

The old reliable mobile home made its way next to the township with restrained caution.

Eight stories tall, the hermit geist that moved the traveler's home brought them into peaceful contact with the people of the Realm of Constructed Branches.

The geist then settled in, for the first time in weeks, to take a nap. Or something nap adjacent. Hermit geists rested in the way of storms, quiet and warm, waiting until the atmosphere was right to stir again.

On the roof of the apartment, the Gardener and the Officer stood to meet an envoy from the township on their docks.

Not many hermit geists came through here. Fewer still the size of theirs. An apartment building, much less an ancient one like this, was a rare sight. They had to guide the geist to the tallest dock.

It would be less walking for the people of the treetop village, at least, to get to them. The Gardener hoped they'd appreciate that. The Officer didn't care.

The envoy from the town greeted them without stepping onto the roof. The Realm of Constructed Branches was a confluence of places, and they got travelers often. The envoy was practiced in their job.

Demands were made, in the form of polite words and appeals to local traditions. The Officer and the envoy's bodyguard spent the conversation trying to plan out each other's deaths, while the Gardener and the envoy dueled with pleasant words.

In the end, they exchanged less coin than expected for safe harbor, for five days. Rest and repairs were the order of business, while the travelers would have most of their days free to enter the township.

None of them save the Courier were built for climbing, really. But every town was a chance at something, and all of them would in some way roll their dice.

After all, they were travelers.

As soon as the deal was struck, the Librarian had surged up onto the roof, and from there to the docks, disappearing into the walkways and rope bridges of the town. The envoy had been angry at the perceived concealment of the Librarian, but the Gardener simply pointed out that they had never asked.

And it was too late, after all. Coin had been exchanged. The deal was struck.

The travelers made their way into the town.

Small homes, carved carefully into the artificial trees. They were not meant to be lived in, there was no private space, no wasted inch of floor.

Instead, they spent their expansive open areas on public bistros, farms for the edible birds they had cultivated, and arranged parks for their rituals. They built pavilions and markets, all with limited space, yes, but making use of ziplines and climbing mounts to navigate they expanded how far a person could reasonably explore.

Below, far below, in the darkest shadows of the trees, hives of angry things congregated and plotted to kill the township. Regularly, veterans would lead the young ones down to cull them. From this, the town harvested victories and coin, culled their own less useful members, and remained stable.

There was an artificial joy, as fake as the trees, and cramped as the homes.

The Mechanic had been here once before. They remembered a long ago time, being here on purpose as part of a trade caravan, before becoming a true traveler. The town had paid well in food to buy only a handful of bullets.

The Courier had also been here before. The town elders sent messages often, to temples or warlocks. They received messages far less often. It didn't like carrying the messages sent; they always had a sour weight.

The Gardener had never been here. She set her fangs on edge at the feeling of the place, but still struck out from the apartment in search of additions to her garden. By the second day of her exploration, she had picked up a shadow.

The Officer hated this place. But she hated many places, and the veterans spoke to her with respect. They swapped victories, spoke as much as their coin could buy about the map of boons. Drank as much as the rest of their coin would buy.

The Reporter held back judgement. This place was different. All places were different. It was harsh, violent, and repressed. So was his origin point. That did not make the people less worthy of being included in a letter, or less interesting to observe.

By the fourth day, the repairs to the legs were as done as they could be. The Reporter aided the Mechanic in running one last line of purchased sap along a fracture in one of the bones, sealing it to heal properly. The Mechanic appreciated the help so much, they even answered a question without deflection. But only one.

The Librarian returned near the turning to the fifth day, sliding back into the towering apartment structure. No one questioned the Librarian on what it had been doing, or how it had acquired

the three new letters that filled their Record. Librarians worked differently, and did not need coin for transactions of that sort.

The details were not worth the cost to know.

As the fifth day crept on, the travelers met to discuss disembarking. Now, they organized, not simply rested. The Courier set off to acquire a tool they agreed was worth the cost, the Gardener moved to provision them for the next leg of their journey. The Mechanic, working this whole time, now simply hibernated until they set out.

Just before they left, the Officer returned, stumbling back in, drunk, and clearly unsure if they were going to return until the moment they did so.

It would not have been unusual. Travelers left, sometimes.

Even drunk, though, she was perceptive. The Officer caught their stowaway just before the hermit geist roused itself and began to take its first waking step.

The boy had followed the Gardener for their whole visit, waiting for a chance. He knew he was weak, he knew they would feed him to one of the hives, or one of the rituals, if he stayed.

Plenty of people became travelers to run away. The Officer had holstered her gun, snorted once, ruffled her hand over the boy's pointed ears, and informed him that he needed to pay passage to the Librarian.

It might have been strange that the boy was prepared for that. He offered a letter without complaint. The Librarian took it gently, as if not to startle.

They called him the Refugee. He picked a room to place his things in, just as the first footstep shook the floor, the hermit geist making them bob as it ducked a branch and began to navigate out of the town.

By the fifth thunderous step, the Refugee had stopped flinching at the noise. By the time they reached the next region, he was napping.

To Whom It May Concern;

I hope I'm doing this right.

I've never made a letter before, but if you want to be a traveler, you have to. I mean, I could be something else. A soldier or a merchant I guess. But I want to be a traveler.

When I was a kid, a traveler came through. They called her Runner, like it was a title or something. And then she left, and no one tried to feed her to the hives.

The elders say we fight to better ourselves, but I think they just like it when we die. And I don't want to die. Runner told me that travelers die all the time, too. But good travelers can live until they find where they're going, or just never die.

And good travelers make letters. So I'm making mine.

What am I suppose to do with it, though? Talk about myself I guess? I'm not important enough to keep alive, but not useless enough to drain. I like the red birds they serve at the lower bistro. I'm the best at tavern's hand, when anyone is playing it. Sometimes I win bullets off passing soldiers.

I've got three bullets, ready for when I get to travel. Maybe it'll be more by the time I hand this letter over! I'll be a good traveler, I know it.

It's all I want to do. This place isn't bad. I hear stories, I'm not dumb. I could be dead, or worse. But I don't want to live and die here. I don't want to be another fodder. I'm getting out, no matter what. I'm gonna see the horizons where the boundary lines fold in. I'm gonna stack up victories and chances, and I'm never gonna come back.

I'll be the best traveler, when I get the chance. I've just gotta last one or two more hive runs until a home comes through. One way or another, I'll be gone then.

I hope this is a good first letter.

Traveler's Word,
Refugee