

TOWERLOCK



Auroch took a cautious sip of steaming white coffee, scanning the granite butte that rose starkly in the distance. The butte's rocky top was high enough to fade into mist, though he could still distinctly make out the mysterious architecture that cluttered its plateau. He tried to gaze on casually, like that wasn't why he was here at all. Strangers in this town though, even ones hiding in crowded cafes, still drew attention. An oriel terminus. That's what it was. No doubt, now that he was looking for himself.

The locals had all kinds of explanations about that domed stone arcade towering above this little nowhere-town, depending on who was asking. But Auroch had seen this kind of thing before: the long-abandoned remnants of the world-spanning society they used to call "The Infinite Republic".

In those days, inflation engineers generated artificial pockets of space they furnished with impossibly huge simulations – glorified terrariums, complete with skies, lakes and cities, farms or warehouses. Land just didn't matter anymore when the great machines were in play in the heyday of Naraia. That all went to flaming soup a generation ago, and here they were with abandoned pockets miraculously left functioning and waiting for somebody enterprising enough to seize them.

Oriels were lightning-soaked gateways into these pockets, typically embedded in the ground and usually large enough for a multi-laned highway plowing straight inside. Sometimes they were pedestrian, sized for a set of stairs, sparkling and bathed in light – step down like a subway station and back up into another world.

A terminus was a place of several oriel gateways, and could be as many as ten or twenty. Twenty gateways. Twenty worlds. And nobody knew what any of them contained. Crazy. How in the world could they abandon such a thing? And how many dreamy-eyed treasure hunters had bankrupted themselves here trying to get inside?

"They're hiring." A familiar voice called from behind him. A beautiful voice. She called herself "The Wake", probably to sound intimidating or memorable. That worked, of course, though there was more to her than a brand name. He remembered well what her hair smelled like and how they'd said goodbye last time. And he knew her real name.

Pointing a long, gloved finger up at that high terminus in the distance, she smiled at him, "If you'd prefer to join a legally permitted business venture over sitting here scheming how to break in yourself."

Auroch tried to regain control of his facial expression, not so much from wishing she'd keep that sort of thing quiet, but more so just seeing her again. He couldn't say if it hurt or felt wonderful, or both. He awkwardly motioned her over, deciding against a hug, "It's good to see you again. Despite what you think it'd be like."

She was beautiful, but there was no way you could tell her that. This was a dangerous and broken viper. The slightest trace of hesitation told him she felt the same, though she wasn't the kind of person to allow a discussion of it.

She turned the café seat backwards and sat leaning forward, resting her elbows on the seatback.



A server placed a glass of iced sana on the tabletop. That meant she was a regular here. She'd turned the seat around to allow for her ball lightning carbine, slung low on a leather strap behind her.

She squinted her eyes, "What is that abomination on your chin?"

He pulled at the scrubby goatee gently, "It's an upgrade, dear heart. That's what it is. And you love it."

Tilting her head to one side, "Meh. It's new. You didn't have that a couple of weeks ago."

So casually she told him she'd been checking in on him. Her pause just then, letting it soak in, said she meant to shock, or maybe remind him that she could reach through the immaterial Datastream and see him without anyone knowing.

No, that's the kind of person you hire to guard a claim. She was working for Towerlock. And she was as mysterious and fascinating and dangerous as she'd always been.

Auroch squinted up at the terminus, machines just visible at the top. This woman held a grip on him, and there was an intensity to her looking in his eyes. He looked away from her because he needed to, though there was one thing he noticed...one electrifying thing that made all the difference to him after all this time away from her.

He could hear her fingernail scratching nervously against the zinc tabletop. She'd missed him.

"Towerlock, huh? Three brothers and a mystery partner – that's the word in the pubs. I'm surprised Karak has time for treasure hunt boondoggles."

Auroch was fishing with this comment, and kept his glance upwards. Karak was a War Marshal of the mountain city of Alson and often commanded her as part of that mighty city's fighting forces. He was an intimidating, bearded, mountain of a man.

"Stop it. Please tell me you're hiring this out and don't plan to go up there yourself." She wasn't smiling anymore, wasn't playing with him. Her eyes sparkled. He marveled at how complex she was.

"It doesn't look that hard to me, honestly. At least to get up there and clear things out."

Auroch examined the sheer rock wall and small scrub brush clusters along its heights, possible avenues to get to its top, and what defenses Karak might have in place already. The butte was roughly cylindrical, with wide expanses along its length essentially free of obstacles or outcroppings. The whole formation was wide enough such that it would seem like a flat wall to anyone clinging to its surface.

The Wake scooted her chair forward urgently, "You're thinking about taking mogs up the rock face. Our Tomb Trapper has snares along the entire wall surface. It's a vertical slaughterhouse. You'll never see them until it's too late."

Auroch pursed his lips, "Who's your guy?"

"Fargo." She said it with emphasis, because Auroch would know how devious and deadly Fargo could be with his traps. It ruled out a wave of mog crawlers blazing up the rock face to trigger the traps and clear a path, since Fargo was just malicious about things like that. He'd think of it and plan accordingly.



“Oh. That’s what Rielle’s doing up there.” Auroch hadn’t meant to communicate anything to her with that, though she reacted at him knowing such a thing.

Rielle was a Codeswarm Officer, a sanctioned hacker able to jam weapons among other things. Anyone who’d heard of Fargo knew he was a second father to Rielle, and often used his traps to drive his victims into a dead zone she created. This essentially ruled out a frontal assault up the rock face, apart from maybe a diversion.

“Airships are no good either. There are two freakishly huge rail cannons up there, like they used to have on The Hag.” Her fingernail was scratching faster. He was bothering her with his casual nature.

Auroch took another sip, “I don’t have an airship.”

“Well good. We’d perforate it.”

Watching her curiously, “We.” He let it be a statement and a question, maybe a judgement.

The Wake squinted her eyes at him, irritated, “You’re being an ass.”

He tilted his head thoughtfully, scooting his chair to gain a better vantage, “I’m assuming you have a sniper up there, stationed at the precipice with full view of the rock faces? Plott, I imagine. Creepy hilljack.”

She nodded, “Yeah. Plott. Doesn’t sleep.”

“How does that beast of a man hide himself? He’s up there?”

Plott was Karak’s favorite sniper, a huge man from the wild country who only spoke with gunfire. Plott wore a haunting mask that acted as a psychic scope, linking him with his weapon intimately.

Auroch ran his eyes along the high walls, imagining his hired guns and their vehicles dropping like rain to the earth in a storm of railgun fire. He was losing faith in his chances. Just how many people had Karak sent here, and what was in that terminus?

The real aim was just to get to the top, as there couldn’t be room for any sort of substantial defenses once you got over the precipice. At least he didn’t think so.

Auroch mulled the challenge in light of what he was learning, what he was validating with her here. It was clear now that a charge up the rock face would be bloody and difficult, even with diversions or subterfuge. He weighed what forces and equipment he might negotiate to bring to the job, what Segmond of the Salt Flats could offer. He side-glanced at her, wondering whether their history was strong enough to keep his secret should he discuss a contingency with her now that the Towerlock people maybe hadn’t considered.

She frowned, rumpling her forehead “Dirt Wraiths, right? A little navy of Dirt Wraiths rising up through the butte itself, popping up into the terminus from the floor?”

He tried hiding his cringe, having long ago accustomed himself to her knowing things she shouldn’t know. She traced practically his every thought. It was unnerving, but dizzying in how attractive it made her to him. These two had always been a mess when they were together, but just kept colliding anyway.



Dirt Wraiths could travel through solid earth and rock, like submarines only traveling through land rather than sea. They did it with a trick of inflation engine technology, the same sort of machinery that once built all those oriel pockets as with whatever was sheltered up on that claim. Dirt Wraith pilots were insanely bold, thinking nothing of driving blind, phasing in and out of any meaningful definition of existence and emerging with precisely timed activations.

Segmond could bring Dirt Wraiths to the table if that would do it. And he'd likely be happy to do so, if it would embarrass Karak.

The Wake bit her lip and inhaled deeply as she took another look to the distant tower, "That's a pretty good thought, actually." She squinted and pointed, "But right there in the central part of the complex where you can...just see that crane golem, the red one...we've parked a Wraithbuster right there. I mean, we had it so we brought it. I'm sure somebody can drive that thing."

"What if we just launch a tornado right up the wall?! I mean...clear it all out. Then we clean up the mess and just take the terminus. Sounds amazing."

"You don't have a tornado launcher. I'd know it."

"What if I did?"

"Yeah, I mean...a tornado, maybe an ephemeral torpedo or something spooky like that...you could try and set that sort of thing up." She gestured at the crowded tables to her left and behind her, "That sort of thing's why we have a Blinkstriker down here. He's in here somewhere right now. I think he is. I'd have to

look."

Auroch's heart sank. That was a good move, if she was telling the truth. Blinkstrikers could infiltrate and hide among the crowds, and tactically remove anyone trying to set up complicated rigs. Karak really had thought of everything.

"Mogs, then. Lots of mogs. Wallcrawlers. Gonna be nasty." This wasn't going to be a cake walk, and the walls of that butte were going to be a madhouse no matter what course Segmond's forces took.

The Wake frowned, rumpling her forehead, "Or sign up with us."

Auroch couldn't react to that, because that's when Karak himself walked in. He shot tension into the room that you could feel in the back of your neck. Academics made careers studying him. Here was a man who'd traveled with the people that tore the world apart in the War Of The Rupture, and whose secret pact with the terrifying Red Witch could bring the fearful to a tremble.

The Wake stood to her feet and watched the bearded War Marshal scan the room. It was quiet enough to hear stomachs growling. He nodded at Auroch, as Karak had asked many times for Auroch to join him on one of the mountain city's vanguard watches. Auroch nodded back, but stayed seated.

Karak was a good guy, just intense and powerfully protective of his adopted homeland. His presence here was electric, and the crowd parted for him as he walked to the window overlooking the butte. Not a word. He just stroked his grizzly beard and gazed out over the rock tower. How could anyone turn their eyes



from a warrior who'd shattered nations and commanded fleets a million-strong? He was just standing there, but his myth screamed.

Auroch glanced at The Wake as it dawned on him she'd likely been sent by Karak for information. It was all over her face, that's exactly what she'd been doing. And it was okay – she didn't owe Auroch any loyalty. Maybe he'd learned a few things too, or maybe she'd been lying all along. It would be hard to know.

When Segmond walked in from the same doorway, Karak didn't even turn to face him. People started to clear the café, slipping out the back or shuffling past Segmond to get as far away as possible before any shooting started.

These two were mortal enemies, clashing over and again with larger-than-life warriors and machines fit to fill a thousand libraries. Segmond grinned thinly, as he always seemed to do. He enjoyed the attention, and coyly fluffed the coils of his wooly hair.

Segmond breezed past The Wake and looked her in the eyes, gesturing a thumb casually in Auroch's direction, "I'll watch out for him."

Auroch got up from his chair, his eyes wide at The Wake as if to question her what on earth these two thought they were doing in the same room. Her face showed this was a surprise to her as well, and that somehow made this room more explosive. How do you surprise a woman who can see everything in the Datastream?

She stepped backwards, spacing herself to allow for return gunfire should it come to that, to protect her War Marshal. She gestured with her head towards the

door, signaling Auroch to get out.

But the doubt in her eyes was classic Segmond. With just those few words and a disarming grin, Segmond had compromised her so gently: she'd want Auroch watched over. She'd want him safe should bodies start raining from that rock face in the shooting gallery to come. And Segmond could do that. It was genius, honestly; his words were sweet poison.

Auroch took a place by an oak table, considering whether he could overturn it and how many blasts it might take from a carbine before splintering into ashes. That's when he noticed the sides being taken inside the café...those with carbines and railguns drawn and readied to light this room up should it come to shooting. Gunslingers from both sides were taking positions, inside the café and visible in the windows outside.

Students of war considered Segmond one of the most dangerous men alive. It was said of him that he steered armies like sailing ships, his command of the Salt Mystic's powerful lore verging on supernatural. Whatever was magical about the engineered folklore that old woman embedded in the tales of humanity, Segmond seemed to harness it as a weapon, and the first order given to soldiers facing him in battle was never to listen to him speak.

Segmond nodded dramatically at Karak and waved casually at Karak's towering Red Witch guards leering from outside the glass as he stepped into a position by the window and just about arm's length from where Karak stood.



And the two War Marshals stood, side by side, examining the rock faces and high terminus in the distance like it was a summer garden, with the electric hum and rattlesnake sizzle of charged weapons suddenly filling the room.

Auroch leaned into The Wake's ear to whisper to her, "They're up to something."

Her eyes narrowed as she frowned back at Auroch, letting him know with a glare hot enough to burn his eyebrows off that she was growing furious at her War Marshal about this.

Karak and Segmond were just standing there, neither speaking nor de-escalating the building tension in the crowded café in the shadows of the vertical granite battlefield where these fellows here would very likely by dawn be gunning for each other. Did they want it to just happen here instead?

She whispered back through gritted teeth, "Yeah. They're comparing balls, and it's pissing me off."

Auroch shook his head slowly, "That isn't it."

Karak at last took a surveying glance at the standoff behind him, then caught the eyes of the café server, holding up two fingers. She'd been crouching under a counter and had to raise her head like a gopher to see what he was signaling to her.

In fact, it took her a moment to realize he was ordering drinks. With wide eyes, she looked around the room at the raised weapons and tense stares, then back to the old warrior. He twirled his fingers and raised his bushy eyebrows at her to trigger some urgency.

Once she finally poured them and placed the drinks in his hands with the kind of tenderness she might had the glasses held explosives and not algae wine, the café server made for the exit mumbling something about insurance.

Karak handed one of the drinks to Segmond.

Segmond and Karak both turned to the room again and raised their glasses, saluting everyone inside, and downed the contents in a single draft.

The act disarmed them all, causing carbines and railguns to cautiously lower as the crackling hums died off. The gunslingers all hesitantly straightened their chairs and eased off from what was set to be a hailstorm. Isolated voices swelled into a crowd murmur.

Enemies, yes. Always. But nerves and fear drove mistakes. That was their message. There was to be no place for friendly fire or panic runs, pointless screaming dashes into hellfire with no chance of success.

This was business. Drink up. Tomorrow, we dance.

The Wake shook her head, caught Auroch's eyes, and grabbed his neck to draw him closer and kiss him soundly on the lips.

He caught his breath afterwards, his eyes round as moons.

She gestured towards the table, "Let's talk about what could be in that terminus up there. I'm starving."