

Monty's Escapade

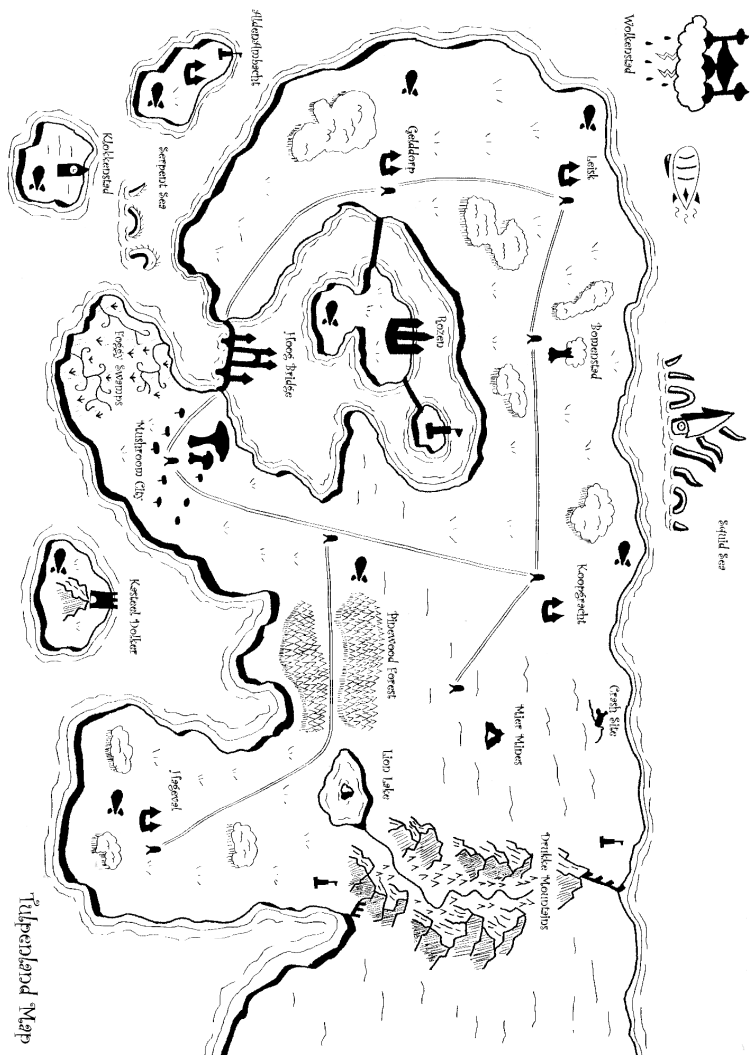
Author's Note

This story has been a long time in the making. It began in 2017, during my time at university, as a simple medieval fantasy world. Over the span of six years, it gradually transformed into something much larger—a dieselpunk setting layered with history, politics, rebellion, and war. The remnants of that original medieval world still remain, now forming the ancient past of a society driven by industrial progress.

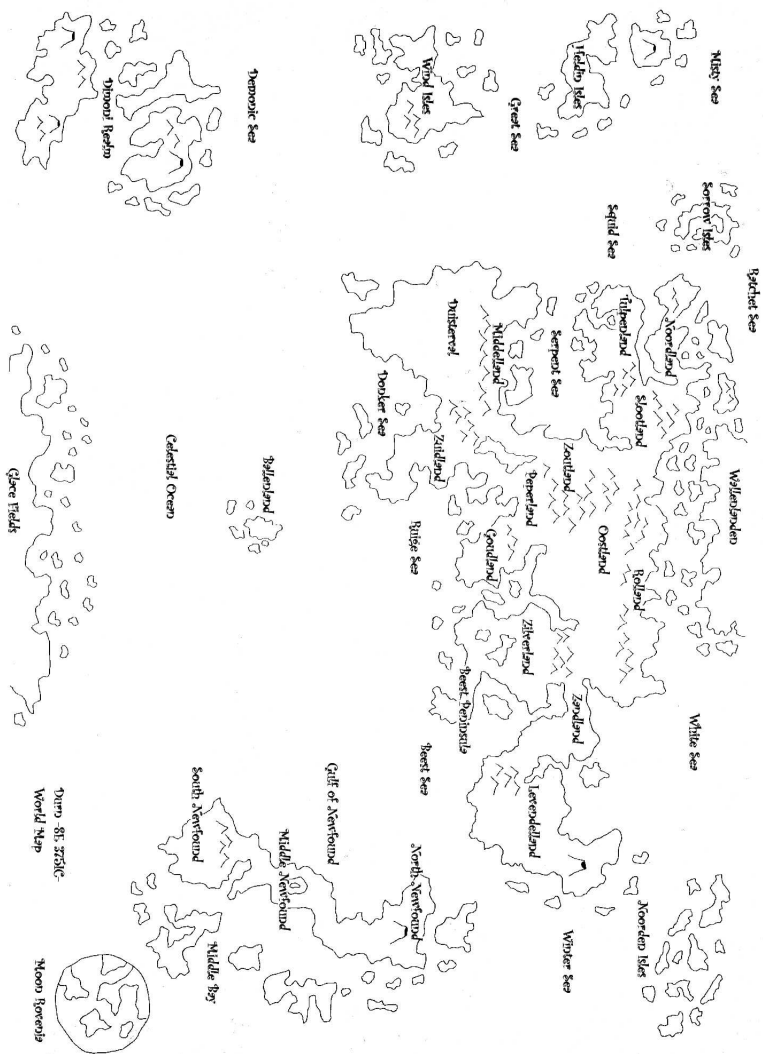
As the world evolved, so did its themes. Labor exploitation, technological advancement, and social unrest became central to the conflicts shaping its people and power structures. These aren't just backdrops—they are the engines that drive the characters and their choices.

This world draws inspiration from many sources—both fictional and real. After struggling with illness in 2024, I made the decision to finally stop planning and start writing. In July of that year, I began putting this world—and the story it holds—into words. What you hold in your hands is the result of years of imagining, building, refining, and finally daring to create. I hope this world feels as alive, complex, and thought-provoking to you as it has always felt to me.

Tulpenland Map



Durn world map



Monty's Escape

Monty was a mole working in the Lucht factory on the newest airship, a colossal Assault carrier called the Expedition of Liberation. His days were spent in one of the four lower hangar bays, where eight Albatros Transport Blimps and seventy-two battle tanks would eventually be stored. It was grueling work, and as the hours dragged on, Monty found himself questioning his life. Is this really all there is? Was he destined to spend his days toiling away, or could he choose to be something more?

Monty was an exceptional engineer, his skill unmatched by anyone in the factory. He had asked for a promotion, hoping his hard work would be rewarded. But his supervisor, recognizing Monty's value, refused to let him move up. He was too good at what he did, and losing him would require three workers to replace him. Instead of the promotion he deserved, Monty was given empty promises and false hope.

One night, after his shift had ended, Monty trudged back to the company housing, a hollow ache in his chest. He missed the ground beneath his feet and the beautiful scenery of his homeland. The factory walls felt like a prison, and the thought of his distant home brought him little comfort. His coworkers were no different from the machines they worked with—drones with no ambition or energy, existing only to labor through the endless days. Like Monty, they had no family to go home to, no one to share their lives with. In fact, none of them even remembered who their mother was.

As Monty lay in his bed that night, the same question haunted him: Was this really all there was? Could he ever

be more than just a cog in the factory's relentless machine? The thought of spending the rest of his life like this filled him with a deep, gnawing despair. As Monty walked past the office of Amari, the boss of the company, he overheard a conversation that sent a chill down his spine. Amari was discussing ways to increase productivity among the moles, but the solution being proposed was far more sinister than Monty could have imagined. Amari was meeting with her shareholders, along with two mages from the Mushroom Brewery, Elisther and Alara. Monty listened more closely, straining to catch every word. The mages were explaining their latest creation—an elixir they called Healing Water. But this was no ordinary brew. Elisther and Alara assured Amari that the potion would make the moles more docile and compliant, stripping them of any desire to escape. The laborers would work longer hours, with greater efficiency, and show less fatigue throughout the day.

But that wasn't the worst of it. Elisther continued, her voice cold and calculated. "You won't have to worry about any mole escaping the factory, contacting unions, or causing any public relations issues," she said. "The brew is highly addictive. If a mole goes without it for too long, the withdrawal will be fatal." Amari and the shareholders smiled, clearly pleased with this wicked plan.

Monty felt a wave of shock and horror wash over him. Without thinking, he turned and ran, his heart pounding in his chest. The factory was built like a prison, and Monty knew that escape would be nearly impossible. But now, with the horrifying knowledge of what Amari and the mages were planning, he realized that staying was even more dangerous. The walls of the factory seemed to close

in around him, and the bleakness of his situation became painfully clear. Monty had to find a way out before it was too late. Monty sprinted towards one of the engineering offices, where a few of his coworkers were still working late.

He slipped inside, quickly closing the door behind him. His breath was ragged as he silently shared what he had overheard in Amari's office.

His coworkers were horrified by the news. The thought of becoming mindless drones, enslaved by the addictive elixir, filled them with dread. Panic set in, and they immediately wanted to escape, ready to bolt without a plan. But Monty knew that rushing out blindly would only get them caught. "We can't just run," he whispered urgently. "If we try to leave now, it won't be enough. We need more people—more numbers to create a distraction and increase our chances of getting out of here alive."

The others nodded, understanding the truth in his words. They couldn't just think of themselves; they had to warn everyone without alerting security. It would be risky, but with enough moles on their side, they might have a fighting chance. Monty's mind raced as he considered their options. Hijacking one of the airships was out of the question; the military contractors guarded them too closely. But there was a glimmer of hope. "What about the Valk twin-rotor helicopters?" he suggested. "They're less secure." A murmur of agreement spread through the group, but another problem quickly surfaced—none of them knew how to fly a Valk helicopter.

Monty's heart sank. Even with a plan forming, the odds seemed stacked against them. But he knew they had to try.

Their only hope was to gather as many moles as possible, create a massive distraction, and find someone who could pilot the helicopter.

It was a slim chance, but it was the only one they had. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Monty and his coworkers faced another harsh reality: the twin-rotor helicopter they planned to hijack could only hold ten moles. With over 40,000 moles working in the Lucht Factory, it was impossible to get everyone out that way. Even if they could somehow manage to steal a helicopter, it wouldn't be enough to save them all.

Monty knew they had to act carefully. The best course of action was to rest for the night and then begin spreading the word delicately the next day. They needed to start a rebellion, but it had to be done in secret, without arousing suspicion. With 40,000 moles trapped in the factory, there was no way they could steal enough helicopters—4,000 of them would be needed to evacuate everyone, an impossible task. The factory only produced 100 helicopters a year, most of which were quickly transported away for the military in the colossal airship cargo bays.

They also had to contend with another obstacle: the owlfolk. These sharp-eyed, keen-eared creatures were always on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary, and if they caught wind of the plan, it would be over before it began. Monty and his group knew they had to be extremely cautious. The next day, they would begin to spread the word, carefully and quietly, to those they could trust. The rebellion would need careful planning and secrecy, but Monty was determined. It was their only chance to break free from the factory's grip.

Monty and his coworkers spent the rest of the night in tense silence, each grappling with the enormity of the situation. The grim reality of their circumstances weighed heavily on their minds, but the faint hope of escape kept them going. The small, dimly lit engineering office felt like a fragile haven, a brief respite before the storm that was sure to come. As the first light of dawn began to filter through the factory's narrow windows, Monty quietly gathered his group. The moles who had been in the office last night were tired but resolute, their eyes hardened by the knowledge they now carried. They had all agreed on a plan: they would spread the word, but with the utmost caution. A single slip could spell disaster for everyone.

Monty took the lead, his natural leadership skills emerging as he carefully selected the first moles to approach. He chose those who had been with the factory the longest, those who were known for their quiet, steady demeanor, and those who had no love for the management. These were the moles who would understand the gravity of the situation and who could be trusted to keep their composure. Each of Monty's group members was assigned a handful of moles to talk to throughout the day. They would use their breaks, brief moments in the restrooms, or quiet corners of the factory to share the plan. The message was simple but dire: escape was possible, but it would require all of them to work together, and they had to act soon, before the elixir was distributed.

As Monty moved through the factory that day, the atmosphere felt different. Every sound seemed sharper, every glance from the owlfolk more suspicious. He knew that the factory's oppressive environment had heightened

his senses, but he also knew that they were running out of time.

The elixir could be introduced at any moment, and once it was, their chances of escape would plummet. During his lunch break, Monty managed to slip away to one of the older sections of the factory, where some of the most experienced moles worked. He found Molezart, an elder mole who had been with the factory for decades. His wisdom and insight were well-known among the workers, and Monty knew he could be a valuable ally.

"Molezart," Monty whispered as he approached him. "We need to talk."

Molezart looked up from his work, his eyes narrowing as he saw the urgency in Monty's expression. He set down his tools and followed him to a secluded corner. Monty quickly explained what he had overheard in Amari's office, the plan to drug the workers, and the desperate need for an escape. Molezart listened intently, his face growing more serious with every word.

"We've always known they don't care about us," Molezart said quietly, his voice laced with bitterness. "But this... this is something else entirely."

"We have to do something," Monty urged. "I'm gathering those we can trust, but we need to be careful. If the owlfolk catch wind of this..."

"They won't," Molezart interrupted, his voice firm. "I've lived in this place long enough to know how to stay unnoticed. We'll spread the word, but only to those who can keep their heads down. We can't afford any mistakes." Monty nodded, feeling a surge of relief. Molezart's involvement was a significant step forward. He would be

able to rally some of the older, more experienced moles, those who had seen the factory's injustices firsthand.

As the day wore on, Monty's group continued to quietly recruit more moles. The message spread slowly, but steadily, like a spark catching dry kindling. Each mole they approached understood the risk but also the necessity of the plan. They all knew that staying in the factory was a death sentence, whether by the elixir or by the relentless grind of labor. That night, Monty gathered his group again in the same engineering office. The mood was tense but determined. They had managed to recruit a small but significant number of moles, each one ready to play their part in the escape. "We've made good progress," Monty began, "but we still have a long way to go. Tomorrow, we'll need to start focusing on logistics. We need to identify where the owlfolk patrols are the weakest, where we can gather without being noticed, and how we can create a distraction big enough to cover our escape."

"We also need to figure out how to get the helicopter ready," one of his coworkers added. "We don't have much time, and if we're going to make a break for it, everything needs to be perfect."

Monty nodded. "I know. We'll need to work fast, but we can't rush this. If we're going to succeed, we have to plan every step carefully. We'll meet again tomorrow night with more information. Until then, keep spreading the word, but stay cautious." As the group dispersed, Monty lingered for a moment, staring out of the small window at the dark, foreboding sky. He knew that the days ahead would be the most dangerous of his life, but he also knew that there was no turning back.

The factory's walls were closing in, and if they didn't escape soon, they would be trapped forever. The following day, the moles continued their quiet preparations. They mapped out the factory's layout, identifying the best routes for their escape and the locations of the owlfolk patrols. They also began gathering supplies—food, water, and anything else they might need for the journey ahead. All the while, they kept a close eye on the factory's leadership, watching for any signs that the elixir was about to be distributed.

Monty, meanwhile, focused on finding someone who could pilot the helicopter. He knew it was a long shot, but he had to try. He quietly approached a few moles who had previously worked in the airship docks, hoping that one of them might have some knowledge of flying. Most of them shook their heads, admitting that they had only ever worked on maintenance, but one mole, a quiet and unassuming worker named Dug, hesitated. "I've never flown one myself," Dug admitted, "but I used to watch the pilots during my breaks. I've seen them start it up, seen how they handle the controls... I might be able to figure it out." "It's better than nothing," Monty said, feeling a flicker of hope. "We'll need you, Dug. It won't be easy, but if you think you can do it, you're our best chance." Dug nodded, though he was unsure if he would even reach a helicopter alive when the uprising started. Monty watched as Dug nodded, though his expression was tense. "I'll do my best, Monty," Dug said, his voice filled with a mix of determination and anxiety. "I've seen the controls, and I've seen how the pilots operate. If it comes down to it, I'll get us out of here." Monty placed a paw on Dug's shoulder,

offering a reassuring squeeze. "That's all we can ask for, Dug. We're counting on you."

As the day wore on, Monty continued to lead his small group in their covert preparations. Each step felt like a race against time, as if the factory walls were inching closer and closer, threatening to crush them. The sense of urgency was palpable, and every mole in Monty's group knew that they were walking a razor's edge. That evening, Monty gathered his group once more in the engineering office. The atmosphere was tense, but there was also a flicker of hope in their eyes. They had made progress, but they all knew the most dangerous part was yet to come.

"Molezart should be here any minute," Monty said as he glanced at the door. Molezart, the elder mole who had been with the factory longer than anyone, was a figure of quiet wisdom and strength. He was known for his calm demeanor and his ability to inspire others through his words. Just as Monty finished speaking, the door creaked open, and Molezart stepped inside. He was an older mole, his fur streaked with silver, but his eyes were sharp and clear. He carried himself with a quiet dignity, a presence that commanded respect. "Good evening," Molezart said, his voice soft but steady. He looked around at the gathered moles, his gaze lingering on each one, as if assessing their resolve. "Monty has told me everything. I see that you've all come together, and that is a good start. But we must be cautious. The road ahead will be perilous." Monty nodded in agreement. "We've made progress, Molezart. We've mapped out the factory, identified the weakest patrol routes, and we have Dug ready to fly the helicopter. But there's still so much that could go wrong."

"There always is," Molezart replied, his tone thoughtful. "But you've done well to prepare. Now, we must ensure that everyone involved knows their role and that we stay unified in our purpose." One of the younger moles, Molebert, spoke up. "What about the others, Molezart? The ones who haven't been told yet? How do we know they won't panic when the time comes?"

"That is a risk we must take," Molezart said. "But it's also why we've been so careful in choosing who to trust. Those we've approached so far are steady, reliable. When the moment arrives, they'll help to keep the others calm. Fear is our greatest enemy now, and we must control it, or it will control us."

Monty looked at Molezart, grateful for the elder mole's wisdom. "We've been careful, but we still need to figure out how to create a distraction large enough to draw the owlfolk away from the helicopters. Without that, we won't even get close."

Molezart stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Distraction... Yes, that will be key. We could use the factory's own systems against them. Perhaps a power outage in the main assembly line, or even a fire in one of the less critical sections. Something that would require the owlfolk to respond in force, giving us the time we need."

"A fire might work," Monty agreed. "But we'd need to make sure it doesn't spread too quickly. We don't want to endanger anyone."

"We can control it," Molezart assured him. "Start it in one of the storage areas where the materials are less flammable. It will create enough smoke and chaos to draw attention, but it won't be an immediate threat."

"Sounds like a plan," Monty said, feeling more confident. "We'll need to assign someone to start the fire and then regroup with us at the helicopters."

"I'll do it," Molebert volunteered. "I can slip away during the commotion and meet you at the launch site." Monty nodded. "Thank you, Molebert. Make sure you're careful. The owlfolk will be on high alert once they notice the fire." Molebert gave a determined nod, understanding the gravity of his task. "Once the distraction is in place," Molebert continued, "we'll need to move quickly. The owlfolk are sharp, but if we time this right, we'll have the element of surprise on our side." As the group finalized their plans, the tension in the room grew thick.

Each mole knew what was at stake, and the weight of their mission pressed heavily on their shoulders. The factory, with its oppressive atmosphere and relentless grind, felt more like a living entity, watching their every move. Monty took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come. "We'll meet here again tomorrow night. Be ready. This is our only chance."

With a final nod of agreement, the group dispersed, each mole slipping back into the shadows of the factory, returning to their stations with the same quiet resolve they had carried all day. That night, Monty lay in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. Sleep wouldn't come easily, not with the enormity of what they were about to attempt. The factory's hum seemed louder than ever, a constant reminder of the life they were desperate to escape.

But amidst the fear and uncertainty, there was also a spark of hope—a hope that, if nurtured carefully, might grow into something strong enough to shatter the factory's chains.

The next day passed in a blur of tension and preparation. Monty's group continued their covert efforts, spreading the word and gathering the last of their supplies. Molezart, with his calm presence, helped to steady the nerves of those who were wavering. His quiet confidence was a balm to the anxious moles, and his guidance was invaluable as they prepared for the night ahead.

As night fell, Monty's group gathered one final time in the engineering office. The air was thick with anticipation. Molezart spoke, his voice low and soothing. "Remember, stay calm, stay focused. We move as one, and we do not look back. This is our moment." As the final preparations fell into place, the air in the engineering office crackled with tension. The moles knew they were on the brink of something dangerous, but the only path left was forward. Monty, Molezart, and the others gathered for one last meeting before their daring escape. The plan was set: Molebert would start the fire, creating the necessary distraction, while the rest would make a run for the helicopter. "Remember," Molezart said, his voice steady and authoritative, "we move as one. There's no room for hesitation. We don't look back."

Molebert gave a firm nod, his usual playful grin replaced by a look of grim determination. He had volunteered to start the fire, knowing full well the risks. But Molebert had always been the kind of mole who didn't shy away from danger—he faced it head-on, with a reckless courage that the others admired.

As the group dispersed, slipping into the shadows of the factory, Monty's heart pounded like a war drum. The factory's silence felt ominous, like the calm before a storm.

They moved quickly, their eyes scanning for any sign of the owlfolk or the Lucht Marines, who patrolled the factory with their long rifles slung over their shoulders.

The Luchtmartines were clad in formidable matt bronze armor that gleams with a steely resolve, paired with a deep crimson tunic featuring intricate clasps along the front, exuding both strength and discipline. A matching crimson cape drapes over their shoulders, adorned with a purple shield bearing a white "V" insignia, signifying their allegiance to Tulpenland, while sturdy black gloves grip a long rifle with precision. Their closed helmet, with its glowing cyan eyes and attached breathing tubes, adds an otherworldly menace, completing the fearsome ensemble of these elite soldiers.

Molebert broke off from the group, heading toward the storage area where he would set the fire. Monty watched him go, hoping against hope that Molebert would make it back in time. The rest of the group continued toward the hangar, where the twin-rotor helicopter awaited.

Suddenly, a distant plume of smoke rose from the storage area. The fire had started.

The factory exploded into chaos. Alarms blared, and the sharp-eyed owlfolk, perched in their high nests, quickly spotted the rising smoke. They let out piercing cries, alerting the Lucht Marines below. Within moments, the factory was swarming with activity. The marines rushed toward the fire, their long rifles raised and ready.

"Move! Now!" Monty hissed, leading the moles into a sprint toward the hangar. But their movements hadn't gone unnoticed. As they dashed across the factory grounds, a group of Lucht Marines spotted them. With swift precision,

the marines took aim and fired. Bullets whizzed past Monty's ears, kicking up dust and debris as they struck the ground around him. The moles scattered, zigzagging to make themselves harder targets, but the marines were relentless. Monty could hear the sharp crack of rifles behind him, the shouts of the marines growing louder. Molebert, having set the fire, was sprinting back toward the hangar. But the Lucht Marines were hot on his tail. Molebert ducked and weaved, narrowly avoiding the bullets that tore through the air. But the marines were gaining on him, their rifles trained on his back. "Molebert! Hurry!" Monty shouted, but his voice was lost in the chaos.

Just as Molebert neared the hangar, a rifle shot rang out, and he stumbled. Monty's heart sank as he saw Molebert fall, a dark stain spreading across his back. The brave mole hit the ground hard, his eyes wide with shock, and then they dimmed, his body going still.

"No!" Monty screamed, but there was no time to mourn. The marines were closing in, and the owlfolk had descended from their perches, swooping down into the hangars with submachine guns in hand. The rapid staccato of gunfire filled the air as the owlfolk unleashed a hail of bullets.

Monty and Molezart ducked behind crates, their breaths coming in ragged gasps. "We have to keep moving!" Molezart urged, his voice taut with urgency.

Dug was already in the helicopter, frantically starting the engine. The rotor blades began to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster, until they were a blur. Monty and Molezart made a break for the helicopter, dodging bullets

as they ran. Several other moles, their faces pale with fear, scrambled into the helicopter behind them.

As Monty leaped into the helicopter, he glanced back one last time, his heart aching at the sight of Molebert's lifeless body lying on the factory floor. But there was no time for grief—not yet. "Go, Dug! Now!" Monty shouted.

Dug gritted his teeth, his hands shaking as he pulled the helicopter's controls. The aircraft lifted off the ground, wobbling at first, then stabilizing as it rose higher. The owlfolk, realizing what was happening, turned their guns skyward, firing in a desperate attempt to bring the helicopter down.

Bullets pinged off the metal frame, but Dug kept climbing, pushing the helicopter to its limits. Monty looked down, watching as the factory shrank beneath them, the chaos below turning into a distant blur. But the danger wasn't over yet. In the Observation deck, Amari watched the scene unfold in disbelief. Her face twisted with fury as she realized that the moles were escaping. She slammed her fist on the desk, her eyes blazing with anger. "This can't be happening!" she snarled. "I want them brought down—now!"

She grabbed the radio, barking orders to the remaining owlfolk and Lucht Marines. "Squash this rebellion! Shoot them down! I don't care what it takes!" But despite Amari's frantic commands, the helicopter continued to climb, gaining altitude as Dug expertly maneuvered it away from the factory. The owlfolk's bullets grew more erratic as the distance increased, and soon, the gunfire fell silent. Monty, breathing heavily, looked around at the moles huddled in the helicopter. Molezart sat beside him, his

expression somber. "We did it," Monty whispered, almost unable to believe it. Molezart nodded, but his eyes were filled with sorrow. "We escaped, but not all of us made it." The helicopter flew on, carrying them away from the factory and into the night. Below them, the Lucht Factory was still burning, the fire Molebert had started raging through the storage area. But even as they left the factory behind, Monty knew that their fight wasn't over. They had won this battle, but the war for their freedom was far from finished.

As the factory faded into the distance, Monty made a silent vow. They would return for the others. They would bring down the factory's walls and free every last mole trapped inside. Amari and her cruel regime would not go unchallenged. "Molebert is dead," Monty said, his voice heavy with sadness. Molezart placed a hand on Monty's shoulder, his own grief evident. "His sacrifice saved us, Monty," he said quietly. Dug, focused intently on flying, remained silent, the weight of what had happened pressing down on them all.

Amari was fuming. "How could this have happened?" she muttered, pacing her office in agitation. Her mind raced, grappling with the shocking escape that had just unfolded. A troubling thought crossed her mind: Was this the work of Alara and Elisther, those crafty mages from the Mushroom Brewery? Could they have orchestrated this chaos to push their elixir, the so-called Healing Water? The timing was suspicious, almost too convenient. But no, Amari dismissed the idea, forcing herself to stay calm. "That's just paranoia," she thought. "They wouldn't go so far as to engineer an outbreak just to market their product to other

industrialists." Still, she couldn't let those moles escape. The potential fallout was too great. She needed swift action. "I have to alert the military of Groenenrijk," she decided. "Leisk Airfield could send one of their Assault carriers to hunt them down."

She turned to one of her owlfolk henchmen. "Get me Charles Dumond on the line," she ordered. Moments later, the rijksleider of Groenenrijk's voice crackled over the connection.

"Hello, Miss Amari. To what do I owe the pleasure of speaking with my beloved campaign sponsor?" Charles Dumond's voice was smooth, almost mocking.

"Hello, Rijksleider Dumond," Amari replied, forcing politeness into her tone. "I need a favor. Could you send one of your airship Assault carrier to the vicinity of my Lucht Factory? One of my workers stole a helicopter."

"An entire airship Assault carrier just to shoot down one helicopter?" Dumond's disbelief was palpable.

"If possible, I want to capture one of them alive for interrogation," Amari explained. She was already growing suspicious of the visit from Elisther and Alara. The timing of this incident was too convenient, too perfectly aligned with their visit.

But Amari's concerns went beyond that. News of the uprising had already started to spread through her city, and if word reached the other cities of Tulpenland, it could spell disaster for her public image and the stock value of her company. Panic among the investors could unravel everything she had built. She needed to clean up this mess quickly. Once the situation was under control, she would invite the investors to the Sky Palace to reassure them that

everything was fine, that her factories were operating smoothly. She couldn't afford to let this incident snowball into a crisis.

Amari's mind was racing as she prepared to face the aftermath of the escape. She knew she had to take control of the narrative before it spiraled out of her grasp. With cold determination, she called her senior employees into her office. "Clean up the mess in the Lucht Factory," she ordered sharply. "The fire, the escape, all of it. I want everything back to normal by tonight."

Her employees nodded and hurried to carry out her orders. Amari couldn't afford any loose ends—not with a shareholder meeting scheduled for later that evening. She would sweep this entire incident under the rug, dismiss it as a baseless conspiracy theory, and reassure the investors that everything was under control. As she was planning her next steps, one of her owlfolk henchmen approached.

"Rijksleider Dumond is on the line," he said.

"Put him through," Amari responded, steeling herself.

Charles Dumond's voice came through the line, smooth and composed. "Hello, Amari. Tonight, I'll be attending the opera at your Sky Palace. After that, I'd like to meet with you at the restaurant with the atrium garden and a view of the clouds."

Amari recognized the location immediately—one of her most exclusive establishments, known for its breathtaking views and impeccable service. "Of course, Rijksleider," she replied. "I look forward to our meeting."

"I should let you know," Dumond continued, "I can't send a Assault carrier to intercept the escapees. It would raise too much suspicion. Instead, I've dispatched a sky support

frigate, accompanied by a flight of Valk helicopters with their side Gatling guns manned. We'll tell the public it's just a military exercise."

"Understood," Amari said, her voice even. "I hope you enjoy the opera performance. We'll discuss the situation further at the restaurant."

With the call ended, Amari turned her attention to the preparations for the shareholder meeting. She moved to the observation deck, looking down at the factory floor. The storage fire had been extinguished by her firefighters, and the alarms had been silenced. The damage was minimal, and to Amari's relief, the factory was quickly returning to its usual state.

A twisted smile curled on her lips as she considered how to spin the events to her advantage. She would present the storage fire as a minor incident, a non-issue that only served to fuel ridiculous conspiracy theories. After all, why would the moles rebel against an employer who provided them with housing, food, and security? The idea was laughable, and she would make sure the shareholders saw it that way.

As the hour approached, Amari prepared for the meeting with meticulous care. When the shareholders began to arrive, she welcomed them with her usual poise and charm, guiding them to the conference room.

Once they were all seated, Amari began her presentation. She spoke confidently, explaining that the rumors of an uprising were nothing more than an overreaction from the public, blown out of proportion by the stress of recent events. The storage fire? A minor accident, quickly

contained. The alleged escape? A mere fantasy, the result of fear and speculation.

She assured the shareholders that the factory was running smoothly, that there was no cause for concern. Her tone was calm, persuasive, and the shareholders, eager to believe her, nodded in agreement.

An hour passed, and the meeting concluded without a hitch. Amari's performance had been flawless, and the shareholders left reassured, their confidence in the company intact.

Later that evening, as Amari prepared to receive Rijksleider Dumond at her Sky Palace, she allowed herself a moment of satisfaction. Dumond would be arriving in his own luxury airship, no doubt expecting further details on the situation. She would meet him at the restaurant, where they could discuss the escapees in private, away from prying eyes.

As she looked out over Wolkenstad from the observation deck of her Sky Palace, Amari saw the city lights twinkling far below, a stark contrast to the dark sky above. The factory incident had been a close call, but she had managed to keep control. Now, she just had to maintain that control, keep the narrative in her hands, and ensure that her empire remained unshaken.

In her world, where power and perception were everything, Amari knew one thing for certain: she would do whatever it took to keep her position secure, no matter the cost.

Monty, Molezart, and Dug sat in tense silence as the helicopter whirled through the sky, piloted by Dug. Below them, the clouds parted, revealing the sprawling, floating fortress of Wolkenstad, with its glittering cityscape perched

above the hidden factories. It was hard to believe they had actually escaped. "I can't believe we did it," Monty said, his voice filled with a mix of disbelief and relief. "We're finally free."

"Yes, we are," Molezart replied, his tone cautious. "But we're not out of trouble yet. We need a place to land, and fast. They're probably already trying to intercept us." Monty looked at him, confusion crossing his face. "How do you know all this? I had no idea about any of it." Molezart glanced at Monty, a hint of a smile. "I've always wanted to know more about the world beyond the factory. We were among the few taught to read so we could operate the more complex machinery. But I used that knowledge for more than just work. I snuck into Amari's office once and studied the map she had on her wall. I also saw notes about how she was preparing for a visit from a union representative. The oligarchs hate unions—might be our only chance to get help."

Monty frowned. "But that's a huge gamble. What if the union can't help us? What even is a union?"

"From what I understand, they're supposed to protect the rights of workers," Molezart explained.

Before Monty could respond, Dug suddenly yelled, "Uh, guys! I see a sky frigate with four helicopters heading straight for us. And they're armed!"

Monty's heart sank. "They're probably trying to intercept us. We can't head to Leisk now. What are we supposed to do?"

Molezart quickly calculated their options. "Dug, steer south," he ordered.

"Okay," Dug replied, adjusting their course. The four helicopters began closing in, their weapons glinting ominously in the sunlight.

"Oh no," Monty muttered, glancing back at the six other moles in the helicopter, all of them wide-eyed with fear.

"Uh, guys," Dug said, his voice tense. "We have a problem."

"What is it?" Monty asked, dread building in his stomach.

"We're running out of fuel," Dug admitted.

Monty's heart raced. "We need to make an emergency landing. But where? We can't outrun them for long."

Molezart's mind raced. "Dug, head for the coast. We can try to dig in once we land."

"What? Are you crazy?" Molezart exclaimed. But Dug didn't hesitate—he steered the helicopter straight toward the sky frigate.

Onboard the frigate, the captain eyed the approaching helicopter with a steely gaze. "Attention all fighters," he barked. "We are nearing our target. Prepare to engage." The enemy helicopters closed in, their guns blazing. Dug swerved the Valk wildly, narrowly evading the hail of bullets as they zoomed past their attackers. The moles inside the Valk held their breath, bracing for impact.

"Haha! I can't believe that worked!" Molezart shouted, his voice filled with triumphant disbelief. But on the sky frigate, the mood was less jubilant. An Lucht attendant turned to the captain, his face pale. "Uh, sir... they just flew past our helicopters, and we didn't manage to shoot them down."

The Luchtattendants were clad in striking blue uniforms with gold epaulettes, a matching cap bearing a "V"

insignia, a crimson sash with a utility pouch, and red gloves, blending military precision with ceremonial elegance.

The captain's expression darkened. "No matter," he said coolly. "We'll anchor the frigate near the coast and wait for them with our ten Luchtmarines. Their long rifles will take them down. They don't have enough fuel to steer far off their current trajectory. Those helicopters are designed with limited fuel to prevent escapees from reaching the mainland. That's why we transport our war machines by cargo airships."

The lucht attendant nodded and relayed the orders. The sky frigate altered its course, ready to intercept the moles as they approached the coastline.

In the helicopter, Dug fought to keep them steady as the fuel gauge dipped dangerously low. Monty, Molezart, and the other moles braced themselves for what was to come. They had escaped Wolkenstad, but the danger was far from over. The coast was their only hope—a slim chance to dig in and disappear before the enemy could catch them. Monty glanced at Molezart, who was focused, his mind already thinking three steps ahead. They had come so far, but the fight for freedom was just beginning. As the coastline loomed ahead, the moles knew they were heading into their final stand.

"Sire, the helicopter is closing in according to our optics," an lucht attendant reported urgently to the captain of the sky support frigate. "We don't have time to wait near the coast."

The captain scowled, quickly assessing their options. "This frigate isn't armed with guns, but we do have ten

Luchtmarines onboard. Get them on top of the frigate, armed and ready to shoot down that helicopter. Meanwhile, head toward the coast anyway. Once we're close enough, the remaining Luchtmarines can zipline down and intercept them on the ground."

The Lucht attendant saluted and rushed to relay the orders. The frigate began its sharp turn toward the coastline, while the Luchtmarines, clad in their dark uniforms, emerged from the hatch, rifles in hand. They moved quickly, securing themselves on top of the frigate, their eyes trained on the approaching Valk.

Inside the mole's Valk, Dug's voice was tense. "That frigate's turning back toward the coast. I'll try to steer us as far away as I can with the fuel we have left. There's a cave near the coastline—we can run in there and dig ourselves in. But we need to take all of our supplies, or we won't last long."

Monty turned to the other moles in the cramped Valk.

"Okay, there are nine of us here. We're further from the factory than any mole has ever been. We can do this. Stay strong—we're almost there."

The moles nodded, steeling themselves for what was to come.

"We're closing in!" Dug screamed. "Brace for impact!"

The Valk Roared past the frigate, narrowly avoiding the hail of bullets as the Luchtmarines fired at them. Dug maneuvered as best he could, but the fuel was nearly gone. The Valk splashed down into the water, sending waves crashing over them. The moles scrambled to unbuckle and grab their supplies, lifting them above their heads as they waded toward the shore.

Shots rang out from above—the Luchtmarines weren't done with them yet. Monty heard a sickening thud and turned to see one of their group, fall into the water, a bullet through his head. The sight of their fallen comrade fueled their determination, and the remaining eight moles pushed on toward the cave, adrenaline and fear driving them forward.

"Molezart, we're here!" Monty yelled as they reached the cave entrance.

"Good, let's dig in as fast as we can!" Molezart commanded. "Monty, you keep watch. See if the Luchtmarines are coming."

Monty climbed up to the mouth of the cave, his heart pounding as he scanned the area. He watched in horror as ten Luchtmarines began to zipline down from the frigate, landing on the shore with practiced precision.

They quickly spread out, rifles ready, advancing toward the cave.

"Molezart! They're coming!" Monty shouted.

"Keep your head down!" Molezart called back, as he and the others frantically dug into the cave wall. Suddenly, the earth gave way, revealing a hidden chamber behind it.

"Finally, some good luck!" Dug exclaimed, his voice filled with relief.

Just then, gunfire erupted, bullets ricocheting off the cave walls as the Luchtmarines spotted Monty. He ducked behind a rock for cover, heart pounding in his chest.

"Monty! Get over here!" Molezart yelled. "We found a secret chamber behind the wall—we can close it off before they figure out where we've gone!"

Monty didn't hesitate. He sprinted toward the others, dodging bullets as he went. The Luchtmarines' shots echoed through the cave, but Monty managed to reach the chamber just in time. Once inside, the moles quickly sealed the entrance, piling earth and rocks back into the hole they had made. The gunfire outside grew muffled as they worked, their hearts racing with the knowledge that they had narrowly escaped death.

Inside the hidden chamber, the moles finally caught their breath, exhaustion and relief washing over them. They were safe, at least for now, hidden from the Luchtmarines in a place no one knew existed. Monty, Molezart, Dug, and the remaining moles huddled together, their faces illuminated by the faint glow of their remaining lamps. They had escaped Wolkenstad, but the fight for survival was far from over.

In the evening, Amari finally received Rijksleider Dumond at her Sky Palace. She waited outside in the opulent halls of the opera house, her eyes occasionally glancing at the grand doors through which the Rijksleider was enjoying the performance with his entourage of sycophants. The air was thick with the scent of expensive perfumes and the murmur of high society, but Amari's mind was elsewhere—focused on the escape and the looming repercussions.

As the opera concluded, the applause echoed through the halls. Rijksleider Dumond emerged, flanked by his bootlickers, but was quickly escorted by two of Amari's Luchtmarines, separating him from his entourage to meet with her.

"How was the opera, Rijksleider Dumond?" Amari asked, her voice smooth but her smile forced.

"It was tremendous, absolutely fabulous," Rijksleider Dumond responded, his tone dripping with satisfaction.

"Oh, splendid to hear," Amari replied, masking her anxiety.

"Shall we proceed to the restaurant you requested?"

They made their way to the exclusive restaurant within the Sky Palace, a place reserved for only the highest elite. The room was bathed in soft candlelight, with moonbeams filtering through the glass atrium, casting a silvery glow on the lush garden below. It was a picture of serenity, but the tension between them was palpable.

As they settled at their table, Amari's heart raced beneath her composed exterior. "So," she began, her voice measured, "was the military exercise successful?"

Rijksleider Dumond sighed, a hint of frustration breaking through his usually calm demeanor. "Unfortunately, I have bad news. The moles—those clever little pests—managed to escape and have gone underground. We've isolated the area where they're hiding, but it's proving to be more of a challenge than anticipated."

Amari's fingers tightened around the stem of her glass, but she maintained her calm. "What measures are being taken?"

"I've deployed dropships carrying battle tanks retrofitted with drills to bore through the tunnels in the area. Five tanks, each with a crew of five—twenty-five men total, all sworn to secrecy. They've been given strict orders, and I'm paying handsomely to ensure their silence. To the public, we've fabricated a cover story—claiming that the operation is a search for fuel and crystals," Dumond explained, his voice steady but tinged with irritation.

Amari nodded, her mind racing as she tried to process the situation. "And what about tracking them?"

"That's where the real ingenuity comes in," Dumond continued. "I had the Sky Frigate fitted with a ground-penetrating radar, enhanced with magical enchantments from Kasteel Dolker. It can detect human-sized insectivores, mapping out old tunnels and caves in the process. We're confident we can flush them out."

Amari forced herself to take a slow, controlled breath.

"And you're certain this will contain the situation?"

Dumond leaned back in his chair, studying her. "We have to, Amari. The risk of this spreading beyond control is too great. I'll see to it personally that these moles are captured—or eradicated. Your factory, your operations—they won't be tainted by this incident."

Amari nodded, though her mind was already racing with thoughts of how to handle the fallout. "Good. We can't afford any loose ends."

As they continued their meal, discussing the finer details of the operation, Amari couldn't shake the unease gnawing at her. Dumond was competent, but the moles had already proven more resourceful than expected. She knew she had to be ready for whatever came next, for the sake of her empire—and her life.

Amari and Rijksleider Dumond sat at a lavish table in the exclusive restaurant of her Sky Palace, the ambiance heavy with the scent of fresh lobster and the rich aroma of chardonnay. The soft glow of candlelight flickered across their faces as they discussed the dire situation at hand.

Dumond swirled his glass of wine thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing. "I have a Sky Frigate that isn't equipped for

direct combat, but it does have a rocket artillery battery. We can rain hell down on the area, collapsing caves and tunnels, and scaring the moles out of their hiding spots. I'm considering arming the Luchtmarines with flamethrowers or chemical weapons to push them out of the ground.

According to my intel, we've already taken down one.

There are eight more to go." "We also have four helicopters armed with Gatling guns, patrolling the area. They're doing reconnaissance, ensuring no mole escapes unnoticed."

As the staff served their lobster and poured the wine, Amari leaned forward, her voice laced with concern. "So, should I be worried, or is this going to be under control?"

Dumond took a sip of his wine before responding. "My captain has a plan to drive them toward the rocky grounds near Koopgracht—beyond it, actually, into the wasteland where the ground is solid and nothing grows, so the moles can't dig their way out. The Mier mines are located there. If we can push them that far, we'll have the upper hand."

Amari nodded, considering the plan. "How long will that take?"

"At least a month," Dumond admitted. "The Luchtmarines aren't eager to hunt moles underground. The last time we dealt with them, it was easier. We just pitted the Antfolk slaves against the moles and let them wipe each other out. But we can't do that now. The remaining ants are all working in the mines, and we've supposedly subdued the moles."

Amari's mind raced as she processed the information. It had been a long time since she had visited the mainland. An idea formed in her mind, one that could serve multiple purposes. "It's been ages since I've seen the mainland.

Would it be possible for me to join you when you return to your airship? I'd love to see the interior. And, perhaps, I could accompany you to Leisk. I was planning a vacation there, and I need to start lobbying the politicians in Rozen." Dumond smiled, pleased with the suggestion. "Of course, Amari. I'd be honored to have you aboard. We'll ensure everything is taken care of. By the time we reach Leisk, this mole problem will be nothing more than a memory." Amari nodded, feeling a sense of resolve. The escapees were clever, but she was determined to crush this rebellion and restore order. The moles would be dealt with, and she would ensure that her empire remained unshaken. Later that evening, Dumond led Amari to his airship, docked at the edge of her Sky Palace. As they boarded, Dumond couldn't hide his enthusiasm. "Wolkenstad is something else, Amari. The way it floats above the clouds, the lights—it's like nothing I've seen before."

Amari nodded, satisfied with his reaction. "Wolkenstad is designed to impress, Dumond. It's not just a city; it's a statement. Everything here has a purpose, from the architecture to the engineering." As they walked through the airship, Dumond admired the polished metalwork and intricate designs. "Your attention to detail is evident everywhere. Leisk may be known for its bustling industries on the ground, but Wolkenstad has a way of making the earthbound seem mundane." They reached the ornithopter bay, where five sleek machines awaited. Dumond gestured to one of them. "Care to take a flight?"

Amari inspected the ornithopter, appreciating its craftsmanship. "Impressive design, Dumond. Sleek and functional. You've put together quite a fleet." Dumond

grinned. "I knew you'd appreciate them. I wanted something that would match the grandeur of Wolkenstad." I bought them in klokkenstad from our mutual connection Evelien. As they took off, the ornithopter lifted smoothly into the night sky. Below them, Wolkenstad gleamed with lights reflecting off the clouds. Dumond was clearly impressed. "This view is worth every penny. Your city, Amari, it's a marvel from up here."

Amari glanced down, her tone businesslike. "That's the idea, Dumond. Wolkenstad isn't just a place to live or work; it's a symbol of progress, power, and prestige." Dumond nodded. "You've achieved that, no doubt. It's no wonder people speak so highly of you." Amari gave a small, satisfied nod. "That's what matters, Dumond—being at the top and staying there." As they circled the city, the conversation shifted to practical matters—updates on business ventures, political strategies, and future plans. The night air was cool, and their exchanges were direct and focused. As they began their descent back to the airship, Dumond turned to Amari. "This was a solid evening, Amari. Thanks for showing me around." Amari replied, her tone brisk. "Glad you enjoyed it, Dumond. Now, let's make sure everything stays under control."

In the cave near the shore, not far from Leisk, the moles—Monty, Molezart, Dug, and five others—took a moment to catch their breath. The narrow escape had left them exhausted, but there was no time to relax just yet. They decided it was best to push further away from Leisk, moving closer to the direction of Rozen, where they hoped to find safety or at least some time to regroup.