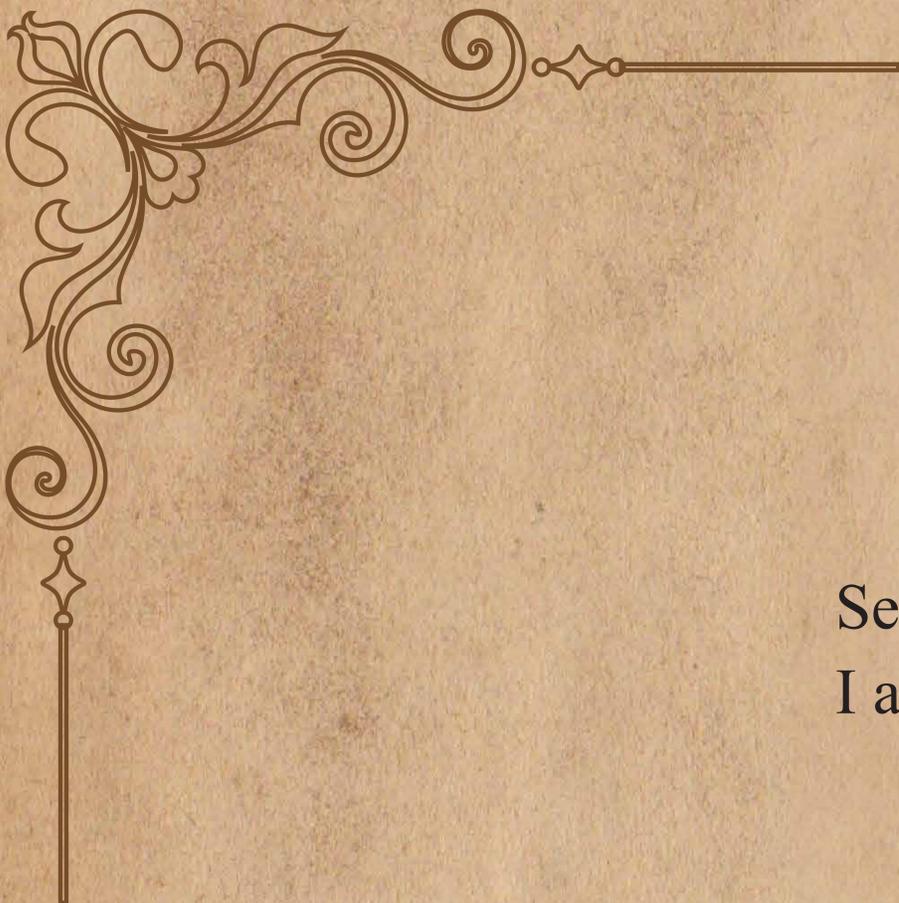


The Charmingly Good
= And =
Goodly Charming
* Tales *  * Of The *

Thundercloud
Kid

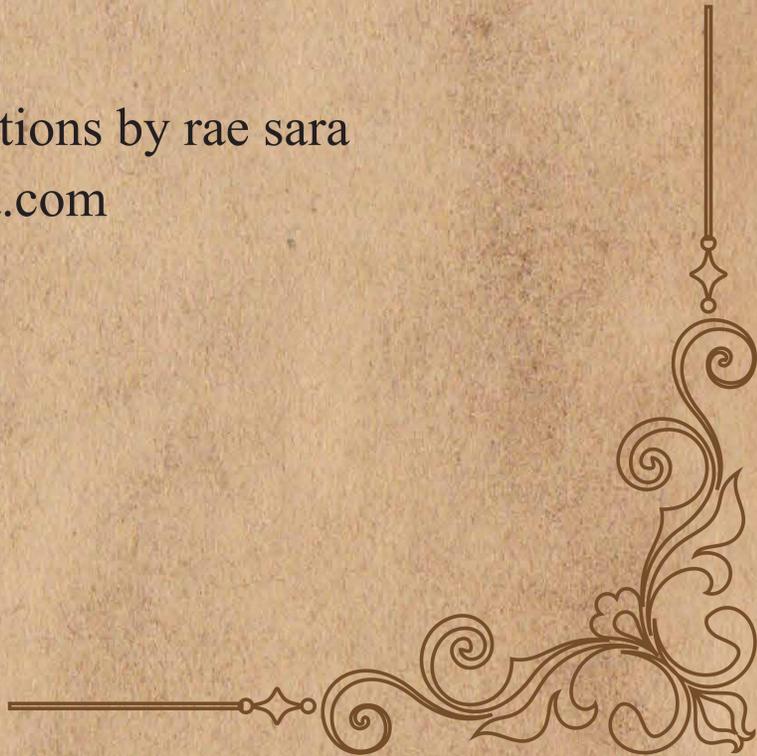
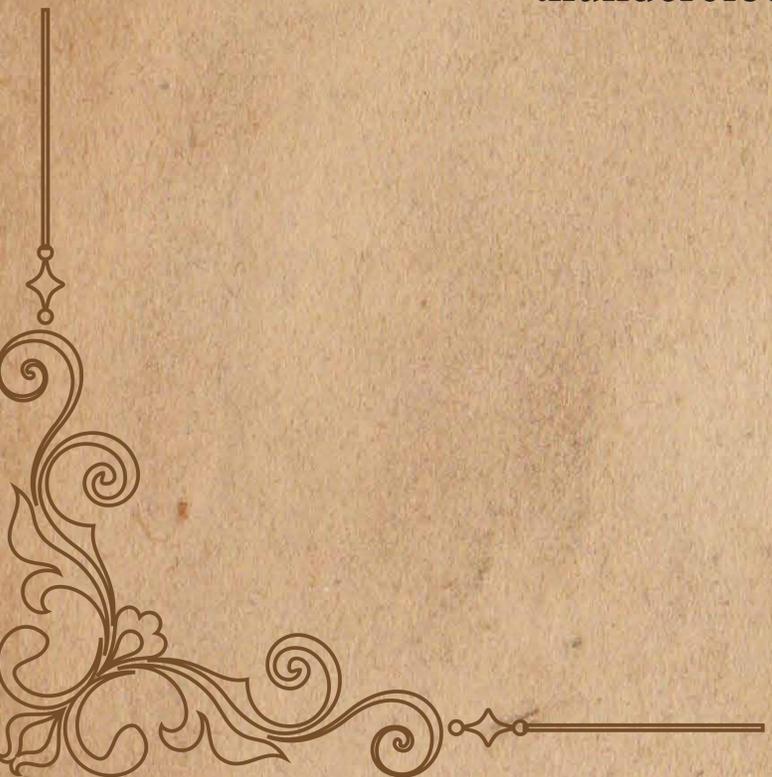
CHAPTER TWO: "IN THE WAKE OF SILENCE."

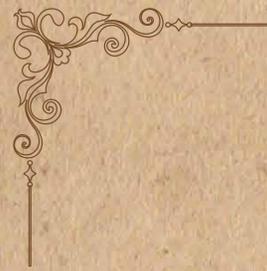


Seasons come and seasons go.
I am a season, you should know.

story by thundercloud kid
thundercloudkid.com

illustrations by rae sara
raesara.com

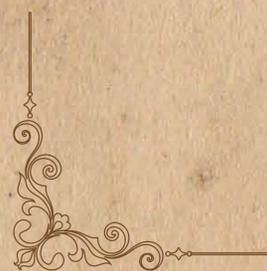


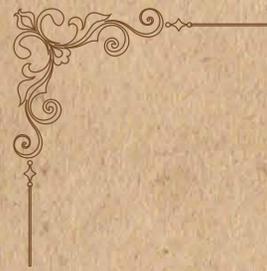


The sun rose hesitantly upon Overcast City. Without so much as a whisper, its rays crawled meekly through the streets, summoning just enough strength to scratch at the windows of the city's downtrodden. One by one, the Overcast Hearts emerged from their dour slumbers only to find that the dawn did not bear any miracles: she was still gone, and Hopeless Lighthouse seemed to slump in its new-found solitude. Hope shattered and littered the sidewalks, and one could not help but feel that whatever light was at the end of the tunnel had just collapsed into more tunnel.

All the while, Lake Effect Steel slept on, weighing on the city like a corroding anchor. For the first time since the Overcast Hearts could remember, not a sign of life stirred from this dozing goliath of iron and steel: no plumes of black clouds wafted from her smokestacks, no creaks or groans rambled from her rafters, and, worst of all, there was no indication that McKinley was aware of the tragedy unfolding on the streets below.

In this lapse of life, the very soul of the city became vulnerable, waiting – wishing – to be seized.





“Out of the way, Tralf!” snorted Prodigy, huffing past the Hawthorne family’s eternally tenured butler. “Or I’ll go right through you!”

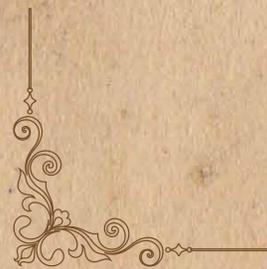
“No more than a turnstile for your pursuits, sir,” Tralf returned as he gathered himself from the floorboards. “Youth,” he muttered, watching his frantic young master bustle down the corridor, “not knowing toward what they rush, but rushing all the way. And yet,” he added, peering down into his midsection, “not even the swiftest can outrun the legions of time.”

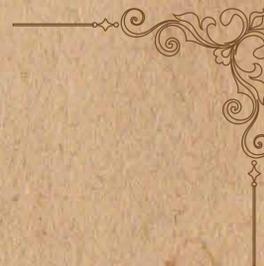
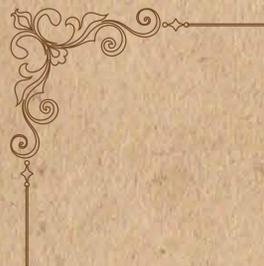
Time. Tralf had learned to live with it - the Hawthornes had not, and the grains of sand, which counted down to an unknown event of unknown gravity, had become a source of increasing paranoia for the Mayor and his son. They fell like gunshots, echoing through the halls of Hawthorne Manor, and laying siege to its inhabitants. Prodigy never understood why the Mayor had not relieved Tralf of his duties long ago, but he did feel that there was something just under the surface of reason, another variable in the equation. This unknown variable, however, had not managed to prevent Prodigy from growing increasingly hostile toward their faithful servant.

So on tumbled the seconds, and on remained the butler, and on did Hawthorne and Prodigy resent their old acquaintance.

“Father! Father!” Prodigy burst into Mayor Hawthorne’s chambers in a whirlwind of euphoria. “The Overcast Hearts are gathered in Decadent Square, just as you’ve planned! But they are growing restless! They need answers! We must hurry!”

“Patience, my son. Patience.” Mayor Hawthorne posed before his bedroom mirror, adjusting the blood red tie that shot like a dagger down his chest. “A mayor must look the part if he is to obtain the obedience of his people. Besides,” he surmised, sizing up his reflection, “they could use a bit more time fumbling in the dark. They have grown rather...bullish lately, what with that Steel Skeleton all but tucking them in at night. Ah, well,” Mayor Hawthorne turned to face to his son, “such days are over. A new era has arrived! Come,” the Mayor barked, striding past his sniggering boy, “and let us address the masses. It’s time we cement the Hawthorne name as an institution in this town.”





While Mayor Hawthorne breathed freely, the city suffocated. Just outside Hawthorne Manor in Decadent Square, the hand of silence tightened its grip on the Overcast Hearts, sharpening its knives and gnashing its teeth wolfishly at the prospect of inhabiting the metropolis for eternity. And in the wake of this silence, as if on a diligently rehearsed cue, Mayor Hawthorne emerged in a saunter to his terrace, and inhaled the palpable destruction that clung to the city like morning dew. He gazed over the sea of Overcast Hearts that had pooled beneath him, hardly making an effort to stifle the poisonous smile that slithered across his face. Then, with lies in his lungs and venom in his veins, Mayor Hawthorne proceeded to strike the city that he had vowed to protect.

“My friends, my brothers, my sisters, my countrymen,” he began, his voice booming over the blackened plaza. “It is with a heavy heart and weary eyes that I address you this dreadful morning.”

“Tragedy has struck! Calamity has consumed us! Adversity has arrived! Our guiding light, our beacon, our saving grace – She – is gone!” The Overcast Hearts stood motionless, granite statues below.

Reverberations shuddered through the city.

“Gone! Gone from Hopeless Lighthouse! Gone from Overcast City! Ripped from our embrace in one fell swoop! In the swift course of one moonfall, the melody of our minds, our livelihoods, has been snatched!”

Seismic rumblings shifted to quakes of misery as the words drowned the formerly damaged, presently destroyed, Overcast Hearts. And the Mayor could taste it – the moment was right, and like the predator he was, he caught the scent of blood, and went for the city’s throat. In a voice no more than a whisper, in a breath barely audible over the stir of the crowd, Hawthorne leaned from his pulpit and hissed, “And where is your white knight?”

Knives spewed from his mouth.

“Where is your Steel King?”



Poison tipped his tongue. Increasingly frantic murmurs spider-webbed like tectonic shifts as Hawthorne's words gashed the Overcast Hearts and left them hemorrhaging everything they believed in. Mercilessly, Mayor Hawthorne plunged onward. "His absence this morning must be duly noted, for while this city lies at its most vulnerable – weeping, broken, and bruised in the gutter – he has vanished into the night. Now, my friends," Hawthorne cooed, feigning to regain the composure that had never been lost, "as your mayor, as your humble servant sworn to look after your best interests, I feel that it is my duty, my burden, to see such matters through...and, after restless hours spent struggling with the unimaginable, the deplorable, the wretched – but the truth – I have arrived at what I believe to be the only explanation..."

The Mayor paused, just for a moment, allowing ample time for the lull in his words to load the pistol before firing his final bullet. "McKinley has taken to the skies with Her!"

An icy numbness ripped through the Overcast Hearts' frozen bodies as the Mayor's carefully composed fiction surged over them.

"He has fled! He has abandoned us! Have not you seen the way he looks at her, the way he lusts after her intrinsic value?!" He savored the sweet taste of irony rubbing on his gums. "In the darkest hours of the night, while we slept so peacefully unaware, McKinley has run off with Her! Run off with Her to some distant shore where he will undoubtedly pawn Her to the highest bidder, and pocket the proceeds of the egregious exchange! Citizens of Overcast City, don't you see?! He is, and has always been, a false idol! A fraud! A thief!"

The Overcast Hearts felt as if they were hearing their own eulogies. Meanwhile, Hopeless Lighthouse, to which their eyes were fixed, cast a shadow that seemed to represent a whole new genre of hopelessness.

With Prodigy smiling at his side, Mayor Hawthorne continued to pull at the very stitches that held the Overcast Hearts together. "And it would be nothing short of an injustice to ourselves if we were to treat him in anyway but such...which is why I am henceforth issuing a region-wide bounty for the Thundercloud Kid! No citizen of Overcast City, not even the great Steel Skeleton, outranks the law! McKinley must be held accountable for the heinous crimes he has committed, and I will ensure that all of Mo(u)rning Lake, from the Mountains Grim to the Rivers of Redemption, knows of his treachery and the reward for his capture! We are all answerable to our past, and I promise you that McKinley will not outrun his."

The Overcast Hearts did not know whether to weep or applaud. The Mayor's words, daunting as they were, appeared to possess a degree of merit: if McKinley had not run off with Her, then where was he? Why had he abandoned them when their need was most dire? Mayor Hawthorne, sensing this shift in emotion, had the Overcast Hearts right where he wanted them. "But for the time being, my fellow Overcast Hearts," he went on, voice as formidable as a siren. "Hear me! This!...Is!...No!...Funeral!"

Hesitantly excited murmurs weaved through the square. "On the contrary," the Mayor maintained, "this is an awakening, an opportunity for rebirth, a renaissance cloaked under a black veil. Her departure, although regrettable, is but a test of our resolve, and, as always, we will endure!"

Murmurs rose to clamor. "This is a city built on the pillars of industry and heart, and I believe that there is no better time than now to reinvigorate these ideals. Let us return to our work. Let us move on with our lives. Let us begin a new chapter in Overcast City, a chapter in which the city's fate lies not within the bony hands of a conniving miscreant, but upon the shoulders of its honorable citizens."

Cheers resonated from below. Mayor Hawthorne never batted an eye. "Let us forge for ourselves a glorious community of comradeship and brotherhood that will outshine all others against the course of history. Let us rebuild Overcast City to its former glory, and then continue building beyond. But, most of all, my beloved Overcast Hearts..."

Hawthorne trailed off, and the Overcast Hearts hushed to a giddy silence. The city was at his fingertips, and he was plucking its most dreadful chords.

"Let us never forget who we are, or where we come from. This city is the jewel in the crown of Mo(u)rning Lake, and it's time we started treating it as such."

Applause erupted, and spirits buoyed. The Mayor basked in his triumph – the virus had been planted, the seed of betrayal had been sown, and now, in the course of a single, bitter morning, he had prepared Overcast City for the harvest.

As the Hawthorne tandem waved to the ecstatic crowds and retreated back inside Hawthorne Manor, Prodigy could not help but vocalize his excitement. "Political clout, unabashed fame, infinite wealth, and no remaining competition to rival the Hawthorne name!" Prodigy gestured to his father's empty mantel, "Why don't you light your old pipe to celebrate anymore? I used to like watching the smoke curl and fade in the night."

Hawthorne's demeanor slouched as he replied, "That pipe is no longer for celebrating. Not since your mother..."

The air quietly excused itself from the room in the Mayor's silence. Prodigy studied the knots in the floorboards for a time before offering, "Well I'm sure she would be happy to see us run this city until the world ceases to turn."

The Mayor had never been so proud of his son – so proud, in fact, that he had yet to note the absence of his forsaken daughter. "Or, better yet," the Mayor added, breaking into a grin as he draped his arm around his protégé, "turn when we tell it to turn."



For Daisy Hawthorne, the stars had never looked brighter. McKinley's balloon had whisked them further from Overcast City than she had ever dared to wander, and yet, there, suspended in a wicker basket in a field of cosmic lights, she had never felt more at home. How distant, how trivial, how small the trials of her life now seemed from her vantage point among the clouds, and though she missed her mother, she was grateful for her present company. McKinley, as she suspected, had proved himself a worthy adversary of the winds, and while the ground heaved and trembled with the toils of its earthly inhabitants, their balloon washed quietly across a canvass of stars. *Like singing lanterns in the sky*, Daisy thought as she watched them pass in and out of the holes in the clouds. Meanwhile, the waves of Mo(u)rning Lake crashed silently below, a graceful choreography for its newly sunken souls.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" Smalls chirped from just a tad too close. "Batteries recharged?" He beamed crookedly, analyzing Daisy with his wide, digital eyes.

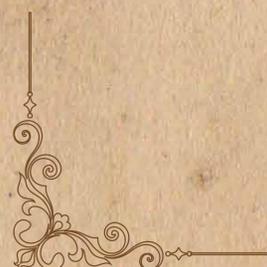
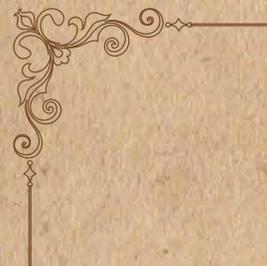
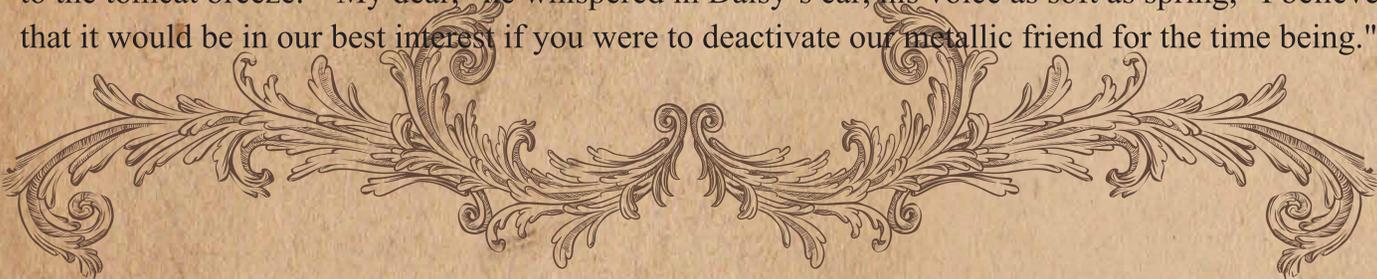
"You certainly needed it, my dear," McKinley observed, extending a hand and helping Daisy to her feet. The sun had just crested the mountains, wrapping McKinley's balloon in a blanket of gold.

"I hadn't even realized..." Daisy blushed. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere between the heavens and the earth," McKinley smiled, their balloon drifting along a canopy of clouds. "I suspect —"

The guttural thud of an explosion cut McKinley short, and a whistling, wailing noise of increasing intensity sliced through the sky. As if guided by an archangel, the cannonball approached like a banshee, howling its way through the wind with dizzying speed. It took less than a moment for it to find its target, and it unapologetically tore through the heart of the balloon. In a reflex, McKinley snagged Daisy's hand, who in turn snatched that of Smalls, and the trio clung to McKinley's umbrella as they floated down from the wreck.

Helplessly, they watched their fiery vessel plunge from the sky like a broken bird, and Daisy cringed as it was consumed by the lake. McKinley could see that their descent, while gentle, was dead on arrival: the black banner of the Flagship of Regret was approaching, and they were no more than mice to the tomcat breeze. "My dear," he whispered in Daisy's ear, his voice as soft as spring, "I believe that it would be in our best interest if you were to deactivate our metallic friend for the time being."





“What?!” Smalls cried. “What for? I—” Daisy nodded, and turned the key in Smalls’ back, because she too knew that Smalls’ gregarious mouth could prove a liability in the subsequent encounter. She quickly tucked Smalls out of sight, and as their boots touched down on the putrid deck, a snarling mass of pirates assembled around their prey.

One strode through the crowd. “Move aside,” he growled as he pulled on the shoulders of those standing in his way. “Protocol first.” The sea of buccaneers swayed. Daisy could tell he was getting close. He grunted as he approached the ship’s bow, and after elbowing past the remaining pirates, the Flagship’s stenographer made his appearance.

At first, he did not know what to say. He had never seen a pair like this before. His eyes darted from the skeleton to the girl, and Daisy could see the lines on his forehead searching for an explanation. They scrunched like wind ripples on a sand dune, and carved through the rest of his face like cracks on a dried riverbed. His lower lip wavered, as if he wanted to inquire something of the pair that he did not typically inquire, but then, like a blazing sun rising in a desert’s sky, the springs of curiosity evaporated, and the rigid rules of protocol returned. The marauder narrowed his eyes and extended a hand. “Guns and knives, if you please.”

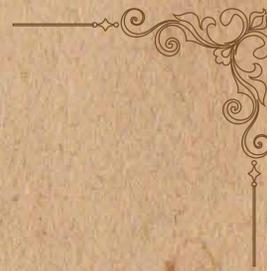
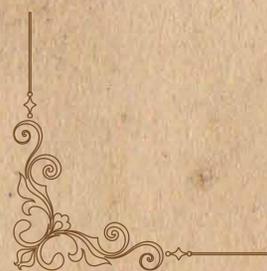
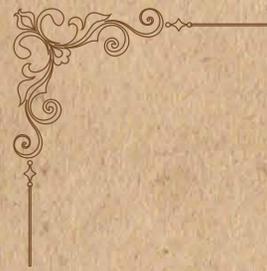
McKinley eyed their captor coldly. “We have nothing to declare,” he said as he folded his hands on the handle of his umbrella.

The wretch glared at this skeleton who had hearts for eyes, and then dropped those of his own to the umbrella McKinley was leaning on. “Interesting umbrella you have there,” he gleamed, his teeth flashing white and gold. “Expecting a little rain?”

McKinley answered the raider’s smile with one of his own. “If the past has taught me anything,” he said, his voice as cool as the water, “it’s that you’ll never know when you’ll be caught in a storm.”

The outlaw sneered at the skeleton’s impertinence. “You’d be wise to mind your mouth,” he hissed, taking out a book and a pen. “There are more monsters about than those on this here boat.”

Monsters? Daisy thought. *What did he mean by that?* She kept her thoughts to herself, but kept her eyes on the villain. McKinley did the same.



“The Admiral wants to know who you are, where you’re from, and where you’re going,” the clerk declared, making a few notes on the parchment in his hands. “Ordinarily, we’d begin with that whom we perceive to be a greater threat, but since we already know who you are, McKinley...” The horde surrounding the inquisition snickered, and the interrogator moved his eyes over to Daisy. “...I suppose we’ll just have to begin with this wee one.” The crew devoured Daisy with their eyes. “Name?” the scoundrel asked.

Daisy knew she was going to lie. She had known it the moment she saw the Flagship racing toward her as she and McKinley floated down from the sky. She had to protect herself, and McKinley, and since her surname was the closest thing the region had to royalty, she thought that it would perhaps not be prudent to divulge it here. “Shea,” she said after a moment’s hesitation. “Daisy Shea.”

“Shea,” the brute mumbled as he thumbed through his logbook. “Shea...I know that name.”

Daisy nearly fell out of her boots. *How could that be possible?* She watched the clerk closely as his eyes scoured the page. *Perhaps I should say something.* She opened her mouth, but then decided against it. No, she had better keep quiet. The less words she spoke, the better. She knew it was only a lie if the clerk thought she was telling him one.

Still, he did not seem appeased. “Hmm,” he murmured, his fingers turning through the pages. “I know it’s in here somewhere...”

Daisy had a feeling she was in trouble. How long was he going to keep looking? If he found the name he would realize that she was not its proper owner, and she could only guess what would befall her and McKinley then. She could feel the blood in her fingertips tingling, and the roof of her mouth going dry.

The buccaneer kept his eyes on the page. “And where are you from, Miss Shea?”

Daisy could not believe her luck. “Overcast City,” she replied, thinking that there was no better way to disguise a lie than with a bit of truth.

The clerk nodded, and continued recording her response. He muttered to himself inaudibly, and scratched at a tic on the side of his head. For a moment, Daisy thought they were in the clear. For a moment, she thought she had deceived him, but then the bandit raised his pen, and asked her what should have been the crew’s final inquiry.

“And what is your business out here on the lake?”

Daisy almost revolted at the question. *Business?* She had forgotten the crook was going to ask her about that. She couldn’t tell him the truth – she knew that – but she could not tell him just any lie either. What was she going to say? She had to tell him something. She could only begin to speak, and hope that she would find the right words somewhere along the way.

“McKinley was taking me...” Daisy had to pause. She was on the verge of assembling an appropriate lie. The swine had stopped writing, and though he had raised his eyes, Daisy ignored his glare. She focused on the words inside of her, and tried to pick out the right ones swirling through her brain. “...to Mt. Grim,” she said after a few moments, her mind racing just ahead of her mouth, “to pick flowers.” She realigned her gaze on the rogue. “At the bottom of the mountain. That’s where the wild Humsuckles grow.”

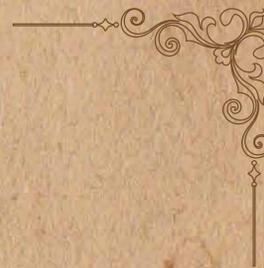
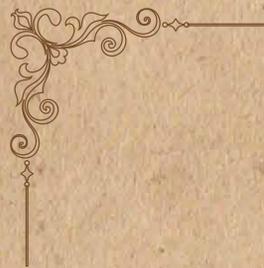
Daisy smiled, though on the inside, she was holding her breath. She hoped her moment of uncertainty hadn’t betrayed her. Murmurs rose from the crowd. The deviant arched an eyebrow. “Flowers?” he said, his eyes dancing like flames. “You came all this way just to pick flowers?”

Daisy never flinched. “That’s right,” she said, the timbre of her voice restored. “Bright, purple flowers that look like budding stars. They’re very rare to this region, Humsuckles, you know, and they grow only at the base of Mt. Grim.”

The clerk frowned, and scratched his neck. He grumbled, and then mentioned something about “the trivial amusements of the well-off” before proceeding to write in his logbook again. That’s when Daisy knew she had him. That’s when she knew her plan had succeeded. She knew that this miscreant was the Flagship’s official stenographer, and that as the Flagship’s official stenographer, he had been entrusted with recording the narratives of those unfortunate enough to come within the ship’s wretched walls. She figured that by now, he had heard all the stories, and he had heard all the pleas, and that her testimony could not have been much different from those given before hers. Notwithstanding a few minor details, they all fit into one of two patterns, and there were those whose stories lifted them out of trouble, and there were those whose stories sunk them deeper into it. In order to fit her narrative into the former, Daisy knew she had to find the right combination of words: a story plausible enough to account for their arrival while just innocuous enough not to perturb the pirates. Through a rapid examination of potential phrases, Daisy, ever the capable poet, believed she had delivered the right ones.

“I’ve read about them in my books,” Daisy continued, emboldened with a new sense of resolve, “only, I’d never seen one in person before.” She turned to face McKinley, who she noticed had a twinkle in his eye. “McKinley volunteered to take me there,” she said as she caught his gaze, “so that we could pluck a few and take them home with us.”

Daisy turned back to the clerk to see how she had fared. He hadn’t enjoyed their conversation much, that was very clear, but he hadn’t indicted her either. He just kept scribbling away in his notebook, muttering to himself, and copying her response. Daisy figured he did not care much for flowers; she had hoped he didn’t. That made it easier for her to pass it off as if she did. She knew a little bit about Humsuckles, just enough to detail them to the stenographer, and even though neither she nor McKinley intended to pick any on this present journey, she felt reassured that any book on the botany of Mo(u)rning Lake would support her descriptions.



It wasn't until the Admiral spoke that she realized she was wrong.

"Humsuckles?" a voice crooned from somewhere beyond the crowd. The clerk stopped writing. The sea of buccaneers parted. The Admiral was leaning against the Flagship's foremast. His arms were folded against his powerful chest, and he had a smirk plastered across his face. He leered at Daisy from across the way. "A very rare flower indeed," he croaked.

Daisy had never seen anyone like Admiral Crooksnout before, and he was indeed a threatening specimen: battle-born, battle-raised, battle-worn, and surely battle-doomed. He towered over the rest of the company, though not even his shadow could eclipse his reputation. A patch shielded his left eye, and if not for the icy sabres dangling at his side, his souvenir of war would have perhaps been far graver. He sneered at Daisy from across the deck. "You seem to be well acquainted with the flora of the region, Miss Shea," he said, his teeth gleaming razors. "You must be very well read."

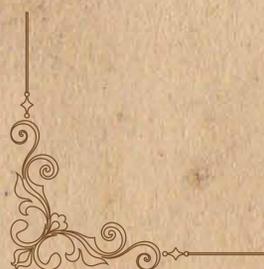
Daisy knew the Admiral was on to something; someone of his stature was not one to waste a breath on an idle conversation. She surveyed the Admiral for a moment, and then chose her words carefully.

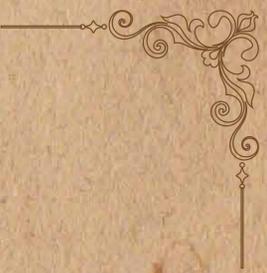
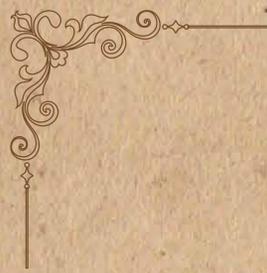
"I read when I can, sir," she said as innocently as she could muster, "but I'm no expert. I think I just like Humsuckles more than most."

The Admiral grinned at his prey. "Evidently," he said, his teeth glistening in the sun.

The boat swayed over rolling waters. Birds called from somewhere more pleasant in the distance. The Flagship's sails billowed in the wind. Daisy was not sure what to do next; the Admiral continued to leer. She could feel McKinley at her side, his quiet courage smoldering like embers.

She wished she could feel his bravery. She wished she could know no fear, but she was the Mayor's unwanted firstborn, and she had grown up in a house of fear.





Daisy could remember the first time she was afraid. It was late summer. Her mother had taken her to the lakeshore. It was her first time.

“Where’s all the sand?” Daisy asked when they had arrived. She had left her shoes further up the bank with her mother’s, and her feet were sunk in stones.

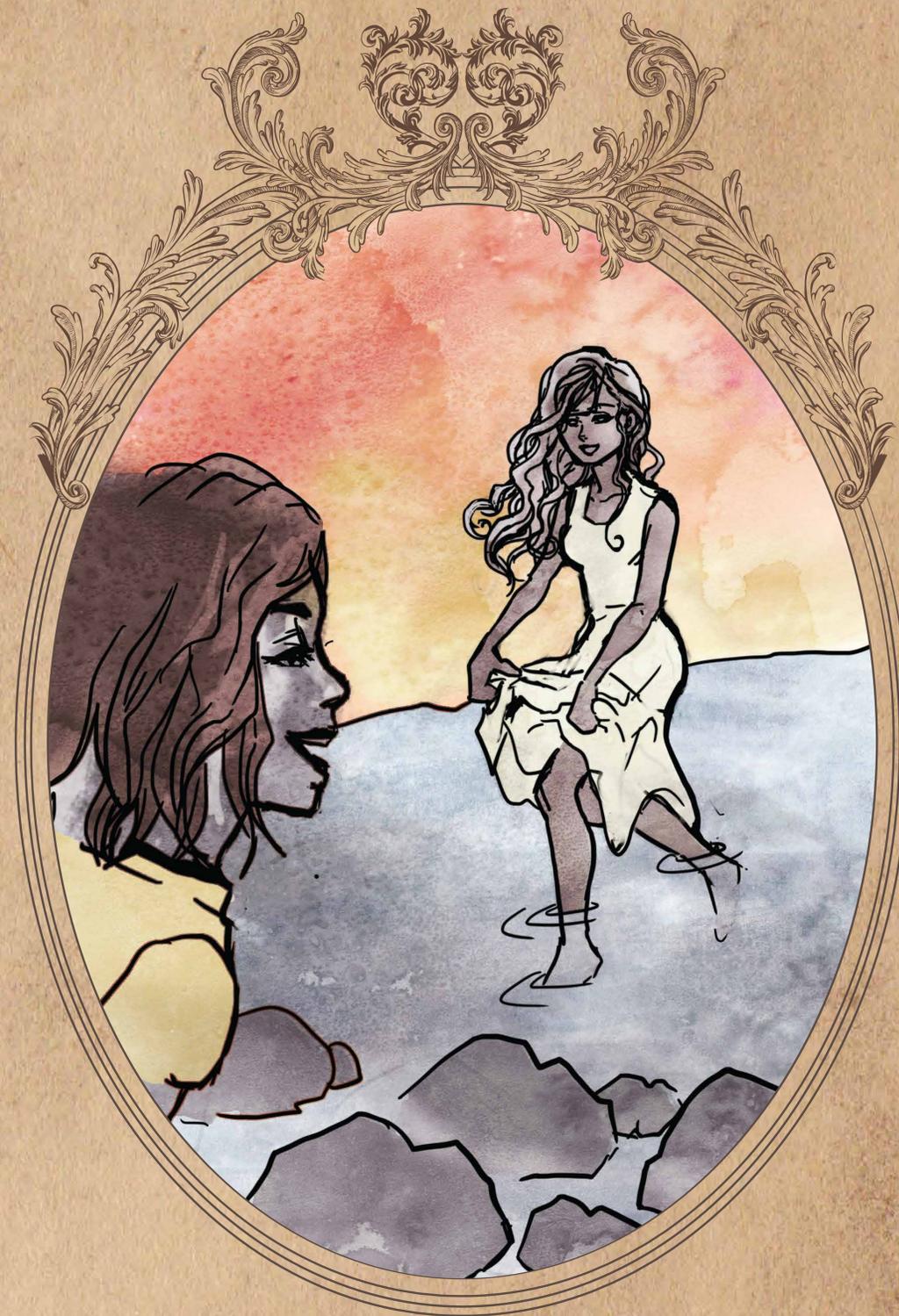
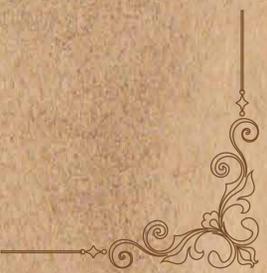
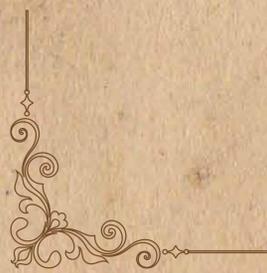
Her mother laughed as she passed a hand through her daughter’s hair. “Unfortunately not here,” she said in a voice like chimes. “This great lake of ours prefers stone to sand.” She brushed Daisy’s cheek, and then followed the contours of her jawline before resting a hand on her chin. “But you know,” she said, her eyes tinged with an ageless wisdom, “stone can be just as beautiful as sand.”

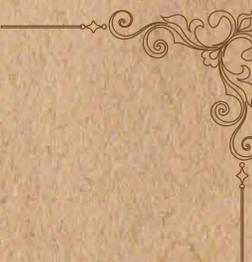
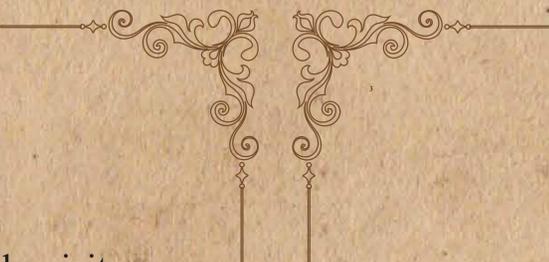
Daisy frowned, and dug her toes into the ground. “I don’t like stones,” she mumbled. “I thought there would be sand.”

Her mother only smiled. “Come on,” she said, taking Daisy’s hand. “Let’s look for seashells. I bet you can’t find one prettier than I can!”

A beam broke across Daisy’s face. “I don’t think so!” she giggled as she darted away from her mother. “I’ll find the prettiest one!” She hopped over some driftwood before pelting down the length of the beach.

Daisy ran. Her feet struggled to find firm footing on the valleys of pebbles that the lake had washed ashore, and the palms of her hands had grown rough from having to keep herself upright. Up ahead, she saw a little cove where the lake had spilled into the trees. *That’s it!* she thought as she stepped over some seaweed. *That’s where I’ll find the prettiest shell!* Daisy scurried toward the inlet, and then cast one final look over her shoulder before she entered the wood.





The beach was empty that day. Daisy and her mother were the shore's only visitors, and Daisy could see her now from afar. She was wearing a plain white dress, a simple garment unencumbered by lace or frill. Tralf had been known to accidentally store it with the pillowcases and bed sheets on more than one occasion, but her mother had never raised a complaint about it. She only laughed when she found it buried in the hallway closet, and explained to her daughter that his confusion stemmed from the fact that she rarely wore white. But that's not how Daisy remembered her. Daisy could only picture her mother in white.

She had always been graceful. Daisy remembered that. She had this way about her, this quiet air of dignity that she carried with her wherever she went. Daisy had always wondered where that sense of stateliness had come from, and why she herself had never felt the same way, but she knew her mother was never one to take pride in her own appearance, and that the last thing she would ever do was condescend. Hers had always been a modest elegance, an introverted elegance, an elegance that whispered rather than shouted, an elegance that Daisy felt her father could never quite understand.

Daisy could see it vividly that day as her mother stepped out into the water. She stood statuesque, the waves pulling gently at her feet. Wisps of golden hair with just a touch of grey brushed across her face, and stuck to the corners of her mouth. Her dress wrapped itself around her legs, and fluttered behind her knees, but in that moment, there on the beach, at the end of one earth and at the beginning of another, Daisy's mother had never looked lovelier. She had a hand on her brow, and she was peering out over the water. Daisy followed her gaze, but she didn't see anything outside of the ordinary – only a bright orange ball that had set itself low over the horizon, and pink ribbons rippling like brushstrokes across a diminishing summer sky.

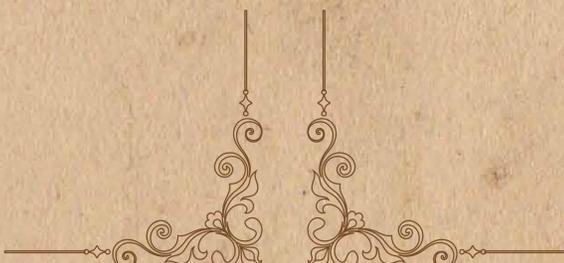
Daisy lowered her head as she crossed into the grove. Twigs snapped beneath her feet. The sounds of the beach disappeared, and the winds rustling through the trees reigned supreme. Daisy could smell tracings of autumn in the air, and she could feel the white wildflowers kissing the bottoms of her feet. Stooping under a branch, she climbed to the top of a hill. *There*. Just over a log, hidden among the trees, the little inlet lay. She hurried to its edge, and knelt down on the grass. She had never seen waters so blue. She peered down into the pool beneath her, and her reflection peered right back.

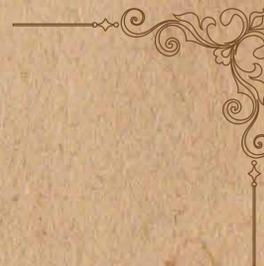
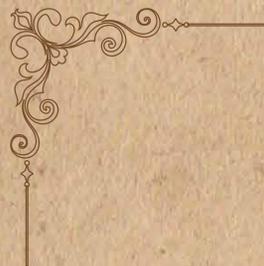
Her hair was much shorter then; her mother had liked it that way. “Bold as a boy's, but graceful as a girl's.”

Daisy never liked it much. She wanted hair like her mother's – long, golden strands that fell casually across her face. Her brother Prodigy was always the first to remind her.

“Dark as soot,” he used to sneer as he groomed himself beside Daisy in the bathroom mirror. “Not nearly as light as mine.”

Her mother was the only one who thought otherwise. “No,” she used to say when she combed her daughter's hair, “not like soot. Like chestnuts. Like burnt chestnuts on a warm winter's fire.”





Daisy stared into her reflection. Her eyes were muted green, although there was a hint of caramel swimming through her irises, and she could see the tip of her nose, her ears, and her hair, but what was that? Daisy looked closer. There was something glistening underneath. She waited for the winds to settle, and then found what she had been looking for. *That's it!* she thought as the waters pacified. *That's the one!* She could see the shell clearly now, a tiny white treasure hiding among the rocks. She laid on the grass, and extended her hand toward the water, but she could not reach it. She was up too high, and the waters were too deep. She would have to walk around, and swim in from the body of the lake to retrieve it, but just as she stood up to do so, her foot slipped out from under her, her fingers grasped nothing but air, and down she tumbled into the pool.

Daisy never remembered the fall. She never remembered striking her head on one of the rocks that had broken though the water's surface. All she remembered was how the world first went silent, and then how it next went white. Her body had gone numb. Her mind had become weightless. The world of the intermediary beckoned. She was a puppet who had lost its strings, and neither her arms nor her legs would respond. She floated there, half-submerged in the water, suspended like a constellation. The sun had nearly set, and the shadows of the trees loomed large overhead. The world was closing its doors, and it looked like little Daisy Hawthorne was going to be forgotten.

But then there was a flutter. The sun peaked its head over the horizon. Yes, there was most definitely a stirring of life. Daisy's mind had returned, and at least for the moment, the other world would have to wait.

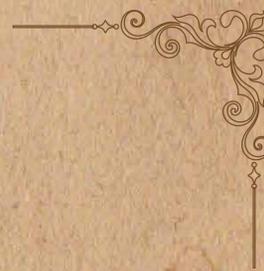
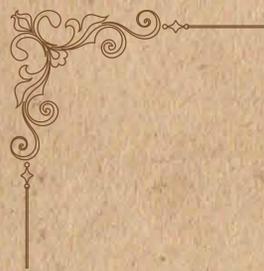
At first, Daisy did not know where she was. Her head ached, and she could feel it ringing. *What...why...* The current slowly turned her body over. Her head was ringing. Her hand washed by her face. Daisy tried to move it. It would not respond. *What...?* She focused on the individual fingertips, and concentrated on moving just one of them. Again, no response. The beating in her head was deafening. She went to turn her neck, but her neck would not respond. Panic set in. She tried to kick her legs. The current dragged her deeper. She tried to move her arms. The shadows pushed her downward. She tried to swim to the surface. The surface drifted away. She was falling. She was plunging. Down. Down. Down to the depths. Down to the bottom of the lake.

Daisy knew this was it. Daisy knew this must have been how the world wanted her to die. Still, she never expected it would be like this. She never expected death by drowning. She was so young, and she had so much to see. But that was not for her to determine. That was not for her to decide. The lake had been designed and her narrative had been written. If this was how her story ended, or if this was the point in her narrative when the ink went dry, who was she to argue? The play would go on. Only her part would be lost.

But somebody objected. Somebody insisted otherwise. A hand reached down from the surface, and whether the playwright had picked up his pen again, or her mother had defied the rules of the universe, the book on young Daisy Hawthorne was going to continue.

Daisy did not stop coughing even after her mother had reached the shore. Her world was still spinning, and her lungs were full of the lake. Her mother held her head in her lap. "Easy, darling, easy," she coaxed, the whites of her eyes brighter than the world around her. "Breathe slowly, now. Not too fast."





The sky was bathed in an ocean of magenta. The sun had just disappeared behind the horizon, and the evening's first stars had emerged from their dens. Pinpricks of light punctured the celestial ceiling, but all Daisy could see were the eyes of her mother looking down on her. Her dress was soaked cold, and it clung to the contours of her body. Her hair was matted, and beads of water dripped down from her face. Daisy could feel them falling onto her brow.

“How...what...” Daisy struggled to find her words. Her head was still fuzzy, and the world was not yet cooperating. Her mother was stroking her hair.

“You had a fall, darling,” she said, her voice as gentle as her hand. “Into the cove.” She kept her eyes on her daughter's, staying with them as they returned from the deep.

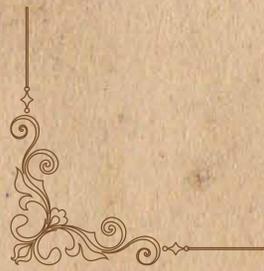
Daisy's chest heaved as she gasped for air. Her lungs had expelled the water from her system, but it was oxygen that she needed now. She could feel the rocks on the beach digging against her skin, and she could feel the tide rolling up against her heels.

“Did you...did you save me, mom?” she asked, summoning just enough breath to speak.

Her mother smiled as she cradled her daughter in her arms. “I did what I could, dear.” She held her daughter tight, and kissed her forehead.

Overhead, the stars turned their gaze downward. The winds stopped blowing, and the lake lapped silently against the shore. Daisy's mother had turned her head to the water.

“But I believe I had some help.”



The Admiral was still staring, but Daisy's mind was elsewhere. She had never gone back to that cove.

"You've certainly come a long way for them."

The Admiral stood up straight and clasped his hands behind his back. He approached slowly, deliberately, combing through his thoughts with each stride. The stenographer, meanwhile, remained silent, and the crew looked on with anticipation.

"I think you underestimate your charisma, Miss Shea," the Admiral observed, the deck boards squealing under his weight like a drove of stuck pigs. "You've managed to convince Overcast City's greatest hero to escort you over waters which everyone knows belong to me." The Admiral crouched down on his knees, and leered at Daisy with his one good eye. "Our ship could use an eloquent liar such as yourself."

That's when McKinley intervened. The Admiral and his crew had been tormenting his companion for far too long, and he could no longer stand idly by.

"Admiral Crooksnout," the Steel King thundered, his voice rolling like the waves, "enough of these games! You have no right to hold us hostage, and you have no right to treat my friend so poorly!"

The crew was taken aback. They hadn't expected the skeleton to chime in. The Admiral roared. He was never one to be intimidated. "First!" he bellowed, his jaws inches away from his adversary. "I have every right to detain you! The lake is mine, and that goes for the skies above! Second!" The Admiral spat. "I know a liar when I see one! And this one..." The Admiral pointed a saber in Daisy's direction. "This one fits the bill."

Daisy did her best to suppress her guilt. How did the Admiral know she was lying? He glowered at her, but she had trouble maintaining his gaze: she was distracted by the miniature creature perched on the Admiral's right shoulder. It was a Shriek, a native of the Silent Forest. Daisy recognized the micro-beast from the leaves of McKinley's yellowing volumes, and although it stood no more than a few inches tall, she knew that its deafening screams could drive even the most stable of minds mad. She had heard the stories of how these creatures had drove the early settlers out of the Silent Forest, and how they had since rendered the forest uninhabitable, save for the plants. This one donned a bandana on top of its head, and with a tiny eye-patch placed over its right eye, and a pair of pointed teeth protruding from a scowl, it looked every bit the Admiral's image.

The Admiral grinned as he followed Daisy's eyes. "Ah," he said, the fervor in his tone losing its edge. "How rude of me not to introduce my first mate here." The Admiral reached into his coat pocket, and retrieved a single Jum-Jum bean. "Name's Mumm," he said, as he handed his minion the treat. Mumm snatched the snack with his little paws, and gobbled it up greedily. His button eyes flicked from Daisy to McKinley as he examined the Flagship's newest specimens.



“Little guy found me in the Silent Forest,” the Admiral explained as he tickled the critter. “Seems his family didn’t want anything to do with him. Could have something to do with him being a mute and all.” Mumm rubbed his furry head against the Admiral’s hand, and nibbled playfully at his fingers.

“Poor beast,” the Admiral cooed. “Left all alone. Abandoned by his brothers and sisters – could you imagine? But he and I get on just fine.”

Daisy had her reservations as she watched Mumm nuzzle the Admiral’s hand. She never expected the Admiral to be a man of compassion, let alone one to receive it. Regardless, even if the Admiral had managed to win over the heart of this Shriek, she had heard the stories circling onshore about him, and she knew she would be a fool to assume anything of him.

“It’s a curious thing, Miss Shea,” the Admiral continued, his eyes still on his fuzzy first mate, “the way me and him get along. Truth is, he’s more like me than most people think.” The Admiral tilted his head back to Daisy. “Would you like to know why?”

Daisy nodded. *What was the Admiral getting at?*

The corners of the Admiral’s mouth contracted. “He’s just as suspicious as me.”

McKinley appeared ready to speak, but Daisy felt it was her turn to reply.

“I’m sorry sir if we have offended you,” she interjected. “We were only going to pick Humsuckles.” Daisy did not even have to look at McKinley this time. “Both of us can attest to that.”

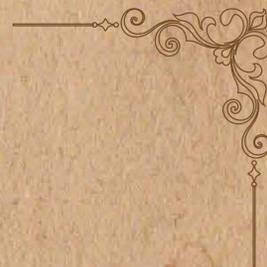
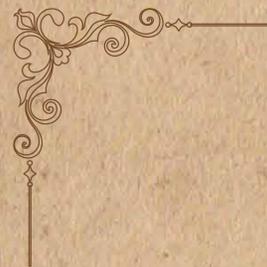
The Admiral sneered. “Of course you were. There’s only one problem with your story. If you attest to liking Humsuckles more than most, as you just did...” The Admiral paused. Daisy noticed something flashing in his eye. “...then how do you intend to pick them when we are three full moons past their growing season?” The Admiral glowed triumphantly. Alarm crashed over Daisy like a tidal wave. How could she forget that Humsuckles did not grow until spring? How did the Admiral even know that in the first place? Daisy struggled to devise an excuse, but the Admiral waved his arm.

“No more games, Miss Shea,” he said, “and no more lies. Just tell me...” The Admiral’s eye was no longer glistening, and he spoke quietly. “What are you really doing out here among the waves?”

Now Daisy felt uneasy. Did the Admiral know something she didn’t? Perhaps she should tell him the truth. Perhaps he could even help them. McKinley, however, was less trusting.

“Our business is ours alone,” he declared in Daisy’s lapse, “and if you’ll be so kind as to lend us one of your skiffs, we will promptly remove ourselves from yours.”





Whatever was left of the fragile diplomacy hanging in the air was shattered. The Admiral seized McKinley by his coat.

“You folks think you run this world,” he growled, his tattered coat billowing in the wind, “but you skirt around the coast with your tails between your legs. You and I both know that the monster in your closet really lies beneath these waves...Tie these rats up!” The Admiral threw McKinley into the hands of his crew. “And see that no one speaks to them! I know that the skeleton will fetch a fair reward from Overcast City, and I have a suspicion that Miss Shea may as well.”

The pirates seized their captives, and began tying them to the Flagship’s mainmast. Daisy grimaced as the rope chewed into her wrists. McKinley, meanwhile, remained dreadfully silent.

“Let the girl keep her...doll,” Crooksnout smirked, “but as for that...” The Admiral swiped McKinley’s umbrella and tossed it into the crowd. “You won’t be needing it.” The Admiral smirked, and nodded toward the sky. “I think you’ll find our storms are not quite like yours.”

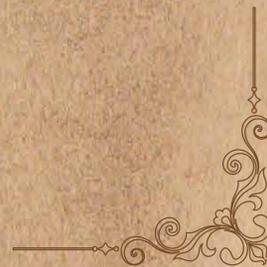
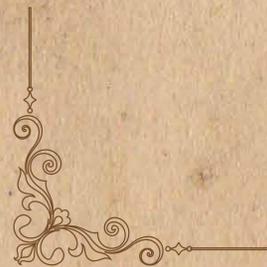
Steam started to pour from the ship’s smokestacks, and the Flagship’s mighty engines roared to life.

“Full force back to the Empire,” the Admiral hollered as the Flagship lurched to a start, “and make no stops along the way!”

The Admiral turned back to his captives, who were now bound to the mast in front of him. “We should reach the Empire by nightfall,” he added, “and I suggest you two take that time to get your story straight. If that does not happen, I can assure you of one thing...”

The sun covered its eyes, and the Admiral leaned in.

“I have more than one means for extracting that which I’d like to hear, Miss...Shea.”



The moon loomed like a vulture over Mo(u)rning Lake that night, and while the rest of the region obliged the night, vengeance brewed to the south. Save for two inhabitants, citizens of the Mistake had not lingered long enough to watch their rotting metropolis incur what many would describe as a euphemism for the name of their fledgling town. What began as a dream had quickly soured into a nightmare, and the city had left but two men to bury its corpse.

“I’d sooner die than acquiesce,” Kane muttered, staring out a window to the east. “Defeat comes only to those who welcome it.”

“But we came here ourselves,” Gronk ventured, not entirely sure what his partner was insinuating. “Didn’t we do this to ourselves?”

“Did you ask for this?” Kane snapped, wheeling his head around.

“No, but...”

“Did you want this factory to die?”

“No.” Gronk avoided Kane’s eyes.

“Well, neither did I.” Kane returned to the window, his hands clasped behind his back. Gronk remained motionless, desperately chasing his partner’s train of thought.

“Fortune’s gaze never rests for long on a single suitor,” Kane professed, noting the first drops of rain tapping against the windowpane. “She is blessed with seductive charms, but cursed with wandering eyes.”

Rain fell steadily now, streaking down the glass like unanswered tears.

“And when she finally does look our way...” Kane turned to face his partner with a glint in his eye. “We must be ready.”

