

# MADE TO BE BROKEN

RUTH BEDDER

For greed, all nature is too little.

*Lucius Annaeus Seneca*

**IT ALL BEGAN**, I suppose, with greed.

Greed is a flaw in all living things. It has shaped worlds and brought down the lofty accomplishments of civilisations. It cannot be overcome, cannot be fought, and cannot be removed. Enlightenment, then, is the achievement of a state where one may say truthfully: *'this is greed, I feel this, I acknowledge this, but truly I will not act upon it'*. And so is enlightenment rare indeed, even among my kind.

When the Grammaticus raised his hand and drew upon his great power to create the book, I have no doubt that his actions were driven, at the basest level, by greed. The book was a thing of enormous power; a tome which bound the rules and laws of the Grammaticus' dominion and enforced them for a thousand thoughts in every direction. The most powerful artefact created outside of the Eternal City, forged by one man's greedy desire for control.

And of course, greed begets greed, for if you have something wonderful and terrible, others will cast envious eyes upon it. So it was with the book. Many desired it but did nothing, not because of an enlightened nature, but because of fear, or because of inability.

Then came the edge walkers, those canny few who can learn the secrets of the cats and slip between realities, wandering sometimes aimlessly along the lines where the edges of realities meet. The most promising of them, if they do not meet a terrible end very early on as so many of them do, grow over time able to reach for those edges even from far away, feeling through the cracks and folds, and so manipulating the very fabric of reality. It was one of these, sure in his power and greedy in a way which far outstripped the flaws of the Grammaticus, who at last turned his gaze, his power, and his envious hand towards the book.

And so did his greed cause the awakening of an Ancient, and changed the fabric of all the worlds forever.

**SIF KNOWS THAT** levitation is a conceit, but she does it anyway. She is subtle, and she only permits herself this flaw in such a way as to be unnoticed by most people, but her feet never truly touch the ground. She remains separated from the earthly realm by less than the thickness of one of the starling feathers that dangle lazily from the woven bracelets around her slim wrists, reflecting the pale fluorescent lights of the anteroom with a somehow oily sheen. She dislikes contact with the ground in the same way that one who considers themselves intellectually superior will disdain the company of the dull: it is a necessity for what she does, but her power comes from the

air and not the ground, and so she allows herself to be conceited.

This is not a place she wishes to be. Her home is many miles away by deliberate choice, and the noise and smell of the city centre traffic has already tainted what might otherwise have been a pleasant evening. She dislikes the palace on principle: there's something wrong with the wiring in this place that she can feel but not identify, some flaw in the way the electricity moves, its crackling pathways interrupted or forced to stretch where it should simply flow. The unavoidable awareness of it lodges itself as an itch somewhere between her throat and her spinal column, but she isn't willing to draw attention to it in front of her apprentice, so she accepts that any enjoyment she might have taken from the rest of the day is now lost. In truth, she knew that as soon as the summons came.

Cordero follows her closely. He's never been to the palace complex before, although no person in the city is unaware of it. It is a gargantuan presence that dwarfs the industrial complexes and their ruthless black smoke efficiency, that drowns the wide waterways of the rivers, and that dominates the horizon without exception. Even when one closes one's eyes, or turns away, to set the complex behind and out of view, it seems to loom, waiting, tensed and ready to strike.

It has been eighty-three years since Sif last set foot in the palace, which is the home of her master, and she is not at all happy to return.

She leaves Cordero behind when she slips quietly into the audience chamber. The boy isn't ready for the presence of the Grammaticus: he's as yet unable to control his emotions to an appropriate level, and one does not show emotion in the face of this embodiment of order. The well-hidden look of disappointment on his youthful features is confirmation enough that her decision is appropriate. If he's lucky, Cordero will be at the height of his power before he needs to be in the presence of the Grammaticus, or any other member of the Keepers Council.

The room is almost silent. It is calm, precise, not even a mote of dust out of place. She's stood in many palaces before, but never a room such as this. It should be a throne room; it is after all the audience chamber of one of the most powerful beings ever to have risen beyond the ties of accepted reality. Yet there is no throne here, no place to sit either for the master or for his servants.

There is no one in here except her and the Grammaticus. He stands by the grand, sweeping expanse of glass that looks out over the darkening city beyond, expressionless and unmoving except for his eyes, which scour the streets and rooftops of city. His long, clever fingers are laced together behind his back. He is the epitome of grace and poise; a predator in calm repose, dangerous and beautiful.

She loved him, once.

Sif waits, silently, watching him through the long seconds that he gazes out of the window over the heart of his dominion. Her mind is effortlessly clear. She does not try to anticipate his questions or his need – such a thing would be pointless, and would serve only to taint any response she might give. Her master prefers concise honesty.

Eventually, he speaks. His voice is richer than honeyed wine, deeper than the chasms of the Endless Fall.

“The book has been stolen.”

Sif's control is excellent, her self-mastery near to flawless. Even so, such a statement is shocking. She feels a twitch in the muscles around her left cheek, but maintains her silence.

The Grammaticus turns to look at her. His eyes are the unsettling red-black of blood straight from a vein. Although his perfect features are expressionless, she can feel the fury in him like an inferno.

“Find the book, Sif. Bring back what has been taken from me.”

Without waiting for further dismissal, she turns and heads for the door, stride measured to an expected standard.

“Witch.”

She freezes, and looks back. He has already returned to the glass.

“Make the thief suffer.”

**CORDERO KNOWS BETTER** than to ask what has happened. He follows Sif no more than a pace behind, studying her closely. Her body is built to channel magic: a lithe frame holding muscles like steel cables, head carefully and ritualistically shaved, hair replaced with swirling tattoos that show the nature of her power without the cage that humble words would provide. She is not beautiful, but there is in her effortless confidence and well-earned self-assurance a kind of wild elegance which she wields like a blade.

He has been her apprentice for six years, and among their kind is considered little more than an infant. Despite this, the servants who scurry about the labyrinthine corridors of the palace avoid looking not only at Sif, but also at him. This pleases him, on some distant level. The marks of witchcraft are fresher on his scalp than on that of his mistress. His power comes from metal, and so is different from

hers, but the fundamental aspects of their craft are the same, and Sif is the very best. Cordero killed fourteen other students to earn his place by her side. He can sometimes still taste their blood in the back of his throat, like iron turned to liquid and mixed with salt, and an aftertaste of strange sweetness. He is not yet a monster, but he is still very young.

If he expected her to leave the palace complex, he betrays no trace of surprise or rising excitement as they turn instead towards the archive. His face is expressionless as they trace a path between the great walls of books, although he knows that the knowledge and power contained in each one could elevate him to Sif's own level of ability or beyond, were he only able to comprehend the contents and hold them in his mind without ruination. It is not until he views the empty pedestal which sits in the centre of the inner library that he realises what has been accomplished, and allows his mouth to betray his shock with a whispered curse.

"Cordero." Sif murmurs in reprimand, although he thinks there's an element of relief in her tone; perhaps that someone else understands the implications of what lies before them. Or rather, what doesn't.

"How is this even possible?"

"That's what we're here to find out." She tells him. Her voice is stern. "I want a full historical scan of the area, and since you're clearly idle enough for common vulgarities, you can do it for me."

He takes a moment to steady himself before he begins. There is no door here which he can close behind himself, no privacy in this act, and although Cordero has used magic in public before, it is not something he is comfortable with. As the servitors who keep the library in check pause to watch, he feels the familiar sense of ego rising within him. Their fear, their awe, both are like an elixir to him. It is something he struggles against, for it is unbecoming in a master of the craft, a station he hopes one day to achieve. Pride is his greatest failing. He has been told that it will one day kill him.

He raises a hand and reaches for the source of his power; an easy task. He can feel it all around him; the metal skeleton of the building, the simple and sturdy legs of tables and chairs, the screws and bolts holding together the book cases and shelves, the metal fillings of the librarian who believed he'd hidden himself away so well to watch, and who now slaps one hand to his jaw in surprise as the metalwork buried in his teeth seems to twist painfully. Far away, the steely heart of the city itself seems to rise to his call. Even the unseen composition of his own body is strength to him; swirling atoms of calcium, potassium, sodium, and the whisper thin traces of magnesium and iron.

He does not, of course, pull from Sif, or from the audience chamber.

Cordero centres the power; holds it, focusses it. It is like a bubbling, boiling liquid, pressing against his skull, pushing outwards through his skin. There is a desperate desire to use it, to throw down the walls of this place and declare himself a god among the crawling ants who scurry through the streets outside. He could do it – there are so few people in this reality who could stop him, and he thinks that Sif at least would *not* stop him, only stand and watch, to see how far his reach could take him.

With an effort, he contains his desire, and drops his hand to chest height, fingers twisting as he bends the power to fulfil the command he was given, rather than to his own need for godhood.

The library sinks into a gentle greyscale. Time seems to slow, and sound to deaden. Ghostly images flicker across the centre of the room; the memories of the metalwork, given up to him.

"*Metal does not remember as well as air,*" Sif had told him when he learned this. "*And so this will not be an easy skill for you to learn. You will see only what the metal does, and metal has a blunt memory. If you require detail, you will also require enough patience and practise to master this far beyond what is required of other crafts.*"

And so it is: the ghostly figures of librarians and servitors sweep past as he burrows through the remembrance he has access to, and they are rough to the point of being featureless. They skip backwards in strange reversed gaits as he rolls back through the minutes and hours before their arrival, slowly at first, then faster, until the images tear past with enough velocity that they're impossible to follow for the untrained eye. The detail doesn't concern him. Not yet. Not until...

"*Ah.*"

Cordero stops the image, pleased. There, in the centre of the room, picked out in faceless tones of black and white, is the bulky shape of a man. He's dressed much as the other servitors, hands raised in the act of sweeping back his hood from his face.

"This is our thief. No one else has even looked at the pedestal. They avoid it as though it's dangerous. Not this one."

The rest of the image dies away, colour growing back among the grey overlay of his magic like patches of fast spreading mould. The figure seems to tremble, although Cordero knows that's only a flaw of the memory. He concentrates, forcing the metal of the now empty pedestal to remember more clearly. It groans with the effort; an aching noise of fatigue as though great hands have twisted it, and the man's face sharpens even as he reaches towards the artefact he's come to take. When he has enough detail that he knows he would recognise the thief even in a crowd, he lets go of the spell, and the metal of the library seems to sigh with a tired relief.

“I don’t like this, Sif.” He says. “I don’t like this at all. We’d have felt the presence of another witch, perhaps even days in advance. What else could have had the strength of mind to steal the book, without being overwhelmed by it?”

She barely moves, but his perceptions are sharp enough that he sees the tiny smile at the corner of her mouth. “You tell me, boy.”

Another spell then, and a simple one. He closes his eyes, and sinks into the city, spreading his mind along steel beams and skyscrapers, feeling the rush of cold air over the skin of cars and late night trains, tasting the smog as it rises past the metal supports of the great factory chimneys. There is nowhere here to hide from him. He is the city, and he sees as it does. He pushes himself out along the telephone cables and power lines, searching.

*There...*

Cordero’s eyes snap open, his breath caught in his throat, his eyes wide with horrified surprise. He takes a hurried and involuntary step backwards, catches heel against toes, and finds himself in an ungainly sprawl on the floor of the library; his first loss of balance in nearly twenty years.

“Well?” Sif asks, standing over him, unperturbed.

“Cutter. His name is Cutter.” He looks up at her, and when he tells her the next part, he sees the fear in her eyes mirror his own. “He’s an edge walker.”

**CUTTER DOESN’T NORMALLY** smoke in his room, but today is a special day. He sits in one of the sagging armchairs which he has dragged over to the tiny balcony, stocking feet resting on the waist high guardrail, thin rollup held carelessly between fingers which are just beginning to turn the jaundice yellow of nicotine stains. The squall of the city below floats past him and into the drifting smog that lies between him and the sky.

He opens green eyes that have caught the gaze of many a gentle lover – and some not so gentle – when his other less appealing features might have turned them away. He is, in fact, far from pretty. He could change that, he knows. It’s an idle thought that’s held his attention any number of times. He’s learned the secrets of bending his own reality to suit his whims, but it pleases him to be the only edge walker that he knows who doesn’t look like a billboard model. Besides, there’s an effort involved in it: it’s much quicker to change what you look like than to come to *believe* that you actually look that way, and belief is the core of what they do. If you don’t believe you’re blonde, then you won’t be when you wake up, even if you spent the four hours before bedtime altering the structure of your body to give you perfect platinum locks.

“Pointless frivolity.” He mutters, and draws dirty air through the tiny remaining nub of the cigarette.

He expected to feel different. After all, he’s just achieved the impossible. For all his raw talent, even the cats couldn’t train him beyond the third circle. He has motivation, but lacks *discipline*, and they have told him this means he will never progress. Yet here he sits, with the Liber Grammaticus stuffed carelessly into a worn canvas rucksack on the floor next to him. He’s done something none of them could have even conceived of, and it unsettles him to find that he feels no different.

Not even a little.

Even now, he can feel the force of the book battering at him, but he ignores it with a truculence so complete and so utterly real that it cannot be denied, even by this artefact. This defiance, which has carried him into the lap of troubled times so often, is also the trait which has allowed him to bend the worlds through which he has walked to his will. Where most would consider such stubbornness a flaw, Cutter has cultivated it, protected and nurtured it, keeping it at the core of his very soul. And so, the thing which prevents him from mastering his calling has also allowed him to steal the prize by his feet.

He glances at the building across the road; blackened glass and dull concrete. He hates this place. He never intended to stay here afterwards, but he was so absorbed in the cleverness of his idea that he didn’t plan what to do once the task was complete. He didn’t take the book because he wanted it, but only to prove that he *could* take it. So he sits in a battered chair, less than fifty miles away from the victim of his crime, and does nothing.

He’s still sat staring at the holes in his socks when the front door explodes inwards.

**SIF’S PRECISELY CONTROLLED** blast takes the door straight off its hinges. She feels it compress the air on the other side as it’s forced into the room beyond, and in the whip-crack scintilla of time that it takes the compression wave to travel, she knows the layout of the room beyond, and the position of their enemy, sat open mouthed with shock in front of the open balcony. She’s running across the

door before it has time to land, Cordero behind her with his pistol in his hand. She can feel the way the heat of his pounding pulse affects the air rushing past his skin. He'd been frightened before, even as he led them here.

"Have you met one before? An edge walker I mean." He'd asked her.

"We work for one, you dolt."

"That's not what I... have you fought one?"

"I've heard stories." She'd told him. "From people I believed."

"How do we fight something that can alter its own reality just by thinking?" His voice had wavered like it couldn't decide if it should sound awed or terrified.

"We don't give it time to think."

And so they don't.

Cordero is faster than she expected him to be, which pleases her. The boy is learning well. He fires twice as Sif leaves the ground, twisting in the air and planting her feet on the dusty ceiling. Cutter throws himself sideways, and the shots are wide. It means nothing: Cordero has no need of a weapon, and the gun is only there as a distraction. The walker reels out onto the sliver thin balcony, using the walls of his apartment as a shield against further shots and balances precariously, fifty floors over the unyielding concrete skin of the city. Sif's hands flicker through the air like blades; static crackles over her skin, and the hair on her arms pulls itself upright as arcs of purple and blue energy dance between her fingers. Streams of lightning cover Cordero's advance, cracking and spitting with all the great rage of nature as the boy rushes forwards, tearing out the metalwork of the apartment like a sentient super-magnet and wrapping it around his hands in elongate and ragged blades.

Their opponent swears loudly as the tightly controlled electricity arcs past him, throwing his shadow in a long, chaotic block against the windows on the other side of the street. Cordero punches his bladed forearms through the walls, prompting further enraged cries as the walker scrambles away from the attacks.

Sif draws the air outside upwards in a rush, feeling it sweep past each pane of glass and preformed window frame. She funnels the air from every street for half a mile, dragging the edge walker's body up with the cyclone until his trembling grip on the railing is the only thing holding him, upside down and perpendicular to the street with windswept tears streaming over his cheeks as the people below struggle for breath. She screams for Cordero to break his grip, and her apprentice obeys with startling aggression, altering the shape of the screeching rail from a smooth pipe to a writhing mass of thorn-like spikes.

With a pained shout, the edge walker lets go and the thunderous wind drags him clear of the balcony and up into the night.

A feral and victorious yell rips its way out of Cordero as the boy rushes forwards to the ruin of the balcony. Sif glances down at the bag by the sagging armchair, which blessedly has avoided being damaged by the eruption of the cushion springs during Cordero's assault. The boy has skill, undoubtedly. If he can learn control as well, he may rise to terrifying heights of power.

"Uh, Sif?"

"Yes?"

"I don't see him." Cordero says. The start of panic is creeping into his voice as he turns back from the street to look at her. "He's not... Sif...?"

But Sif isn't looking at him. She's staring over his shoulder at the shabby figure now floating effortlessly in the street behind her apprentice.

"I don't think you kids really appreciate who you're dealing with." Cutter says, voice level. "Your tricks are lovely, but I can *bend reality*. This fight is only going to go one way."

He lands on the balcony and her stomach sinks. Of course he can fly. Of course he can. Once he's had time to think, to react, he can do *anything*. She can see the tension in Cordero's fists. She can feel the trembling of the metalwork, the whole city vibrating with his fear, and she knows this is about to go badly wrong.

"Now piss off, and I won't have to hurt you."

One stained finger jabs Cordero in the chest, and the boy's fear gives way to his pride. He swings, skin rippling like silver as metal particles cling to him. The blow lands with a force that would devastate a human skull, turning sturdy bone to fine powder.

The edge walker lets it hit him.

Sif hears two of Cordero's fingers break.

Cutter's eyes narrow. He knocks Cordero's injured hand aside and grabs him by the front of his shirt. With an animal swiftness, the edge walker drives his forehead into Cordero's nose, and the boy sags as his face turns red, body held up by the bunched clothes still wrapped in Cutter's fist.

Cutter looks up at Sif, still standing inverted on the ceiling. Cordero's blood is smeared across his hairline.

"He's a metal mage, right? They can't fly, can they?"

She swallows hard. "Don't do it. I will make you regret it."

"*Sure* you will."

Almost carelessly, as though he weighed nothing, Cutter throws Cordero through the open window.

Sif is already dragging up air to meet him as the boy's body tumbles out into the darkness, but her power isn't meant to work like this. Cordero hangs in the middle of the street, buoyed up by rushing wind and twisting as she fights to keep him steady, to guide him back towards the window. Sweat beads in the small of her back; air is not like lightning, it has no precision and no elegance, it is raw force, and it is not designed to be used to safely guide nearly two hundred pounds of unconscious flesh.

"Witches." Cutter shakes his head, and scoops up the backpack. "You think you know everything."

All of her power is bent to keeping Cordero afloat and alive. She watches helplessly as Cutter reaches out a hand and the wall comes alive with rippling lights.

*He's leaving, she realises. He's going to walk out of this reality and you won't be able to follow him. You are not good enough to trace him once he's gone.*

And so it comes to a choice: save her apprentice and explain to the Grammaticus why she identified the thief and then let him go, or drop Cordero and follow the edge walker through the rippling tear.

Cutter steps through.

Sif follows, leaving the empty ruin of the apartment in a shattered stillness broken only by the wail of sirens and screaming as Cordero's body lands in the street.

**THE SHARP AND** ragged rip in the world grips and tears as Sif forces her way through after Cutter. His trail cools even as she fights to cross the barrier, and by the time she finds herself scratched and bloody at the edge of the Wildwoods, she is alone in the dark with only the lonely murmur of the trees for company. Behind her lies a chasm so deep that the noise of the rushing water in its belly is lost to distance. Ahead, the trees seem to reach out to her with hungry branch fingers. She curses bitterly, hissing muffled expletives into the air around her.

She's been here before, and she knows that this is a place of death. There is nothing here that does not exist to hunt and kill. It is not nature, not quite. Nature, although cold and uncaring, does not feel the fell joy at the rending of flesh that the creatures of the Wildwoods do. It is a legendary testing ground for the highest circle of witchcraft; a place where apprentices in the last days of their masters' service will dare each other to walk, knowing none of them would be so foolish as to accept such a challenge. Sif knows only one other person who survived a night in this place, and they no longer speak of such things, not even in the hushed midnight tones of those who have lost a part of themselves to horror.

If Cutter has gone into the Wildwoods, then it is a path she cannot follow. For all her power, she knows that she is no edge walker. Magic is a part of reality, and Sif lives in a world of strict rules. Cutter and his ilk break rules simply by being alive.

She will not enter the woods again, not even for the Grammaticus.

There are few options left now. Leaving this place will require her to find a ley line in order to focus the limited natural forces and create a second breach. By the time she's done such a thing, Cutter will be well beyond her ability to track. She cannot return to the Grammaticus' dominion without her quarry. She needs an ally. She needs something that can breach realities as easily as Cutter, that can follow him no matter where he runs, and that will bring her back both the book and that arrogant bastard's head.

She needs to summon a demon.

Sif pulls a knife from her boot, and begins to carve crude and fast symbols in a circle on the muddy ground around her. Above, baleful clouds begin to trouble the sky, and the first growling of a thunderstorm comes as companion to the gamble she's about to take. She takes it as a good omen, even as she tells herself that such things are superstitious nonsense.

With the marks complete, she turns the knife on herself, opening shallow cuts in the flesh of her upper arms and thighs. The faded denim of her jeans parts and reddens as she draws the blade across her skin. She flicks four drops of her own life out to the cardinal points of the circle, and begins to speak. Her voice is low, but it is commanding. The storm quakes as it hears her whisper, and she knows in her conceit that it is right to do so: she is a witch of the final circle, an air adept, dominus maleficarum, a lord of nature.

But these are the Wildwoods, and they are not natural. She has escaped them before, and *they do not forget*.

They twist her magic, and turn it back on itself; her blood rises, dragging up earth and rock with it. Rain begins to fall, drops

turning to a torrent in seconds, water funnelling into the shape which forms in front of her.

*Too big, she realises. Far, far too big.*

This is no demon servitor to obey her will. This is a thing which has used her power to pull itself into existence. Sif raises a hand to call lightning and destroy this foe before it is fully formed. She does not think to question that it might not be a foe. Here, all things are enemies.

Purple and white lightning springs out from her fingers, crackling around an earthen beast now towering over her. It scorches and burns, and Sif can smell baking clay. Still, it grows. Roots force their way out of a tear that becomes a mouth, and the four spinning drops of her blood settle like eyes in a monstrous face as it turns to look at her. She backs away, and her heel scuffs the edge of the chasm. Tiny pebbles dislodge and tumble, spinning into the abyss.

It speaks, and its voice shakes worlds. "I SEE YOUR PURPOSE, WITCH."

"Then obey me, demon." Sif hides her fear well. Her voice is calm, and full of confident authority.

It laughs, and its four eyes seem to dance. "I AM NO DEMON."

"Speak your name."

"THOSE THAT HAVE BOTH VOICE AND KNOWLEDGE TALK OF ME AS ISHMAEL."

And only then does she understand what she has done, and how helpless she is, caught by this thing and trapped between the chasm and the trees. She turns to flee, already in the air and flying, almost too fast to see.

Ishmael is faster. How could it not be? It has run like poison through the dreams of the great and the mighty since time began. Before it was given form it existed as glorious, terrible concept. It cannot be denied by one such as she.

With a motion so fast that the air seems to crack, it reaches out for her, wrapping filthy vines around her ankle, and dragging her back to the earth hard enough to have the breath explode out of her. She is not killed and not driven from consciousness, and so she is awake and screaming while Ishmael devours her, with the strange creatures of the Wildwoods watching from the darkness.

**CUTTER HAS CROSSED** four dominions and two domains to shake off the witches, although he's fairly certain that they wouldn't have followed him past the Wildwoods. He can't seem to focus as easily as normal. His fingers hurt, and he can't find a way off this damned street. He knows it's not guilt that's causing it; it's a pity about the boy, but the survival of one magically inclined lackey when weighed against his own escape means nothing. Besides, the little bastard punched him.

The disorientation had started when he left the Glasslands, smashing his way past crystalline golems and the razor wings of the vitrefey to emerge unhurt into the edges of the dust storm around the Last Post. There'd been a strange taste in his mouth; the metal tang of blood, and the sensation of chewing blue steak. He'd spat onto the ground, but his saliva was unstained except by the scuffed ground where horse tracks and boot prints joined in a chaos of marks.

"Must be the book." He mutters.

Now he's here, wherever *here* is. Every time he walks away from the centre of this place, he finds himself turned back towards it. His finger ends ache like they did when he broke two of them trying that ridiculous kung fu crap that Oisin showed him last year.

The girl is the heart of it. This isn't her dominion; if it was she'd have control. Instead she just stares wide-eyed at the truck that's frozen with her in the road. An ice-cream cone is caught in a timeless mid-tumble from her left hand (*and what is time, really, to one who has lived so long*), while her right is stretched out towards the polished chrome radiator. Cutter had stared at it when he arrived, but he couldn't work out if they were touching or just the width of a moment apart. It didn't seem to matter then, but now he understands that it's her sense of belief he has to overcome in order to be allowed to leave.

"Nice try, brat. Y'nearly got me."

He turns his back on her, feeling for the edges of the street and pulling them away from his own sense of what-should-be like peeling wallpaper.

There's a smell in the air. It's deeply familiar, and it excites an incongruous and predatory instinct in him that he's never felt before (*hunt, consume, grow strong, conquer*). It almost keeps him in this place, although he knows that will surely kill him. As he forces his way off the street and into a more familiar domain, he recognises the smell, and knows it's his own body.

It's not the book, then.

He's being hunted.

**DAWN HANGS OVER** the Necropolis like a shroud. Cutter emerges blinking from the wide mouth of a tomb, the final clinging grip of the street fading to a fine dust that settles onto his worn jacket as though he'd stood in the silent darkness of the grave halls for millennia. The thin crest of the sun, now over the horizon but still obscured by the sandy walls of the palaces gives pale and breathless light to a city that has sat unchanged for longer than he or any of his kind have known about the presence of the edges. This is the stronghold of a mightier power; uncountable eyes that watch from hidden places, claws sharper than razors, minds faster than time's own heartbeat.

"Hello, Cutter."

The edge walker looks up, squinting in a sudden dazzle of sunlight. Silhouetted against it, on top of a wall, is a cat. It sits with a proud and haughty arch to its back, one dainty brown paw held up as if in contemplation of the potential microcosmic possibilities of its own cellular structure.

"Hi, Doughnut."

It sighs, turning amber eyes on him. "I do so wish you'd stop calling me that."

"I've been calling you that since I was six. It's a habit."

"You are a creature of particularly poor habits."

Cutter shrugs. "At least I don't lick my own ass."

"Not, I imagine, for a lack of trying. Why are you here?"

"You don't really expect me to believe that you don't already know, do you?"

With a sinuous grace, Doughnut leaps down onto the path. Tiny plumes of dust rise under his paws. He looks up at Cutter as though he were a poorly trained and unnaturally large kitten.

"Come on, then."

**THE CAT TREADS** the lightening pathways of the maze-like city with surety. Cutter is lost in minutes, but he doesn't try to enforce his own reality on this place. He's tried that before, and he knows how it ends. Neither of them speaks; no sound breaks the dull thumping of Cutter's feet on the hard packed ground. Idly, he wishes he'd brought his shoes.

The sun is fully over the tops of the buildings when they reach the amphitheatre, hanging above them in a dazzling, deformed oval that seems to flicker as threads of cloud sweep across the powder blue sky.

Carbonel is waiting for them, statuesque and solitary on the great platform at the centre of the semi-circle. Cutter's companion, an animal he's known since childhood, stops at the top of the carved stairs, respectful of the creature below them. Wishing for limbs that don't feel quite as grossly oversized on the delicate steps, Cutter makes his way into the arena.

"Human," Carbonel speaks, voice a whisper that carries across the distance between them as though they were sat with their heads touching. "I have asked you before not to drag your unworthy troubles upon us."

"Sorry."

"I believe you. Yet you are still here, and in your wake comes a peril you cannot comprehend. It makes the trinket you have stolen seem worthless in comparison."

"I'm being followed, Carbs."

"You belittle my rule even as you petition for my aid. You are a contradictory supplicant, Marcus."

Cutter flinches.

The cat shakes its head. "I will address you by your chosen name, if you so wish. All I ask is that you respect the name that I have earned."

"It always seemed strange to me that all of your kings share the same name."

"I would not expect you to understand all of our ways. Truthfully, I do not understand all of yours."

His feet make contact at last with the flat ground in front of the wide dais. Carbonel watches with an implacable stillness as he approaches and attempts a clumsy bow.

"Yer majesty."

"Cutter."

"I'm being followed. That shouldn't happen."

Green eyes narrow in a black furred face as the king of the cats bends his mind towards him. For a second, Cutter sees himself as



the creature sat in front of him does: a mote of dust in a swirling cosmos of manipulable variables, one unimportant and expendable leaf fallen in autumn's twilight. He spins on the axis of the planet as civilisations crumble by this creature's will, and knows painful humility.

"Tell me," Carbonel asks. "Have you heard of Ishmael?"

Cutter shakes his head.

"He is an Ancient. They were the first beings. Some say that they shattered the true reality with their wars, and so created the first domains. Then later, others came who learned to mimic their powers and form dominions. There are few alive who know the truth."

"Do you?"

"No, although the man you stole from yesterday does. Or at least, I believe he does. We have not spoken of it."

"Why is an Ancient following me?"

"I cannot speak for the purpose of a being so powerful. I would ask only that you do not linger here. Take your prize and your doom and leave this place."

"My doom?"

"If Ishmael had scented my blood, boy, I would be making my peace with the universe."

Cutter swallows hard.

"I have said all that I wish to on the matter. I am certain that you know how to leave, since you have done it before. I would tell you not to return, but it seems likely to me that you will be dead before the sun sets in the Prime."

"That's forty minutes! I was hoping for something a bit more helpful."

"Helpful? I have allowed you to walk unharmed through the Necropolis. I have held back an enemy more complex and powerful than your fragile mind can comprehend, and I have done it out of respect for the love of you borne by one of my own. Had I not helped you, the thing which seeks to devour you would have brought you down before you made it onto the pathways here."

"I..."

"There is nothing more to discuss. Go now, before you share your death with those I care about."

**HE WATCHES THE** king leave, fists clenched into furious balls at his sides (*anger, hate, rage, death*). He knows he has to keep calm, but the pounding throb of his heartbeat fills his ears.

"Cutter?"

Doughnut peers around his ankle, face a mask of sorrow. The cat's presence is a salve.

"Hey furball."

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

"I'm not going to die, stupid."

The silence seems to condemn him further.

"Ah, shit."

He reaches down and scoops Doughnut up in both arms, feeling the weight of the book shift in his backpack (*shifts like time, like the friction of starlight in the void, like the rage of a thousand suns, fear, fear and darkness*).

"You can hear him." It's not a question.

Cutter nods. "It's hard to tell if it's me thinking it or him, but yes. I can hear him."

The cat places a paw on either shoulder and looks at him seriously. "The witch woke him while she was chasing you, but he was close to awakening anyway. She was a catalyst... well no I suppose that's not accurate. She was an accelerant. When he comes, he'll have her power as well as his own. When he takes you..."

"Thanks for the confidence. I suppose when he gets me, he gets the ability to step between?"

"He can already do that."

"Then what?"

"He'll know about the book."

Cutter shrugs. "So?"

"So imagine if an Ancient could impose its will the way the Grammaticus can. It would destroy worlds. It would destroy the Necropolis. Even the Prime."

"Well that sucks. Not as much as my impending transformation to a corpse, but, y'know. Not good."

“No. Not good. But you can prevent it.”

“How?”

“Destroy the book.”

Cutter laughs bitterly. “Why would I do that? After what I risked to take it? That theft will be the only part of me that anyone except you remembers.”

“Because it will make the last thing I remember about you an act of selflessness rather than the sulking petulance so common in humans who sense their end approaching. I know you can be better than that. I’ve always known it.”

“I liked you better when all you did was meow.”

Doughnut’s sharpened teeth gleam as his lip curls back in a startlingly human grin.

Cutter puts the cat down on the edge of the dais, and slips off the worn straps of his bag.

“So, what do we do?”

Doughnut leans forward and sniffs the pages. “Well, you’re going to have to do it on your own. This thing is well past my abilities.”

“But you’re a *cat*.”

“That’s as may be. Of the two of us, you have the more chaotic mind. You’re antithetical to everything this book was written to achieve. It’s a device of will, created to enforce rules.”

Cutter snorts. “Well, you know what they say about rules.”

“I know almost everything.”

“Smartass.”

He runs a hand over the smooth cover of the book (*perfection, break it, take it, make it mine*) and wonders if he could have made different choices. If he hadn’t been so bloody minded (*blood, flesh, sinew, bones break and shatter*) then maybe he’d have been more skilled. He’s heard rumours that the greatest of edge walkers can control the flow of time (*ageless, senseless, meaningless*).

He bends his mind to the book, reaching for it as he would an edge, pulling back the corners of what it represents and drawing them away. Warmth runs out of his nose, and when he touches his face his fingers come away red and sticky (*what should lie within will soon be exposed and consumed*).

“No.” He mutters. “No, you don’t get to beat me. Just no.”

And he turns the full force of his mind to destroying the artefact whose pursuit has sealed him on this path (*brought low, brought down, as galaxies have been before me*). The smell of burning paper curls into the air (*burn you, an inferno of loathing, the true catechism of hate*). If this is to be his last act, he thinks, then it’s fitting for it to be one of defiance (*defy all the worlds, reject reality and be mightier than God*). He knows, he can almost taste (*eat you, eat you, eat you, take what you are and devour*) his victory, but the voice (*hear me, tremble at my coming*) is closer now (*claws and bladed teeth to pierce the orbs of your eyes*) and he can’t (*standing so still as though there is nothing to be afraid of*) quite work out (*but there is, for I am here*) who he is (*those that have both voice and knowledge*) any (*talk of me as*) more (*ISHMAEL*).

**BURDENED WITH A** loss of self, Cutter doesn't realise Ishmael is on top of him until it's too late. He tastes his own blood as Ishmael eats him.

**ISHMAEL'S HANDS ARE** slick with viscera as it turns the pages of the book with careful delicacy. It has been careful not to spill its meal onto the artefact; it has a cosmic understanding of the power in blood, and does not yet know how such a thing might interact with the tome.

When the hissing starts, it turns to look at the broken body of the cat, but it lies still and unmoving, sightless amber eyes turned up towards the comfortless warmth of the Necropolis’s sky.

Not the cat then.

Not that one, anyway.

Ishmael turns to see another, more recognisable feline, teeth bared angrily.

“CARBONEL.”

“You have destroyed one of mine.”

“IT STOOD BETWEEN ME AND MY PREY. HAVE YOU NOT INSTRUCTED YOUR SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLY OF SUCH THINGS?”

“No amount of instruction will prevent a good soul from defending the things he believes in; even when he knows it will destroy him. You should know better than act against us.”

Ishmael laughs, and the sound is the death cry of solar systems. “DO YOU THINK TO THREATEN ME? I HAVE BROUGHT LOW OTHERS WHO CARRIED YOUR NAME, GOD-KING. I AM MORE THAN EQUAL TO ANY CAT. EVEN WERE YOU SURROUNDED BY A THOUSAND OR A HUNDRED THOUSAND, YOU COULD NOT HOPE TO STAND AGAINST ME.”

“I do not have a hundred thousand.”

“THEN HOW MANY?”

“I have *all of them*.”

Carbonel gestures, and Ishmael turns to look at the once empty amphitheatre, now a rippling wall of bodies that overlap through time and dimension. Every cat that ever walked or ran, from the mightiest prairie hunter to the most ragged mouser; every slinking body that ever lay waiting on a step or tore open skin, that fought or hid or hissed in the night stares out from the stones of this ageless and most holy place.

Such a thing gives even the Ancient pause.

It turns back to their king.

“THERE SHALL BE A RECKONING BETWEEN US, FOR THIS THWARTING OF MY PURPOSE.”

“And such a thing will be my death.”

“THEN I WILL AWAIT IT EAGERLY.”

“Do so from the darkness, and do not trouble my kin again.”

“HAVE THEM WATCH FOR ME, THEN, FOR I SHALL RETURN AND BRING WITH ME YOUR DEATH.”

Ishmael raises its arms to the deformed sun, and comes apart. The unanimated soil and rock of the Wildwoods tumbles lifeless to the ground as the force that has animated that form retreats.

Carbonel sags. Such a calling as he has just made is dangerous, and not without price. So few of his predecessors have ever needed to call upon the full remit of his species. Fewer still would have tried such a thing, but then none of them ever faced an Ancient.

“What now, my king?” A brutally scarred calico asks, stepping carefully around the debris.

“We finish what the human started. We unravel the book.”

“The Grammaticus will be wroth.”

“I will make amends to the Grammaticus later. Cutter was a fool in many ways, but he was right about the book, and the rules within it.”

The calico looks at him questioningly.

“Such a thing can only ever have been made to be broken.”

**AND SO, IN** the last remaining shadows, the cats unbind the Liber Grammaticus, and chase some small measure of greed out of the world. Then they go about their endless watch, one which knows no beginning and no end, guarding the places that no one else sees against the return of Ishmael, and the end of all things.