

A DEAL'S A DEAL

Campaign 2 · Session 12 · August 12th, 2026

The lakeshore, the drowning Mercy, and a folding stool



A man who has attended a great many endings, come early to this one.

The last thing **Art** felt was a hand: warm, too warm, root and tendon closing around his own. Then the world folded up like a paper cup, and he was on his knees in mud and reeds, breathing lake water and the faint ghost of roses.

It took him a moment to understand what he was looking at, because he was looking at the **Weeping Mercy** from the outside for the first time. She was beautiful. She was enormous. She was dying. Out on the black water she listed like a tired animal, her lanterns going out one deck at a time, and the sound carrying across the lake was no longer applause. It was a hundred and fifty people waking up all at once and understanding where they were, and why.

His hand hurt. He had made a fist so hard his nails had cut the palm, and he did not remember closing it. He opened his fingers.

THREE SEEDS

Three of them. Pale, knuckle-sized, warm, heavier than they had any right to be. Not humming a sound exactly, but a rhythm: the same slow patient pulse he

had felt through the floorboards of the ship. The **Gardener's** breath, slowed down to something almost like a heartbeat. Almost like his own.

And where they touched his skin, something happened. He knew what was on his arms. He had watched the black threads climb a little higher every week, patient as an appointment four months out, and he had done the arithmetic so many times he had stopped noticing he was doing it.

The threads retreated. An inch, maybe two, pulling back from the seeds' warmth like a tide going out, leaving a patch of bare forearm pale and clean, the way it had not looked since **Westgate**. It was the first time in his life his sickness had ever surrendered anything.

He closed his hand. The dark crept back in, slower, he would swear, and more reluctant than before.

Somewhere in that hull, under the water line, his friends were still inside. He had three warm things in his fist, a great deal of arithmetic, and no idea what any of it was for. The lanterns went out another deck. The screaming carried very well across still water.

THIRTY SECONDS OF AIR

Below the waterline, the **Conservatory** was dying quietly. The moonbeam was gone. The vines hung slack off the walls like cut rigging. The great purple flower overhead was a scorched ruin dropping cinders of burnt petal that hissed where they hit the flood. The skylights that had shown impossible stars now showed nothing at all, because they were under the water, and what pressed against the glass was a black without malice and without hurry, because it had never once needed to hurry.

Somewhere under all of it was **Balbi**. Thirty seconds, at the rate the water was climbing, before the bottom chamber was simply gone.

Irofine went in on horseback, which is a sentence that should not work and did. Her steed swam like it had been waiting its whole spectral life to be asked. She hunted the dark twice and found nothing, and it was the horse that saved him in the end: it put its face under the water and opened its eyes and looked.



Two failures and a save, and then a gauntlet on his chest.

Balbi was thirty feet out and falling. Two failed death saves, one success, and no air anywhere in the world. Irofine dove, caught him, hauled him to the waterline, put a hand on his chest and gave him twenty-eight points of somebody else's certainty. He came up face down, then came alive spewing lake, then got smacked on the backside for his trouble.

"Oh my God. What happened? Where are we? Did I kill him?"

BALBI, RETURNING TO CONSCIOUSNESS

Upstairs was worse. The spell that had kept those souls calm was broken, and the wealthy and the occult

were screaming together on a tilting deck. All three lifeboats were already in the water a hundred metres out: one overcrowded and sinking, one holding a single passenger with two spells readied for anybody who tried to climb aboard, and one floating empty, which turned out to be empty because it was faulty.

ALL RIGHT, BROTHER, WE GOT A RIDE

Balbi went looking for Art as a giant eagle and took a harpoon through the breast for it. Then he felt two somethings grab the rope, and looked down, and there they were: **Gary and Mary, Lords of Lister**, gnome-hunters of Westgate, scaling his tether hand over hand with the enthusiasm of men flagging down a cab.



Two old men, one stolen eagle, and a plan.

He dove. Straight down, from height, with the fury of a druid who knows exactly what these two do for sport. They hit the meniscus like a wall and something in them cracked. Then the harpoon rope snagged on the underbelly of the sinking ship, and Balbi was pinned underwater to forty thousand tons of descending pleasure barge. He burned his last wild shape on a giant octopus and still could not find purchase. The seafloor came up to meet him. He had one action left.

I ONLY TEACH IT ONCE

On the beach, a voice behind Art said that he never did pick a shore for the view. Sitting a few feet away, in a spot where Art would have staked what is left of his life that nobody had been, was a man on a folding stool with a travel case open beside him: a tin soldier, a dried rose, a tooth, an empty vial, folded paper. **The Curator**. Younger than the one Art has met, darker haired, unworn. That one had been the end of his story. This one was nearer the beginning.

"Don't be alarmed. I'm not here for them. I've already been to this shipwreck, years from now. For me it's a strange evening." He knew what was in Art's hand: the only proof in the world that it can be run backwards. He knew about the four months, and said so the way a man reads a train timetable.

The offer was simple. He would teach Art how a seed opens, and spend the first one that evening on something suitably large, so Art could watch it work. In exchange, and here he smiled, and it was not unkind: Art's **last day**. Whatever it holds, wherever it comes. It belongs to the collection.

"I'll be there for all of it. You won't spend it alone. If that helps."

THE CURATOR, CLOSING THE DEAL

"Done." A slip of red paper folded itself out of the air and into the case.



Ding, ding, ding. And then the sound goes back in.

HOW TO OPEN A SEED

- **The wound.** The seed goes into the thing being healed, worked deep into the grain. Not laid on top.
- **The past.** A true remnant from before the break. He used the Mercy's first bell, from the yard where she was launched, before anyone had drowned in her. Replicas it spits straight out.
- **The tendon.** Hands that want the thing well enough to leave themselves open for it. This part cannot be performed. It is the discovery that killed the Gardener, who wanted Westgate back the way a man wants his money back.

THE LAKE GIVES THE SHIP BACK

He rang the bell, and it un-rang, a sound like a shine being swallowed, and crumbled to nothing in his hand. Then, violently, backwards: water poured out of her the way it had poured in, the list unlisted, the lanterns reignited deck by deck, and the screaming stopped mid-breath. The **Weeping Mercy** sat high on the black lake, dry as the day she was launched, with a hundred and fifty of the worst people in the realm standing on her, alive, remembering all of it.

Two seeds came back into Art's hand. "Keep one for Westgate. A true piece of her from before the blight, and hands that can kneel over her honestly." He tipped his hat, walked into the sand, and was simply not there. A voice said it would see Art on his last day, and to wear something nice. "I always do."

ONE LONE FIREBALL

The pigeons came. Ropes came down. And as they rose, while Irofine had her back turned throwing a line to an octopus, **Ferrick** let a single small sphere of flame slip out of his hand.



Gosh. Where did this fireball come from.

It found a gas nobody had ever lit. The **Weeping Mercy** went up in a cloud that sprayed the lake with wood and root and people, and half an hour of searching turned up no survivors at all. Irofine knows the blast started up top and cannot prove a thing. Art knows, said so underwater, and then handed Balbi a seed and swam off alone and invisible. And on the shore, abandoned again, **Big Poppy** found a beached yellow life raft, and two old men with harpoon guns stepped out of the bushes behind him.

✦ NEXT SESSION: SOME LITTLE
LEVERAGE ✦