern properly, where its roots won't spread to you. But we must wait- the Fern needs to... finish... before it will let go of Sol. Once it's done after the morning, you can take it.' Helio spoke, '...for now let's rest and mourn our friend. You need to give yourself time. Be patient... Everything will be alright. Despite how it feels now.'

'Yea...' The starry night once again danced far above Helio and Arum's tents. The streaks of light slowly turned, guiding the Sun back up once more. The first rays of light hit the opaque plastic tent that Arum and Pitch slept in. Arum rose and exited into the green and blue world. Helio was already up gazing out at the distance, nothing in particular, he was just taking it all in.

Arum shuffled over and they greeted each other.

'Here-' Helio said as he pulled out an empty pack and handed it to Arum. 'Place some of the Soil into this bag. Choose the darkest Soil, filled with clay and any small bugs, it's all good for the Fern.' After she scooped some fresh Soil into the bag- Helio went to pull out the Fern.

'I'll do it.' Arum said.

'Okay...' and he stepped aside. Arum walked up to Sol again. Her face contorted down as she looked at Fern's engorged leaves. The empty shell of Sol laid still. Her hand grabbed the base of the Plant and she pulled. She felt no resistance as the blade of roots gently slid out of the loose trash of his hollowed body. Arum held out Fern- the roots slowly squirmed- barely moving at all. Arum set the Fern down

into the Soil and packed it in. She brushed her hands through the leaves... they were soft.

Arum tied the bag around her shoulders- the beautiful Green arms stretched over her head and gave her the slightest shade. Helio finished packing up his belongings and walked over with a Water bladder and a portion of bread.

'Eat and drink please.' Arum took the bread and looked at the texture. It had a skin to it, while the inside was fluffy and soft.

'What is this?'

'Bread. Made from flour, yeast, and saltwater. Flour is made from wheat- another plant. Salt is found in great bodies of water. Yeast is a fungus- like us. They are singular, yet there are many that live in a colony.'

Arum was unable to hear Helio speak, she ripped it apart in her hand- the inside was porous with tunnels swirling around. She tasted the bread and didn't realize how hungry she was. She tasted the clean water and didn't realize how thirsty she was.

'Shall we?' Helio asked as he gazed down at Sol's leftover pile. Arum followed as he left, but knelt down one last time, and kissed his head softly. The trash shifted a little in response. Pitch cooed and followed Arum as she stood and left.

Through the forest and just over this rolling hill is The City called Fluer. Waiting for those willing to enter.

