

The Stench of Freedom

written by

Joel C. Scoberg

illustrated by

JOHN BARLOW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joel C. Scoberg lives on the beautiful Gower Peninsula in Wales, United Kingdom, with his very supportive wife, two somewhat feral children, and a growing menagerie of animals. He predominantly writes science fiction and fantasy stories, usually at night after his children have gone to bed and before he collapses from exhaustion. His stories have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, Gwyllion Science Fiction and Fantasy, 365tomorrows, and Every Day Fiction.

Joel's love of science fiction and fantasy goes back further than his earliest memories. Starting with The NeverEnding Story, which he watched so many times as a toddler he wore out the video, to his family's Christmas tradition of watching the original Star Wars trilogy back to back, and then discovering The Hobbit on a caravan holiday as a teenager and reading it, utterly mesmerized, in one sitting. He hopes to one day write a story that will equally enthrall a reader and make them fall in love with fantastical characters that, currently, only exist in his head.

"The Stench of Freedom" was inspired by the transformational perspective that becoming a parent brings. Joel had long dreamed of becoming a writer, but pursuing a career in law and the long hours that entailed, as well as the fear of ridicule for putting something so personal as your own creation into the world, acted as excuses not to follow those dreams. Then, when his children were born, he realized he could hardly tell them to pursue their dreams if he hadn't done so himself.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

John Barlow is an illustrator and educator creating rich illustrations with a focus on storytelling. A Minnesota resident, John was raised on fairy tales,

fiction, and forests. He's strongly inspired by golden age illustrators like N. C. Wyeth and Arthur Rackham, as well as many contemporary illustrators.

Each illustration is an exercise in atmosphere and texture, creating a world you can easily get lost in. John tells stories with a variety of clients in both the tabletop-gaming industry and fantasy publishing. When he's not drawing, he enjoys cooking, biking, sleeping, and taking unnecessarily complicated reference photos.

The Stench of Freedom

Hywel Arfon twirled his Earth rod as he strolled along Station Avenue with Nine-six on his heels, his grim shadow dressed head to toe in white. The broad thoroughfare was packed with the lunchtime rush of well-heeled shoppers and dour men in flat caps, all of whom scattered to clear a path for him. Hywel crossed the cobbled road, pausing to let a horse-drawn omnibus *clip-clop* past, then strode towards Copperton's fog-shrouded generating station. A tangle of cables buzzed overhead and spread out from the great red-brick building, just one section of the vast web across the city of Inglebad. As he approached the station, the orb atop the coiled wooden rod crackled with tiny streaks of lightning captured from the static in the air.

"After this inspection, I will check on my wife. The baby is due any time now," said Hywel. He straightened his tie before knocking on the station's weathered copper door, which was adorned with a spoked wheel in white-gold filigree; the wheel of Taranis, god of the Lightning element and symbol of the Electricity Commission. Hywel glanced back at Nine-six. His battery was as silent as ever. Whatever expression it had was hidden behind its ghoulish blank mask, and its pure-white eyes gave away nothing either.

The station door swung open in a waft of warm air, and a freckled young woman in overalls peered out. Her brown eyes grew as wide as saucers as she took in Hywel's emerald eyes, tweed suit, Earth rod, and red rubber boots. And with Nine-six behind him, there was no mistaking who he was, but protocol was protocol.



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“Hywel Arfon from the Earthers’ Guild. I am here to audit your generator.” He flashed his badge, which bore a daffodil flower for Blodeuwedd, the goddess of the Earth element, then handed his staff to Nine-six, feeling suddenly vulnerable as he did so, as if one arm was tied behind his back. The orb atop his Earth rod ceased crackling immediately in the battery’s grip. “Please show me to the bolt box and inform the Master Engineer of my presence.”

“Y-Y-Yes, of course. Right this way, s-sir.” She glanced at Nine-six. “And will he...?”

“It will wait outside. Don’t worry, my battery is well-trained,” Hywel winked as he stepped inside, “it won’t do anything without my permission.”

Beyond a panelled reception was a dimly lit, stuffy warehouse; machines buzzed and clanged and the caustic smell of engine fumes caught in his throat. Hywel knew little about how it all worked and cared less. All that mattered to him was the generator inside the bolt box at the centre of it all.

Hywel approached the copper-coated dome and opened its viewing hatch, stifling a retch at the sharp stench of sweat that smacked him in the face. Inside, the station’s generator sat strapped to a scorched, high-backed chair. The skeletal creature wore a sweat-stained vest and a copper helmet covered its face, obscuring all but its pure-white eyes. A little smile tugged at Hywel’s lips. He had caught and earthed this sparky himself. It was satisfying to know it had all worked out.

Someone cleared their throat behind him and he stepped away from the bolt box. A squat woman in filthy overalls glared at him. She looked as tough as old leather and her expression could have curdled milk.

“I’m Marla, the Master Engineer,” said the woman in a tone as friendly as her appearance. “I was not informed of an audit today, Earther...?”

“Hywel Arfon. And, well, that is the point of a surprise audit. But do not be concerned. I am carrying out surprise audits of all generating stations in Inglebad.”

“The Electricity Commissioner has signed off on this?”

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The incredulity in Marla's voice rankled Hywel. "She does not have to. That generator is Guild property and I act on Grandmaster Fotheringham's authority. The Commissioner need only worry herself about the state of your transmission infrastructure."

Marla narrowed her Taranis-touched grey eyes. The white flecks inside looked about ready to spark, though she managed a smile as she answered. "Of course. I trust you are happy with what you've seen? Our generator's reliable, she has one of the lowest blackout rates in the city."

"It looks fine to me but looks can be deceiving. I need to see it in operation."

"Is that necessary?" Marla scowled but her tone turned pleading, and she resorted to invoking the primal pantheon, as if that'd sway him. "I swear by the Elements, I'd have reported any issues. And shock-starts risk burning her out."

"It is just a generator. It can be replaced. In fact, I will personally find you a replacement."

"A sudden power surge could overheat the grid, blackout the whole Copperton district."

"Trust me." Hywel gave his most reassuring smile—not the easiest thing to pull off under the circumstances. "I'd rather be out hunting rogue sparkies, making the streets safe and all that, but my wife is due to give birth any day now. I am being kept local." And the timing couldn't have been worse. With just a week to year's end, Clarence Rochester had leapfrogged him into first place in the Guild's league table. Promotion to a recently vacated office of First Earther awaited the winner, so this audit assignment was the last thing he needed. "I want to be here as little as you want me here. I just need a little shock, then I will be out of your hair."

Marla wrung her grease-stained hands. "I won't take the fall for any blackouts."

"I am not asking you to."

Marla sighed then pulled a lever on the side of the bolt box.

The air buzzed with static and Hywel's skin tingled all over. A loud *crack* sounded, like a peal of thunder, and he turned back to

the viewing hatch. The generator thrashed against its restraints. Earthworm-like tendons jutted out of its neck. It screamed a blood-curdling howl before lightning bolts crackled from its body, ricocheting off the copper walls to create a light as bright as the midday sun. The dial on the bolt box's meter bounced hard against maximum watts.

"Happy?" Marla shouted over the tremendous racket.

Hywel nodded and Marla pushed up the lever.

As quickly as it started, the lightning stopped and the generator slumped against its restraints. Wisps of grey smoke rose from its body and, for a brief moment, a scent not unlike fried bacon tickled Hywel's nostrils. His stomach rumbled and he thought of grabbing lunch.

"We done here?" Marla looked about ready to punch him, so Hywel gave her a thumbs up and left her to attend the generator. How anyone could have a bond with those creatures was beyond him.

"Excuse me, sir." The freckled young woman approached Hywel and handed him a small square of paper. "A telegram just arrived for you."

IRONHOLME DISTRICT BLACKOUT ROGUE SPARKY
SUSPECTED STOP
APPREHEND AT ONCE ANY FORCE PERMITTED STOP
GRANDMASTER FOTHERINGHAM END

Hywel smiled. This was more like it. He lived in Ironholme. He'd capture the sparky, peg back Rochester on the leaderboard, then pop in for a cup of tea with his wife, Sian. Lovely.

HHywel squinted as his eyes readjusted to daylight. The brisk breeze was a refreshing tickle on his cheeks and it carried with it the smell of fish and chips from a nearby shop.

"A successful audit, sir?" Nine-six's soft voice, seldom used, cut through the air like the sound of ripping paper. It held out Hywel's Earth rod.

Hywel took it and a tickling sensation rushed up his arm from

his fingertips as he reconnected with the coiled wooden staff. Instinctively, his mind branched out and he felt Blodeuwedd's power blossom inside him. He turned the rod in his hands and it uncoiled into snaking vines before reforming at his command. Hywel grinned. He was whole again. "Yes. But there is a change of plan. There is a sparky on the loose in Ironholme."

"I thought as much." Nine-six pointed to a dark bruise in the thick white clouds smothering the skyline. "I've watched the storm clouds gather as though summoned by Taranis himself, and lightning strike the rooftops—a dozen forks at a time. They are a powerful elemental. We must exercise caution, perhaps call for support. Another earther, even a pair of blockheads."

"No." Hywel shook his head. He wouldn't share this prize, and he was far too skilled to call upon the Guild's army of non-elemental thugs. "We must exercise *haste*. Otherwise, Rochester will steal this one from me. Beating me to First Earther means more to him than anything."

"Even apprehending the Undergrid?"

"Well, probably not that." Hywel had to concede the point. Clarence Rochester was many things—few of which were pleasant—but his zealous obsession with rooting out the criminal gang of sparkies was greater than even Hywel's. "Still, I cannot afford to lose this sparky to him."

Hywel left the generating station behind and soon passed Copperton Sanitorium and Respite Park. He crossed a bridge over a canal choked with narrowboats travelling between the factories in the north and the port in the south, then turned into a maze of red-brick tenements where grubby children played in unpaved roads and tired mothers chatted on their doorsteps.

Eventually, Hywel found himself in the more salubrious side of Ironholme, walking along tree-lined streets of pale townhouses he knew only too well. He turned onto Lavender Row and as his boots trod their usual way home, a sense of unease formed in the pit of his stomach, heralding doom like some primordial beast emerging from its dark den. He picked up his pace as jagged thoughts tumbled through his mind; was the sparky a neighbour, previously hidden in

plain sight, or, perish the thought, a sparky come seeking vengeance? He burst into a sprint, leaving Nine-six behind.

Dark rumbling clouds loomed menacingly above Hywel's ivy-covered home. The hairs on his neck stood on end, his skin tingled, and he knew without doubt the rogue sparky was inside. He raced up the steps and tried the door. Unlocked. He uncoiled his Earth rod into vicious vines, then stormed inside his house.

A pile of bloody towels lay on the tiled floor at the foot of the staircase. The foreign stench of medicinal herbs lingered in the hallway. No one was in the living room, nor the kitchen beyond it, though a great iron pot sat on the hob bubbling. More towels, but clean and white, lay piled in a wicker basket before it. This wasn't a break-in. But his relief was temporary. "Sian?"

Heavy footsteps drummed above the ceiling. Hywel let his mind take root in the clematis wrapped around the upstairs bannister. His bedroom door creaked open and, through the plant, he saw a portly man rush out onto the landing. The man's blood-red eyes matched his tunic: a healer, blessed by Arianrhod, the goddess of the element Fate. "Earter Arfon?"

"My wife..." Hywel worked moisture back into his mouth. "Is she well?"

"It was a most trying delivery. A lesser healer would not have saved her." The man's tone was not boastful, then it took a sombre tone. "But, the baby..."

"Do they live?"

The healer's expression betrayed his concern. "You had better come upstairs, sir."

Drawn curtains left the bedroom in gloom. Sian lay on their bed propped up by pillows. Her eyes were closed, her face was as white as the bedsheets, and her mousey hair was slick with sweat. More bloody towels lay piled on the cream carpet. Hywel rushed to his wife and gently stroked her forehead. "Sian, are you all right?"

"Hywel?" Sian's voice trembled as she opened her eyes, her pain and exhaustion plain, but she managed a weak smile. "We have a son. I've called him Elwyn."

"Elwyn..." Hywel returned her smile and for the briefest moment

he was as happy as he had ever been. His mind flowered with visions of taking his son to play in Respite Park. Then, his brain put all the moving parts together and his joy and excitement died, replaced with cold dread. He leant into the cot and picked up his child, who fit snugly inside his suddenly clumsy hands. All he wanted was to hold this perfect little being to his chest and celebrate with his wife. But he couldn't. Not until he knew the truth. "Hello, Elwyn." His voice broke and his heart thundered in his chest. "I am your daddy."

Elwyn woke up with a stretch, chubby arms breaking through a soft muslin cocoon, and a pair of pure-white eyes stared up at Hywel.

"No..." Hywel's legs gave out and he slumped onto the bed. He held Elwyn against his shoulder, fighting back tears as he tried to bury the thoughts of what he must do, and the grim future that awaited his son.

"Isn't he handsome?" said Sian, her voice thick with pride and denial.

"He is..." Hywel frowned. "But his eyes...how can this be? There's no sign of Taranis in either of us, nothing to suggest we're aligned to Lightning. By the Elements, I'm an earther!"

"I don't know. It shouldn't be possible." Sian's brown eyes were like a pair of smooth wet river stones. "When the contractions started, I felt this power surging through me. It grew stronger and stronger." A tear broke loose and spilled onto her cheek. "I thought I was going to die, Hywel. I thought our son was going to die."

"I am sorry I was not there for you." He held her clammy hand and focussed his mind not on the turmoil ahead but on that moment with his wife and newborn son. Their first as a family. Elwyn gurgled in the crook of his arm, and he leant back so Sian could see him. "You did wonderfully, my darling, I am so proud of you."

Sian wiped her cheek and her beautiful eyes locked on his—those eyes which had first stolen his attention, then his heart. "You're going to take him from me, aren't you?"

Hywel's tongue stumbled for a response but she beat him to it.

"You are! He's *our* son, Hywel."

"It is the law," he said, but without any of his usual conviction.

"The gallows await me if I don't, or worse if I resist. Even if I delay, I will be dismissed—"

"Of course, it's about you. It always is." Sian shook her head and looked at him like he was dog mess smeared beneath her shoe. "I offered my life to the Elements during labour. I begged them to save Elwyn and take me instead. I was willing to die for our son. Yet you think only of yourself and your precious job. You are a coward, Hywel." Disgust dripped from Sian's tongue and each word lashed him, leaving him raw and ashamed. She glanced beyond his shoulder. "Oh look, your pet has come to snatch away one of his own."

Hywel turned. Nine-six stood in the doorway. A malevolent white statue set against the verdant backdrop of sweet-smelling honeysuckle cascading up the wall. Its presence suddenly made his nightmare real. Even worse, it held up a mirror to Hywel's role in the events of that morning. It showed him as he truly was. And what he saw horrified him.

The generator inside the bolt box. Thrashing and screaming as lightning surged from its skeletal body. The charred wooden chair. Its ragged clothes. The smell of fried bacon. The pain he'd inflicted on that creature—no, not a *creature*. *A person*. A living breathing human. The thoughts he had buried a moment ago resurfaced, exposing the rotten roots upon which he had built his life. One day that generator could be Elwyn. One day, he could torture his own son. A flood of emotions—shame, fear, anger—threatened to swallow him. He clutched Elwyn to his chest. "Stay back."

Nine-six flinched. "I have been your loyal servant for a decade, sir." His battery's soft voice sounded not hurt, but surprised. Disappointed, even. "I have obeyed all your commands, irrespective of my own feelings. I shall continue to do so." Nine-six closed the oak door behind him. "Whatever it is you instruct me to do."

Hywel stared dumbly at Nine-six. His brain moved slower than a narrowboat through Inglebad's canals. Surely, Nine-six was not suggesting what he thought he was? Hywel could have his battery put down. But...would he? Nine-six was offering to help, at great personal risk. And Hywel was hardly in a position to refuse. He

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opened his mouth to speak, a thank-you lodged in his mouth, an apology caught in his throat. “I-I don’t know what to say....”

Elwyn cried and the air crackled with static, interrupting Hywel’s thoughts. His son’s little face turned red as he bawled and the high-pitched sound activated Hywel’s primal instincts to protect him. Stabbing pinpricks lanced Hywel’s arms as tiny blue-white lightning bolts fired from his son’s skin, leaving him in no doubt how powerful his son already was. Nine-six stepped closer, absorbing the static. Hywel cradled Elwyn in his arms, rocking and hushing him as best he could, though feeling as useful as a chocolate teapot. For the first time, he truly *saw* his son; chubby cheeks, a little round nose above full lips, and a dimple in his chin just like Hywel. Elwyn was so small, so helpless, so innocent, and yet so valuable to the Earthers’ Guild.

“Earther Arfon.” The healer knocked on the bedroom door. “Can I come in? It likely needs a feed.”

Hywel’s jaw clamped shut. *It*. Such a small word had never carried so much force. And to hear the word directed at his own son, the one he had used so readily against other sparkies, was like a punch to the gut. Without thinking, Hywel’s mind reached out to the white-flowered honeysuckle on his bedroom wall. He felt himself take root and, as though an extension of his own arm, the thin vines snaked across to the door’s brass handle, strangling it.

“I shall not give him up,” Hywel spoke in a hurried whisper. He glanced at Sian and would forever cherish the look of joy and love she gave him, her smile wider than on their wedding day. It reminded him of what was truly important in life, what he had to fight for, and what he stood to lose. “We need to get out of Inglebad. Then make our way out of the country, to someplace where Elwyn can have a proper life.”

“Easier said than done, sir.” Nine-six cleared his throat. “Once word gets out a Lightning elemental is on the loose, the city will be crawling with earthers and blockheads. Especially when it’s known he is your son. Our only hope is the Undergrid.”

“The *Undergrid*!” Hywel baulked. Trusting Nine-six with Elwyn’s life was one thing, but the Undergrid? “Are you mad? Even if I could contact them, as if I would entrust my son to that gang of criminals.”

"Earther Arfon?" The healer banged louder and tried the door, but the vines held it closed. "I must insist that you let me in."

Hywel's mind untwined the vines from the handle. "The door is open."

The healer hurried inside. "I delayed in taking it to the Sanitorium earlier, out of courtesy to your position. But it belongs with my Order. We shall provide for it before it is transferred to the care of your Guild."

It. Hywel snarled and spoke through his teeth. "I am familiar with protocol. But *he* is my son and I will deliver *him* there myself."

"I do not think that is wise, sir." The healer's tone—firm but not unkind—carried a solemn empathy. "It'll be harder once a bond forms."

"Remember to whom you are speaking." Hywel straightened his back. The act fortified his resolve, but not more than the feel of Elwyn's warm little hand gripping his finger. "Watch you do not overstep your role."

The healer narrowed his red eyes at Hywel. "And watch you do not neglect yours."

"I will feed him." Sian interrupted the tense standoff. She held out her arms and Hywel passed her Elwyn. "Healer Gorrick, please would you be so kind as to fetch the bottles of boiled cow's milk you mentioned earlier? In case Elwyn does not latch."

The healer glanced between Sian and Hywel, his experience of these situations no doubt setting off alarm bells in his mind. Nevertheless, he left without a word and Nine-six closed the door behind him.

"We don't have much time," said Hywel. "Maybe an hour before the Guild comes knocking. We"—Hywel caught himself—"they don't wait around once a healer reports a newborn sparky. Less, if Gorrick used the telegraph in our hall."

"I suspect he sent a telegram before we even arrived, sir. Healer Gorrick strikes me as an officious—"

Bells chimed downstairs, followed swiftly by the front-door knocker clanging.

The blood drained from Hywel's face. He ran to the bedroom window and slid up the lower pane, letting light and sounds flood

inside; the mumbling hubbub of the city, and a motorised carriage honking its horn as it chugged along the street outside. Down below, a gangly man in an ink-black suit stood at Hywel's front door, flanked by two white-suited figures. Both wore the same blank-white mask as Nine-six, but one wore a suit covered in inch-long pins crackling with static charge.

Hywel ducked back inside before he was spotted. "It's Rochester, and he's got a shocker too."

They'd been sent to bury him. A summary execution. He knew the protocol for apprehending rogue earthers and sparkies—he'd been the Guild's go-to man for years: overwhelming force and no mercy. Not even four months ago, he'd buried Remi Kuval, not just a fellow earther, but a good friend. He shuddered at the memory. He couldn't risk Sian and Elwyn getting caught up in that. They were in no condition to make a run for it and there wasn't time to sneak downstairs and head out the back. At least, not without Gorrick telling Rochester where they went.

"Sian, gather what we need for Elwyn, pack as light as possible. Nine-six, stand guard in here and do not let that shocker near my family." Hywel had no idea what kind of Lightning elemental Elwyn was; either he'd absorb lightning like Nine-six, or he'd channel it. The risk of Elwyn reacting to the shocker and frying himself and Sian was too much to think about. He turned to leave then stopped, and kissed Sian and Elwyn for what he hoped was not the last time. "I love you."

"Sir, are you sure about this?"

He'd hang for assaulting an earther, that is, if he survived long enough to reach the gallows. But as he looked at his wife and newborn son, Hywel knew there was only one decision he could live with. For however long that might be. "Nine-six, whatever happens, protect my family," he said. "And...thank you." Then he picked up his Earth rod and slipped out the door.

Hywel tip-toed to the washroom off the landing and hid inside the linen closet. A moment later, he heard the healer open the front door and direct Rochester and his sparkies upstairs.

"Arfon is dangerous, keep alert," Rochester growled above the creaking stairs. "I don't want you mongrels ruining this for me."

The washroom door inched open. Hywel held his breath. He spied Rochester through the wooden slats in the linen closet's door. The man's neat grey beard and tailored suit oozed sophistication but when he moved, Rochester's sharp features and loping gait left a rather wolfish impression.

"You can't hide, Arfon. Come out, come out, wherever you are." Rochester moved on, and tapped his Earth rod on the bannister, the knocks muffled by the thick clematis. "I'm taking that bleach-eyed sprog of yours where it belongs."

It. The word set off Hywel's temper like a starting pistol. He cracked his neck. Then, as quietly as he could, he pushed open the linen closet's door. On the landing, Rochester sauntered towards the master bedroom, sandwiched between his shocker at the rear and his battery at the front.

Hywel held his Earth rod before him and set his feet. His mind extended to the clematis on the bannister as his Earth rod unwound into powerful vines. Sensing elemental magic, Rochester and the sparkies turned. A wicked smile hooked Rochester's lip, revealing yellowed teeth.

The time for words had passed.

The clematis's grasping tendrils leapt from the bannister, swarming the intruders, blocking their path to the master bedroom and separating the shocker from the others. Rochester deflected the clematis but the battery was consumed. Vines shot from Hywel's Earth rod, wrapping around the shocker's throat and chest, crushing him. The shocker's hands scrabbled at the vines but with each one torn away, another two replaced it. Gurgling and gasping for air, the shocker changed tack. He lifted his arms and unleashed a surge of lightning towards Hywel.

Blindingly bright, ice-white bolts struck Hywel's Earth rod with a ferocious clap. The wooden staff thrashed and kicked in his grip as it diverted the crackling energy into the tiled floor. But there was too much. Jagged forks of lightning whipped and slashed his body, burning the flesh from his bones despite his natural resistance. He

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clamped his jaw shut and closed his eyes. The primal urge to save Elwyn sustained him, as did knowing the shocker would burn out if he kept up this attack.

Moments passed—it could have been seconds, minutes, the pain blinded Hywel to the passage of time. Then the lightning stopped. The air throbbed with static and acrid smoke stung his nostrils. Leaning heavily on his Earth rod, which now crackled with bright-blue lightning inside its clear orb, Hywel opened his eyes just as the shocker slumped to the ground in a sizzling heap.

Without hesitation, Rochester leapt over the shocker's body. Snarling, with yellowed teeth bared, he lunged at Hywel, swinging his staff. Hywel barely managed to raise his own in time to parry the blow. Their rods collided with a cacophonous clap. Rochester reeled back but Hywel's rod clattered onto the landing.

Hywel charged at Rochester and smacked the staff from the man's hands. He was shorter than Rochester but broader and stronger, and more desperate. He threw punches, a headbutt, an elbow; landing no clean blows but plenty that made Rochester groan.

Rochester smothered Hywel in a boxer's clinch and kneed him in the thigh, the chest. Hywel dropped his shoulder and shoved Rochester against the wall. He threw a punch, missed, and Rochester grabbed him again. They cursed and growled as they wrestled.

Rochester's thumb gouged his eye. Hywel flinched and covered his face. The instinctive response created an opportunity. Rochester kicked Hywel in the chest and he staggered back. Then, with a predatory grin, Rochester picked up Hywel's crackling Earth rod and speared him.

The captured lightning exploded. Hywel flew backwards in an explosion of white-hot static. He landed heavily on the tiled floor. The air thumped from his lungs. His burned and battered body screamed in pain. Hywel rolled over and crawled to the bath beneath the washroom window, gripping the edges of the tub to drag himself to his feet.

"It's over, Arfon." Rochester blocked the doorway and wiped blood from his nose as two white-suited figures stepped behind him; Rochester's battery and Nine-six, who held Elwyn in his arms.

"We've got your precious spark-spawn and it doesn't look good for you either. Going rogue and assaulting an earther, *tsk tsk*. Grandmaster Fotheringham will be most disappointed when I tell him 'Prince Hywel' has betrayed us."

"Jealous until the end, Clarence." Hywel snorted at his rival's pettiness. "I have made my bed, I alone. Sian had nothing to do with it."

"She's not my concern. Although, the Guild are always after surrogates." Rochester grinned then clicked his fingers. "Eleven-five, take that... *creature* downstairs. I won't be long."

"Sir," Nine-six piped up. "I think it will be safest if I take the child. He has already bonded to me."

"You hear that? Not an ounce of loyalty in these white-eyed freaks, not even to their own." Rochester chuckled. It sounded like stones shaken in a paper bag. "I don't care who takes it in."

Hywel glared at Nine-six. Maybe this was his way of paying Hywel back for years of mistreatment. It didn't much matter now. He deserved his fate but his son did not. Elwyn was innocent, pure. But there was nothing Hywel could do. He was outnumbered and outmanoeuvred. He couldn't see any way to save Elwyn now. The only chance to save his son was by first saving himself. He stepped back into the bath.

"Hand yourself in peacefully now. Never know, may save your life."

"Same lie I told Kuval." Speaking his friend's name aloud dug up the grisly memory Hywel had tried to bury in the dark depths of his mind. Kuval wouldn't bond with a young sparky that was the same age as his own daughter. He'd lost his nerve, gone soft, allowed the sparky to escape the Guild's control, so Hywel buried him. The Guild could not abide weakness. Strength and fear kept the sparkies beneath their heel. No bonded sparkies, no lightning. No lightning, no electricity. Inglebad would grind to a halt, factories would close or, worse, move elsewhere. The Guild would have failed. That could not be allowed to happen. Weakness was death. "You won't let me leave here alive."

"No." Rochester cracked his knuckles and stepped forwards. "I've dreamed of this moment."

Hywel spun, slid up the sash window and rolled outside, just as

a vine smashed through the glass. He dropped onto the flat roof of the kitchen below then rolled off the edge. He landed in a heap, then crawled into a run. His body ached down to his marrow and his skin burned where it rubbed his clothes. Yet, he pushed his body to its limit. He dashed across his small garden and clambered over the back wall into his neighbour's garden. He glanced back towards his house, expecting pursuit.

Instead, Rochester watched him from the washroom window. A faint smile cracked his lupine face before he turned away.

After Rochester disappeared inside, Hywel cut across his neighbours' gardens, scaling walls and pushing through bushes, while looking for a passage out onto the street. "Think, Hywel," he muttered, urging his brain to come up with a plan.

One of the gardens had washing on the line. He kicked off his red rubber boots, slipped off his tweed trousers, jacket, and waistcoat—now was not the time to be declaring himself an earther—then tossed them in a bush before he unpegged a pair of plum corduroy trousers and a thick mustard and brown cable-knit jumper. The trousers were too big and the jumper drowned him. He'd never be seen dead in such ill-fitting clothes. But, perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing. He stuck his boots on and grabbed the money clip from his old jacket before he dashed off.

Protocol dictated Elwyn would go to the nearest Sanitorium, which was in Copperton. They'd keep him there for some time before the Guild collected him, Sian, too, but he didn't know how long. Days, weeks, months? It usually depended on the sparky's age. A thought crossed his mind; what if they made an exception in this case? Sometimes they did, if the sparky was particularly dangerous. He'd taken sparkies straight to Grove Tower, the Guild's headquarters, though they'd all been adults, the youngest maybe fifteen. Never a baby. Elemental alignments usually occurred in puberty, even later if triggered by a traumatic event. Babies born already able to summon the lightning of Taranis were rare and incredibly valuable.

And could he even break them out? Sanitoriums were designed

to keep sparkies in. They weren't dancehalls one could walk in and out of freely. The loss of his Earth rod smarted; he felt weaker. Each rod was unique to an earther, constructed over months of torturous training. It provided a focal point to channel Blodeuwedd's power, a conduit for the enormous elemental energy at his fingertips. It was simply irreplaceable. He was only ever without it inside a generating station; that much concentrated lightning in the atmosphere could damage it. Without it, he was incomplete.

"Go with your gut," Hywel told himself. "They'll take him to Copperton Sanitorium. Figure out a plan to break them out on the way. You are strong enough. You have to be."

If he was Rochester, he would put eyes on the ends of his road. Hywel had to find a different route. An unexpected one. Though it galled him he tried a few back doors until one opened. As quick as he could, he strode through a cosy kitchen that smelled of toast and freshly brewed tea, along a narrow hall tiled in an eye-jarring mosaic pattern, and out of the front door. Without breaking step, he jogged down the front steps and across the road, turning off onto another street then another, putting as much distance as he could between himself and his home before emerging onto Ironholme's main thoroughfare.

It was easy enough to lose oneself on King's Road. It was about as busy a road as you'd find in Inglebad outside the very heart of the city. Hywel mingled with the crowd and allowed the rush of noise to swallow him whole; mothers pushing babies in perambulators, men talking politics or business, children gawking at shopfronts and begging for whatever shiny knickknack was behind the glass, food stalls and shoe shines, business folk in tailored suits and workers in overalls.

A young paperboy shouted himself hoarse trying to flog his last copies. Hywel tossed the boy a copper and tucked the paper under his arm, then stopped at a bakery to buy two corned-beef pasties. His stomach growled for the warm, greasy contents inside the paper bag, and he hoped the purchases would help him disappear in the crowd. The Guild would be on high alert by now, with all available earthers and blockheads on the hunt. But they'd be looking for Earther Hywel

Arfon—well-dressed, desperate and dangerous—not some worker in ill-fitting clothes taking a late afternoon lunch break.

The *clip-clop* of shod hooves and a sharp jingling brought him to attention and he weaved through the crowd towards the approaching omnibus with his hand raised. The driver brought the horse-drawn carriage to a halt and Hywel hopped onto the back, slipping the brown-liveried conductor two copper coins. There were no free seats so he stood in the aisle, breathing in the thick fog of tobacco smoke as he ate his pasties, grateful for the anonymity amongst the chatter of those aboard.

The omnibus plodded along King's Road, stopping and starting at regular intervals. At each stop, Hywel risked a glance outside and at those climbing aboard, half-expecting to see a tweed-clad earther and their battery, or a street-tough blockhead. But of course, he didn't. It would be a waste of resources to ask even the dull-witted blockheads to randomly roam the streets. When he had led search parties, he had posted earthers to the railway stations and main checkpoints out of Inglebad, as well as the sparky's home and place of work. Occasionally, the port if there was some connection, but rarely: the Port and Canals Authority distrusted sparkies as much as the Guild.

When the omnibus finally crossed over the canal bridge into Copperton, Hywel hopped off a few streets down from the Sanitorium and entered the back of Respite Park.

The trees were that wonderful autumn mix of gold, orange, and red amongst the evergreens. Paved paths snaked across immaculate lawns lined with vibrant flowers and painted benches. A soft breeze carried the sweet smells of wild garlic and jasmine, and children laughed as they played. He held his face up to the sky and took a few deep breaths, drawing strength and energy from the green oasis around him and the weak sunlight filtering through the smothering clouds. He could almost feel the burns and aches in his body fade as Blodeuwedd's gifts refreshed and reinvigorated him. It was almost enough to make up for the loss of his Earth rod. Well, it would have to be.

Hywel watched the children play for a moment, wondering if

Elwyn would ever get that chance to be wild and carefree. But now was not the time to get emotional, so he pushed all thoughts except plans of attack from his mind as he made his way across the sprawling park towards the Sanitorium.

Hywel watched the comings and goings of Copperton Sanitorium from a bench inside Respite Park, his eyes peering over the top of his newspaper. It was as grand and formidable a building as its name suggested. Built from great blocks of ruddy stone, each as tall as a man and an arm-span wide, it towered above the buildings either side of it, projecting an ominous power like a wolf amongst a pack of dogs. Long narrow windows set with iron bars betrayed its more sinister role as a holding centre for sparkies before the Earthers' Guild claimed them.

Two blockheads stood either side of the entrance in the shadows of twisted granite columns. They were a real rough-looking pair of brutes in green shirts, with not a straight nose between them, and both experts in breaking skulls with the wooden batons at their waists. The taller one smoked a pipe, nodding at whatever it was the other said to him, while occasionally eyeing up someone on their way in. Hywel's stomach churned. Without his Earth rod, he stood little chance of getting past them.

A youngish woman pushing a pram stopped and sat next to him. She wore an ankle-length plaid dress, and her blonde hair, perfumed with lavender, was tied up in an elaborate plait. She huffed and sighed as if she wanted to make conversation. Hywel smiled but otherwise paid her no mind, hoping she'd take the hint and move on.

"Strange weather this afternoon," she said at last, rolling her *r*'s and stretching her vowels in an accent he couldn't quite place. "Quite the storm we had."

"Storms are pretty common in Inglebad."

"Yeah? Probably one of those Lightning elementals, eh? Causing the storm, I mean."

"Indeed," he said, though he felt compelled to distort what had really happened. "Most likely a generating station firing up."

"Is that so? And what about that miserable-looking building over

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there, then? Is that where they take them, is it? The little ones. Terribly sad, wouldn't you say?"

Hywel turned to the woman, who held his stare without blinking. She had Taranis-touched eyes, brown with floating white flecks, a strong jaw and an aquiline nose that gave her a regal bearing. He glanced down at the pram. Inside was a child's doll, staring lifelessly towards the sky. A chill ran down his spine. He folded his newspaper and went to stand but she placed her hand firmly on his leg.

"Easy now, Earther Arfon. You will want to hear what I have to say."

The park suddenly felt darker, colder. Hywel swallowed what felt like an egg in his throat. "Who-who are you?"

"You can call me...Storm. Once your foe but maybe now your friend."

"You are from the Undergrid!" Hywel baulked at the brazenness of this woman. "I could have you arrested."

"Yes, you could." Storm smiled and spoke with rock-steady conviction. "But you won't. You wouldn't want to draw attention to yourself, would you? What would happen to Elwyn?"

Hywel bared his teeth and leant in but Storm didn't so much as flinch. "How do you know his name?"

"A mutual colleague sent me. The man you know as 'Nine-six.'"

"Nine-six? How is he your...?" The realisation struck him like a lightning bolt. "He is with the Undergrid."

"That he is. Now, bury your shock about this revelation for a moment and let's get down to it. Go to this address in the port before nine o'clock this evening." She held out a simple white business card and he took it without thinking, just surprised that the Undergrid worked out of the port. "There's a ship that leaves once a week, sometimes more. Join us and there'll be a space aboard for you, Sian, and Elwyn. We'll get you out of Inglebad's jurisdiction, where Elwyn will be safe."

Hywel shook his head but, suddenly, the sound of children laughing and playing seemed to become louder and louder. "Why are you telling me this? This information could bring down the Undergrid. The Guild would do anything to know this. It would probably save me from the gallows."

“It’s a risk we’ve decided to accept,” said Storm. “And, do you really believe the Guild will let you live? You, of all people, know their promises are empty. Say they do spare you, what then? In saving yourself you would condemn Sian and Elwyn to the most miserable, wretched existences imaginable. You know better than anyone what awaits them—”

“Don’t.” A heavy, suffocating dread pinned him to the bench. It squeezed the air from his lungs and left him as limp as a deflated balloon. “Please.”

“Why should I not?” It was Storm’s turn to bare her teeth at him and Hywel shrunk back. “This is the fate that *you* have inflicted on countless innocents. If you think it just, then why is it hard to hear?”

Hywel closed his eyes and said nothing. How could he?

“Having given birth to a pure Lightning elemental, that rarest and most valuable of children, Sian will become a surrogate for the Guild.” Storm’s mouth twisted as she said “surrogate” and the word stabbed Hywel, carving a vicious, cold cut through his heart. “And Elwyn? Nine-six said how powerful he is. No doubt he’ll make a fine generator.”

The image of the generator from that morning jolted into Hywel’s mind. She thrashed and screamed beneath that cursed copper mask and he watched her suffer without a shred of remorse. *He* did that to her. And afterwards, all he had thought about was lunch. But now, the pasties in his stomach threatened to burst from his body and he felt nothing but shame.

“We have shared this information to convince you to trust us. We are sticking our necks in the noose here. This is a high-risk gamble. Elwyn is under guard like no other babe before him. Ordinarily, we wouldn’t take the risk. There are many other innocents to be saved with far less risk to our operatives. His life and Sian’s life are worth no more than any other. But we need someone like you, with your experience and knowledge. You’d be an asset to the struggle. And you need us.”

“No.” Hywel shook his head as the nature of this agreement resolved itself in his mind. Though he could see now, with painful clarity, the awful things he had done, jumping into bed with the

Undergrid was no way to redeem himself. “You are terrorists, criminals, agents of anarchy. You have murdered my colleagues, my friends, and politicians. Blown up buildings, killing and maiming innocents, destroyed railroads and the Elements know what else. I cannot trust you. I cannot *join* you. I cannot allow myself or my family to be beholden to the Undergrid. No, I shall free them myself.”

Storm raised her eyebrows, surprise writ plain on her face. “Now is not the time to correct the falsehoods and propaganda you believe about us. But, so be it. You are the one who has to live with your decision. We tried to help you. Remember that.” She stood, smoothed down her plaid dress then nodded towards the Sanitorium. “They are being held on the second floor, Ward S, room two. Your best bet is the mortuary entrance round the back, I’d say.”

It took Hywel a few minutes to compose himself after Storm left. His hands trembled and an iron grip crushed his chest. His mind swirled from the questions and revelations Storm left him grappling with. But now was not the time to think it all through. Now was the time to rescue Sian and Elwyn. After a couple of deep breaths his chest loosened, then he got up and walked out of the park.

He didn’t know whether to trust the tip-off about Sian and Elwyn’s location. Then again, it was a better place to start than trying to hope he got lucky and just stumbled across them. And he could hardly stroll up to the reception desk and enquire. That is, if he even managed to get past the blockheads out front. So, he walked alongside the park’s cast-iron railings to the end of the road, where Canal Street bisected the city north to south.

Hywel crossed the road behind a motorcar and walked purposefully down the side of the Sanitorium. A weather-beaten sign for the mortuary directed him down a muddy lane between two sections of the colossal building. It was damp and gloomy, the sun hidden behind the towering walls of the Sanitorium either side, and sounds blasted erratically through open windows; a high-pitched scream, shouting, arguing, moans, cries for medicine or help, and the unmistakable crackle of lightning. Suddenly those noises had a sinister edge and a heavy weight formed in his stomach. He picked up his pace.

The lane ended at a set of wood-and-glass doors, which were thrown open onto an ochre-tiled corridor. A pair of heavyset orderlies in grubby white uniforms chatted just outside the doors. Neither looked up as he walked inside.

Hywel didn't stop as he entered. He moved as if he belonged and knew where he was going, smiling and nodding at healers and nurses going about their shifts. He glanced at signs on the cream-painted walls and followed directions to the stairwell, which wound upwards for maybe ten floors. There was no movement in the stairwell, no sound at all. He climbed, his heart pounding with each step, and soon found himself on the second floor.

A white-tiled corridor stretched in both directions. Fixed to the wall in front of him, beside various posters for common ailments, was a large sign with arrows. To the left was Paediatrics (General) and Paediatrics (Theatre). To the right was Paediatrics (Burns) and Ward S. Hywel turned right.

The corridor was strangely quiet except for the steady *zzzz* from the electric lamps on the walls and his squeaking boots sounded like thunderclaps as he walked. At staggered intervals, little grey signs hung from the ceiling; the first said: "Paediatrics (Burns)." He walked to the next one, a hundred yards or so from the stairwell: "Ward S." Hywel leant against the wall and peered through the door's small glass windows.

A nurse's station faced the door. It was unattended. Hywel swallowed and crept inside on high alert. The ward branched off in two directions, with four rooms on either side, each with a little window. Muffled conversations took place behind closed doors and the faint smell of fried bacon lingered in the air from a half-eaten roll on the nurse's station. The smell turned his stomach, making him nauseous.

"Room two," he muttered, then broke into a grin. Through the small glass window on a door marked "2," he saw Sian rocking Elwyn in her arms. She turned, as if she sensed him nearby, and his grin vanished. Her eyes were saucers, terror-struck and bloodshot, and her face twisted in an anguished scream. The door opened.

"I hoped you'd stop by, Arfon." The pleasure in Rochester's voice

was unbearable. He stepped in front of the door, blocking Hywel's view of Sian and Elwyn. Rochester had a nasty split lip and the start of a black eye but he otherwise looked as debonaire as ever. The featureless white mask of his battery hovered over Rochester's shoulder, a sight that was no longer just unsettling, but terrifying. "Sadly, visiting hours are over."

Hywel heard door handles turning either side of him. He glanced left. A shocker stepped into the corridor, short and petite. The air crackled around her and blue jolts hopped between the pins on her white suit. He glanced right. Two blockheads leered at him. One cracked the knuckles on his ham-sized fists, the other swiped his wooden baton through the air—*swish, swish*. They sauntered forwards, looking far too happy to see him.

It was hopeless. He knew it. Rochester knew it. Sian must know it too. There was no way he could overpower Rochester's gang alone, especially without his Earth rod. Hywel backed up to the door as the blockheads and shocker closed in.

"I love you," he shouted, then ran back into the corridor.

"Catch him," Rochester roared. "And dead is fine by me."

Hywel sprinted towards the stairwell, yelling at a bewildered healer to stand aside. By the time the blockheads' boots thundered behind him he had reached the doors to the Burns Ward. He risked a glance over his shoulder as he reached the stairwell and saw Rochester and the shocker in the hunting pack. Thankfully, the burly thugs blocked any clear view for the shocker to try and blast Hywel. Short of breath, Hywel shoved open the double doors.

A blockhead ran up the stairs towards him. "Got you—"

But Hywel reached the landing first. He kicked the blockhead in the chest, sending him tumbling back down the stairs. The oaf clambered shakily to his knees just in time for Hywel to knee him in the face, dropping him for a second time. The doors above him burst open and the blockheads hurtled down the stairs while the shocker stopped at the handrail.

A tingling across his skin warned him a moment before the bolt of lightning struck his back. He staggered forwards, the pain like being whipped with a belt. He grabbed hold of the handrail as he

fell to his knees, just about saving himself from falling headfirst down the stairs. He got to his feet as the blockheads were nearly on him. His skin tingled and he leapt down the stairs, landing heavily on the ground.

The wall where he'd stood a moment ago was scorched black. The blockheads stared at each other, stunned and hesitant to press on in case the shocker fired another bolt of lightning. It was the pause Hywel needed. He scrambled to his feet and ran out into the Sanitorium's ground floor.

Behind him, Rochester yelled, "Get him, you cowards!"

Hywel retraced his steps. The presence of staff and patients gave the shocker no clear shot at him and the lumbering blockheads tired with each step and fell further behind. He smiled as he saw the exit into the lane. Though that faded as the two orderlies he'd seen earlier now blocked the doors. Their wicked smiles confirmed his fears: blockheads.

It was too late to stop. Rochester and his gang were behind him. The only way out was through those blockheads. Hywel charged at the brutes, his fists clenched and ready to strike, and roared a battlecry. But as he did so, his skin tingled. Instinctively, he threw himself against the wall.

A blue-white lightning bolt crackled past him, its heat prickling his cheeks, and struck one of the blockheads in the chest. The man went down with a yelp and his shirt caught alight. His partner stared, dumbfounded. Hywel pushed off the wall, recovering his balance, and punched the blockhead flush on the jaw. The man's head whipped to the side and his body followed as he twirled to the ground like a falling tree.

Hywel ran into the narrow lane, his lungs on fire and his legs begging for a rest. He pushed on. Once, a lightning bolt thumped into the walls of the Sanitorium above him. But not again. He guessed the shocker had run out of energy, or he was out of range. He cared not either way and dashed out of the lane, running headlong through traffic on Canal Street, over the grassy embankment on the other side, and down onto the towpath beside the canal.

A line of narrowboats laden with goods sailed south to the port.

Without breaking stride, he jumped onto the deck of the closest one. He crashed against a tarpaulin mound that did not yield an inch. With a dead arm and a groan, he climbed over the mound then crawled underneath the tarpaulin. A stack of steel girders lay beneath the khaki covering and he pressed against them as a gruff voice hollered.

A few moments later, beneath the edge of the tarpaulin, a pair of worn leather boots tramped across the deck. Hywel held his breath. “Damn kids,” said the gruff voice, as the boots turned and went back to the captain’s cabin. “Ain’t got time for no pranks.”

Hywel waited a few minutes, grateful for the chance to catch his breath, then fished the Undergrid’s business card from his pocket. The white card claimed to be for a shipping company, its name and address spelled out in simple black letters. He turned the card between his fingers and realised he had already made up his mind. As if he had any other choice.

The narrowboat stopped too frequently for his liking as it navigated through the canal’s extensive lock system. Hywel checked their progress each time. It was unbearably slow. And it gave him too much time to doubt what he was doing, and fear for his family’s future. The afternoon trickled away into a cool, dark evening and across the city the electric streetlamps flickered on, throwing an orange haze above the rooftops. Finally, the narrowboat stopped at the largest lock of all into the Port of Inglebad. Hywel crawled from beneath the tarpaulin and hopped off. Behind him, he heard the captain yell but he didn’t look back.

Unlike the rest of the city, there were no electric streetlamps in the port. Hywel walked amongst the shadows cast by large warehouses, keeping pace ahead of a lone Fire elemental firing up the port’s traditional torches. The orange-cloaked disciple of Belenus bent over each round concrete basin and—*whoosh*—ignited a flickering flame, which burned without heat or fuel. It was far less effective than an electric streetlamp but, for once, Hywel was grateful for the deeply entrenched animosity towards electricity in these parts.

A strong wind blew from the darkness of the sea, salty and fresh, and Hywel wished for a thick coat to warm his bones as he walked along the wharves. Night had finally swallowed the city. Yet, even now, stevedores still cursed and yelled as they loaded cargo onto great steel ships bound for who knew where.

Hywel found the address on the card. It was a red-brick warehouse with a corrugated iron roof, one amongst a hundred all the same, set about halfway down the penultimate wharf in the port. He'd seen no sign of any blockheads or earthers thus far, and those scuttling about the port had better things to worry about than a lone man. Yet, he still glanced nervously about before walking inside.

Stacks of crates filled the warehouse. Each crate was twenty feet high and each stack at least a dozen crates tall. To his left, an iron staircase led up to an office on a gantry high above. A dim light shone through the small window in the office door. Hywel started as he spotted a figure shrouded in shadow watching him from the gantry.

"I wondered if you'd come," said the figure. Hywel thought he recognised the man's soft voice. "I am glad that you did. Come, we have much to discuss."

"Nine-six?"

"Please do not call me that. My chosen name is Ocelot."

"Oh, I...I am sorry." Hywel climbed the stairs as Nine-six—no, *Ocelot*—opened the door to the office, throwing a weak beam of light into the warehouse. It shamed him to realise, in over a decade working together, Hywel had never asked if "Nine-six" was actually his name. It had never occurred to him to ask.

Maps of Inglebad and the wider world covered the office's papered walls, and it smelled of coffee and stale tobacco. Storm sat at a heavily notched table made from dark teak, with mugs and papers scattered across its surface. Her elaborately plaited blonde hair was gone, a wig it seemed, and she now sported a brunette bob. She watched him, a small smile on her painted-red lips.

A balding, heavyset man with sunburned skin sat beside Storm. He wore a striped jumper over a lemon shirt and his eyes—a pair of gleaming sapphires—bored into Hywel with what he could only

describe as intense hatred. Hywel hadn't expected to find any jetters with the Undergrid. Water elementals hated sparkies as much as earthers, or so he had believed.

"This is Darius, the captain of our rescue ship," said Ocelot.

Darius grunted what might have been a welcome in response.

"A pleasure," said Hywel. Then he turned to Ocelot and gasped. Ocelot wore no mask. It was the first time Hywel had ever seen his battery's face and he was too shocked to mask his horror. Tattooed in blue-green ink across Ocelot's high forehead was "96 B 47-4." Hywel didn't know where to look. He didn't know what to say. His mouth flopped open pathetically and the look on his face must have said it all.

"Just in case I escape," said Ocelot. "Or I forget I am chattel."

Hywel shook his head, stunned that Ocelot had been branded like cattle. Then again, was it truly a surprise? He himself had never considered Ocelot his equal. He had treated him like a disposable tool, something to assist him and nothing more. It was a sight that would be seared into his brain, along with the shame of knowing he had been a willing part of the system that could do this to another human. Why had he not considered it unjust? What did it say about him that he could inflict this misery on others? Was he callous, cruel? Most certainly. Perhaps, even...*evil*? A rush of blood to his head made him grip the table for support. His selfish greed and ambition had blinded him, and it took the system coming after his family for Hywel to finally see the rotten truth of the man he truly was. He hung his head. "I am so sorry."

Darius and Storm both snorted.

"Save your apologies," said Ocelot, in a tone that demanded obedience. "Take a seat."

Hywel sat down beside Storm and spotted a familiar staff poking out of the umbrella stand. "My Earth rod!"

Ocelot plucked it from the stand and tossed it across the table. Hywel caught it and a warm, tingling sensation flowed from his fingertips up his arm. He already felt more powerful, more confident. He twirled it in his hands and the coils began to unwind—then he

stopped. He became conscious of those around the table, of the fear and anger the sight of those vines might cause them.

“In the bedlam after your battle with Rochester, I stashed it away and one of our agents collected it. We thought you may want it back.”

“Thank you,” he said. “This means a lot to me.”

“There was no sentiment involved. You’re more use to us with it than without it.” Ocelot spoke with the brusqueness of a military commander, no longer the soft-spoken battery Hywel thought he had known. “If you want to free Sian and Elwyn, we must move quickly. But first, you must know that our price for freeing your family is your complete cooperation. There is much that you know that I am not privy to, and your skills are invaluable. An earther of your rank would be a real coup in our struggle. You will answer all our questions, divulge all that you know, and do whatever it is we ask of you. This is a high price to ask of you but the risk to us is equally great.”

Hywel’s emerald-green eyes locked with Ocelot’s pearlescent pair. For the first time, Hywel held his battery’s gaze as an equal. “I swear I will do anything you want. Anything.”

“Good. Now, tackling the Sanitorium head-on, not to mention alone, was not a wise course of action. You are very lucky one of our agents was able to help you escape.”

“What?” Hywel’s face scrunched up in surprise. Then, as his mind replayed his escape, he realised there was more to it than just luck or skill. The shocker hit him on the stairs with a lightning bolt that merely knocked him over. It could have been far worse. She’d held back. Then, she’d missed him as he lay prone on the stairs, which allowed him to escape. And now, he suspected that she’d always meant to strike the blockhead at the mortuary entrance. “The shocker.”

“Naya is her name. She sent a telegram updating us just before you arrived. Your little stunt has shocked the staff at the Sanitorium. It’s actually helped us. Normally, they’d hold Elwyn and Sian for a few weeks, months even, before the Guild collected them. Now, however, they want them gone. The Sanitorium’s Director is kicking up a

fuss with Fotheringham about scorched walls and dead blockheads, and their unacceptable threat to patient and staff safety. Long story short, the Guild will be collecting them tonight and taking them back to Grove Tower.”

“Tonight?” Hywel’s heart sank, his new hope dashed. “But...the Tower is a fortress. We need time to plan. This...this is a disaster!”

“No,” Ocelot spoke firmly, with the authority of an experienced leader. “This is good. Yes, the *Tower* is impregnable to anything short of an army, but a transport arranged hastily is very vulnerable. Who will be available at such short notice? The Guild will assign Rochester, as he’s already there, and, so too, Rochester’s battery; she’s not one of ours. Then Naya, and whatever blockheads survived. I’ll have to head back to the barracks in case they summon me. We need to strike quickly. Once they remove Elwyn and Sian from the Sanitorium, we’ll snatch them on their way to the Tower. That’s the window. After that, they’ll be lost to the Guild.”

The motorised wagon was as black as the sky above it. Its rear compartment had a yellow flower painted on each side, the daffodil of Blodeuwedd, iron bars across the solitary window and reinforced steel doors. Hywel knew the inside was layered in rubber sheets, as were the benches welded to the floor. The wagon grumbled out of the lane from the Sanitorium’s mortuary and headed north up the now-deserted Canal Street. Rochester sat beside the driver up front, a Guildsman in marmalade overalls and cap. A second wagon, identical to the first, followed not far behind.

“They’re on their way.” Hywel handed the binoculars back to Storm as he climbed into the motorcar beside her. He bounced his Earth rod on his knees and tugged at the flat cap he’d been given. He’d been on transports before, as had Rochester. He could count on one hand the number of times a sparky had escaped. Their plan suddenly seemed so simple, so hopeless. Hywel took a deep breath and folded up the collar of his new trench coat.

“You ready?” Storm arched her eyebrows and he worried she could sense his nerves.

“Yes, of course,” he said, a bit too sharply. “This is not my first operation, you know.”

“Okay, big boy.” Storm tapped his knee. “You just keep calm, do as we say, and remember whose side you are on.”

Hywel started to object then thought better of it, swallowing his pride and indignation. Though it still grated, he wasn’t in charge here.

Storm fiddled with levers and dials beside the wheel, then she pressed a pedal and the engine sputtered to life, spewing out acrid black smoke. This was it. This was the moment where he truly left his old life behind him. He felt sick but exhilarated. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, mingling with fear. If this didn’t work, he’d never see his family again.

Behind them, another motorcar coughed and sputtered into life. The driver was Bryn, a stocky and sullen warhorse and long-serving member of the Undergrid, who could easily have passed for a blockhead if not for his open hostility towards the Guild. Beside Bryn was a jittery flamer called Gryff, a Fire elemental who spoke at the speed of lightning and had coal-black eyes. They were a small team but experienced in smash-and-grab attacks, so Storm claimed.

They pulled onto Canal Street, a hundred yards or so ahead of the Guild’s lead wagon and trundled along. Bryn remained in the side street, waiting for their target to pass. It was all Hywel could do not to turn around, but he couldn’t risk Rochester spotting him, however unlikely. He watched the lead wagon in the motorcar’s side mirror as it gained on them.

They approached a canal bridge on their left. A narrowboat appeared to have run into difficulty, and its captain’s backside poked out of the engine compartment at the rear.

Storm gently applied the brakes.

The Guild’s wagon approached on their left and, just as it was about to overtake them, Storm spun the steering wheel and blocked its path. The Guild’s wagon screeched to a halt and the second swerved to avoid rear-ending it. Hywel hopped out as Bryn’s motorcar accelerated alongside. Gryff stood in the passenger seat beside Bryn,

muttering, his eyes glowed like red-hot embers and a fiery ball the size of a watermelon formed between his hands.

The doors of the second Guild wagon opened with a *clang*. Yelled orders and heavy boots pounded the road. Rochester—snarling and shouting—clambered out of the lead wagon, raring to attack, but Gryff's fireball smashed into the driver's compartment. Rochester, engulfed in flames, screamed and dived for cover.

Hywel ran towards the rear of the lead wagon. A huge man stepped from behind it and Hywel skittered to a stop. It was the blockhead from the mortuary lane, still in dirty white scrubs and nursing a black eye, but this time armed with a billy club. He ran at Hywel just as a *whoosh* came from behind, another of Gryff's fireballs. The blockhead stopped. The vicious grin fell from his craggy chops as an apple-sized fireball raced over Hywel's shoulder. It thumped the blockhead in the chest and he staggered back, dazed and hurt, but not down.

Hywel darted forwards and focussed his mind, uncoiling his Earth rod into whipping vines that intertwined into a giant club as they shot forth. The vines struck the blockhead and his head snapped back. Spit and shards of teeth flew through the air and the blockhead dropped to the road in a pitiful heap. Hywel reached the back of the wagon and pointed his Earth rod. Vines slammed into the door, punching huge dents in the reinforced steel. *Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!* The vines slithered under the tiny gaps at the edges and where the two doors met. Hywel pushed as much energy as he could muster through the staff. The doors strained, buckled, and finally popped open in a screech of twisted metal. “Sian?”

Inside was dark but he could make out a few figures, then his skin prickled. He instinctively held up his Earth rod as lightning flashed, illuminating the inside of the wagon.

Ocelot grappled with a heavily built shocker. Lightning crackled across the long pins covering the shocker's suit, but Ocelot absorbed it all. Ocelot punched the shocker. The shocker throttled Ocelot. Sian cowered on the bench beneath them, her manacled feet chained to a metal ring on the padded floor. Elwyn cried, harsh high-pitched wails that lanced Hywel. With each cry, lightning shot from Elwyn's

tiny body. Sian held their son, trying to soothe him, and the padded walls absorbed what her body didn't. Hywel pointed his Earth rod, and a vine shot forth, wrapping around the manacles and the metal ring, then wrenched them apart as if they were nothing but paper decorations.

Sian rushed out, clutching Elwyn to her chest, and stumbled into his arms. The relief at seeing them was indescribable. Hywel wanted to burst with joy. But they weren't safe yet, nor was Ocelot. He gave her a quick kiss, and another for Elwyn, then climbed into the wagon.

Hywel pointed his Earth rod at the pin-covered man in white. Vines wrapped around the shocker's muscled frame and arms, peeling his hands from around Ocelot's throat. Ocelot broke free and kicked the shocker in the gut. The shocker doubled over. Then, with a frightful yell, the shocker unleashed a blast of lightning. Blinding white bolts shot in jagged arcs from his body. Ocelot and the rubber surfaces absorbed the worst of it, but a kickback flowed through the vines from the Earth rod. The bolts fried some of the vines and burned Hywel's arms. But Hywel held on. He focussed his mind beyond the pain and towards his family's freedom. The vines squeezed the shocker, crushing him, until, finally, the shocker slumped to the padded floor.

A motorcar's horn blared, startling Hywel. Bryn hopped out—blood dribbling from his nose—and started pulling the leather convertible roof from behind the two seats, tying it to the frame of the windscreen. Gryff was slumped inside, his eyes and skin as grey as ash, sweat-soaked and exhausted. Storm pulled her motorcar alongside, its roof still down.

“Quickly,” she said, waving Ocelot towards the car. Then she pointed towards the canal, and the narrowboat that no longer seemed in difficulty. “Get aboard. Our agent will be waiting for you at the port. A sailor named Elber. Do what he says, trust me.”

Hywel flinched. *Trust me.* The remark from an Undergrid agent still challenged everything he thought he knew. But he had come too far to stop now. “Find Elber, understood.” Hywel took off his coat and flat cap and handed both to Ocelot, who peeled off his mask then slipped the garments on before climbing into the idling car.

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Hywel leant inside. The sight of his former battery filled him with joy and an unexpected feeling of camaraderie.

“Thank you,” he said, meeting Ocelot’s eye. “I treated you terribly. Yet, you have still helped me save my family. You are a better man than me, that is clear. For what it’s worth, I am sorry. For everything. Truly, I mean it. I will never be able to repay you.”

“I didn’t do this for *you*. I did it for your son and for our movement. But...” Ocelot paused and Hywel saw a hint of a smile in his pure-white eyes. “Maybe when our paths next cross you will have helped us enough for me to forgive you.”

Ocelot tapped the windscreen and Hywel stepped back. Storm and Bryn pulled their motorcars away, each in different directions.

Sian stepped beside him, shushing Elwyn, who had now settled down. She still looked wan and weak with dark circles beneath her scared eyes. He wanted to take her in his arms and never let her go. He stroked her cheek, pushing a lock of mousey hair behind her ear, and it was all he could do not to cry.

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand and leading her down to the canal towpath. Hywel hopped onto the narrowboat and glanced about but saw no sign of its captain. He reached back and took Elwyn from Sian’s hands then helped his wife on board and quickly climbed below deck.

Inside, the narrowboat was far comfier than it looked. The ceiling was just high enough that he didn’t need to stoop. There was a long cushioned-bench and table, and a little kitchenette with pots and pans hanging on the red walls. It was pleasantly warm and smelled of smoke from a small log-burner stove, which gave out the only light in the otherwise dark interior. Beside the stairs, there was a round door with the word “Captain” burned into its surface, and another door at the far end.

As soon as they were below deck, the idling narrowboat kicked into life. Hywel sat down and a swell of emotion filled his chest, a wave that threatened to pour out and overwhelm him. The events of the last day were hard to process; his whole world had been upended. Everything he knew had been challenged. Who he was, what he believed in and, worst of all, what he had done. He held Sian’s hands

and sat silently for a moment, listening to the narrowboat's throaty engines, the gentle bobbing motion of the cabin, as he tried to catch his breath and take it all in.

The joy of having Sian and Elwyn quickly evaporated and his doubts and fears resurfaced with the startling horror of discovering a masked intruder in the bedroom. Hywel's mind whirred with questions; where were they going? What would happen when they got there? Could they really trust the Undergrid? The thought was anathema to him. Yet, he had no choice. Not if he wanted his family to be safe.

"This boat will take us to the port," said Hywel, trying to hide his concern. He draped his arm across Sian's shoulders and allowed himself a smile. Sitting there, with Sian and Elwyn, it was hard not to dream of the future that had seemed, even moments ago, so out of reach. "A ship is waiting that will take us far from here to somewhere we can be a family."

"Oh, Hywel." Sian leant into him, sobbing into his chest. Her forearms were covered in nasty red burns and Hywel knew there'd be more across her body. She hadn't complained at all, and he was as proud as he'd ever been that she'd chosen him to be her husband. "I thought we'd never be free. I thought...Elwyn, me...the things that man said...."

"I know, I know." Blood pounded in his temples as he thought of Rochester taunting Sian with that lupine grin on his cold, smug face. The pleasure he must have taken riled up Hywel, but he let those feelings wash over him and he took a few deep breaths. They were safe, for now, and that was all that mattered. "You don't need to worry about him anymore."

Sian and Elwyn soon fell asleep, Elwyn in Hywel's arms. Every now and again his son stirred and Hywel felt a jolt of lightning, each like a swift punch to his arm. He kept his Earth rod close, which helped absorb most of it. The orb atop his rod glowed as bright as any streetlamp. Hywel marvelled at Elwyn's power, which chilled him to his core as he thought of what the Guild would do to get their hands on his son.

After more stops than his nerves could handle, they finally reached

the port. Through a porthole, Hywel watched the narrowboat pull up alongside a wharf. The captain hadn't come in to check on them as he'd have expected but then Storm hadn't told him what to expect. There hadn't been time. He didn't know if the captain was a full member of the Undergrid or just a sympathiser who was happy to help but even happier with the less he knew. The captain stamped his boots on the deck and Hywel took that as the sign to head up on deck.

Hywel climbed up first. The narrowboat was moored beside the same warehouse as before, though he couldn't see anyone who looked like they were waiting for him. In fact, there was hardly a soul on the moonlit wharf. Hywel glanced around, a sinking feeling in his stomach. Then, he saw a light come on inside the warehouse office and he let out a sigh.

"Sian," he shouted down the stairs, "come on up."

"I'm sorry." The baritone voice came from the rear of the deck. Hywel turned. A stocky, white-haired man in grey overalls looked back, sheepish and ashamed. Hywel's heart stopped. "I had no choice. I couldn't warn you, I—"

Hywel sensed Blodeuwedd's power. An Earth elemental was close. Terror, like an icy claw, crushed his chest as he dashed down the stairs.

"Hello, Arfon." Rochester stood behind Sian and Elwyn, who were wrapped in a thin tangle of vines. Savage, weeping burns covered half of Rochester's long face and his clothes were charred and smoky. His green eyes glowed menacingly in the dim light and his words carried a hard edge, years of jealousy and hatred spilling over. "I smelted a rat when I saw that narrowboat idling beside the canal. My instincts are always right. It's why I've always seen through you, even when no one else did. I could sense your weakness, something not right. And look, here it is. I've got your spark-spawn and, to top it off, you've led me to the home of the Undergrid." Rochester smiled that crooked, yellowed grin of his and his tone changed. He was joyous, victorious. "It is finally time I show everyone who is the superior man."

"Clarence, please." Hywel stepped towards Rochester, his knuckles white from gripping his Earth rod.

“Stay there, Arfon.” Rochester wagged a bony finger. “Nothing you can say will change my mind. And if you make one move, I will kill your wife.” As if to show his intent, vines crawled across Sian’s throat and squeezed. Her eyes bulged and she started choking. “Then, I will bury—”

A flash of lightning burst from Elwyn, as if his son had sensed they were in danger. It lit up the small cabin and nearly blinded Hywel. Sian screamed. Rochester staggered back, moaning, as his vines burst into flames and disintegrated. Seizing the chance, Hywel raised his Earth rod and a stream of vines shot forwards and smacked Rochester in the face sending him tumbling against the wall. Hywel directed his vines to grab Sian and Elwyn and he dragged them away from Rochester.

Sian groaned in agony. The blast from Elwyn should have killed her. He didn’t know how she survived; perhaps the bond between them as mother and son gave her a resistance that saved her life. Though that was a mystery for another day.

Rochester pushed himself off the wall and swung his Earth rod. Hywel didn’t have time to defend both himself and Sian. Rochester’s vines thumped Hywel across the cabin. He crashed against the captain’s door and slid to the floor. There was scant room to fight and Rochester worked that to his advantage. Rochester’s staff created huge club-like vines that struck out indiscriminately—punching a hole in the cabin door, smashing through a porthole. Hywel used his vines to shield Sian and Elwyn, ushering them towards the stairs as he took a barrage of blows to his head and back. Only the love and desperate need to protect his family kept him conscious.

“Find Elber,” he shouted as Sian scrambled up the stairs. Then, just before she vanished, he added, “I love you.”

“How sweet,” said Rochester, and his burned face twitched into a vicious snarl. “I’ll enjoy telling her you squealed for mercy when I catch her, and how you gave them up to save your skin.”

“That is the difference between you and me, Clarence.” Hywel struggled to his feet, using what felt like the last reserves of his strength. With Sian and Elwyn out of harm’s way, Hywel redirected his focus. He didn’t know if he had the power to beat Rochester. At

full strength, both were evenly matched. Injured? Who knew who would come out on top? But he knew Rochester would have to beat *him*. Rochester would have to show Hywel that *he* was the stronger man. Hywel, however, just needed to save his family, by hook or by crook. “You have no one to fight for but yourself.”

Rochester’s vines shot forth. Hywel raised his rod and their vines entwined into a great seething mass. It was as though the two men’s hands had knotted together, two wrestlers locked in a duel, each jostling and shoving to unbalance the other. Hywel pushed and strained and his vines, his energy, forced Rochester back a step.

“I. WILL. BEAT. YOU!” Rochester roared, unleashing a near overwhelming power that drove Hywel against the wall. Then, the mass of vines whipped forwards, yanked by Rochester, almost ripping the rod from Hywel’s grip. Rochester swung his vines back and forth, a puppet master gaining back control of his puppet’s tangled strings. Hywel staggered to and fro, clinging desperately onto his Earth rod. But Rochester’s power was too much. Hywel stumbled and fell. The seething mass of vines finally pinned Hywel to the ground. Vines wrapped around his legs, his chest, squeezing the life from him.

The wild grin on Rochester’s face said it all. Hywel was done for. Then, Hywel’s eyes fell upon the stove. He released a few of his vines in apparent defeat, then sent them slithering across the floor. Smoke rose from the burning vines as they gripped the stove. Hywel cried out as Rochester’s vines crushed him, and his mind searched for one last ounce of strength. With a mighty wrench, the stove was torn from the wall. Hywel swung his vines and they thumped onto Rochester’s back.

Burning logs and coals scattered across the cabin. Rochester screamed and his vines withered. Hywel clambered to his feet and charged forwards. He stabbed Rochester with his Earth rod. The orb transferred all the lightning it had captured from Elwyn into an explosion that threw his foe headlong across the cabin.

Rochester hit the kitchenette counter. His back cracked, folding unnaturally on itself, and he landed in a horribly twisted, smouldering heap.

Flames flickered around the cabin. The long bench caught alight, so too the curtains around the portholes. Soon the whole cabin was aflame and thick with smoke. Hywel climbed up the stairs and staggered onto the deck. He turned and used his vines to twist the handrail into a makeshift barrier then jumped onto the wharf.

Sian leant against a barrel, Elwyn nuzzled in her arms. A wiry sailor in a blue-striped uniform crouched beside her. Hywel rushed over and bent down beside his wife.

“She hurt,” said the sailor, who spoke in a deep voice thick with an unfamiliar accent. The man’s short sleeves showed off his heavily tattooed arms. “But we go now.”

“Elber?”

“I am Elber. You, Earther. We go now.”

Hywel nodded and helped Sian to her feet, taking Elwyn in his arms. She moaned and leant on Elber for support. The sailor, who was a head shorter than Hywel, lifted Sian over his shoulder with ease.

A great crackling groan sounded behind them. Hywel glanced over his shoulder. The narrowboat collapsed on itself in a rush of flames, sending a great plume of smoke into the night sky. The captain knelt beside the canal, shaking his head and sobbing. Hywel felt a pang of guilt at the destruction he’d wreaked upon yet another person’s life. But he buried that feeling. This time, he had no choice.

“Quick.” Elber broke into a jog and Hywel struggled to keep up. They ran into the warehouse and out the other side, where a steamer ship was moored to the neighbouring wharf. Two tall, fat chimneys stood at the rear of the ship, and its steel hull was painted white above the waterline, blue-black beneath. Its name was painted in large red letters near the bow: *Mercy*. Its deck was full of crates and stevedores, and sailors rushed up and down a wooden gangplank to the wharf.

“Wait.” Elber laid Sian on the ground beside an unloaded crate and dashed off. Hywel knelt down and lifted her head. Her eyes opened up to his and she smiled.

“You made it.”

“I did.”

A bell rang and, as one, the stevedores and sailors headed into the warehouse. Elber came back, lifted Sian without a word, and ran up the gangplank. Hywel followed the sailor aboard, across the deck and through narrow corridors. Then, abruptly, Elber stopped, laid Sian down, and removed a few floorboards to reveal a small hatch. Elber opened it and, immediately, the stench of stale sweat rushed from the darkness along with the sounds of coughing, crying, and muffled conversations. “Go here.”

Hywel hesitated. He looked at the dark hole and bile rose in his stomach. The stench was horrendous. The sounds ghastly. He wavered but Sian uttered a command that brooked no argument.

“Go on,” she said. “This is Elwyn’s only chance at freedom.”

She was right. What lay ahead was unknown, what lay behind was not. He had trusted the Undergrid this far. For better or worse, he had to trust them again.

“Thank you, Elber,” he said, as the sailor helped him lower Sian into the darkness.

Hywel climbed down the ladder with Elwyn in one hand, his Earth rod under his armpit. There was an audible gasp. Someone cried and he heard a desperate scuffle. His eyes adjusted to the gloom and he froze. In a space barely ten-feet square were fifty, probably more, cowering figures. They looked at him and their eyes, almost to a person, were pure white. Then he realised what they must see; his emerald eyes and Earth rod. Their enemy.

“I am no threat to you,” he said, “not anymore.”

The hold full of sparkies stared at him, a mix of anger and terror on their faces. Hywel realised he may have captured some of them himself, or earthered their friends or family. If they recognised him, or just wanted vengeance against any earther, they could easily kill him. For the first time in his life, he felt fear for being who he was. It unnerved him, he felt small, helpless. Slowly, he turned Elwyn towards the sparkies and hoped they would show him more pity than Hywel had ever shown. “My son...it’s not safe for us in Inglebad.”

The hatch closed, plunging Hywel into darkness. He reached for Sian’s hand and prayed to the Elements to get them through this.

The hatch opened and light poured into the hold. How long they'd spent in the darkness, Hywel could not say. Time had become nothing to him. He'd slept, eventually. In fits and bursts, between Elwyn's frequent cries and feeds, squashed against Sian and strangers, hot, filthy and exhausted. The deep grumbling of the engines, the vibrations through the floor and whispered conversations became a wretched lullaby.

Hywel shielded his eyes from the light, his empty stomach jumped. Others around him cowered, all of them fearing the worst. A figure stepped before the light, covered in shadow, then reeled back, coughing. The stench from the terrified, sweating bodies crammed into that tiny space, without a toilet or running water, was nothing less than a weapon of torture. But weighed against the fear of losing Elwyn, of the gallows, of his wife's bleak future as a surrogate, the stench was nothing. No, it was not nothing. It was the stench of freedom.

"At sea now," said Elber, addressing them all. "You safe."

Hywel dropped to his knees and kissed Sian. It seemed too good to be true.

"Come," said Elber, encouraging the disbelieving runaways forwards. "You free."

A murmur of excitement jolted through the crowd and the braver sparkies shuffled towards the ladder. The sailor held out his calloused hand and helped a teenage girl up the ladder. He reached next for Elwyn, but Sian held her baby boy close. Hywel nudged her forwards, then helped her up through the hatch as she held onto Elwyn for dear life. Another sailor waited outside the hold, clad in the same blue-striped uniform. Young and friendly, her dark hair was cut fashionably short and her brown eyes were filled with pity, concern, but above all, kindness. It was enough to make him weep. She pointed down a narrow corridor which took them up onto the ship's deck, bathed in glorious sunshine.

Hywel followed Sian to the stern and together they leant on the guardrail, admiring the clear blue sky over the sparkling sea. The salty wind blew strong across the choppy waters and beneath them

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the ship's engines rumbled. Somewhere in the distance, beyond his eyes' reach, lay Inglebad. He closed his eyes and pictured the cloud-choked sky he'd lived so long beneath, the bolts of lightning that struck the city's generating stations like clockwork. Above all, he pictured that poor, wretched generator he'd tortured without a second thought. Hywel opened his eyes and a tear broke free.

"We did it." Sian leant her head on Hywel's shoulder. "We saved our son."

"We did." Hywel grinned as he kissed her head but his joy was laced with grief. Grief for all the boys and girls who hadn't been saved, grief for the countless innocents he had condemned during his long career. In the long darkness in that hold, Hywel had promised himself that if they escaped, he'd spend the rest of his life saving as many sparkies as he could. It was the least he could do to try and atone for the misery he had caused those who had not been saved. And, one day, he hoped to meet Ocelot again and share a drink as equals.