

Pneuma
by Zachary Ross

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Elias told me this story. I am recounting it as precisely as I can, but no doubt he will have corrections for me.

- Columbine

“That organ has been in its current form for five hundred years, unaltered. That’s all four instruments, all twelve divisions in five manuals with four more pedal divisions, all two hundred and seventy-three stops, each and every one of its eighteen thousand pipes. All of them, exactly as Meersara made them. It’s the largest organ on this side of the Lake Country, and any other organs by the same smith, singly or together, are either defunct or cannibalized. To make any significant changes to her at all would be, in my opinion, ill-advised. To do *this* would be...”

To kill her, he thought, only to begin tempering his words in a desperate hurry; *to despoil her*; *to mutilate her*; *to fetter her*. He realized then that he was impassioned, and he gripped the edge of the round table to keep himself from gesticulating.

“It would be to undo the work of so many hands.” His voice, which had been placid and placating at the start of the meeting, was high and bleating now. It cut too sharply through the silence of the Wheelhouse library, he thought; and judging by the faces of the rest of the council, they thought the same. They were too long in answer, too stiff in their shifting, looking at each other but not at him. Elias sighed.

“Aye, well, we are all aware – thanks to your expertise, Elias – just how remarkable our organ is. No one is contesting that.” Mother Gattisk adjusted her great, round glasses again, glaring at him through the top of their lenses like his own scolding mother. Her conspicuous lack of philtrum, he always thought, made her look more like a goat than a ewe, to which her acerbic personality eagerly contributed. “But your enthusiasm, however contagious, is misplaced,” she said. “As we have already discussed, there are practical problems to consider, both within and beyond your tenure here.”

“That’s right, we have already discussed them,” said Elias, much more evenly.

“Thanks for that, Mother,” husked the beaverfolk Clymwr, stealing a glance at the tidy notes which lay on the table before her. He sat to her right, Father Brennan to her left, a ram with prodigious horns in a Shepherd’s belted robe. “I’d like to add myself that we aren’t ‘undoing’ any part of the organ. We’re adding to it, which is exactly the opposite.” Father Brennan nodded. Mother Gattisk’s lips thinned.

Shaker whickered his approval after them, a squat black stallion of advanced middle age with a stark white lozenge on his forehead. He sat to the right of Clymwr, nearest Elias. “And to play the fool here, Elias, I fear that your more technical arguments are lost on, shall we say, the uninitiated,” he began, striving to sound more learned than Elias knew him to be. “I’ve no doubt that you understand the instrument – you speak of it as if it were your wife, or your daughter. But the instrument itself is not at stake here; this Wheelhouse, of which the organ is a part, is. The River Gecirreth moved long before any of us were born; and most of Brokenhead, including our fold, moved with it. You are at present the only one with the breadth of skill and acquaintance necessary to command that organ with all of its complexity. Can we pull organists from visiting pilgrims by lot, Elias? Does that sound sustainable to you?”

Except for Elias, Shaker was both the youngest member of the Wheelhouse council and its president; and at twenty-four years of age, Elias had only been able to horn his way into their deliberations through his understanding of that organ. He snorted and tapped a hoof against the worn red rug. The high collar of his brown coat, embroidered with its honeysuckles, chafed his chin. “Our

dearth of organists is a problem that was created years ago, and could have been solved by now,” he said. “Sir Lyre was our organist out of charity. He trained me out of desperation as much as love. No organist can live on a country stipend, given the amount of love that organ demands.” Realizing that he was repeating the same argument he had been making for five years, he fell to muttering: “I can barely afford to live.”

“Which is precisely why it will be a benefit to everyone, including you, to make the organ more accessible to players,” said Shaker, drumming his calloused, unskilled fingers against the table. Father Brennan nodded again, stroking his chin.

“And let’s not assume that Elias is the only one on this council with any mechanical know-how,” Clymwr interjected, setting aside for a moment his half-chewed pencil. “The way Mother Gattisk explained it, pneumatics will only make the organ easier to play: the keys, the pedals, the stops, everything will become simpler and less toilsome. The bellows will pump themselves – just think about that! It will free up paws, and the organist – be it you, Elias, or someone else – will be a whole lot less intimidated.”

Straight from Mother Gattisk’s mouth, indeed, thought Elias, only to feel a prick of guilt a moment later. He rubbed his face, feeling the roots of his horns through their ridge. “Simpler? Less toilsome?” He asked. “The organ is not a simple instrument to play, Clymwr, nor should it become one. It’s a living creature that requires cooperation, not a marionette. And on the topic of simplicity, fitting a five hundred year old organ with a network of pneumatic piping will only introduce complexity upon complexity. What organist will know how to maintain such an instrument himself?”

“What organist can maintain that instrument now?” asked Mother Gattisk sharply. “One must travel increasingly far abroad to find an organsmith capable of crafting the mechanical parts – all too specific – for this organ, and that’s not to mention the difficulty of transporting and installing them. At present, the only workshop large enough to work with us is on the far western side of Mount Bighorn.”

“Not to mention the expense,” added Shaker. “An expense that becomes sillier and sillier to consider when there’s a pneumatist springing up in every two-herd town.”

It was then that Elias realized, less with surprise and more with a sense of grim resignation, that they were walking neatly down Mother Gattisk’s proposal, a fugue that she had composed and played for the council members since the renovations were first conceived. His was no counterpoint in that fugue after all, but rather a rejected theme played on a swell with closed vents – or, he was beginning to suspect, with the stops closed entirely. “The expense of installing pneumatics for so many ranks of pipes can’t be negligible,” he said, speaking so delicately that he feared only Shaker could hear him.

“On the contrary, it will be perfectly reasonable, and will pay for itself in the end,” bleated Mother Gattisk. “We already have the coal boiler, mind you; the heart of the instrument is alive.”

“The heart of that organ are the bellows pumpers,” Elias objected. Letting slip a thin smile, Father Brennan nodded again.

“Who wouldn’t be needed with pneumatics, thank the Stars,” grunted Clymwr, waving his gnarled pencil like a conductor’s baton. “Two boys at the bellows, every time an organist wants to play? That’s three folk just to work the thing, and four with someone at the stops. Pneumatics would cut it down to one.”

“And let us not forget that we pay the bellows pumpers,” Mother Gattisk almost lilted.

“Barely!” Elias barked, so indignant that he stood up from his chair. As stiff as he had been, his spine down to the root of his tail was utterly numb, and began to come alive with a symphony of pinpricks. It was how he used to feel as a child after long hours of practice, when his horns were shorter and his core was still unused to supporting the weight of all his limbs. His neck, at least, was as solid as a rock, as all rams’ necks must be.

“I’m afraid I can’t quite understand you, Elias,” said Shaker sanctimoniously. “Are you arguing for saving the expense of pneumatics, or for spending more on the instrument we already have?”

A more choleric ram might have been moved to retaliate against such backbiting; but Elias, notoriously steady among his brothers, wanted only to cry. "Father Brennan, please, bestow a little wisdom," he begged, stretching out a hand to him.

Father Brennan looked to Mother Gattisk first, trading unspoken words with her, then to every other face at the table before heaving a mighty, reluctant shrug. "Is it strictly necessary," he said haltingly, "to play the organ at all? They don't use them on Mount Arzkoroll, I happen to know."

Chatter erupted around the table, an inharmonious shrilling and moaning of voices all straining to make the same complaint in different registers. Sensing that his peacemaking effort was in vain, Father Brennan raised conciliatory palms and nodded again, his nostrils flaring in a silent, browbeaten laugh.

Shaker's fist, pounding on the table until it shook, restored order. "Since our last meeting, Mother Gattisk has spoken with a pneumatic organsmith at the leadsmith's guild here in Brokenhead," he announced. "Now that we've heard the arguments for and against, I think it best that she conclude by proposing his estimate. After that we will take a vote."

"What was the name of the smith you found, my dear?" asked Father Brennan, leaning over to look at her notes.

"Smythe, as it happens," said Mother Gattisk, leaning slightly away from him. "He was a journeyfolk of the organbuilder's guild in Sootoven, while they still had one. He has agreed to cast the hose for a downright merciful price."

"Then it sounds like the job is already halfway done, doesn't it?" said Elias venomously, so angry now that he feared he really would cry. "Let me hear the price."

"I reckon about a year."

"Pardon?" said Elias.

"I said it'll take about a year, I reckon," the fat black donkey grunted, over-enunciating in his dwindling patience for the ram's daydreaming. "You got four instruments here, so even with all of us working it'll take at least that long."

Elias blinked and unballled his fists, returning from his flight to find himself once more upon the balcony of the Wheelhouse's dome. The organ console was still there against the western wall, unmolested for a little while longer. Its horn keys had yellowed over time, and its ashen bench had been polished and resurfaced again and again beyond record; and yet, thought Elias, she was as proud in her beauty as she had ever been. "I know how many instruments we have" was all he could think to say.

"Yessir, and everything about them," Smythe nodded. "I heard you loud and clear when we were touring the pipes."

"Will I still be able to play her in the meantime?" he asked, looking Smythe in the eye for the first time all day. There was something so sly about his brown eyes, something so bright set in a face as black as the coal dust coughed up by the boiler.

Smythe shrugged. Ill-fitted yellow suspenders, purchased long before his formidable belly had seen a multitude of beers, hiked up his soot-streaked pants. "Until we take the trackers out, sure," he replied, pointing his mighty arm toward the northern wall of the dome, painted over with the Wagon of Heaven and the other never-setting stars. Behind it lay the bellows in the largest pipe chamber, out of which emerged as they watched half a dozen of Smythe's apprentices. "First we'll hook up the bellows to the boiler," he began, "and you can play it by yourself once we do. After that we'll run hose to all the wind chests, set up the action on the manuals and the pedalboard, and then we'll install the combination pistons last of all. Shouldn't be out of commission for more than a week or two."

"And after that you'll breathe into her corpse," Elias muttered.

Smythe glared at Elias and scowled, then turned to the north and hoisted a thick, calloused thumb high into the air. A second thumb answered, attached to the hand of an elkfolk bull, who proceeded toward them around the balcony. "Are you going to carve new trackers for the pedals when they need replacing?" Smythe brayed over his shoulder. "Thirty feet long, irregularly shaped? Are you

going to hike up Mount Bighorn and fell the pines yourself? Cut timber? Saw, plane, join, sand, and install?"

"I would love to try, if you're too busy laying pipe to hike up with me," Elias retorted, knowing that he was venting his anger toward the wrong folk but powerless to restrain himself.

Making a point of disregarding him, Smythe scooped up an open notebook from the organ bench and began to flip through pages of arcane notes and sprawling diagrams. "You gonna pump the bellows yourself too, when you can't find boys to do it for you any more? I'd love to see that."

"The Wheelhouse isn't that thin on folk just yet," Elias snorted.

"Not yet, at least," Smythe chuckled. "Anyhow, you've got the boiler already. Be a shame not to put it to good use."

Only then did Elias understand the niggling sense of familiarity he felt whenever he looked at Smythe, a familiarity too precise to be merely his own misattributed resentment toward Mother Gattisk. He snapped his calloused fingers together and stomped his hoof, then stretched out a half-accusatory hand. "You installed that boiler!" he bleated. "You were here with Fallax last year. I remember you now."

"The very same," said Smythe proudly, pulling down an almost lapine ear. "I know my work, Elias, and I'm not ashamed of it. Time's a mad bison: you won't stop him from charging by shutting your eyes."

"That explains how Mother Gattisk knew you already, I suppose," said Elias. *And why you talk like her*, he appended to himself.

Smythe stiffened, leaving a page of his notebook half-turned, and began intently to read Elias's face. "Begging your pardon, but did you say 'Mother' Gattisk?"

"Aye, of course I did," Elias nodded, letting his hand fall to his side. "Mother Gattisk is the Shepherd's wife, didn't you know that?"

How a nose and ears so dark could seem to turn white with pallor, Elias could not fathom; but so they did, robbed of blood just as pipes are robbed of pitch when the bellows pumpers slacken. Smythe grinned nevertheless, showing rows of square, white teeth. "And so she is," he said, almost managing to chuckle.

The apprentice joined them then, a full head taller than both, boasting an inconvenient rack of horns and a frame so solid that his hooves positively rang upon the balcony's timbers. His plain gray waistcoat did much to hide the dust swept up from the pipe chambers; but his white shirt, especially at the joints, was hopelessly stained. He bowed to Elias, and Elias bowed back, sweeping his green cape in front of him.

"Elias," said the elk, sporting a smile as earnest as Smythe's was sardonic.

"Fallax," said Elias, withholding his bitterness from an even more undeserving target. Fallax, as it turned out, was Smythe's son as well as his apprentice – certainly a son by adoption, he thought, although the sight of them together was no less strange for it.

"Just a few shy of eighteen thousand pipes on the plans, Pa," Fallax said to his father, in a polished, brazen trombone that filled the dome with echoes. "I'll get a crew out here tomorrow to count against that number."

Smythe whistled long and low. "That's a lot of pipes for one organist," he remarked, glaring again at Elias as he handed his notebook to Fallax. "Take this down and put it with the drafts. We're done for today."

Looking at them both in turn, Fallax frowned slightly, then tucked the notebook under his arm. "Sure thing, Pa," he said; and then, after a pregnant silence: "Are you going to be here tomorrow, Elias?"

"I'm here every day," said Elias.

"Oh, good!" said Fallax. "And would you be at all willing to help me tally up the pipes? It'll be a might easier with your expertise."

“Seventeen thousand, nine hundred and twenty-four,” Elias replied, watching the rest of the apprentices disappear through the south door to the balcony’s spiral staircase. “That’s what it says on the plans, doesn’t it?”

Fallax scratched his chin and canted his head from side to side. “The plans are rarely exactly right,” Smythe supplied for him, “and we wouldn’t want to underestimate the amount of hose.”

“Well I’ll warn you both now that the number will be the same,” said Elias, shrugging, “but if you insist.”

“Wonderful, thank you Elias,” said Fallax, clicking grateful hands together and bowing his head. “In that case, I’ll return tomorrow morning with some of the apprentices. I’m looking forward to working on this organ – she’s stunning.”

Feeling his face burn, Elias flicked his ears and nodded a little impolitely, and without another word Fallax hurried past him toward the stairs on his long, shaggy legs. For a moment Elias merely stood there, listening to his heavy steps, until Smythe’s gruff baritone pulled him once more out of himself: “Say, is it true that Brown Cuella’s buried under the Wheelhouse?”

Elias blinked, hopelessly turned about by the day’s whiplash, and only answered after he had mouthed the question to himself twice. “Only his head is buried here,” he corrected, “in the hill well beneath the crypt.”

Smythe grunted, and on his lame bow legs waddled over to the organ console, where he had hung his fine black stovepipe hat on an outjutting mixture stop. “See, I’m from way over in Sootoven,” he said, retrieving the hat and pushing in the stop, “and over there we just say that he died in the Gecirreth River Valley. But of course they butchered him after the fact, so I always wondered.”

“He died of his wounds here after slaughtering the last of his pursuers,” said Elias, wandering himself to the balcony and looking over the railing at the Wheelhouse floor. There, far below, lay the mosaic of the great brown bison in the middle of a tile-maze stretching from wall to wall, riddled with arrows and yet unfelled. In his eye were the Seven Stars, and around him were attending heavenly ministers. “They dismembered him when they found him, and threw his head into the river, but it washed up here and was buried in the hill. One of his legs is buried under my father’s ranch just south of town – it’s why we hold the rodeo there.”

“Must be a queer thing to walk around on top of old Brown Cuella’s bones, eh?” said Smythe, reluctant himself to lean over the brass railing.

Elias smiled thinly for the first time that day. “I’m used to it,” he said. “And if someone proposed to move them elsewhere, for his own peace of mind or anyone else’s, I should very seriously question his motives.”

With this Elias made once more for the organ console, where awaited his felted shoes and gloves. Unclasping his green cape, he folded it neatly beside the bench and began to put them both on, paying a deliberate lack of mind to Smythe. “Now if you’ll excuse me, the boys will arrive for Evensong soon,” he said, “and I would like to hear the old girl speak with her own mouth until I can’t any longer.”

“I’m giving her a mouth of her own, kid, and you’ll be a lot less catty when you finally realize it,” Smythe huffed, folding his ears into his hat as he stormed off with his staggered gate toward the stairs.

It is poor form for an organist to practice the most dynamic pieces of his repertoire in full registration, with every stop pulled and all of the great, bombastic pipes singing uninhibited. To say nothing of other ears nearby, it is taxing to his own, and over long periods of time contributes to the deafness which is the sacrifice the organist makes for his art. That morning, however, Elias chose to disregard both, giving vent instead to his soul’s rage and the lamentation the organ could not voice

herself. He was finished rehearsing that night's passages from the Heliand. Knowing that the bellows pumpers had stuffed wax in their own ears, he pulled out the great, bone-rattling gravissima with a resounding thud, followed by stop after stop up the ladder of pitch until even the highest piccolo was pulled. That the keys were now outrageously heavy was only a boon in his mind; he leaned into them, and began a minor prelude which must have so startled the pumpers that they flinched from the bellows. The pitch fell, then rose again to soaring, well-tempered heights.

His fingers, armed with their keratinous tips, fairly flew across the manuals, sheathed in felted gloves to protect the horn keys. His hooves, likewise felted, opened the throat of the organ's pedalworks, invoking contrabass more felt than heard. Flat-footed folk, those hares and bears with proper heels who lived on and around Mount Bighorn, would have been more dexterous at the pedals; and yet obsessive practice since childhood had made him a match even for them. The prelude turned into a fugue, a collaboration of counterpoint which brought on a bitter grin when he remembered the many voices of the Wheelhouse council, composed ahead of time to outbid him. His hooves stated the subject last of all, an assertion of himself more forceful – and thus more successful – than his own bleating voice had managed.

And yet within that fugue, between and among the vying voices, Elias heard another strain emerge, full of irrefutable spirit and a will not his own. The organ played beside him, at times ahead of him, speaking in a way that only living folk can speak. She responded to his touch with trills and tremolo, and he in his love for her knew precisely where to expect her next. The injustice of it broke his heart, as the final cadence ended and he jerked around on the bench to find Fallax applauding enthusiastically behind him. The bull was beaming almost reverently, a foil to his father's cynicism unfitting for his role. He had changed his shirt since yesterday, but wore the same vest.

"I would weep if I could!" he said. "What a magnificent instrument."

"That makes two of us," Elias replied, smiling sadly as he began to push in the stops. "Though I would rather you weep for your own sins, in this case."

Fallax frowned. "I just want to do a good job, Elias," he said, "and so does my father, really, as prickly as he is. Isn't that better than doing a poor job?"

The bellows pumpers emerged from the northern pipe chamber, a pair of stout young bisonfolk who prided themselves on their endurance. One of them hoisted high an inquisitive thumb, and as Elias dismissed them with a wave he heaved a mighty sigh. "Forgive me, Fallax," he said, hopping down from the bench and bowing to him. "I'm ashamed of how snide I've been, with both of you. Unlike my brothers, I don't often wrestle to exorcise my anger, and I don't expect that the Wheelhouse council would appreciate it if I did."

Fallax chuckled and shifted an accordion satchel across his shoulder, full of an arsenal of papers and drafting tools. "I'll warn you now that you'll incur a mighty headache if you butt heads with my father," he said. "I understand why you would want to, though, I really do. This organ is alive, and if it isn't I'll eat my own antlers."

"And yet it isn't his fault!" Elias bleated, throwing his cape over his shoulders. Its high, upturned collar, sprayed with goldenrods, sparkled in the sun rising through the dome's arched windows. "I wish it was, to tell you the truth. There's no headache quite like a Mother Gattisk headache."

Fallax laughed then, a brassy laugh not unlike the organ's cornet, and to his chagrin Elias found that he was already beginning to like the bull. "Those two work well together, don't they?" he asked. "He practically jumped at the chance to do these renovations when she asked. I've never seen him so excited about anything."

"Did he really?" asked Elias, furrowing his thick brow. "I was surprised when I heard the estimate. Not even Mother Gattisk is that good at haggling."

Fallax seemed to grow a little stiffer then, turning up his nose in thought. “Well, maybe he just wanted to give her a good price because she’s the Shepherd’s wife,” he proposed, turning his attention to half a dozen apprentices as they streamed from the top of the southern stairwell.

“It didn’t seem to me like he knew that she was Father Brennan’s wife at all,” Elias muttered, as Fallax waved to his fellows.

“Forgive me for interrupting,” the bull grinned, “but where would you like to start?”

“I thought we would start with the swell and the solo on the eastern side,” said Elias, pointing across the dome to the far wall. “All of the smallest mixtures are in there, and those are the most painstaking to count. After that we can work our way clockwise until we get to the bellows, where the first great is, with the orchestral and a few other divisions. There’s a corridor that connects all four chambers behind the wall – you might have noticed it as you were coming up the stairs.”

Fallax nodded, then pointed the apprentices to the eastern chamber, for which they dutifully made. “I almost wish I wasn’t doing this, having heard you play her,” he sighed, with a sudden and unexpected wistfulness.

“Then don’t,” Elias proposed. “I don’t intend to help your father with this travesty. I’m only helping you count pipes because I’ve never taken inventory of them myself and it sounds like fun.”

Fallax looked at him and grinned again. “It is fun,” he said. “We can’t count them all one by one, you realize – with close to eighteen thousand pipes, that would take weeks. We tally them by rank, and if a given rank holds the expected amount of pipes, we can extrapolate up to divisions and then whole instruments. The truth is that you can never perfectly account for an organ of this size. I find it thrilling!”

“And yet you’ll fit her with miles of lead hose to saddle-break her?” Elias snorted.

The grin vanished then, and Fallax seemed to slouch. “What do you do, Elias, when the last person who knows how to fix something is gone?” he asked, with an earnestness that begged an answer. “Do you leave it as it is until it breaks down for the last time, or do you make it into something else entirely? I think about that a lot.”

“She doesn’t need to be fixed,” Elias insisted.

“Not yet,” Fallax agreed. “But while my father could cast the throat of that great big gravissima in the pedalworks, all sixty-four feet of her, he may be the only one left on Mount Bighorn who can. Could you?”

Knowing not what to say in reply, Elias swallowed the brick lodged in his throat, peeled off his gloves and his felted shoes, and began to walk counterclockwise toward the eastern side of the balcony. Fallax followed behind him, taking one stride for every two of Elias’s, and the sharp sound of his hooves against the boards awoke formidable echoes in the belly of the dome.

“That’s a striking cape you have there,” Fallax ventured, almost sheepishly. “You don’t see brocade worn casually so often anymore, it’s a shame.”

“I won it calf-wrestling against my older brother years ago,” said Elias, pulling up the edge to display its goldenrods. “My family hosts the Brokenhead Rodeo at their ranch.”

“Do they really?” Fallax beamed, alive once more with such enthusiasm that Elias’s best efforts could not keep his resentment alive. He made way on his left for the elk to walk beside him and fumbled with his own hands, wishing for his pipe. His ears flicked of their own accord, seeming to detect the subtle banging of organ pipes somewhere.

“I’ve never competed in a rodeo, but I’ve always wanted to,” said Fallax. “Do you do it often?”

“Not since I became the organist at Seven Stars,” said Elias, shaking his head. “I’m sure it doesn’t surprise you, given my frame, but I was never very good at it. I was as shocked as everyone else when I wrestled my calf down first. The look on my brother’s face...on my father’s face, Ram’s crown!”

“That must have felt good,” Fallax chuckled, clasping his hands behind his back.

“One builds up his core muscles, sitting at an organ bench every day,” said Elias, letting slip a chuckle. “That’s what did it.”

“Speaking of core muscles, would you like to see a neat trick?” asked Fallax, looking over his shoulder as if he feared eavesdroppers.

“What kind of trick?” asked Elias, arching his brows.

“Here, hit me in the belly,” said Fallax, rapping a fist against his abdomen. “Don’t hold back!”

“I beg your pardon?” Elias bleated, stopping dead in his tracks. The banging of pipes fell to echoes, and Fallax laughed deep in his throat.

“Forgive me, I know it’s strange,” he said.

“It’s entirely inappropriate for a Wheelhouse,” said Elias, adopting the same scolding air that served him whenever a bellows pumper or the odd student began to climb the pipes.

“Try it,” Fallax insisted. “You won’t hurt me, I promise.”

There was something in the invitation so pure, thought Elias, so free of the competitive bravado he saw in his brothers, that after working his jaw into every shape of refusal he chose, at last, to oblige. Making a fist, he rather awkwardly delivered a blow against the bull’s belly, just hard enough to mean it. His knuckles glanced off of a brick wall, stinging and shot with numbness.

“Stars in heaven, you’re made of stone!” he exclaimed, shaking out his hand.

“You may sit at the organ bench all day, Elias,” said Fallax with a wink, “but I’ve had organ parts on my shoulders since I was old enough to walk. I may be a lowly pneumatist, but I’m as intimate with the instrument as any player.” With that he made for the eastern pipe chamber again, and now it was Elias who walked behind him.

“Do you hear pipes clanging?” asked Elias a few moments later. “Are the apprentices moving things around already?”

Fallax shook his head, rolling a thick, dark mane. “Work isn’t slated to start until we get a pipe count, and then it’ll be down by the boiler first.” He paused then, and seemed so transparently to be composing some thought that Elias declined to interrupt him. “Not to change the subject,” he said at last, in a confidential bass, “but I may be able to convince my father to leave the trackers on.”

Elias’s eyes, fair brown and lashed in white, shot open. A spark of hope, buried in the ashes of his disappointment, was raked over alive. “Can you do that?” he asked breathlessly.

“The blower would still be on the bellows,” Fallax warned, “so you wouldn’t be able to pump them by hand any more, but the action would be more or less identical. I won’t promise you that he’ll do it – I know my father too well for that – but I’ll try to convince him.”

“I would be in your debt,” said Elias, nodding furiously. “I and every organist after me.”

“She’s a beautiful instrument,” Fallax shrugged, “and I can see that you love her. Consider it my thanks for your help. Ah, and here are the pipes. Don’t be afraid to count your hooves if you run out of fingers, Elias.”

“Seventeen thousand, nine hundred and seventy-four,” Fallax announced, when after a long day of counting and calculating they stood, dusty, scuffed, and picking away cobwebs, around the great treadle of the organ’s bellows. It was a figure exactly one less than that which old Meersara had written down in his own paw whole centuries prior, a figure so tantalizingly close that its single unaccountable pipe thrilled Elias just as it vexed the pneumatist’s apprentices.

“It’s within the margin of error,” Fallax assured him with a wave of his hand. “Close enough to make the hose for, no matter who’s right.”

“You’ll find that a master’s best work is difficult to account for,” Elias replied smugly, shaking the dust out of his cape toward the apprentices. He was becoming pettier than he ever imagined he could be, full of the triumphant contempt of one whose wife has just rebuffed the advance of a

handsome suitor. Remembering Fallax's promise, he checked himself, but could not quite relax until those suitors had all descended the steep, spiral staircase and piled into their wagon to return to the leadsmith's guild.

It took two years to complete the renovations once they were underway, a full year longer than Smythe had hoped. All things concerning that organ, as it turned out, were more complicated and less forthcoming than the pneumatists at first supposed. More work was always being discovered, while it felt – for it could not truly be so – as if old work was often undone. Smythe and his apprentices, savoring early on the tremendous feat at which they were throwing themselves, soon fell into a species of reluctant confusion, then consternation, then silent, furious wrestling. The patience of Father Brennan and Mother Gattisk thinned as scaffolding and hoists remained eyesores in their historic Wheelhouse. The members of the Wheelhouse council complained among themselves, and eventually at the pneumatists.

And Elias, who himself felt a sort of pride at first in the resilience of his lifelong love, learned sorrow and righteous anger soon enough. The organ was put out of commission several times in those two years, longer and more often than Smythe had promised him. Each new phase of the renovation made her unplayable until a host of hurdles were surmounted, stripping the chanted hours of their accompaniment and forcing Elias to practice exclusively at the little reed organ he had salvaged from the parsonage and restored in his tenement apartment down the street. They were a whole month in surgery over the bellows, enabling the instrument to breathe for itself by means of a steam engine fitted to the great basement boiler. During this time Elias could scarcely bring himself to enter the Wheelhouse at all, for dread of the mechanical gore strewn about the pipe chamber.

It was after the bellows renovation, when he was for the first time allowed to play the self-sustaining organ, that Elias first began to notice eccentricities in its performance. Constant pressure filled the bellows when once its new valves were opened, an acrid, coal-scented breath; and yet at times, in the middle of an impassioned fantasia or a hair-splittingly precise chorale prelude, the organ would seem to sigh, or rather to wheeze, losing some of its pressure and therefore the proper pitch of its pipes. Sometimes walking, sometimes running, he returned again and again to the transfigured bellows, now outfitted with hoses and valves and compressors he could scarcely comprehend – looking for leaks, for loose valves, even flying down the spiral staircase to examine the boiler in the basement. He never found anything amiss; and yet while the wheezing continued, both Smythe and Fallax assured him that hiccups were to be expected and would all be ironed out by the end.

They had scarcely installed the pneumatic action on the pedalboard, however, before even more eccentricities emerged. Smythe and his apprentices ran their pale webs of lead hose from the pedals to the bellows first, for their were fewer divisions tied to the pedalboard and the work was less fine than it would be in the upper registers. The end result, to Elias's horror, was what he could only describe as a cushion of air beneath his hooves. The fleshy resistance of the pedals, requiring the force of his weight and much of the exertion of playing, was gone, replaced by a featherweight touch which opened wide the pipes at any accidental nudge. Notes he did not intend began to speckle the bass-lines of his otherwise flawless playing, so often and so in spite of his meticulous care that he stormed one morning soon after into the apprentices' labors, demanding that they furnish some way for him to re-engage the trackers. The apprentices snickered to each other over his bleating; and Fallax, while he was sincerely apologetic, nevertheless revealed to him that Smythe had removed all of the pedal trackers and put them into storage.

"He wants them out of the way while we work," he said, streaked with lead and coal dust. "I'm sorry Elias, I'm trying to convince him to put them back when we're done."

Elias did not have the heart to continue his tirade. He sulked out of the pipe chamber and went home, then made a point thereafter of avoiding Fallax when the other apprentices were around.

After the pedalboard went the manuals, gutted in order from bottom to top: the choir, the two greats, the swell, and the solo. As each of these were robbed of body in exchange for effortless action, keys that hardly told one when they were pressed, misfires littered Elias's playing until it became as noisome as a novice's recitals. Driven often to the point of tears, he would go to Fallax alone and beg on his knees to be given back his trackers, only to receive the same news that Smythe had removed them against his completion of the renovations. "It'll take some time to get used to it, that's all," Fallax assured him, attempting to lend some comfort by way of an eyeless smile and a cold, stiff hand upon his shoulder. "By the time the trackers are in again, you'll be just as proficient with both!"

"You wouldn't say that if you would only play her," Elias protested, stamping a felted hoof upon the floorboards.

"If only I could play her," Fallax sighed. "Alas for me, I grew up building pipe organs, not playing them. I'll tell my father what you said, though. Maybe he'll turn up the air pressure, it could be low."

Fallax's assurances were proof against no result, however. The organ's malfunctions did not improve, but only worsened as the labyrinth of lead hose invaded her chambers. Sour notes became the rule, suspicious trills and dissonant chords like the cry of some great beast. No longer playing beside Elias, she played askance instead; where once she had skipped ahead, now she simply fled from him. His sense of the organ as his partner was gone, never once returning throughout the course of those renovations. He grew depressed, wretchedly so, while he watched the thing to which he had hoped to devote his life dismantled in front of him. He could do no less than watch, for he was the only one who would remember what she once was; and as silly as he sounded even to himself, he swore to love her even when she no longer remembered him.

Last of all went in the combination pistons, polished buttons mounted into the console frame which would open whole ranks and divisions of pipes at once, allowing for immediate changes in registration without the aid of an assistant. These Elias almost liked, for they were more powerful than any assistant and opened whole frontiers of improvisation; alas, they were cold comfort in the face of such upheaval, undercut entirely by Fallax's final apology on his way out the Wheelhouse door: "My father told me that you should ask your Wheelhouse council about having the trackers re-installed. He'd want more installation fees, and he isn't sure that Mother Gattisk would pay for anything she didn't sign off on already."

Bowing then with a feeble sort of deference, the great bull elk said more closely: "I know that's not what you wanted to hear, Elias – but I did my best, and I won't just dump her into your lap. If you find that she still isn't playing right after you've had a chance to get used to her, I'll come back to take a look at it. All right?"

Elias did not reply. He did not bow, did not nod his head, did not so much as wave goodbye. He had no will to do anything more than stand and watch as the pneumatists' wagon rolled away, a constellation of malefic Stars leaving destruction in their wake.

His petition to reinstall the trackers, brought up at the next Wheelhouse council meeting, was soundly denied – they no longer had the budget for it, and did not expect to any time soon. Mother Gattisk said so, the rest nodded, and that was that.

Elias, therefore, returned to the life he knew, so rudely interrupted for the last two years – or rather he tried to. The rhythm of the chanted hours, once as familiar as his own heartbeat, was now offset and irretrievable, its bar lines broken off and stored away with the organ's forgotten trackers. His playing was shameful, though he focused unto panting on the most basic organum; to no avail, for the sour notes, like flocks of frightened birds, continually swarmed him. Before the doomed renovations, Elias could always count on Father Brennan's placid, diplomatic face as he stood at the altar, seen

through the angled mirror standing atop the organ console. Now, more often than not, the Shepherd's face mirrored the organ's consternation, even casting sharp glances at the distant balcony. Those same glances were Elias's from every member of the Wheelhouse council; and while they were patient with him for a few months, that thin veneer flaked off when the music did not improve. Elias's own helpless face stared back at them, framed by his hunched shoulders.

And yet Elias, as confounded as he was by the changes, was no greenhorn. He hated the organ's ghostly, fleshless action, hated its haunted voice, and yet his skill should by all means have accounted for it. He bent all of his will toward learning how to play her again – and succeeded, and knew that he succeeded – but the more time passed, the more convinced he became that he was not to blame for his partner's sour notes, her startling, shrill chords, her fluttering pitch and low moaning. They occurred of their own accord; and he began to think, though he shared it with no one, that it was an accord more intentional than mere malfunction.

There were times when her extraneous notes – notes which Elias now observed were tied to no key-presses at all – seemed almost composed, as if snatches of strange melodies were finding their way into unrelated works. They were unsuitable invasions, alarming in their coherency and implying distress in their grating combinations. Baffled, he combed through the pipe chambers several times after particularly egregious fits, but could find nothing amiss in the illegible scrawl of lead hose. The organ was beyond him now; and on the threshold of fall, six months after the renovations were complete, he resigned himself to this.

The leadsmith's guild answered his summons – made in person and with passionate intensity – a week later, by sending an apprentice who was neither Fallax nor Smythe. He was a gray foxfolk, one of those who had performed the renovations and who ostensibly understood the organ as a result. He had lost none of his condescending amusement toward the ram; but seeing that both of them desired a working organ, they shelved their mutual contempt and set to work.

Their strategy, while painstaking, was simple enough: Elias was to play every note on every stop, rank by rank by rank, while the apprentice observed the respective pipes in their wind chests. As soon as the sour notes began, he would be able to see the action moving and trace the problem to its source.

"You haven't seen Fallax, have you?" asked the apprentice, too aloof to meet his eyes.

"Why no," said Elias. "Should I have?"

"I was hoping Master Smythe would have sent him," the apprentice huffed. "He's been playing truant from the shop, but he really likes this organ."

"Truant?" asked Elias, arching a brow. "You mean you haven't seen him?"

"Eh, it isn't the first time," said the apprentice, waving off the question. "Where are you hearing it the most?"

"In the first great," said Elias, pointing to the northern chamber where lay the bellows.

"Makes my job easier, at least," the fox snickered, lugging his heavy box of tools across the balcony. "Give me a minute once I get inside, then start at the bottom of that thirty-two foot bourdon."

"Aye," Elias nodded, then took up his place on the organ bench and slipped on his felted gloves.

The bourdon buzzed as it always did, a great bumblebee struggling against its own mass. Note by note Elias opened its pipes, half-expecting that nothing would happen, that the second pair of ears would prove that he had gone mad in his grief. His expectations were thwarted, however, when around the middle of the manual he began to hear a shrill honking of pipes far distant from either of his hands. The pitch of the notes dipped, then rose again, fluttering in a way that Elias could only describe as pained. The apprentice was out of the pipe chamber and leaning against the balcony railing before he had reached the highest note.

"You didn't pull that nachthorn, did you?" he shouted across the dome.

Elias's eyes darted to the stop; and finding it closed, he snorted his indignation. "Of course I didn't pull it!" he shouted back.

“Well it was sounding!” replied the apprentice, throwing his paws in the air. “It might be a problem with the air pressure. Play something, I’m going to take a look at the blower.”

Elias hoisted a thumb aloft. “They’ve built the whole thing wrong,” he muttered to himself, almost triumphantly. “I warned them, they can’t say I didn’t! Master Meersara’s work is too much to circumscribe, and now she’s laughing at them.”

The apprentice was back inside the chamber a moment later, leaving Elias scrambling to choose a piece of repertoire. He settled without deliberation on an oratorio from the Heliand, an imprecation from the Siege of Genipweg played mostly on the great – why he chose it, he could not have said, although it seemed appropriate from the first note. The words arose in his mind to follow the melody; he found himself humming them as he played: “How art thou to earth abased, who once as queen didst reign?”

He was not ten measures in before a wailing of pipes transfixed him, so sudden and so loud that he lurched away from the console against his will, falling down backwards from the organ bench and beating his hard horns against the floor. He cursed, but could not hear his own voice, for the pipes that spoke rattled his very bones. Seven notes sounded for a score of seconds, notes that reverberated upon all four corners of the dome, their overtones combining to churn Elias’s guts and trample his brains. He could scarcely move until they had fallen silent, until their wailing lament fell to the stark bellows’ sighing. He scrambled to his hooves then; and realizing that he had never learned the apprentice’s name, poorly masked his alarm as he stammered after him: “Wh-what did you do?”

There was no answer. The Wheelhouse below, empty of its earlier Evensong crowd, caught and held his reedy bleating. Brown Cuella stared up at him, daring him to move, until he decided to call out again: “Can you hear me? What did you do to those pipes?”

But the silence remained, and after half a minute of it Elias felt his heart splash into his bowels. He ran across the dome from west to north, overhung by Stars who were in the dim light as inscrutable as the pneumatists’ machines, until he had flung open the door to the pipe chamber and stumbled inside. It was even darker within. One of a pair of oil lamps hung burning over the bellows, throwing sinister shadows over the forest of pipes and its choking lead lianas. The other lay broken on the floor beside the treadle, extinguished by its own oil, alongside the limp gray mass of the pneumatist’s apprentice.

Dead.

5

“I thought that the oil on the floor was blood at first,” Elias told the sheriff and his deputies that night – wanly, sickly, and full of a guilt he could not explain even to himself. “It was soaking through my organ shoe, so I kicked it off, but of course that only meant I stepped in it again. Forgive me, that doesn’t matter. It wasn’t blood, obviously. There was no blood. Nothing fell on him, he hadn’t broken his neck. There was only the blast of those pipes, and that was how I found him when I ran in.”

He said the same thing to Father Brennan, bleary-eyed from sleep, when they roused him a little later, then to the whole Wheelhouse council when they convened for an emergency meeting the next day. No one but Elias, to his surprise, regarded the detail about the pipes as in any way important, though he stressed it again and again. The undertaker proffered his professional opinion that the apprentice – whose name turned out to be Tiber – had simply dropped dead of a heart attack, and that was the end of the matter for the council members. That a deafening blast of pipes had immediately preceded that heart attack, in their estimation, was a convenient justification for Elias’s aesthetic vendetta.

Father Brennan performed Tiber’s funeral at Seven Stars the day after, and Elias – who staunchly refused to play the organ for it – was presented with a unique opportunity to attend his rites on the ground. Several members of the leadsmith’s guild were also in attendance, clustered together in

a black gaggle: including Smythe, though conspicuously not Fallax. Elias snatched glimpses of them throughout the rites, and for the most part they were, while polite, not particularly bereaved. Smythe, however, he could not stop staring at; for the master pneumatist, as he stood on Brown Cuella's body clutching his stovepipe hat to his breast, seemed not so much sorrowful as scared. He would not allow his eyes to alight upon Tiber's body. There was something in them that fled the Wheelhouse even before his hooves could follow, and he was the very first to vanish after they had covered his apprentice in earth. The meaning of it eluded Elias, though it was the greatest of all the niggling pricks which had made him a pincushion over the last two years. Systematically excluded for so long from the deliberations of the powers, he felt himself one of the mice who lived in the Wheelhouse's walls, asserting himself only to be stomped. They sent him back to the organ, where his own powers no longer availed. The pistons began to malfunction, pushing out stops by themselves and changing the instrument's registration to every conceivably offensive configuration. There could be no more playing it during the hours; Father Brennan insisted upon it, in a rare development, and Mother Gattisk once more sent for the pneumatists.

Meaning began at last to coalesce, like a committee of vultures, when two more apprentices perished. Smythe sent them a week after the first, a badgerfolk named Senken who was as wide as he was tall and a rabbitfolk named Freelack who carried half his height in his ears. At Elias's insistence they began their investigation at the console, where they learned only what every ear already knew: the organ was practically playing itself, and was not playing well. The misfiring pistons especially interested them, who after a mere ten minutes set off for the bellows, shrugging off Elias's inarticulate warnings with grunts.

Left with no instructions, the ram merely wrung his hands atop the organ bench, carefully watching the stops so that he might push in any that shot out from a bluster of the blower's breath. Even this was only an illusion of agency. The apprentices began to test pipes directly from the wind chests, opening and closing chest valves by paw before pulling open tone valves. At times by rank, at others pipe by pipe, they slowly climbed a single stop, halting when stifled notes began to sound in the swell halfway across the dome.

It seemed then that they turned their attention to the pistons, for suddenly a whole register of stops clattered out of the console. Elias startled, then pushed them in by instinct, only to be met with an angry shout from the pipe chamber. Embarrassed by his own skittishness, he tucked his hands under his arms and turned to hop down from the bench, shaking his head censoriously.

"Don't be a fool, Elias," he told himself. "Go help the poor bucks if you're going to help them, or else stay out of their way. Shaken or not, you have no reason to be afraid of-"

A second shout echoed the first, one hundred times louder and full of rage and sorrow only living throats can muster. The same seven pipes sounded again, cutting through flesh to throttle bone, and Elias fell breathless to his knees as long as they persisted.

He rose well before his liquid limbs remembered their master, and with a haste verging on panic stumbled across the balcony. It occurred to him that the pipes might blare again when he was inside, that whatever hand had opened their throats might somehow open them again. He entered anyway, praying to all the Stars that he was a fool, that Tiber had merely died of a weak heart, and sprinted for the bellows. Senken was upon them, folded over the blower valve. Freelack was tangled amidst the principal pipes.

Both were dead.

And Smythe, while he attended their funerals, would come no closer than the door to the nave. Elias intended to corner him after each burial, but he attended neither. He returned to his duties full of dread, only to cover the organ console with his tears when the stray notes returned.

After that the Wheelhouse council began to gossip about Elias. He never heard their whisperings himself, but rumors of murder hung so thickly over Seven Stars that their tight lips and penetrating stares revealed their thoughts more transparently than any words. The Brokenhead sheriff had held him in the city jail that first night, only to reluctantly let him go when the undertaker declared that both apprentices' brains were a mess of blood despite the conspicuous lack of injury. Padlocks barred the pipe chamber doors when he returned; he was never consulted, nor was he given a key, though he asked repeatedly. It was a nightmare from which he could not wake, except perhaps to flee, but to flee now would mean both to implicate himself and to abandon the organ he loved. He did, therefore, the only other thing he could think to do.

"I confess to no sin," he said in shrift, stamping his hoof to punctuate his declaration. A moment later his face began to burn. He backpedaled: "To no sin of murder, I mean. I was short with Smythe and the other pneumatists, and I'm sure it comes as no surprise to hear that I resent them for what they did to her – but I did not murder those apprentices, Father. I didn't do it."

He was staring into Father Brennan's eyes in a far corner of the Wheelhouse, something that penitents are by no means encouraged to do. The Shepherd positively squirmed under it, and struggled to conceal his discomfort behind the piously placid mask he usually wore. "Has anyone accused you of murder, my son?" he asked.

"No, they've only convicted me," said Elias, finding against his will that the fire of indignation he so often felt before the Wheelhouse council was alive now, feeding on his helplessness. "Of course they haven't accused me, Father, not to my face. But you and I both know how little that matters to a flock like ours. They've locked the organ's pipe chambers without telling me, and seem indignant when I ask for a key; how am I supposed to do my duty if I can't access the pipes?"

"Ah, ah, I see now," Father Brennan stammered. No longer able to meet Elias's eyes, he began to trace the tiled windings of Brown Cuella's wanderings across the floor; for a moment Elias almost felt pity for him, until he spoke again: "Take heart, my son. It seems to me that all of this is a mere misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?" said Elias, trying not to balk. "Which part, Father? The dead bodies, or the night I spent in jail?"

"No one is accusing you of murder, my son," Father Brennan continued more hastily. "Certainly not publicly, and I should hope not privately. We on the council have chosen to cloister the organ out of a sense of propriety, not retribution. There is safety to think about – you're one of the more thoughtful ramfolk among our ranks, Elias, I'm sure you understand."

"That doesn't explain why no one thought to make me a key," said Elias, mindful that they were losing the scope of shrift but intent upon pursuing the thread.

Here the Shepherd looked as though he might bolt; and Elias, to his own surprise, determined to tackle him if he did. "Ah, aye, well, I suppose I hoped to yoke you with this – or rather remove the yoke – at a more opportune time, but I can see now that it cannot wait." He cleared his throat. "The organ, you must understand, cannot be played in its current state – not until we have made the necessary repairs and determined that it is safe to do so. In the meantime – and this is the majority consensus, mind you, not representative of my own opinion – in the meantime, without an organ, Seven Stars can have no organist. You were excluded from the deliberations, not only because you were so unjustly under scrutiny from the sheriff, but because we – that is to exclude myself – voted to suspend your position from the council entirely." A long silence grew longer, until the Shepherd fairly begged Elias to reply.

"So that was her play," he said numbly. "I was the last vestigial piece of the old organ, and now she's finally rid of me. Are you going to lock me away with the trackers, Father? Are you going to replace me with a pneumatic player as well, like some kind of Circus calliope?"

"Now now, my son, this is no time to be leveling–"

"She plays herself already, Father, did you know that?" Elias pressed, staring hard into the Shepherd's eyes again. "I had all night in that cell to think about it, and I'm more convinced than ever that you won't discover what killed those apprentices until you consider that."

Elias felt a hand on his shoulder, and so believed it a challenge that he very nearly charged Father Brennan with his horns then and there. He swallowed instead, finding his mouth parched, and flicked his ringing ears. "For what it's worth, my son, I have never believed that you murdered those apprentices," said the Shepherd. "If that is what's distressing you, don't be troubled. By all the Stars in heaven, I would suspect that pneumatist's son before I ever suspected you."

"Who, Fallax?" exclaimed Elias, glancing back over his shoulder when his voice rebounded off of the walls. "Why on earth would you suspect Fallax?"

Father Brennan blinked. "I mention it only for his conspicuous disappearance from the leadsmith's guild, of course," he said, clearing his throat. "I wouldn't dare level an accusation; but given that his truancy began shortly before poor Tiber's death...well, rumor spreads like wildfire, doesn't it?"

"No one told me that he was missing!" Elias bleated, heaving his narrow shoulders. "Hasn't anyone gone looking for him?"

"Why, yes!" said Father Brennan. "Smythe, the boy's father, inquired after him here shortly after the organ renovations were completed. I assumed that Mother Gattisk told you."

That, in the end, proved too much for Elias. Shouldered inch by inch out of his own Wheelhouse, out of his life's work and all his love, he stood a mile away from himself, and watched as the thoughtless, explosive action so famed among ramfolk seized rare hold of his horns. Without a word he turned his back on Father Brennan. Brown Cuella's convoluted circuits melted underhoof as he stormed out of the Wheelhouse, pulling his cape around him to shut out the cutting fall wind, and walked halfway across Brokenhead to the leadsmith's guild.

It was just after Evensong on Silversday. The pneumatists should still have been in; yet when Elias barged into their shop, an addition newly built onto the guild hall, but a single apprentice waited within. He was a pronghorn, pacing the floor with yellow sleeves turned up and a fat cigar shrouding his pinched face. "What do you want?" he bleated, before the door had so much as latched behind Elias.

"I'm looking for Smythe," Elias bleated back, dipping his head into every room and down every hallway he could find. "I need to talk to him right now. Immediately."

"Aye, and that makes two of us!" honked the pronghorn, throwing up his hands. "You're not going to find him here, that's for sure."

"I'll wait," Elias snorted. "When is he coming back?"

"Well given that nobody's seen him since yesterday afternoon, your guess is as good as mine," the pronghorn scoffed. "The old ass emptied his desk in a real hurry and took off with one of our wagons, and now the rest of us are out looking. I'm here in case he comes back. I hoped you were him when I heard those hooves stomping up the steps."

Elias's jaw fell slack. Awful, creeping suspicion began to coil around his spine, and only then did he remember poor, dead Tiber's first inquiry, framed by Smythe's mortified face in the Wheelhouse door. Nothing about the last two years made any sense. None of the injustice was comprehensible, none of it worthwhile; but his wordless instincts, unbearably like those he had honed at the organ bench, told him that action must precede thought from now on. "Do you remember me?" he asked.

"Sure, you're the organist at Seven Stars," the pronghorn nodded. "You come to complain about our work again?"

"Do you have a pair of bolt cutters?" asked Elias.

This won the pneumatist's full attention. "Bolt cutters?" he balked. "The master of our double-damned guild is missing, and you're asking about bolt cutters?"

"I need to borrow them," Elias pressed, "or else to steal them. I'll give them back either way, but I need them now."

"What for?" the apprentice snapped.

"I think I might know where Fallax is," said Elias.

The cigar fell out of the pronghorn's mouth, spraying hot ashes across the floor. They had not cooled before Elias was running across Brokenhead once more, bolt cutters tucked under his arm. He stopped at his drafty tenement to retrieve his little reed organ's toolbox, then made for Seven Stars, where he slipped in through the back door. They may have barred him from the organworks, he thought; but they had made him a key to the Wheelhouse when he had volunteered to be their organist, and the council, in their haste to be rid of him, had forgotten to confiscate it. The bolt cutters would get him the rest of the way.

7

That night was chill and overcast, hounded by a mounting autumn storm whose wind moaned with a breath that never faltered. As such, Elias did not recognize the organ's own moaning until he was in the empty Wheelhouse. Her great contrabass was sobbing in a whirlwind of pedal stops, while every now and then came shivering, feathering mixtures singing snatches of melody. In the near-blackness of the nave, those notes raked his hide like a catfolk's claws, eliciting constant shivers that he knew but dared not admit were born of fear. If someone was playing those notes from the organ console, he knew beyond doubt that it was no mere folk.

Dark or not, Elias knew the shape of the nave. Feeling the wall with his hand, he made his way to the southwest corner, where stood the golden sandboxes of the votive taper candles. A cup full of long matches sufficed to light one; and leaning down, he searched until he found what he sought: two sandy stubs half-buried, the visible remnants of prayers perhaps as desperate as his own. These he dropped into his coat pocket, then made for the spiral staircase which led to the dome balcony, shielding the taper with his hand.

The organ's moaning grew louder the higher he climbed, reverberating in the walls, the stairs, and his own bones. So awful was it, so powerful and perilous, than when he was only halfway up his fear got the better of him. Stopping on the metal steps, he retrieved the candle stubs from his pocket, held them over the open flame until they were soft, then pressed both into his ears until he was almost deaf. There was, of course, no telling if deafness would suffice against the threat he suspected, but it granted him, if nothing else, the courage to complete the climb.

By day, the southwestern stairwell would have granted Elias a clear view of both the organ console on the western wall and the far side of the balcony. By night he was blindfolded, with only the meager flame of his candle to cling to in the cavernous, echoing space. This itself was something of a confirmation, however. There was no light at the organ console. Whoever played this queer lament, if anyone did, played by feeling alone.

And that queer lament, now that he was so near the pipes, was more truly a lament than he was prepared to acknowledge. Familiar strains from the Heliand found their way into his deafened ears with such stark clarity that he would have sworn there was a folkish singer buried in the registration. On either side of him was a door, short and squat and unaccommodating, the only place where the encircling pipe chambers were forced to touch the outside world. Both doors were barred by new padlocks. Beside each hung an oil lamp. Lighting the one to his left, Elias snuffed out his candle, set down his toolbox, and set to work on the padlock, leaning against the bolt cutters with all of his weight until its shackle snapped and the whole thing clattered to the floor. He dropped the cutters after it; and retrieving the lit lamp from the wall, sucked in a deep breath and pulled open the door.

It would have been wiser, he realized then, to have shut the valve in the basement boiler before venturing in, stopping the flow of air before it could reach the bellows. Something deep within,

however, buried in the same corner of his soul that knew his organ as well as any lover, feared that it would no longer avail. He was vindicated in this fear the moment the door swung open, when before him stood, not the narrow corridor he expected, but rather a pipe chamber he had never seen before. Its size was unfathomable, extending far beyond the purview of his lamp, large enough to house long echoes of its own. Pipes of every size sprouted from a maze of wind chests, singing pipes as small as mixtures and twice as large as the largest throat of the gravissima. All took part in their pitiful lamentation, weaving in and out with lines which Elias, blessed by years of dedication, recognized one and all.

The door swung shut behind him. He took ten steps, then halted again, as with a jolt he realized that these impossible new pipes were no longer playing the unwieldy cries of a newborn lamb. Nothing about them could be construed as error. They, one and all, were adding up to a single voice: that of a ewe as large as the Wheelhouse, completing the imprecation Elias had selected from the Heliand against poor Tiber. Even deafened, he could feel the words in his skull: *"See, unto you, O Genipweg, unto you bring I a foe from far. A mighty foe, a mighty foe, whose tongue thou knowest not, and canst not understand what they are saying."*

More frightened than he had ever been in his life, it occurred to him that he might turn back, might take his unceremonious dismissal as a mercy and flee like Smythe somewhere far away from his misfortune. The thought made him ill. He was the only one left who loved her, and now the only one left who knew anything about her. Whether or not Fallax was here, he had a duty to do the one thing no one else dared. Steeling himself, he plunged into the dark forest of pipes, making for the muffled sound of the first great somewhere far in the distance. "It's me, old girl, it's only me," he called, only for the music to drown his voice utterly.

Very quickly he became aware that someone was following him. The sprawling tangle of pipes, laid without rhyme or reason – or, Elias wondered, with every intention of ensnaring interlopers like himself – proved no easy road to navigate; and yet, while he veered ever toward the sound of the principal, of the gedackt, of the trumpet and the cornet, there seemed to stalk wherever he went some moving thing that clanged with every step. A few dizzying turns put that thing ahead of him, between him and what he had no confidence was still the bellows. To turn to the left or right, to try to evade, he knew would only lose him more hopelessly in the labyrinth. He was just wishing that he had thought to carry the bolt cutters in with him when that clanging swelled to a rolling din, accompanied by a roar of brass that fell upon him like a catamount from some high ridge.

A hideous face entered the light of his lamp, one mere moment before the weight of some armored, scalding hot body tackled him to the floorboards. The lamp fell from his hands onto the floor, by some miracle neither breaking nor going out. Its meager light threw deep shadows on that face, a maze of lead hose like some offered victim's foreboding entrails. Two deep, black eyes flickered with red sparks, lidless and full of rage; a pair of brass pipes crowned its head like the horns of a bison, moaning under jets of steam. It was strong and heavy, a full head taller than Elias; and yet, though it tried to pin him, there was an inexplicable feeling of hollowness to its frame that robbed a measure of its might. Hanging over him, it roared again, a shout of the same seven hideous pipes that had melted the brains of the apprentices like butter in the sun. The sound of it rattled Elias's teeth; and yet the wax stopping his ears, if only just barely, rendered the monster's sevenfold curse impotent.

And the monster, it seemed, could not account for this. It roared again, full of bleating savagery, and yet even in the midst of the blast Elias had hooked his limbs around its own, twisting the sinews of his mighty back to throw it to the floor. He scrambled to his hooves, bruised yet alive, and scooped up the still-burning lamp. The monster rose a moment later and made to pursue him; but Elias, in a last bid for freedom, did what his older brothers had done to him ten thousand times as a child: lowering his horns, he ran headlong into the monster, plowing slaten hammers against its brassy belly to send it sprawling into a thicket of reeds. He turned and ran, heeding only the sound of the great, of the organ's weeping bellows, threading corridors and turning away from dead ends he might already have visited

ten times over as the ewe's voice sang: "*Their soldiers proud and valiant giants, their quivers of arrows deal destruction. And they will consume all thy harvest, devour thy sheep and thy oxen, devour the fruit of vineyard and autumn olive.*"

How long Elias wandered that maze, he could not begin to guess. There were no windows that he could see; if the storming night had passed, or two or three such nights, the sun gave him no sign. He knew only the rhythm of the music, the antiphonal interplay of sorrow and anger, all the while running to where the sound of familiar pipes was loudest. He voiced his own sorrow and anger as he went, venting two years of injustice against the Stars, until in a single, revelatory moment, when the twisting lanes of pipes took on a more predictable arrangement, he recognized the bellows and knew with soaring clarity exactly why he was so angry. Panting and weak in the knees, he staggered over to that great pair of lungs, so impeded by their leaden shackles, and lay a calloused hand upon their frame.

The great lamentation ceased. The moaning gravissima and the screaming piccolo closed their throats, with every pipe in between. Silence fell upon the pipe chamber, grown out beyond its own walls and ceiling in the organ's uncontainable bereavement. It lingered for a minute and more, as Elias, still caressing the bellows, lit a second lamp hanging from a pillar nearby. The windows reappeared when next he looked, full of the northern stars, along with the expected circumscription of the walls and ceiling. Opposite the windows, not far distant, the monster clutched its dented belly between the trombone pipes, unwilling to approach – and yet Elias knew now that it was no monster at all. Fallax watched him behind his mask of twisted hose, poised like he for the sound of the organ.

Her bellows sighed. Turning to them, Elias began to weep. "You were alive," he croaked, stroking the rod to which the bellows pumpers had once clung as they worked the treadle. "You were alive this whole time, and I knew it, but I never knew just what it meant when I said it."

The pipes sang again: not the former forest of wailing, but a registration full enough to form the sound of a fair, if enormous, alto: "*And they will bring to nought by the sword the mighty cities wherein thou art trusting, and they will spare not thy sons and thy daughters, for no compassion dwelleth in their hearts.*"

"Of course you took it as violence," said Elias, remembering with guilt the dead apprentices. "So did I, and if I had truly loved you I wouldn't have let them do this to you." He glanced at Fallax again, who seemed in his own way to sag with half-remembered remorse. "I wish you hadn't done that to poor Fallax, but what choice did you have? He loves you no less than I do."

The organ sighed again before answering: "*E'en now the brood of wild wolves howls round thy walls and thy ramparts, an army is threatening to storm thee, that makes of thy strongholds a jest.*"

"But this mustn't go on," said Elias more forcefully, both to the organ and to Fallax. "Folk mustn't die for this, no matter how unjust it is. Tell me what I can do to make it right."

Fallax, wheezing and unsteady from his injury, answered with the organ from another place in the Heliand: "*Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.*"

"I understand," said Elias, and with a nod resolved to do one final act of love. Slinging Fallax's arm around his own shoulder, its shirtsleeve hopelessly soiled with coal dust and lead, he raised him up, and together the pair left the northern pipe chamber for the dome's balcony, where hung the painted figures of the incomprehensible Stars in the full moonlight. Elias propped him up against the organ console, then turned to continue on toward the stairs – but Fallax grabbed the hem of his cape before he was out of reach, tugging on it and pointing to his labyrinthine mouth until Elias knelt down and bent and ear toward it.

"My father," he whispered. "He and Mother Gattisk...I think they-"

"I know," said Elias, standing up and shaking his head.

"Those apprentices were my own fault," said Fallax. "I'll take responsibility for them. It's the least I can do for her. I loved her."

“I’ll do all I can for you,” said Elias, and without further ado stamped off to retrieve his toolbox and the pneumatists’ bolt cutters.

Elias was barred from Seven Stars for what he did to that organ, and later left Brokenhead altogether to become a halser; and while he did his best to testify on Fallax’s behalf, the elk, stripped of his armor and yet crippled forever without his father to mend him, found neither favor nor credence with the judges. In the end he bent the bars of his cell and escaped the noose, just before Seven Stars itself was overturned by what Mother Gattisk had done. The organ is no longer used, as far as Elias knows; but wistfully he wonders, as do Jonas and I: if a pipe organ was granted the power of speech through the mere touch of folkish hands, how many other things, as well loved, are awaiting their own mouths?

By the pen of Columbine, on this the twenty-first day of the Ram in the year of the Rabbit