THE WHIPHAND’S HOT PEACH pie was delicious. It was crusty and juicy, and the peaches exploded in my mouth like warm little suns. I Shifted the pie into four slices and ate it with my fingers. I was ravenous and hungover, and the sugary tartness glided into my belly like motor oil, coating my corroded intestines and repairing the damage done by Aleksandar’s cheap whiskey.

Whenever we drank together, Aleks poured liquor into me like he was trying to drown me, ignoring my protests, laughing when I stumbled and slurred, kicking me to make me fall and then catching me to keep me from hurting myself. He got me so drunk that I could barely Share, making us equal.

I licked the pie from my fingers and considered buying another one. Now that I no longer felt sick, I could have eaten ten more. But I decided to hold off. I wasn’t the only one who needed food. Now that I could think and move, I didn’t want to load up and make myself slow and lazy.

Of course I could have stolen a bicycle from one of our neighbors, plopping my ass down and Shifting the bike across the sky like any other respectable psychic. But since human Shifters were so incredibly rare, I needed to travel by bovor to avoid drawing attention to myself. With Aleksandar shunted, our days of being flashy were over. The Snap brothers couldn’t afford to stick our necks out
anymore, not at any price. In Pip’s Cross, you only had two choices: you could either be invincible or invisible.

The bovor cart flew high enough that I could see the whole city beneath me. As I lounged and ate my pie, I wound a length of guiderope around my ankle just in case we crashed into something. Up this high, I could see all the way to the Edge and beyond. The General’s tentacles cut out into the silent blackness like eight oars the size of continents, sweeping onward through the utter emptiness of a dead universe without planets or life.

Only the General or the Sharat could say where we were going, but I couldn’t remember ever spending so long in the General’s own empty Fetish before. The General was impossible to fathom. What kind of creature would Build a Fetish so empty and dark?

Usually, the General’s Fetish was only a place where we went to escape or regroup after a catastrophe. It was never a destination unto itself, and for good reasons. There was nothing to trade here. There was nothing to see and nothing to do. Here, we were slowly running out of resources, stewing in our own juices. Every day here the Razzarii gained more power, since they were the only ones in the city who were able to Make.

I counted my jack. I was down to one wheel and six spokes. I held up one of the spokes to my eye: a tiny eggplant-colored coin with a slash across one side. I flipped it over and compared the crude map of Pip’s Cross etched onto the other side of the coin with the actual city beneath me.

Four slices. Like my pie. Schoolside, Bellside, Shiftside, and Shareside. Four quadrants divided by the four rivers that flowed across the General’s head like rain down a window, recirculating at the Edge where the water was absorbed again into the General’s brain. Four rivers: Kiss, Song, Game, and Wine. The Fevers in these quadrants were winding mazes of exposed brain tissue, spongy hills and alleys that were just as confusing from above as they were when you were stuck in them.
We lived in the brain of a giant octopus that Traveled all the worlds. Was there any place finer in all the Fetishes?

The more rich and powerful you were, the closer you lived to the city center, also known as the Hub, where the Turner kept the city’s time. The destitute in Pip’s Cross—the immigrants, the slaves, the criminals, and the diseased—were all pushed to the periphery to live in worm-blocs and spikehollows, like the one where we lived with the old man.

I spat off the side of the bovor as we crossed over the Hub for good luck.

Once upon a time, things had been different for the old man. Once upon a time he had lived in a fine brick building in Bellside, right in the shadow of the Bells. He had been an important citizen in Pip’s Cross back then—a necronaut, like our mother. But those days were burned up and gone.

From up here, the city looked as simple as it did on the surface of the coin in my hand. But the simplicity of the city’s layout was deceptive. The real Pip’s Cross had nothing to do with class rivalries between the Fevers. The real Pip’s Cross was a linchpin of the Nested Worlds, and it was therefore a microcosm that contained the wars, trade, crime, science, and art of all the psychic races that were governed by the Communion. The real Pip’s Cross was a sparring ground for all the Fetishes that the General had ever touched, and it was also the Communion’s mighty fist.

There were seven Communion leaders, one for each layer of the Fold. Most remained in their own Fetishes, but two of them made their home in the Traveling city. The Shiftat and the Sharat were twin rulers, the Shiftat—currently, an old Quark named Pellmar Shenh—taking care of foreign affairs, and the Sharat—currently, an Orloc named Colae—taking care of more mundane domestic problems. The towers of the Shiftat and Sharat were the grandest towers in Shiftside and Shareside, curling up out of the ground in gravity-defying twists and spirals. They were towers excreted by architect invertebrates thousands
of Turns ago, biological goo now hardened into shiny bruise-colored dollops of bright reproductive resin. The smooth, thin curves seemed as brittle as spun sugar, but the walls couldn’t be Burned or Made. No one had ever busted through, meaning our government was as safe as an ancient insect ootheca.

In the real Pip’s Cross, jack flowed like the General’s four rivers, flowing out to the Nested Worlds, wetting the Circumjacency, and then returning here to further engorge the already swelling vaults of the city’s leaders. Pip’s Cross was the sole chokepoint in a limitless expanse of interlocking worlds, and Pip’s Cross always took its cut.

We were nearing the Kiss River.

The Kiss River was named after the fuckhollows, pleasure-slave boutiques, petting rooms, brothels, aphrodisiac dispensaries, gloryholes, dream churches, sexmarts, love hotels, and pitshows along the banks—places that catered to every species, caliber, and flavor of lust.

Back when he was still a Burner, Aleksandar spent whole engines along the banks of the Kiss River. He brought me along with him, first as a joke, and then later as security once I learned to Share and Shift. It was here where I had first plied my own peculiar craft while waiting downstairs in brothel bars for Aleks to drink and whore. It was here, bored and listening to the moans and squeals of my brother’s paid company, that I first honed my skills as a filthy thoughtsnatch—the same discipline that was now keeping us all alive.

The bovor cart was deflating. Jets of fire shot out of the bovor’s mouth and ass. I banged on the whiphand’s window. The whiphand leaned out and grunted at me. I pointed at the ground where I wanted to be dropped off. The ape nodded and pulled guideropes with his six hands, directing the bovor toward the swatch of space I wanted.

We came in hard and fast, and I jumped down off the cart as soon as we landed, bowing to the ape and tossing him the pie tin so that he could reuse it. The whiphand took off again as soon as I was clear, heading back for the
Edge. There was no sense in sticking around here. There were already bovor carts everywhere along the Kiss. Too much competition.

I watched him float away until he was sucked into the churning traffic overhead. I dusted off my black jeans and tucked in my black cotton shirt, trying to look respectable. I rolled up my sleeves and walked along the river for a while, trying to get my bearings.

Beside me, the water of the Kiss River flowed as pink and pearly as the inside of a pig’s ear. You could drink it if you weren’t afraid of disease, though it flowed through a trench carved right out of the General’s skull, and it tasted too sweet, like rotting flowers. It was slimy with the General’s pus, and it tended to make visitors and immigrants sick. For a boy born and raised in Pip’s Cross it was safe enough, though I preferred coffee or liquor to river water.

I walked through the Kiss River crowds as if I had no place to go and all the Turns in the world, as if I were just another tourist looking for the cheap thrills that made the Kiss River famous. I knew I wasn’t the only thoughtsnatch working here, so I stretched out to find my own niche. The Kiss Fever provided the perfect cover. Everyone here was so self-conscious that their minds were wide open if you were nimble enough.

I kept my eyes to myself as I strolled, dipping into people’s most private worlds just as if I were grubbing through their pockets.

Most of the information available here was silly and depressing. Affairs, perversions, low-level crime, romantic betrayals. There was a price for this kind of information, but it was too small for the pain of finding a buyer.

For a while, I followed a slick Quarkish Populat who was out visiting his mistress. As I meandered along in the crowd behind him, I slid through his mental defenses one by one.

Populats were elected officials who sat with the Sharat once a day to calibrate the city, taking in information and
executing the General’s plans. In this way, the Sharat determined the will of the people, regulating the city with fresh, daily intelligence. This Quarkish Populat represented one of the Quarkish Fevers in Schoolside. I tried to find something outlandish or dirty that I could leverage against him. Was he funneling weapons to some rebellion out in the Circumjacency? Was he responsible for any of the Quarkish violence against the Razzarii that had taken place since the new Makat had been selected? Was he unusually cruel to his slaves, or perhaps too familiar? Did he eat human children, or did have some twisted sex fantasy involving hot honey and hungry fairies?

The Quarkish Populat was slick at Sharing, but he wasn’t as good as me. But as I broke through his mental layers one by one, I grew increasingly frustrated. With the exception of maintaining a human mistress in a Kiss River brothel, this Populat was exceptionally clean and exceptionally stupid. Not only was he basically free from any damning secrets or sins, he didn’t know anybody else’s damning secrets or sins either.

I thought about trying to sell the whereabouts of the Populat’s young whore to the Populat’s rival in his home Fever—somebody called Weighsor—but then I discovered that Weighsor already knew about her and had already decided that such a revelation would only help the Populat as far as his reputation was concerned. The Populat’s vitality was in some dispute lately, and human women were well-known for being insatiable. In fact, the Populat was planning to leak the scandal himself. Quarks were so predictable.

I let the Populat continue along toward his rendezvous and looked around for another target.

I thought I’d gotten lucky when I spotted an elderly Arianae madam who was out picking up lunch for her broodboys. Amazingly, she didn’t bring any guards with her to protect her from the likes of me. Her bloated body was suspended in the air twice as high as the top of my head, and so it was easy to follow her through the crowd,
though she moved as quickly on her eight spindles as any spider scuttling up a drainpipe. She was carrying a pair of paralyzed goats on her back.

The Arianae madam was the opposite of the Quarkish Populat. She knew too much, and all of it ran together. She knew so many dirty secrets about so many important people that I couldn’t tell them apart, nor could I tell if the secrets she knew were worth anything. She was nearly senile. Whole Turns ran together in her mind.

Arianae were always difficult to thoughtsnatch. Their bones were made of the hardest structure in the Nested Worlds, an organic material called floan. Floan was psychoreactive, meaning that it became denser and sharper the more that you Shared with it. This made floan ideal for knives and edged weapons, which the Arianae were always willing to sell. Floan was also a shield, which meant that when you were thoughtsnatching an Arianae, you always had a time limit. Eventually, the floan in their skeleton would block out your mind.

There were fascinating nuggets buried inside the Arianae madam, but I didn’t have the patience to sort through all the layers of garbage. I thought I had something when I pierced a belt of guilt and saw that she was planning to dissolve the tiny spider head of her business partner with her wrinkled maw while he slept, but then I realized that the murder had happened long before I was even born. In the end, I gave up on the steel-boned spider, and I let her scurry onward to deliver her goats to her broodboys.

I took a break and lay down on a bench plastered in advertisements for girls that were written in glowing Quarkish glyphs that I could not read. Darko could read Quarkish, but I had never picked it up. Pretending to sleep, I stopped searching for targets and just let my mind wander, trolling for peculiar personalities among the ardent throng. It wasn’t long before I sensed a Razzarii coming down the crease. It was rare that they left their glass towers. I sat up on the bench.
Two human slave children were tending to the Razzarii, carrying packages for him and walking behind him at a respectful distance. My heart went cold the way it always did when I saw human slaves. I didn’t have the resources to help them. I couldn’t even afford to give them sympathy. I was glad I wasn’t one of them. I was glad I could Fold.

Without dipping into the Razzarii’s mind, I could sense that he was following someone. I thoughtsnatched the humans carrying his things, dipping in and out with a delicate touch, tasting their resentment and getting a clearer picture of what was going on.

He was following someone, and it was related to the ink.

I scanned the crowd in front of the Razzarii. One creature was shielding itself so well that I couldn’t get any read from it at all. This was a mistake: a mind so opaque stood out. Whatever it was, it was dressed in human clothes. It was wearing a black balaclava to hide its face, black gloves, and a long, orange duster that was as shiny as polished steel and as bright as flame. The creature was carrying a leather satchel over one shoulder. Surely this was who the Razzarii was following.

I got up off the bench and joined the crowd again, following the creature with the opaque mind. The Razzarii swept along behind us both, clearing a path through the gawking crowds. I kept my distance. The paper doll would gut me like a fish if he caught me thoughtsnatching him. He would set me on fire and string me from a lamppost. Nobody would do anything but snicker.

The creature in the orange duster moved erratically, knocking into people as if it was in a big hurry. Eventually, it stopped in front of a pitshow named “Hungerpain” in wee candid. It probably had a different name in great, or in any other of the half-dozen languages scrawled onto the awning.

The front of Hungerpain was daubed with rhinestones as bright and gaudy as the feathers of a cowsnake. In the
window of “Hungerpain,” a tubby human woman with gray hair and doll makeup was giving a blowjob to an Arianae broodboy while the Arianae mechanically twisted her breasts with two of his spindles. She stood on her tip-toes, and the Arianae had to squat in order to lower his paunchy abdomen to her face so that she could take his segmented membrane in her mouth. Arianae broodboys were hot right now in the Nested Worlds. Their long penises could wiggle around and exert gentle pressure with the same precision as human tongues.

Working the door of Hungerpain was a creature that seemed to be made entirely of hairy shoulders and razor-sharp teeth. I couldn’t see any eyes. At first, I counted four mouths on the living tumor, but then these four mouths closed and six different ones opened like lenses.

As I passed the creature in the orange duster, I peered into its balaclava and saw the soft, bulbous eyes of a Quark. There was a bright metal piercing in the creature’s nose as well, meaning that the Quark was probably female.

A Quark and a Razzarii. I was just trying to make enough jack to keep my family alive, and if they hadn’t somehow been related to ink, I would have left them alone. But it was about the ink, and I had to know what was going on.

The Quark paid the bouncer and slipped inside Hungerpain. The Razzarii went next, whispering instructions to his human slaves before dismissing them. They waited in front of a love hotel just across the crease.

I doubled back around, as if the sight of the human woman pleasuring the Arianae had been too much for me.

“How much to see the show?” I shared with the mound of teeth and sinew who was guarding the door.

“Issss one wheel,” shared the creature, moving closer to me, closing some mouths while opening others. His breath smelled like spicy pork and spoiled milk.

“Are you kidding? One wheel to see some old slag suck off a spider?”

I slapped the window, and the glass shuddered in its
frame. The powdered woman looked over her shoulder, blinking rapidly, her mouth covered in brown grease from the Arianae’s flexible cock. The lids surrounding the Arianae’s eye cluster popped and snapped, and his spindles bent at the joints as he stooped, sniffing the glass where I’d slapped it. I waved my hand in front of their faces, but the window was one-way, and they couldn’t see me.

“Not humans or stupid Arianae in showpit,” Shared the tumor, annoyed. “Sssomething sssspecial. One wheel. Issss worth it. Isssss nothing you have ever experienced before, pink baby. If you cannot afford my sssshowpit, keep going.”

“I can afford it,” I Shared.

I dug in my pocket for the wheel and handed it to the mound of hair and teeth. A tiny three-fingered hand winnowed through his tangle of brown locks and took the coin from me. The creature stepped aside. I only had six spokes left, so I didn’t bother to tip him as I walked inside Hungerpain. He hissed at me as I passed, and I felt him press a memory into my mind that made me stumble.

At first it was simply the flavor of hot blood. But then, in a flash, I became the hairy creature without eyes, and I was using all of my hands to hold down my victim in an empty Shiftside squat. I felt my victim struggle beneath me on the slippery layer of plastic that was protecting the floor. Eleven of my mouths opened and closed around sweet flesh, and then my mind was filled with screaming.

The memory ended. The hairy thing wanted me to know that it had murdered humans for their meat before, and that it had liked the taste.

“Lovely,” I murmured.
I’D NEVER BEEN INSIDE Hungerpain specifically, but I’d been in a thousand places like it with Aleks. A cramped hallway sloped down and to the right so sharply that I had to lean forward and hunch my shoulders to keep my balance. The deep red paint of the walls was peeling away from dull gold wainscoting. It felt like walking into an infected throat.

Further in, the hallway of Hungerpain was lined with faded posters that advertised long-forgotten pitshow performances. If you put your hand against these feverish images, you could still feel the psychic resonance of the sex-filled “madness” they were selling. Flaming sconces had been drilled into the walls at intervals, and black leather curtains hid private cubicles where I could hear people eating and drinking. It was dark, and the half-glimpsed faces of the creatures who took their dinner at Hungerpain made my skin crawl. They were eating humans in here. I could smell it.

When Aleks could still Burn, he loved to go to places that openly served human meat. Someone would say something, and Aleks would pick a fight. Our evening would end with the staff hauling away some surprised stranger’s smoking corpse and free chicken dinners for both of us to keep Aleks from Burning the whole place down.

It got twenty degrees hotter as the hallway corkscrewed
into the ground. I started to sweat. I was deep inside the General now, down lower than the bottom of the Kiss River beside us. I hugged the wall as I made my way deeper, trying to stay out of the light of the torches in order to hide my face. I could hear the rush of the river behind the clammy walls. Behind the plaster veneer was raw brain matter that hadn’t been hardened by exposure like the creases and folds on the surface of the General. I could sense that the place was filthy with fairies.

But I couldn’t sense any other human minds. Except for the woman in the window, I knew that I was most likely the only other human alive inside Hungerpain, and I knew that I’d probably already been targeted.

I tried not to get distracted by the conversations that were leaking from behind the black leather curtains and instead followed the throat downward, probing for the Razzarii and the mysterious Quarkish woman. Something told me they had gone all the way to the bottom, all the way to the pitshow, where tonight’s entertainment was about to begin.

Further down, the throat ended in a vaulted arch shored up with old bone. Beyond this archway was a tiny amphitheater with rounded walls and a floor like a bowl. A fire burned in the center of this grimy hole, throwing shadows on the pit walls.

Speakers spewed tuneless music: throbbing machine beats punctuated by recorded sounds of animal pleasure. There were rows of benches around the perimeter of the pit that were made of gleaming aluminum. Vents in the ceiling carried away the smoke from the fire.

We were so deep underground that everything here was sticky with the General’s ooze and organic humidity. The pit was actually carved out of the General’s sebaceous flesh, flesh which could not heal because of the sharp ribs of iron and bone that punctured the ceiling and floor.

There were only a few spectators, so I hastily ducked to the side and hid myself in a back row near the arch, where I could still get a good view of the show but where I could
also duck out quickly once I satisfied my curiosity.

I spotted the Quarkish woman and the Razzarii deep in conversation across the pit, but they didn’t notice me in the shadows of the fire. I tried to push my mind closer to them in order to make a connection with the Quarkish woman, but her mind was too quick for me. Quarkish minds are already oily and hard to wrangle. Their minds twist and curve, just like the writing on their skin. Their minds rush along in any direction that seems natural, and they’ll snap back on you if you try to get something out of them in a hurry that they don’t want to Share. The trick to thoughtsnatching a Quark is to relax and wait for them to dance in your direction, where you can slip inside quickly and get what you want.

Thoughtsnatching this woman, though, was like trying to lick my own elbow. All I could get were hints and suggestions, and I wasn’t sure if these vague shadows were real or just my mind filling in gaps. I leaned forward and waited for an opportunity, satisfying myself with the meager tidbits that I could tease out of her. Eventually, she would let her guard down. I could sense the psychic turbulence created by her friction-filled interaction with the paper doll.

In order to sit on the bench beside the Quarkish woman, the Razzarii had folded itself into something that looked like a squatting crab. The thin paper of the Razzarii’s pale purple body was featureless and smooth.

They were involved in some kind of negotiation. The Quarkish woman had all her defenses up, and the Razzarii was carefully probing her, just like me. The Quarkish woman’s mental smell was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. Burning charcoal mixed with some kind of citrus.

I stared at her through the fire, trying to cut her open. I let my mind drift, exploring the psychic resonance of the orange duster she wore. It was empty. My mind moved down to her leather satchel. Though she was carefully shielding it, I could tell that it was full of jack. I licked my
lips.

This was a business meeting.

As the rest of the audience for the pitshow trickled into the room, the tension grew between the Quarkish woman and the Razzarii. I felt a crack in her mental armor, and I tried to slip inside. But before I could make my move, there was a piercing whistle from the entry arch. We all turned to look.

The pitshow.

The shriek was coming from a glass tank carried by a team of more hairy, mouth-covered tumors, same as the one upstairs. The giant tumors were using their tiny three-fingered hands to lift the tank. It took ten of them to carry it, but even full-grown humans would have had difficulty with the gallons of slooshing water.

The tumors brought the glass tank into the pit and suspended it above the fire, using a tripod and strong chains. Swimming inside the greenish water was a bloated jellyfish. The body of the jellyfish was translucent, but it was topped by a bulbous mushroom cap covered in a circle of tiny faces. It lashed its tentacles against the tank, writhing in fury. All of its faces were enraged. They blew bubbles. They whistled and growled through the glass.

On top of this tank was a small round portal sealed by a sliding partition. Two more tumors slunk in through the arch, carrying a much smaller glass tank that held another, smaller jellyfish. This smaller jellyfish was also ringed with faces, though they were more serene. This tank was perforated on top and had a matching circular portal on its bottom with another sliding glass seal. The bottom seal of the small tank was slotted to the top seal of the large one.

The tumors rested the little tank on top of the big one and began to screw them together.

As the heat from the fire started to boil the water in the lower tank, the tumors yanked out the sliding glass plates, dumping water from the top tank into the bottom tank. The little jelly darted into the bigger tank as steam billowed from the top.
The heat from the fire was making the bigger jellyfish relax: lullaby by scalding bath. I could feel amorous pulsations coming from the smaller jellyfish, of course. This is what we were all there to see.

The smaller jellyfish sank to the bottom of the tank. Its faces were all parodies of lust: gnashing teeth, rolling eyes, curling lips. In contrast, the larger jellyfish had become sleepy-looking and laconic. So that was how it worked: the heat made the tiny one horny and the big one drunk.

The smaller jellyfish crept toward the larger one and encircled it with its tentacles. The smaller jelly’s hungry faces pressed against its conquest, kissing and slurping the masks of resignation, as the water inside the tank reached a rolling boil. The smaller jellyfish orbited the larger one, rolling around and tonguing each face like a stamp rolling across an inkpad.

The other members of the audience were moving their minds into these jellyfish, Sharing with this rare sex act, savoring it as a delicacy. Many of them pleased themselves in the shadows of the fire. It was grim and dutiful, not quite the erotic frenzy that I had been promised.

Even though I was trying to ignore the pitshow, I couldn’t help but be affected by the strange energies coming out of the tank. These jellyfish were colony animals, and they merged by joining together and piercing each other’s soft membranes. Their bodies melded as information passed between them. Their tentacles wove together, sliding into hidden orifices and then disappearing.

The jellyfish writhed in the boiling green water, and I knew that this fucking would end with the larger jellyfish totally subsuming the smaller one. Their colonies would unite, and the final creature would be bigger and more dangerous.

The pit filled with shrieks of joy as the spectators Shared in the bliss and violence of this communion.

“Fuck that jelly,” yelled another six-armed ape next to me. “Fuck that jelly HARD.”

It was great cover if you were trying to have a private
conversation.

I focused again on the Quarkish woman and the Razzarri. Here in this orgy, everyone was trying to Share with everyone else, and so I was able to slip inside their private circle unnoticed, pushing inside to finally make a connection.

“You know my name, but I don’t know yours,” Shared the Quarkish woman.

“Razzarii don’t have names, though we admire the technology of naming,” said the paper doll. “You may call me Whorr if it helps you make decisions about me. I know your name, Aldemonda Sengh, but I will call you weapon. Beautiful weapon. Why are you here in my city, weapon?”

“I am an artist, as you know,” Shared the Quarkish woman. “I am here to put on a show.”

This upset the Razzarii named Whorr. Whorr unfolded himself, reconfiguring into a paper hand.

“What does weapon want? Does weapon want a job? We have many jobs for a good weapon.”

“I want information,” Shared Aldemonda. “I am prepared to pay for it. I already told you. I need to know everything you can tell me about the ink. There isn’t much time.”

The ink. The fucking ink. The ink that brought the dreams.

“Show me,” asked the Razzarii.

Aldemonda Sengh took her satchel from her shoulder and passed it to the Razzarii. The Razzarii opened the flap. Even from the shadows, I could see the eggplant-colored glint of jack. I sat up straighter.

“Why does weapon want to know about the ink? What does weapon already know about the ink?”

“I have my suspicions,” Shared Aldemonda.

“Weapon is not thinking,” Shared the Razzarii. “Weapon is reacting. Does weapon really think we Razzarii need jack?”

“You agreed to meet with me.”

Aldemonda Sengh and Whorr were both silent for a
few moments, sizing each other up. The eyes beneath the Quarkish woman’s balaclava were hard and full of fire.

The jellyfish in the tank reached a fever pitch of excitement, making the tank shiver and bang. Steaming water sloshed over the side, hissing as it hit the fire. All around me, creatures were spiraling up into orgasm right along with the jellies. My dick went hard as a rock. I couldn’t help it.

Beside the tank, the tumors running the show were writhing on the ground in pairs, hairy blurs of gnashing teeth and swinging elbows.

“The School wants to make an Oth,” Shared the Razzarii finally. “Soon it will be time for the Razzarii to leave the city.”

“What’s an Oth?” asked Aldemonda.

“Weapon is too curious. Weapon says she is only here to put on a show. Weapon says she is only an artist.”

“I don’t care about the School,” Shared Aldemonda.

“The School wants the ink more than you do,” Shared the Razzarii. “They need the ink for their project—their Oth. And who is running the School, do you think? Weapon should consider the School a rival.”

Aldemonda closed her satchel full of money and stood up, heading for the door. The Razzarii folded into a paper snake and followed her, encircling her legs and then pinning her orange duster to the ground.

“Weapon wants information, and weapon thinks information can be bought,” Shared the Razzarii. “Maybe it can, but not with jack.”

“What do you want?” asked Aldemonda.


Whorr touched Aldemonda and put a vision in her head. I was able to intercept it. A tiny aluminum building in the Astarshe Fever that rested in the crook of the immense, ancient wormbloc there. Rooznians swarmed around the silver trailer, washing it with water from their trumpet-like noses.

Written on the building was a simple word: diner.
Whorr was certain that there was something hidden beneath this diner: the source, he’d said. So it was here, beneath this building: the source of the ink, the sweet hallucinogen that had been eating away at my old man ever since it first came to the city five Turns ago.

I put the pieces together. The Quarkish woman wanted to know about the diner, but Whorr wasn’t interested in her money. Instead, he wanted this mysterious Quarkish woman, this “weapon,” to infiltrate this diner and retrieve the source of the ink for his own purposes.

Your diner.