

## Tower of Mud and Straw

### Sample Chapter

#### 1

“It’ll come,” Shea said. “Two more hills, and we’ll see it.”

*The place where the river meets the land, where the hillside scoops the sun’s honey and the toy white boats ride the ripples.*

He didn’t know whom he was telling this—certainly not that calm silence which sat across the table from him.

Aidan fished a piece of meat from his plate, eyes on the airship’s window. The black gloves stayed on even when he ate.

The dining lounge hosted one more passenger, an old lady with large, veiny hands. Although she held on to a fork, she didn’t appear to be eating: each time Shea glanced at her, it was the same posture, same lowered head, as if she’d started the motion but didn’t have the strength to finish it.

“Something seems to be bothering you,” Aidan said. “May I ask what?”

His earlier words echoed in Shea’s mind—‘we must get rid of Patrick, I’m afraid’—as if Aidan had applied a knife to the sentence the way he’d been ready to apply it to Patrick’s throat.

“Why are you asking?”

“Because we share a common goal, and I’ve no desire to see it compromised. And because I still know nothing about this workshop of yours.”

Sunlit hills flowed below, trees at that distance turning into gilded fur.

“Musk Valley is my home,” Shea said.

“Fine, don’t talk.” Aidan folded his napkin. “You seem intent on rejecting my help.”

“What do you want me to say? Listen, when I convinced the duke to destroy the Drakiri devices, I believed in what I was saying. The stuff’s dangerous.

Heaven knows how many were maimed at the tower, perhaps even died—were there any deaths? Do you know?”

“I don’t. Not that I care much, mind you.”

The old lady twitched the way people twitch in their sleep. The fork clanked against her plate, and she finally started eating.

“What the hell am I even doing,” Shea said, “bringing more devices to Owenbeg?”

“A chance at the crown means nothing to you, does it? Then consider this: if the tower doesn’t get finished within the next two years, Duma will attempt an incursion.”

Shea couldn’t contain a hiss. “Come on, are you one of those idiots who believe Duma has the densest population of megalomaniacs in the world?”

“I don’t *believe* anything.” Aidan skewed his mouth, from the looks of it probing his teeth in search of a wayward piece of food. “I *know*. Duma is my motherland, I spent the first thirteen years of my life there; I know how they think, their opinion of other countries, of *you*.”

“Well, it’s not like we have a lot to do, so why don’t you convince me that they’re the furnace of the world’s evil?”

“I’ll tell you a story, Shea.” Aidan slouched in his chair a bit, but one of the black gloves squeezed into a fist, crumpling the napkin. “It was my father who’d decided, single-handedly, that we needed to leave the country. He decided it when the crown prince, only fifteen then, only three years older than me, assumed command of the royal cavalry battalion.

“People went crazy. You know how it happens: everybody ecstatic, everybody talking of a new emerging leader. Father, he saw the writing on the wall. One morning at the end of summer I woke up and saw him through the window, in the sun, exchanging papers with a man I didn’t recognize.

“They shook hands, and the man left. Father turned and walked, too. I couldn’t see him past the window’s edge, but I knew the front door would bang in a few seconds, and that moment was for me—I realize it sounds trite, but still—it was a loss of innocence. My sisters, Maria and Isabel...” He paused. “Maria and Isabel slept in another room. I remember a toy, a bear, perched on the table in mine.

“The door banged and he walked in, or rather, darted through the anteroom. I heard him say something to Mother in a loud voice—normally, he was all quiet in the mornings, afraid of disturbing our sleep.

“When I tiptoed over the ice-cold floor, into the living room, Mother was collecting things, some silly stuff—pictures from the walls, porcelain cats from the shelves. Father told her to stop, pack the clothes, and wake us up.

“The carriage already waited outside. Our cook flapped her apron at her face, and the stable-hand, Michael, ran after us, waving his hands. Michael had first put me on a horse and taught me to ride.”

Aidan slid away his plate. “Past the city gates, I remember, Father relaxed. He even smiled at me. Isabel asked for her doll. That was when the bomb exploded.”

He traced with his fingers a pattern on the table.

“Something hit me on the head, and I flew out through the carriage’s door like a sack. I sat on the pavement, bawling, snot all over my face. My hearing was gone. And you know what the worst thing is? I don’t even remember the corpses. I remember a wheel rolling past me, people running toward us, but not the corpses.

“Mother and Father survived—Isabel and Maria didn’t. It was Michael who’d planted the bomb, of course. They’d found out Father wanted to leave the country, and they bribed our stable hand to blow us up.”

“I’m sorry, Aidan,” Shea said.

“You don’t have to be. It was twenty-five years ago; I healed. Which brings me to another point...” He pinched the rim of his glove. “You’re afraid that people at the tower will never learn to work with the Drakiri devices? Well, you can live with these things for your entire life.”

In one motion, he pulled the glove off. The old lady at the neighboring table gasped, and her fork rang like a little bell.

Aidan’s arm ended at the wrist; what came after branched off in metal and purple veins, glowed in sparks, roughly following the contours of a human hand—but only roughly. Knotted ‘fingers’ rolled in the air as though strumming a chord.

Carefully, Aidan put the glove back on and smiled at the old lady who sat there with huge, frozen eyes.

Shea exhaled. “Gosh. I never knew.”

“Now you do. The bomb maimed me, and I had this thing fitted instead by a wandering Drakiri craftsman when I was twenty-one.”

“You said you found out it was Michael who’d planted the bomb. What did you do to him?”

Aidan didn’t say anything, but his smile sharpened while the eyes went to ice.

*Isabel, Maria. Lena.* Shea exhaled, struck by an analogy. *I could’ve been Aidan. If it were a person that had taken Lena from me, I quite possibly would’ve been him.*

And then they passed the next hill, and, sure enough, there were the ripples on water, and the white sails, and the valley's saddle onto which a palette knife had scrawled the contours of a city.

Somehow, the magic of it appeared dull; all he could think about was a boy looking at dead bodies, an image that held, in itself, a similar picture from his own past, like a Dumian stacking doll.

## 2

Upon entering the workshop, Shea ducked in a nick of time to avoid getting smashed against the wall by a gliding wardrobe.

"Sorry, brother!"

He scanned the room but couldn't understand where Lena's voice was coming from.

On the far side of the hall, Danny and another worker caught the wardrobe and stabilized it in the air. It hung there, spinning lazily, surreal in the purple light that oozed from the 'tulip' fastened to its back. Danny stared at it, mouth open. Other pieces of furniture floated across the workshop, too—a mahogany dining table, a padded sofa for four, an oak-and-leather chair: a scene from someone's dream.

"Grand, isn't it?" Lena descended to the floor, sitting with legs crossed atop a Drakiri device.

"This is dangerous, sis. You could fall."

"Why don't you give it a ride yourself?" She smiled, rose, and tapped the inky surface. "Come on."

"No thank you."

The moment the tulip had touched down, the purple light inside began to die.

"Look." She waved around the hall. "No more hauling things. No more accidents when something falls on someone. We can have twice as much space, we can get rid of all the workbenches—people will work on the furniture while it's suspended in the air. Hey, they can even work outside if they wish."

"Why didn't you wait for me, sis? I thought we wanted to try those things out together."

"I thought so, too." She thumped her fist playfully on his arm. "But today, you seemed more interested in that new maid—what's her name? Muriel? Did you take her out to the vineyards?"

Shea felt red rising to his cheeks. "No. Listen, I had a talk with that Drakiri, you know, the one who works in the town hall."

“Mmm?”

“He told me those things—tulips, eggs, whatever you call them—they’re dangerous. So dangerous, in fact, that I asked him to come here and take a look at them, and he wouldn’t even consider it.”

“Brother.”

“He said they’re volatile and difficult to operate.”

“There’s a valve, and there’s a lever. You saw how *I* operated them—did it seem difficult to you?”

“I saw *you* working with them, sis, yes. What about the others here?”

“I can turn the tulips on and off. Once they’re in the air, you don’t need to do anything else, just push them here and there. I can take care of everything.”

“Perhaps,” Shea said. “But what if you get sick? What if something happens at home, and you have to leave in the middle of the day?”

“Hopefully nothing happens at home.”

“Yes, but what if...?”

“Then we’ll deal with it when we get there. Oh, and by the way...” She turned and ran her fingers across the tulip’s surface, now completely dark. “I’ve ordered another thirty devices from the Drakiri settlement in Owenbeg. They’ll arrive in a few days.”

“What? No! This is my workshop as well as yours, and I forbid it. Even those six...” He glanced at the people trying to get hold of the rotating mahogany table. “...they may’ve been a mistake.”

Something sparkled in her eyes. “Let’s make a bet.”

“A bet?”

“A bet. Like we did when we were children. Give me till tomorrow evening, and I bet you I’ll change your mind about the tulips.”

Shea chuckled. “What do you...?”

She smiled dreamily. “I have an idea.” Without warning, she stepped forward and squeezed him in an embrace. “Everything will be beautiful. You’ll see, brother.”

### 3

The carriage took them from the port’s breeze into Oakville’s narrow, sand-colored streets.

In no particular order: sunlight-watered shadows under the house bridges; a barber on the corner catching the clouds with his mirror; a bigger dog chasing a smaller one; a woman, her hand on her hip, talking to a man with bald temples.

Inconceivable how something could carry the sugary-powder flavor of childhood and, at the same time, a much more bitter, corroding taste.

"I never wanted to return," he said.

Aidan didn't respond.

Sun Plaza. Memory lane zigzagged around striped market stands, past doors the color of green bottle-glass. Summer always managed to prolong its stay here: yellow leaves on the cherry trees seemed simply an extension of daylight.

The driver half-turned to them. "Where to now?"

"Ashcr..." *Damn it.* Something made him swallow the word—whether it was the sun that stung his eyes, or all the things rising up his chest. "Ashcroft family workshop."

"What's that?"

"The furniture shop a few streets away."

"Oh." The man pursed his lips. "Oh. You mean Imogen's."

"I mean that street, right ahead. I'll show you the way from there."

*What had he expected?* After a decade—dead windows, still criss-crossed by wooden boards? Of course the place had a new owner, and he could only hope they hadn't discovered the rosewood trapdoor.

"You've mentioned the proprietor's name," he said.

"A gal called Imogen." The driver smacked his lips. "That shop, after what had happened, folks were afraid it was cursed or something. All those people who died—"

"What *did* happen there?" Aidan said.

The man shrugged. "People died. You know. Anyway, no one wanted to buy the place until Imogen came along and made it into a clothing store."

The carriage drove into a small square in front of a building which still reminded Shea—even though his young, romantic self had long faded—of a yacht: the dark wood of the first floor and the white sail of the second.

The sign read 'Flying Tulip Dresses.' Imogen hadn't simply bought the workshop—she'd bought its history, too.

Leaving the black gloves to meter out the coins, Shea hopped off the carriage.

"What do you have in mind?" Aidan called out to him.

"To talk."

The doorbell silver-chimed.

The main hall wasn't the way he remembered it: no more wheels under the ceiling—or ropes—no scent of resin and finished wood. No laughter; no clinking, somewhere in the corner, of beer mugs. People in white stood at equal distances from one another, each hunched over their own small table. Neat, clean, an invisible checkerboard.

A tall woman sailed up to him. "May I help you?"

"Good afternoon." Shea looked around, remembering. "I..."

"Are you here to order a dress?"

"No... Maybe. I would be interested in a guided tour."

"We don't offer tours, I'm afraid. But if you're looking to buy a dress, I can show you our fabrics."

"Sure," he said. "Thank you." *That door, across the hall. Still there. Here's hoping they hadn't tried to change the floorboards—*

"This is cotton with lozenges, and here's some striped linen. It's particularly beautiful with..."

There was zero chance they would get to the trapdoor with all those people around.

"When do you close?" Shea asked.

"...purple velvet. I beg your pardon?"

"When do you close the workshop?"

"At six. But it's still plenty of time to take your measurements if—"

"Listen, I've some money with me. I know it sounds very strange, but I assure you, there's no malicious intent involved."

"I don't understand."

"You just need to let me in after your close. I'll pay you whatever you ask."

"Let you in?"

Shea lowered his voice. "I won't take anything from the workshop. I'm not trying to rob you. I only require ten minutes ... I'll pay you, okay? I promise I won't get you into trouble."

She nodded slowly, staring at him. "Please give me a second."

A guy at one of the tables cursed loudly and puffed at his fingers—for a moment, that distracted Shea, and then the woman wasn't there anymore. When he caught sight of her again, she stood at the other side of the hall next to a bulky fellow with hands that, from the looks of them, could bend small trees.

Shea saw her say something and point at him.

*Fuck.*

The bell chimed again as he tumbled out into the street.

"Find out anything?" Aidan said.

"Found out we need to scramble, fast."

Rushing toward a back alley, déjà vu gripped him that he first couldn't place; then he remembered—*catch it, Danny, catch it*. The sudden influx of memory was so painful that he doubled over, palms on his knees.

Aidan interpreted this in his own way. "You should exercise more, my friend."

From the shadows, they watched the 'bouncer' step out through the front door, scan the street, disappear back into the shop.

*Catch it, Danny.*

"Let's forget the entire thing," Shea said. "Do you hear me, Aidan? Let's forget it and return to Owenbeg."

Aidan slowly turned his head and chuckled in disbelief. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Coming here was a mistake."

"Do you realize—damn it, I'm repeating myself—do you realize what's at stake? This is our future, combined. *And* the country's future—"

"No, this is your *belief*." Shea pressed his back against the wall and slid down into a crouch. "Or Daelyn's belief. Against someone else's. You believe Duma would instigate a world war. The queen believes her legacy is a two thousand foot monstrosity. Drakiri believe that same monstrosity will bring about the apocalypse. One belief against the other."

"Except some beliefs have foundation in reality and some are pure superstition. What's the deal with the Drakiri, you said?"

"They're convinced..." Shea sighed. "They're *convinced* that once the tower is finished, another will materialize. They even have a name for it—the Mimic Tower. It's supposed to be a portal to hell."

"Surely you realize how crazy this sounds."

"Crazy, Aidan?" Shea glanced at him. "Same crazy as in 'devices we don't understand that can fly'?"

"That's different. That's technology, as opposed to superstition."

It was Shea's turn to chuckle.

"Look," Aidan said, "you have some weaknesses that would make it difficult for you to run the court, should all of this..." He raised his hands, palms up. "Should our plans work. You need to get rid of those weaknesses. Focus on the goal at hand."

*Take the next step in the golden dance.*

"I'm afraid we're out of options anyway—we can't get to the tulips," Shea said.

"Have you at least found out when they close?"

"At six."

"Then we're in luck, cause some of those bloody places stay open through midnight." Aidan turned around. "Let's meet here at ten."

"Where are you going?"

"You said thirty devices. We'll need help to transport them."

"How would we even get them?"

"Well, that one's pretty obvious," Aidan said. "We break in."